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Resisting White Supremacy and Constructing Ethnic/Female Identity: Magical Resistance in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*

Md Abu Shahid Abdullah*

Abstract

Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, which is rooted in Native American cultural context, expresses the 'other' or alternative version(s) of events and attempts to fill in fissures or silence of official history from the contexts of the followers of particular social, cultural and religious practices of reality. Erdrich has employed magic or the supernatural to subvert a realist worldview and to resist colonial supremacy. The article aims to show that by giving Native American women a voice using magic, *Tracks* is centered on the alternative version(s) of history or reality and the notion of comprehending the past and memory. The article also aims to show how Erdrich equips her female characters with the power of magic to resist female marginalization and protest white supremacy. From this perspective, Erdrich's magical realism serves a political purpose.

Keywords: Identity, ethnicity, resistance, magic

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Beyaz Üstünlük ve Etnik/Kadın Kimliğinin İnşası: Louise Erdrich'in *Tracks* Eserinde Büyüsel Direniş

Öz

Yerli Amerikalı kültürel bağlamından beslenen Louise Erdrich'in *Tracks* eseri, olayların "öteki" ya da alternatif versiyonlarını yansıtır ve belli sosyal, kültürel ve dinsel uygulamaları takip edenlerin bakış açısından resmi tarihin boşluklarını ya da sessizliğini doldurmaya çalışır. Erdrich, büyü ya da doğaüstü unsurları, gerçekçi bir dünya görüşünü altüst etmek ve sömürgeci üstünlüğe direnmek için bir araç olarak kullanmıştır. Bu makale, *Tracks*'in, Yerli Amerikalı kadınlara büyü aracılığıyla ses vererek, tarihin veya gerçekliğin alternatif versiyonlarına ve geçmiş ile hafızayı anlamaya odaklandığını gösterir. Ayrıca Erdrich'in kadın karakterlerini, kadınların ötekileştirilmesine ve beyaz üstünlüğüne karşı koymak için büyünün gücüyle nasıl donattığını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu bakış açısından, Erdrich'in büyüsel gerçekçiliği açıkça politik bir amaca hizmet eder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kimlik, etnisite, direniş, büyü

Introduction

Louise Erdrich's Tracks depicts the time when deprived of their rights to their lands and resources, Native Americans were forced to live in the wretched conditions of the reservation and face cultural extinction at the hands of white invaders. Their descendants began to forget their glorious past, traditions, and rituals. Due to the arrival of white colonizers, the violence they inflicted on the Natives, and the diseases they brought with them, the number of native people in the US decreased from "between four and five million at the time of the Columbian invasion [to] 250,000 to 300,000 Indians by the end of the nineteenth century" (Cheyfitz, "Introduction" viii). This violence towards Native people serves as the backdrop of the novel, which is evident from the very first chapter, where Nanapush narrates to Lulu

how people from their tribes died at the hands of the white invaders and how the survivors were systematically forced to leave their lands by the government (Erdrich 1).

The present article aims to show that by giving Native American women a voice using magic, the novel centralizes alternative version(s) of history or reality and the postmodern notion of comprehending the past and memory. Through the dominance of encroaching white supremacy over Native culture, Erdrich attempts to show the way the male Natives start practicing the gendering of social roles, ignoring the fact that Native American societies have always demonstrated gendered equality. The article also aims to show how, by giving women magical power, Erdrich enables them to free themselves from both patriarchal and colonial constraints and to assert womanhood. Instead of painting her narratives through magic, Erdrich has employed the supernatural to resist colonial supremacy and gender marginalization and to protect and mourn her Native culture.

Systematic Destruction of Native Culture and Erdrich's Magical Realism

Joy Porter notes that after the American Revolution, Native Indians were methodically devastated when "Americans created a national mythology that consigned Indians to a 'savage' past" (50). For the success of the changed America, the extinction of Indian culture was essential (50). This absence was done through various techniques, ranging from removing people from their land to converting them to Christianity or the Western mood of education. Porter also claims that the targeting of Indian children was part of a pattern of degradation of Indian family life, which was exacerbated by the placement and adoption of children into non-Indian homes. This pattern of abuse was not legally or completely stopped until the Child Welfare Act was passed in 1978 (52). The Indian Act, which was created in 1876, clearly conveyed the White concept of men as chiefs of families and women as subservient to their men. It also destroyed the traditional matrilineal relationship pattern and the post-marital residence system for women, which had been in practice for generations. Apart from suffering due to

White supremacy, Indian women also started to be marginalized by their people. With the help of colonial laws, the Indian Act robbed women of their sexual freedom, considered them unworthy of respect if they were not virtuous and chaste in terms of rigid Victorian standards, and relegated them as puppets to men from their community. Joan Sangster opines that female sexual freedom was controlled in various ways, with colonial law as "one crucial site of sexual regulation" (303). She added, "Any sexual relations that did not conform to monogamy in marriage were seen as uncivilized and counter to the government's civilizing mission" (308). Finally, the colonial authority prohibited women from any kind of political involvement, giving them no chances to become chiefs or band councilors and entirely excluding them from making any decisions in their community. Women thus suffered at the hands of both invaders and males from their community. Through Nanapush's tale, the novel explores the occurrences in the ultimate years of the extermination of Native people and their systematic displacement from their land. It also emphasizes the heroic struggle of the natives against both natural calamities and colonial forces, bravely attempting to protect their own culture from the clutches of dominant authorities.

This structural way of depriving a group of their home, tradition, heritage, and language is the reason several Native American literary pieces anchor in the notion of identity. Nancy J. Peterson emphasizes the necessity to create a Native history (and perhaps also a Native identity) before Native American authors can start deconstructing it. However, Native American Studies must show "indigenous intellectual sovereignty" (Cheyfitz, "The (Post)Colonial Construction" 4) and "Native nationalism" (Womack 11) to show its difference from other postcolonial movements. It is in their protest against colonial power and attempts to find a Native identity and resist female victimization that Native American authors, particularly female ones such as Louise Erdrich, Susan Power, and Leslie Marmon Silko, among others, have employed magical realism.

Erdrich's work is considered magical realist due to her employing supernatural phenomena in her writing and creating a notion or atmosphere of the imaginary through language, as Faris states, magical realism blends the mundane and the fantastic in such

a manner "that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed" (163). Many critics have interpreted Erdrich's work as the assertion of Native beliefs, thinking that magical elements and figurative language lend an indigenous feature to her work. Although magic is employed to challenge the colonial outlook, there is no assertion of spiritual traditions through magic. Giving more importance to Erdrich's writing techniques and styles over her tribal heritage, Tankersley argues that instead of flooding her books with fantastical happenings, Erdrich creates this organic aspect by bringing a feeling of the extraordinary into the language used in all her novels. As a result, rather than coming from Erdrich's Ojibwe ancestry, the supernatural arises from her writing methods and abilities (21). Although Erdrich's novels might include a smaller number of magical actions compared to other magical realist works, and even those events can be doubted or questioned, it is other elements of her writing that cement her position as a magical realist. Erdrich's distinctive writing style and narration have a strong ability to create a magical effect, undermining the real as Stirrup considers the "fluidity of Erdrich's lyrical prose" a way of refusing "critical determinism" (91). Before introducing any magical scene, Erdrich employs her flowing sentences, which are laden with metaphors, to surprise or confuse the reader. She allures the reader by forming a realistic world before breaking it into pieces, creating a scene where both the magical and the real are intertwined. Through the use of dream motifs, the reader is defamiliarized, and the magical elements are incorporated; it is also used to undermine the colonial depiction of her native culture and to advocate an alternative and/or marginalized version of reality. The political message in Erdrich's work might not be as strong as that of many other writers, but her metaphorical writing style itself is a way of undermining realism and Western rationalism. From this context, her work can be placed side by side with other magical realist novels that challenge a colonial worldview.

Magical Realism as Means of Resisting Colonialism

It has been mentioned that the novel *Tracks* has two narrators—Nanapush and Pauline—who provide a non-linear and fragmented

narrative. The struggle and different, sometimes opposing, narration of the two homodiegetic narrators center on Fleur Pillager, the protagonist of the novel. Susan Friedman considers both narrators physically opposite, where Nanapush "represents resistance to Euro-American culture" and Pauline "represents the colonized subject" (112). Both Nanapush and Fleur are associated with the 'Anishinabe' practice and, therefore, with magic. In the novel, it is Fleur who is the main source of the magic and a metaphor for the dying indigenous culture. She has a strong association with nature, particularly with water and the lake monster, Misshepeshu, who has a mad desire for powerful young girls like Fleur (Erdrich 11). Fleur also possesses the formidable power of metamorphosis, which is believed by the entire community without any doubt: "… in the snow or dust, we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night, we heard a chuffing cough, the bear cough" (Erdrich 12). This magical event takes place in the middle of reality and is considered an ordinary occurrence by the community people. Again, Fleur being respected and feared by her community as she possesses healing power clearly shows the way magic and healing abilities are empowering for women. Her return to the reservation causes many strange events to take place: "The dust on the reservation stiffed. Things hidden were free to walk. The surprised young ghost of Jean Hat limped out of the bushes" (Erdrich 34−35). Fleur also takes revenge on Boy Lazarre, who kidnaps Margaret and shaves her hair by killing him with a mere bite of Margaret (120). Fleur has employed her magical power against Pauline and other characters who have developed a stronger tie with the colonial culture.

Fleur's revenge against her three coworkers who have raped her in Argus also highlights the way she uses magic against men to defy patriarchy and to assert her agency: magic is thus empowering for women and resistance to patriarchy. By magically transforming herself into a tornado, Fleur ensures the rapists' death after they take refuge in the meat lockers and freeze. The most crucial aspect of the tornado is that it is very selective in destroying since no one else is injured or died, and no property is destroyed. The freezer is found locked from the outside, and the event is considered "a tornado's freak whim" (Erdrich 30). Although the inhabitants of Argus do not hold Fleur responsible

for the tornado, it is through Pauline's narration the reader can establish a connection between the tornado's weird characteristics and Fleur's magical ability.

Tracks begin with Nanapush's description of the death of a significant number of his family members and tribal people in the winter of 1912 due to an illness brought by white people. The realistic depiction of the infection and its consequences are mingled with magical beliefs and the presence of ghosts who patrol the forest of the tribe. The tribal police have strictly been instructed by the white government to burn down the houses of people who died by consumption with their dead bodies inside, denying them a proper burial and thus insulting their tribal culture. Although Pukwan, a member of the tribal police, travels to the Pillagers' residence to accomplish government order, which clashes with a proper traditional burial, the house magically remains intact. It also seems to him that it is the angry and dissatisfied spirits of the Pillagers that saved their residence from burning down. Erdrich writes, "He … tried to burn down the house. But though he threw kerosene repeatedly against the logs and even started a blaze with birchbark and chips of wood, the flames narrowed and shrank, went out in puffs of smoke" (3). There is no logical explanation for why the Pillagers' residence cannot be burnt, but the event is crucial for many reasons. It helps us have an idea about the magical powers of the Pillagers. It also shows the inability of Pakwan and the colonizers to demolish Pillagers' residences along with their dead bodies and his realization that the Pillagers' more powerful magical scheme is at work to challenge his constant attempt to make and maintain power. Despite being dead, it is the Pillagers' magical power that challenges and wins, albeit temporarily, over the colonizers. It also shows Pakwan being torn between two ideological conflicts: his official duties and his respect for tribal culture. If readers look at the event more closely, they can realize that Pakwan's conflicting behavior is part of a much larger problem. If the US government had not forcefully imposed any law on the tribal people or if the European colonizers had not brought any fatal disease to the Natives, Pakwan would not have been forced to burn dead bodies instead of giving them a traditional Indian burial. This scene also shows the way the evil colonial venture destroys the cultural integrity of a tribe and turns the tribal people against one another.

Right after the abortive attempt to burn the Pillagers' residence, the death of Pakwan is narrated in such a matter-of-fact manner that it is considered a straight result of the curse of the Pillagers': "[He] came home, crawled into bed, and took no food from that moment until his last breath passed" (4).

Fleur's resistance to colonial authority through magic is also evident in the scene in which the tribal agent who visits her to collect the fee for the allocations of the land given to her by the government loses his mental sanity and is heard to be living in the forest: "He went out there, got lost, spent a whole night following moving lights and lamps of people who would not answer him, but talked and laughed among themselves. … the next thing we heard, he was living in the woods and eating roots, gambling with ghosts" (Erdrich 9). Although the reader gets a story based on reality—collecting fees on land allocation and a real treaty, the 'Dawes Act'—the passage highlights supernatural issues or events such as ghosts or spirits of dead tribal ancestors. The act of driving away the colonial agent and later slowly driving him mad demonstrates the magical power of the Pillagers, having the ability to secure the familial and tribal future and to resist colonial power. By continuing shamanistic traditions and keeping the tribal rituals alive, Fleur becomes an advocate of the faith, antiquity, and heritage of her tribe.

In *Tracks*, the blending of the supernatural and the real gradually becomes problematic in Pauline's narration because of her constant untrustworthiness as a narrator. As a multifaceted and ambivalent character, Pauline transgresses different borders: between Indigenous and colonizers, supernatural and ordinary, regeneration and decay, and between stability and madness. Pauline is someone who never fits in her tribal community and is more interested in Western civilization, and by being converted to Christianity, she frees herself from her traditional beliefs. In the course of the novel, Pauline starts losing her mental sanity, which begins with her magical interaction with the deceased. At the death of the girl she has been taking care of, Pauline feels excited, elevated, and emancipated and considers it her future responsibility to support people to reach the world after death. Pauline's meeting is depicted in a magical realist manner, and her freedom is represented by her thrilling journey:

> If I took off my shoes, I would rise into the air . . . I tore leaves off a branch and stuffed them into my mouth to smother laughter. The wind shook in the trees. The sky hardened to light. And that is when . . . my wings raked the air, and I rose in three powerful beats and saw what lay below. They were stupid and small. (Erdrich 68)

The question or doubt that the event can be hallucinatory is strongly dismissed by the sheer height and smooth body of the tree, making it almost impossible for any human being to reach it. Although people are shocked to find her in such a high tree, she is not at all astonished as she can clearly remember the way she reached the top of the tree. However, since Pauline is considered an unreliable narrator and the entire scene is described through her words, it is also possible that the incident is a part of her hallucination.

The hunting scene where Nanapush spiritually guides Eli to accomplish his task is a remarkable instance of Erdrich's magical realist technique to blur the borders between two opposing realms and to magically connect two men over a great distance. This scene also clearly shows the communal aspect of magic: the way magic can guide and assist community people in danger and unite them. In the rough winter of 1917, Eli's journey to the North with his gun to get some food is paralleled to Nanapush's act of performing rites in his cabin to help Eli in his hunt. Nanapush's shamanistic rituals, where he calls his magical helpers through chanting, empower Eli and enable him to come with a sufficient amount of meat: "I began to sing slowly, calling on my helpers until the words came from my mouth but were not mine until the rattle started, the song sang itself, and there, in the deep, bright drifts, I saw the tracks of Eli's snowshoes clearly" (Erdrich 101). With the assistance of his magical helpers, Nanapush gains the power to observe Eli's activities, to read his mind, and thus to pass instructions. It is Nanapush's mysteriously conveyed directions that help Eli kill the animal, and it is his drumbeats that enable the exhausted Eli to return home. In this outstanding occurrence, the spiritual and the mundane world fuse, and the spatial distance and the borders between human beings become blurred and ultimately disappear. The spiritual assistance enables the tribal people like Eli to survive the hardship and thus poses a threat to colonial authorities.

Magical realism can challenge or doubt the traditional notions of time and space. As Faris opines, "Magical realism reorients … our habits of time and space [and] our sense of identity …" (*Ordinary Enchantments* 25). By writing from within two literary traditions—the Western and the Indian—, Erdrich merges two different and confronting concepts of time: the Western linear concept of time and the Indian cyclical and fragmentary concept of time. In discussing the Native sense of time over the Western sense, Paula G. Allen asserts that the conventional Native notion of time is timeless and ritualistic. She also opines that rather than being founded on industrial, religious, or agricultural orderings, tribal ideas about the nature of reality are what give rise to their achronological sense of time. While time in the industrialized West is based on machinery, Indian time is based on ceremonies (150). The chronological and linear organization of Western time supports the separation of individuals from the environment and God. In *Tracks*, the inclusion of flashbacks, digression, and intertwined dream imagery challenges and defies the conventional chronological notion of time and challenges Western colonial authority. The chronological event depicted between 1912 and 1924 later turns into a mythical notion of time. The non-linear notion of time is created by giving titles to the chapters and years about natural seasons and elements in both European and Native languages. The supernatural scenes like Eli's moose hunt, Fleur's conjuring a tornado in Argus, Pakwan's inability to burn the Pillagers' house, and his strange death are all temporarily taken out of time and put in a mythological domain. Just like time, space, too, is placed in a mythical dimension. The dark, holy space of the forests, which is patrolled and controlled by ancestors' ghosts, is starkly contrasted with the Western modes of sophisticated spaces like schools, churches, and offices where Western identity is prioritized and native identity is subjugated and ultimately made extinct. Erdrich's novel chronicles the final resistance against the conquering of the Native lands by government and lumber companies, pointing to a culture and tradition on the verge of extinction. The novel is thus not wholly a triumphant portrayal of the tribal people but rather the description of their decaying final days, which is hinted at by Nanapush's account of the wasting away of the tribal land, life, and culture.

Magical realism has often been associated with the concept of the grotesque and the carnivalesque. In his research on Rabelai's

work, Bakhtin places grotesque realism, which features exaggeration and humiliation, at a significant point in time when traditional culture, humor, and oral customs begin to wane (Bakhtin 18). Robert Morace associates Bakhtin's carnivalesque with Native American culture in Erdrich's novel. Since the carnivalesque attempts to dissolve hierarchies and prohibitions of an official system, it has the potential to represent the struggle between colonized traditions and colonizing supremacy (36-37). Like magical realism (at the same time as an instrument of magical realism), the carnivalesque is also inspired by our necessity to transgress borders and turn the world or established notions upside down. In *Tracks*, Fleur's colleague Lily becomes involved in a fierce fight with a snoozing sow, which is depicted in grotesque terms:

> Their steps picked up pace and went wild. The two dipped as one, box-stepped, tripped one another. She ran her split foot through his hair. He grabbed her kinked tail. They went down and came up the same shape and then the same color until the men couldn't tell one from the other. (Erdrich 25)

In this terrible fight, the boundaries between men and animals dissolve, and they become one. Although this comic scene contrasts the next scene of Fleur's brutal rape, to some extent, the inflicted violence on the animal body (the sow) substitutes the sexual violence of Fleur.

The association between the carnivalesque and Native American literature can particularly be drawn through laughter and trickster figures. In analyzing contemporary Native American novels through the Bakhtinian lens, Alan Velie describes trickster figures as "Footloose, amoral drifters with strong appetites for women and wine, they play tricks, are the victim of tricks, are callous and irresponsible, but essentially sympathetic to the reader" (122). In Native American culture, trickster figures are characterized by the ability to change physical form and to use bawdy humor. Representing both good and bad, trickster figures break established rules, challenge norms and traditions, dissolve boundaries and hierarchies, and "survive to build a new world on the ashes of the old" (Gross 49). Nanapush is a legendary trickster figure in *Tracks* whose name has been taken from Anishinabe trickster, "*nanapush or nanibozhu*" (Owens 212). Nanapush's name mirrors his trickster nature because "it's got to do with trickery and living in the bush" (Erdrich 33). His strong sense of humor, both gentle

and vulgar, clearly associates him with a trickster figure as Paul Radin states, "[l]aughter, humor and irony permeate everything Trickster does" (x). For example, when Nanapush invites an impassive Eli to share food with him, he wants him [Eli] to "see for himself that the meat in the pot was only one poor gopher that should have hibernated while it could" (Erdrich 96). Nanapush also possesses supernatural and healing abilities, with the healing scene of Fleur after her miscarriage being one of the greatest examples of it. Although Nanapush's act of putting his hands in boiling water without getting burnt is later explained by the fact that he has used ingredients made of herbs in his hands, the magic lies in his coming across this healing method in his dreams. By stressing Pauline's effort to execute the identical trick, chanting in Latin (the language of the Catholic) and getting severely burnt, Erdrich shows the conflict between both Native and colonial practices, and by highlighting the Native superiority, she thus poses a challenge to colonial authority and their practices. Here, magic is shown to be empowering for the Natives.

Through a mocking and disparaging treatment of Pauline, Erdrich links the trickster activities with the grotesque, as Bakhtin considers humiliation to be typical of the grotesque (21). Through the humiliation process, everything lofty and heavenly is brought down to the earthly level, exactly what Nanapush has done to expose Pauline's double standards. By offering Pauline a different type of tea and by cutting several obscene jokes, Nanapush performs a brutal joke in a trickster fashion and makes her embarrassed. Bakhtin says again, "laughter degrades and materializes" (20), and carnival laughter is distinctive because of its enduring and indispensable connection with freedom (89). The collective laughter caused by Nanapush's treatment of Pauline can thus be considered a resistance against the invading Catholic belief of the colonizers: (crude) humor is a survival technique for Native Americans. Highlighting the role of humor in the life and literature of the Native, Erdrich says in an interview that it's another perspective on the world, far from the cliché of the stoic, unwavering Indian standing and gazing at the sun (Coltelli 46). It can be surmised that Erdrich is emphasizing an alternative worldview and reality, highlighting the significance of Native beliefs and culture.

Rewriting History and Reclaiming the Past

Nancy J. Peterson emphasizes the parallel progression of history and the narrative(s) in *Tracks,* where she discusses the colonial invasion, diseases, treaties between the government and the tribes, and many other documents to verify various occurrences in the novel. She considers it to be crucial for Erdrich, particularly for Nanapush, to give history a tribal identity and to rewrite history from the viewpoints of the tribe by renaming various historical events and accounts (985). Nanapush seems to be aware of the significance of naming and renaming in the case of ownership and identity, which is evident from his act of passing down his alternative (hi)story to his granddaughter, Lulu. His statement to Lulu —"'Nanapush is a name that loses power every time that it is written and stored in a government file'" (Erdrich 32)— suggests that the tribal people's authority over their land decreases with every time their lands and people are documented by the government. In the same essay, Peterson also stresses the impact of the use of oral storytelling and the way two opposing and incompatible frames of reference are established in the novel: one is associated with oral tradition, an episodic approach to history, and "a pre-contact culture": the other is tied to visual tradition, a linear approach to history and "a post-contact culture" (986). However, Erdrich neither prefers one over the other nor does the novel begin with an oral depiction of actions and ends with a direct, textual one. The novel rather moves through these two representations just the same way characters float between acculturation and preservation of tribal culture, simultaneously belonging to both and neither.

In magical realist narrative, magical events take place in a realistic framework. Although the realistic description of man and society in *Tracks* emphasizes its socio-political dimension, the employment of the magical realist technique challenges traditional orders and notions and proves prolifically effective. Erdrich's depiction of 'Turcot Company' and the destruction of an entire forest to be economically benefitted brings back to our mind the 'Banana Company Massacre' in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* where to create a sense of collective amnesia,

neither of the brutal events is included in official history. Just like Márquez and Rushdie, Erdrich also wants to let the whole world know the damage of tribal heritage caused by the white colonizers and thus comes up with a marginalized version of history. The destruction of the ancient forest, a place where the Natives bury their dead ancestors on tall trees and which is patrolled by the ancestors' ghosts, stands for the disappearance of the entire tribe. Fleur, who is the last resident of this ancient forest, finally leaves her area amid a magical metamorphosis of nature. It is Nanapush's magical communication with his departed family members that helps him enter the kingdom of the dead and absorb himself in the past.

In a final powerful act of resistance against colonial power, Fleur summons a magical whirlwind that uproots the trees and thus frightens timber company people. The ultimate magical wind, which knocks down trees on the company people and takes revenge for Fleur's death, can easily be related to the scene in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where the tornado destroys Macondo. The final cyclone is foreshadowed in Nanapush's narrative, which becomes real at the end, announcing the death of both the forest and the tribe: "I stood in a birch forest of tall, straight trees. I was one among many in a shelter of strength and beauty. Suddenly, a loud report, thunder, and they toppled down like matchsticks . . . I was the only one left standing" (127). Fleur offers the last resistance to the invading foreign ideas, and although, in the end, she has to leave the Pillagers' territory, she walks away victorious against colonial forces. Nanapush, the only survivor, opposes the colonizer's legal method to reclaim, revise, and rewrite his tribal history.

Conclusion

Tracks ends with an optimistic tone in the Native's struggle against the white invasion of land and culture. Magical realism in *Tracks* draws a parallel between magic and Native American beliefs, values, and traditions. Magic is undoubtedly an inherent part of Native American spiritual reality, a means of going beyond the Western discourse of realist truth. Erdrich equips her female character Fleur with magical means so that she can avenge her rape and challenge and attack white culture or

any colonial instrument or agent that aims to destroy her Native culture. Fleur's lonely battle against patriarchy and white invasion provides the novel with a political tone and thus establishes the proposition that magical realism is firmly anchored in social, cultural, and political reality. Interestingly, Erdrich includes the grotesque and the carnivalesque to assist magical realism in tackling dominant power structures and in turning established beliefs or ideas upside down. Through Nanapush's trickster characteristics and magical healing abilities, Erdrich highlights Native superiority and, therefore, poses a challenge to colonial authority and their practices. By providing her Native characters a voice through magic and local rituals, Erdrich enables them to rewrite history from their viewpoints, giving history a tribal identity.

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The Exceptional Nation: How American Exceptionalism Influences US Foreign Policy

Gökhan Ereli *

Abstract

Defined by beliefs in superiority, divine selection, and a perceived divine mission, American Exceptionalism has influenced American national identity and foreign policy. This article examines the instrumentalization of this idea in shaping US foreign policy, arguing that it serves as a fundamental lens through which the US tendency toward leadership is understood. By engaging with the theoretical frameworks of neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism, this study highlights that American Exceptionalism has driven unilateral policies and the US's self-perceived leadership role in global affairs. The analysis explores the intersubjective structures policymakers, and the public adopted, revealing how ideological principles intersect with national interests. The article also investigates how AE has fueled US ambitions for global dominance and the contradictions of this idea within contemporary international relations.

Keywords: American Exceptionalism, US foreign policy, global leadership, national identity, Constructivism

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İstisnaî Millet: Amerikan İstisnacılığı ABD Dış Politikasını Nasıl Etkiler?

Öz

Üstünlük, seçilmişlik ve tanrısal bir misyon yüklenmeyle tanımlanan Amerikan İstisnacılığı kavramı hem Amerikan ulusal kimliğini hem de dış politikasını etkilemiştir. Amerikan İstisnacılığı kavramının ABD'nin liderlik eğiliminin anlaşılmasında temel bir araç görevi gördüğünü öne süren bu makale, neorealizm, neoliberalizm ve konstrüktivizm gibi teorik çerçeveleri ele alarak, kavramın tek taraflı eylemleri ve ABD'nin küresel ilişkilerdeki liderlik çabalarını nasıl şekillendirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Politikacılar ve halkın benimsediği özneler-arası yapıların yani sıra, ideolojik ilkelerin ulusal çıkarlarla kesişimini gözler önüne sermeyi amaçlayan bu çalışma, eleştirel bir Konstrüktivist perspektiften hareket ederek, Amerikan İstisnacılığı kavramının esnek yapısını ve uluslararası ilişkilerde yol açtığı çelişkileri ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerikan İstisnacılığı, Amerikan dış politikası, küresel liderlik, ulusal kimlik, Konstrüktivizm

Introduction

The idea of American Exceptionalism (*hereafter* AE) has been a prominent issue in American politics and academia for the past few decades (McCoy). Tracing its roots back to the early days of the US, AE emerges as a complex and multifaceted concept that has significantly influenced American foreign policy. At its core, this idea asserts that the US pursues a unique historical path, portraying it as inherently superior to other nations; however, this portrayal is a constructed narrative rather than an objective truth. This belief fosters a tendency toward a unilateral foreign policy approach and has likely contributed

to the spread of anti-American sentiments worldwide. American conservatives, particularly influential figures within the Grand Old Party circles such as Mike Pence, John McCain, Mitt Romney, Sarah Palin, Newt Gingrich, and Marco Rubio, have prominently championed this idea in their electoral campaigns. This was especially evident during the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, where AE became central to their political narratives and policy proposals (Tumulty). Therefore, the idea has garnered both ardent supporters and fervent critics who continue to debate its legitimacy and impact.

In the introduction to the third edition of Australian scholar Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics,* Andrew Hurrell pointed out, "all human societies rely on historical stories about themselves to legitimize the notions of where they are and where they might be going" (Hurrell xiii). The focal point within this quotation resides in the prominence accorded to the national narratives, deemed instrumental in cultivating a sense of identity in its foundational stages. Implicit in this statement is the proposition that these national narratives, often conveyed in the guise of historical stories, could have been expanded by both statesmen and ordinary citizens within a nation, serving to perpetuate a collective sense of identity in bygone eras (Campbell 8). This underscores the potential efficacy of national narratives in either instilling a sense of nationhood or mirroring a fervent collective self-perception (Anderson xiv). Whether these narratives underwent distortions or remained unaltered, it becomes conceivable that virtually all nations may necessitate ideational constructs that function as national narratives underpinned by the endorsement of policymakers (Smith 1-2).

The impetus behind this article lies in addressing a critical gap in the existing literature on AE and its impact on US foreign policy. While much has been said about AE's ideological roots and historical significance, few analyses bridge theoretical approaches to show how AE actively shapes contemporary US actions on the global stage (Caporaso 600). This article seeks to fill that gap by exploring AE through a constructivist lens, which emphasizes the importance of identity and beliefs in shaping state behavior. This study also contrasts AE's influence with theoretical underpinnings from neorealism and

neoliberalism, showing where these theories fall short in capturing AE's complex nature. The goal of the article is to demonstrate that AE is more than a set of abstract ideals –it is an operational force influencing US unilateral actions, internationalist policies, and diplomatic strategies.

Before exploring the varied interpretations of AE and its persistent influence, it is essential to acknowledge how policymakers throughout history have harnessed this concept for their purposes (Huntington 12). Leaders have often invoked the principles of AE during pivotal moments to bolster public morale, justify policies, or assert moral superiority on the international stage (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 3). Such usages range from President Woodrow Wilson's assertion of America's duty to promote democracy globally during World War I to President Ronald Reagan's portrayal of the US as a "shining city upon a hill," emphasizing its unique role as a beacon of freedom and opportunity (Chollet and Goldgeier 17). These usages reflect both the adaptability and the clarity with which AE has been employed to align with varying political motives (Pease 76-77). The utilization of the concept in political rhetoric underscores its centrality in constructing and reaffirming national narratives, setting the stage for understanding how its perception has been subject to both admiration and critique over time (Lipset 17-18).

Over time, the concept of AE has endured a dual fate of both unwarranted flattery and severe critique, thereby contributing to its widespread proliferation and, to a lesser extent, its evisceration within American political discourse (Ereli 3). To facilitate a consistent delineation in this study, AE is to be construed in a narrowly defined manner. The version of AE upon which the arguments herein pivot may be recognized as encapsulating three distinctive and enduring themes, each of which has garnered significant attention and resonance.

Firstly, the idea of AE embraces the notion of spatial distinctiveness and the explicit advantages inherent to the New World, wherein the US came to be established (Turner i-ii). This foundational aspect underscores the unique geographical attributes that underpin the nation's trajectory. Secondly, the idea of AE entails a distinct and enduring role characterized by an unwavering commitment to a divine

mission, positioning the US as a vanguard in global affairs (McCartney 47-48). This divine mission not only portrays the nation's path but also affords it the capacity to assume leadership on the world stage (Guth 77). Thirdly, the idea of AE encompasses a path for the US that is inherently superior and divergent from the trajectories of other great powers throughout history (Hodgson 11).

This so-called unique trajectory, while propelling the US to the echelons of great power status, stands in stark contrast to the historical patterns of other great powers that have invariably risen but ultimately succumbed to decline (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 3; McCrisken 64-65). Unlike traditional great powers that often rose through conquest and exploitation and ultimately fell due to internal or external pressures, AE asserts that the US follows an idiosyncratic path. This path is defined not only by its pursuit of power but also by a belief in a unique moral purpose. The US sees itself as a nation with a higher calling to lead through the promotion of freedom, democracy, and human rights. This self-image implies that American power is not transient or cyclical but enduring, supported by the belief that the US is divinely selected to guide global progress (Restad, "Old Paradigms" 60). Mead implies that this perception, many of the proponents of AE claim, differentiates it from historical empires whose supremacy waned after periods of dominance (11).

As to how ideas shape identities, Daniel Béland posits that ideas gain political attention when championed by policymakers (707-708). The articulation of AE by key policymakers is a recurring theme throughout US history, spanning from Thomas Jefferson, the *Declaration of Independence*'s principal author, to modern-day presidents. Throughout the modern era, American policymakers have continued to evoke AE to shape national rhetoric. For instance, President Ronald Reagan famously described the US as a "shining city upon a hill," emphasizing its role as a beacon of hope and freedom to the world (Frum).

President Barack Obama, despite being known for observing a more multilateral approach, also affirmed his belief in AE by stating, "I believe in AE, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British

exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism" (Obama). This could signal both pride in the US's unique path and a recognition of its global responsibilities. Similarly, President Donald Trump landed the concept in a more nationalistic tone, highlighting America's unparalleled strength and success as a justification for policies aimed at maintaining its dominance (Marshall). These examples underscore the enduring relevance of AE as an ideological cornerstone in political rhetoric and policymaking.

At this point, the development of identity plays a crucial role in foreign policy. Identity formation entails the process by which individuals distinguish themselves from others, establishing a unique sense of self and belonging (Ereli 51). As people in various countries ponder their responses to the complex global environment, ongoing preservation and interpretation of national narratives can be influential. In the US, McCrisken highlights these phrases and things such as "God Bless the United States," "The Star-Spangled Banner," the "Pledge of Allegiance," and the "Statue of Liberty in New York," "Mount Rushmore," with its presidential carvings and numerous other symbols and rhetoric are the "invented traditions" that link American national identity with AE (McCrisken 8).

At this point, Gellner's perspective on nationalism as a historically contingent construct offers a useful tool to critique AE (3-4). He suggests that national identity is shaped by social conditions such as industrialization and cultural dissemination while AE posits an inherent, almost predestined identity for the US (10). This highlights that the narrative of American superiority may be as constructed and propagated as the national identities forged in other industrial societies. Also, in the context of AE, the US educational system and cultural symbols play a central role, akin to what Gellner describes in his analysis of nationalism (27). The "city upon a hill" rhetoric and patriotic education serve as mechanisms to unify citizens under a shared national identity, reinforcing the belief in the US as a unique global leader. This cultural imposition mirrors Gellner's idea of a state-managed high culture that sustains national consciousness (11-12). Consequently, framing American national identity as an independent variable and positioning American foreign policy as the dependent

variable, this study incorporates AE as an intervening variable, signifying its constructive impact on foreign policy.

Bringing AE back to International Relations

To investigate how AE shapes US foreign policy, it is essential to explore the lens through which mainstream IR theories perceive this phenomenon. While AE is fundamentally tied to identity and ideological beliefs, Neorealism presents a contrasting perspective by prioritizing material capabilities and state interests over ideational elements (Waltz 102-103). This part examines why neorealism, with its focus on the international system, often falls short of explaining the influence of AE on foreign policy.

Neorealists

As an ideological construct that shapes the American national identity and exerts a considerable influence on American foreign policy, the concept of AE warrants contextualization within the framework of international theories (Ereli 16). In this context, neither explicating AE within a neorealist framework nor recognizing it as a driving force for foreign policy has constituted a pivotal focus for neorealists. Fundamentally, the underlying premise of AE, which posits the US as an exceptional entity in a world characterized by diversity, stands in stark contrast to the tenets of realism. The realist perspective typically operates on the assumption of states pursuing their self-interest in a competitive international system, rendering the notion of AE incongruent with the realist viewpoint (Walt, "American Exceptionalism"). Neorealist theory suggests that differences between states mainly stem from shifts in the distribution of (hard power) capabilities, leading to changes in relative power dynamics (Walt, "American Exceptionalism"). However, focusing solely on material capabilities and ignoring domestic structures and ideological factors that can influence foreign policy is a limitation on the part of neorealism (Kitchen 117). Outlining the perspective of key neorealists on AE, Walt critically evaluates the concept, asserting "it is mostly a myth"

("The Myth of American Exceptionalism"). While acknowledging that "America's values, political system, and history are worthy of admiration," Walt downplays the role of AE in shaping US foreign policy. From a neorealist standpoint, he argues that the US foreign policy should be guided by careful evaluations of "relative power and the competitive nature of international politics" ("The Myth of American Exceptionalism").

Within the neorealist theory, the adverse repercussions of American foreign policy stemming from what is often characterized as an "imperial overstretch" by the US, exemplified by conflicts such as the Filipino War, the Nicaraguan War, and the Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq War in 2003, have been presented as justifications for challenging the concept of AE (Ereli 22). This perspective argues that, despite its self-image as a unique and moral leader, the US has engaged in conflicts driven by power and strategic interests, like other powers. For instance, the Filipino War (1899-1902) demonstrated the US extending its influence under the guise of spreading democracy but resulting in significant loss of life and resistance that mirrored the colonial behaviors of European empires. More recently, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been viewed through a neorealist lens as costly ventures that prioritized geopolitical objectives over the purported moral imperatives of spreading democracy and human rights. Walt has contended that when confronted with the grim reality of war, the US is not inherently predisposed to behave in an "exceptional" manner that distinguishes it from other nations ("The Myth of American Exceptionalism").

These parallels are strategically utilized by scholars to undermine the efficacy of AE. By highlighting instances of miscalculations within American foreign policy and situating the US within a historical context, Walt approaches to the concept of AE not with uncritical celebration but rather with a sense of circumspection ("American Exceptionalism"). Concluding the normative aspects of his argument, he expresses discontent with AE and contends that realism should have been the guiding principle underpinning American foreign policy for the preceding two decades ("Realist World"). A conspicuous limitation of the neorealist perspective in addressing AE lies in its emphasis on the outcomes of actions and its tendency to perceive states as uniform

entities. When it comes to analyzing the actions and behaviors of the US in terms of AE, it is imperative not to scrutinize it as merely another historical great power. While drawing comparisons could provide valuable insights, the primary focus should be on the enduring nature and pervasiveness of this ideology in American history and the nation's perception of itself (Lipset 18).

Neorealism, by its very nature, does not incorporate prevalent ideas, ideologies, or beliefs as variables of significance within the realm of international politics. Furthermore, the examination of identity is not a facet readily accommodated within the confines of neorealism. It is imperative to recognize that AE, to a considerable degree, plays a pivotal role in shaping the American national identity. It transcends the mere articulation of self-congratulatory narratives regarding the greatness of the US; instead, it possesses a profound depth and wields a corresponding influence (Ereli 22-23).

Neorealists have frequently overlooked the potential influence of ideational factors, often placing less emphasis on their impact compared to material elements in global politics. In their view, the US does not inherently carry a responsibility or mission to better the world. That is why most of the realists/neorealists opposed the Iraq War in 2003, arguing that it was not in the interest of the US to intervene in Iraq because nothing related to survival or genuine national interest was there for the US (Mearsheimer et al.). Nonetheless, the social world and the complicated nature of foreign policy are far from the simplistic binary perspectives that neorealism often posits. In conclusion, as evident from the foregoing discussion, neorealism envisages a world characterized by stability, homogeneity among states, and a uniform trajectory, thereby falling short of providing an adequate framework for comprehending the intricacies of AE within international relations (Ereli 22).

Neoliberals

Neoliberals embrace the idea of change. They contend that as time progresses, humans have the potential to evolve, and consequently, international institutions that are established by states also undergo

transformation. Based on this foundational assumption, one could argue that the concept of identity within neoliberal theory is inherently dynamic rather than stable. Neoliberalism posits that identities can evolve in response to shifts in human behavior and the evolution of international institutions. Of particular significance is the neoliberal theory's proposition of an identity concept that is simultaneously both unique and universal. This signifies the liberal commitment to individualism, wherein each actor possesses a distinctive identity while also participating in a broader, universal framework. In essence, neoliberalism promotes the idea that individual identities coexist within a larger, evolving international system (Heywood 184). Elements like religion, culture, and political principles do not form the basis of neoliberal identity, as identity is considered an individual notion where everyone holds the same rights (Heywood 184). The American identity is, in essence, deeply rooted in the notion that the United States is unique and embodies a sense of being divinely selected. This foundation raises questions about whether neoliberal identity frameworks are sufficient to fully explain the concept of AE.

Neoliberal theory places a strong emphasis on the importance of economic interdependence and active participation in multilateral endeavors, particularly in the creation of various international institutions. However, when analyzing the US through a neoliberal lens, it becomes evident that during the immediate postwar years, the nation assumed a central role in shaping the global order according to its vision. The US took the lead in establishing both economic and security institutions at both regional and global levels. This proactive role in shaping international institutions aligned with its perceived exceptional mission on the world stage, thereby highlighting the multifaceted nature of American identity and its interaction with neoliberal principles.

Following World War II, the United States assumed a significant role in global affairs through a series of strategic initiatives (McCormick 199). These included the Marshall Plan, designed to aid European economies in recovering from the devastation of war; the announcement of the Truman Doctrine, aimed at curbing Soviet influence in Greece and Turkey, the establishment of the North Atlantic

Treaty Organization (NATO), and the creation of the Bretton Woods monetary system to manage the international economy (McCormick 199). The US assumed an active role in the immediate postwar years to shape the global order in alignment with its vision. This proactive engagement carries significant implications for understanding AE within a neoliberal framework, as it highlights how American identity intertwines with neoliberal principles in shaping international institutions and global norms (Motter 514). Specific post-World War II policies reflect both a commitment to promoting global stability, and a projection of uniquely American ideals rooted in its sense of exceptionalism (McCormick 199).

Neoliberalism highlights the importance of state priorities in shaping actions and provides a perspective for understanding the possibilities of cooperative efforts on a global scale within the context of AE. Along these lines, John Gerard Ruggie argues that the US, in its vision following World War II, embraced the notion of "sustainable engagement" ("Interests, Identity" 206). While Ruggie does not explicitly associate this concept with AE, it serves as a useful framework for understanding how the US's active participation in multilateral initiatives aligns with its broader identity. This approach highlights that AE can manifest in isolationist tendencies and in a proactive commitment to international cooperation, where global norms are influenced by American values and preferences (Ruggie, "Interests, Identity" 206). This perspective invites further exploration of how AE's unique characteristics might have driven or harmonized with such multilateral efforts in the post-1945 landscape.

America's understanding of its founding principles and political identity is closely linked to its vision of world order in the postwar years (Ruggie, "Interests, Identity" 206, 218). In other words, ideas about the nature of the US have shaped the nation's identity. Ruggie identifies these ideas as "inherent individual rights, equality of opportunity, the rule of law, and being born out of a radical revolution," associating them with American national identity ("Interests, Identity" 218). As these are universal ideas that can and should be adopted to further human betterment, the US aims to initiate visions for establishing a world order that necessitates American leadership. Indeed, these initiatives

can be seen as directly aligned with the mission of promoting American values and actively engaging with the world to achieve this objective.

While the post-war world order may be characterized as a multilateral one, the US did not solely create this order through a strictly multilateral process. The US played a central role in the establishment of post-war institutions and the formulation of global norms, often steering the direction of these endeavors by its vision and values. This proactive stance was emblematic of AE, which sought to shape the world order in a manner that reflected its distinct identity and objectives, even within the framework of multilateral cooperation (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 110). Given the US desire to maintain its autonomy and flexibility in foreign policy, it cannot be claimed that a genuinely multilateral order was established. The US has avoided pursuing a true multilateral approach in the post-war era, largely due to the restrictive nature of such policies (Skidmore 224). Consequently, the key result of AE in foreign relations has been the advancement of American primacy on the global stage.

Constructivists

Constructivism in the 1990s represented an innovative perspective within international relations field by assigning prominence to and offering a genuine recognition of the ideational factors that influence and shape state interests. Constructivism is a theoretical approach that elevates ideational variables over material variables when analyzing international politics. While constructivist theorizing places a primary emphasis on ideational factors, it is important to note that this does not imply a neglect of material and objective realities. The inherent logic of constructivist theory revolves around the premise that interests are not pre-given or predetermined; rather, it asserts that interests are constructed. This means that state interests are not static or fixed but are instead shaped and molded by a complex interplay of ideas, norms, identities, and social interactions. Constructivism's focus on the malleability of interests underscores its distinctive approach to understanding international relations, one that goes beyond traditional realist or liberal paradigms that tend to emphasize material or structural factors (Hopf 176).

In the constructivist framework, interests are not seen as permanent but are shaped by identities, which are formed through interactions with other actors (Wendt 102-103). This dynamic relationship between interests and identities implies that interests possess the potential for transformation and adaptation over time, signifying their inherent flexibility. Constructivism advocates that interests are intimately shaped by identity, and identity, in turn, is influenced by prevailing ideas and beliefs. Importantly, both identity and interests are viewed as socially constructed within the constructivist approach. This stands in contrast to conventional rationalist perspectives, which often assert that interests are structurally imposed on states by external factors. The constructivist approach underscores the role of social processes, norms, and shared understandings in shaping the behavior and preferences of states in international politics (Hopf 175).

The contradictions explored in Brickhouse's work between national pride and transitional influence reveal an important dimension of AE (27). While the US worked to present itself as a singular, independent identity, its cultural and literary expressions often drew from and resonated with influences from Latin America and the Caribbean (Brickhouse 3). This duality suggests that AE was as much about assimilating and repurposing external influences as it was about asserting a unique national identity. Brickhouse's work urges a reevaluation of the narrative that American cultural and political identity was forged in isolation. By showcasing the US's active engagement with literary and cultural currents from Latin America, it becomes clear that exceptionalism was not solely an internal phenomenon but part of a shared hemispheric dynamic (Brickhouse 3). This insight invites a rethinking of how the US positioned itself as exceptional about its neighbors.

Brickhouse's work reveals that nineteenth-century American literature was influenced by cultural and literary exchanges with Latin American nations (9). These transamerican interactions shaped how American authors articulated national identity, infusing their works with ideas and motifs that transcended US borders. This interconnectedness highlights that AE emerged within a broader hemispheric context, challenging the notion that US cultural development was an isolated

or entirely original process (Brickhouse 3). In this context, identity emerges as a predominant factor, oftentimes the most influential, in shaping a nation's interests. While the emphasis on ideational variables does not negate the importance of other factors that contribute to the definition of interests, it does assign a heightened significance to these ideational elements (Wendt 102-103). Specifically, this perspective prioritizes the understanding of how interests are delineated by giving precedence to the ideas held by policymakers and nations themselves (Gilmore 301-302).

In traditional analyses of AE, the concept has been interpreted from two main angles: As an "objective truth claim" and as a "subjective understanding of the American self" (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 17). The first perspective uncovers the founding principles shaping US foreign policy as well as other tangible traits that are often framed to highlight the uniqueness of the US in comparison with other nations. This understanding underscores AE as an inherent characteristic rooted in identity, implying that America's perception of itself as exceptional is mirrored in its actions and policies on the world stage. The "subjective understanding" approach complements this by focusing on the self-perception of Americans and how this influences collective identity. For example, the idea that Americans view their country as having a unique mission or divine purpose in global affairs reflects an internalized sense of exceptionalism.

This connection between AE and identity could be further demonstrated through John F. Kennedy's "New Frontier" speech (1960), which capsulated the belief in American leadership and responsibility in advancing freedom and democracy. The speech exemplifies the principles underpinning AE by framing the US as a nation with a unique and divinely inspired mission to lead, innovate, and face global challenges head-on. Kennedy's rallying call for Americans to become "new pioneers" points out to the AE as an actionable commitment to progress and international leadership. His emphasis on 'invention, innovation, imagination, decision' underscores that American identity is both aspirational and proactive, consolidating the idea that the US holds a special role in guiding the world toward freedom and justice. This aligns with the constructivist notion that identity and action are

intertwined; Kennedy's speech illustrates how the American sense of exceptionalism drives its foreign policy and global initiatives, blending ideological conviction with practical efforts. Thus, the "New Frontier" frames AE's dual nature rooted in self-perception and manifested through a commitment to leading by example in a changing world.

In that respect, discussing American national identity, Tennenhouse offers a compelling perspective: Early American identity was inextricably linked to British cultural roots (1). This connection persisted even after political independence, as Americans sought to retain and adapt English cultural values to a distinctly American context (Tennenhouse 1-2). Integrating this view demonstrates that the foundational elements of AE were not created in a vacuum but were shaped by a transatlantic identity that blended British heritage with the evolving American self-perception (Tennenhouse 9). This continuity highlights that the notion of AE grew out of both inherited and reinterpreted cultural narratives, reinforcing the view that its uniqueness was an adaptation as much as an original construct (Tennenhouse 21). Moreover, Brickhouse's analysis of the nineteenth century public sphere reveals that the US was part of a hemispheric network of discourse, where ideas flowed across borders and influenced public opinion (Tennenhouse 3). This interconnected public sphere means that American identity was shaped through continuous interaction with ideas from neighboring countries, making it less insular and more dynamic.

Alternatively, another approach to the concept of AE characterizes it as a subjective perception of the American identity. It is noteworthy that the belief in exceptionalism remains enduring and has exerted a significant influence on the discourse and execution of foreign policy, notwithstanding the challenges in empirically validating its underlying assumptions (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 17). This approach delves into the significance of the belief in AE in shaping Americans' self-conception. The essence of this subjective perspective originates from the beliefs held by Americans, encompassing national narratives, historical accounts, and myths sustained within the discourse of key policymakers and the broader populace. Rather than focusing on material distinctions that make America unique, this subjective view provides a rich basis for deeply anchoring the perception of the

American self (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 17). This implies that the belief in AE is significant regardless of the validity of the underlying ideas. Americans define their identity based on the values they cherish. To be American is often seen as synonymous with adopting American values, making it an "ideological commitment" rather than something determined by birthright (Lipset 31). Samuel Huntington described "the American Creed" as encompassing "liberty, equality, individualism, democracy and the rule of law under a constitution" (McCrisken 7). The American Creed represents the essential values that shape American politics and national character. These foundational principles are what sustain the nation's identity and sense of greatness. Therefore, adherence to these values and principles is central to being considered American (McCrisken 65).

Policy Implications: Unilateral Internationalism?

The belief in AE by both the American populace and its policymakers is regarded as a defining aspect of American identity. It is reflected in the rhetoric used by policymakers they devise. This is especially evident in discussions and decisions related to American foreign and security affairs, where the necessity of US leadership in international relations is consistently highlighted (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 204-205). The American national identity, rooted in the concept of AE, advances the notion of American leadership on the global stage. It encompasses a cohesive set of values-based overarching ideals that serve as guiding principles shaping both the discourse and implementation of the foreign policy. In this manner, AE is perceived as being perpetuated through a combination of beliefs in American superiority, a sense of divine selection, and mission, as well as foreign and security policy practices that reformulate the necessity of American leadership in the world (Mead 10)

These practices encompass distinctive interpretations of the global order, envisioning a world order that is to be formulated and spearheaded by the US. In his analysis, Ruggie emphasizes that American foreign policy has historically been driven by a unique combination of interests and identity, where the US positions itself as an architect of global norms and institutions ("The Past as Prologue?" 97-98). This

idea aligns with AE, underscoring the belief that the US has both the responsibility and the capacity to lead the world. Alternatively, scholars such as George Löfflman propose that a post-American hegemony could be sustained through strategies like burden-sharing, cooperative engagement, and military restraint (Löfflman 308-32). These approaches reflect an understanding of how American primacy can be adapted in an era of shifting global power dynamics (Nye 90-91). While the exact strategies for maintaining American dominance continue to be debated within policy circles, the underlying consensus on the importance of American primacy remains one of the few areas where bipartisan agreement is evident, bridging the traditional divide between the GOP and the Democratic Party (Walt, "American Primacy" 10). This consensus highlights that AE not only informs the US's self-perception but also shapes its strategic imperatives, whether through direct leadership or collaborative international engagement (Hodgson 26).

Internationalism represents a proactive commitment to actively participate in international affairs. This engagement encompasses political, military, and economic involvement in global matters, demonstrating a willingness to collaborate and interact with other nations on the international stage (Kuehl and Ostrower 41). Unilateralism and multilateralism represent distinct approaches to how a nation engages with the world, reflecting the choice between acting independently or in collaboration with other countries. Unilateralism signifies a foreign policy stance wherein the US seeks to safeguard its freedom of action, aiming for greater maneuverability while conducting international affairs (Kagan 4). It does not entail a passive or directionless approach to foreign policy but rather emphasizes independence and autonomy in decision-making (Mead 107). In contrast, multilateralism entails the coordination of policies with other international actors, adherence to established rules, and a willingness to yield to multilateral decisions in specific policy domains. This approach involves a commitment to cooperation with other nations and often necessitates compromises, thereby potentially limiting the degree of independent maneuverability in policy matters (Caporaso 603).

The central argument herein contends that the US has consistently adhered to an internationalist foreign policy paradigm characterized by sustained and proactive involvement with the global

community, a commitment dating back to its inception (Schlesinger 53-54). Concurrently, the US has persistently endeavored to augment its strategic maneuverability, displaying a zealous determination to safeguard its autonomy and freedom of action, even when participating in multilateral initiatives it may have played a pivotal role in initiating (Ikenberry et al. 1-2). Furthermore, this argument advocates that the concepts of unilateralism and internationalism offer substantially enhanced analytical utility for comprehending the intricacies of American foreign policy.

In this contextual framework, unilateralism can be construed as a corollary of the belief in AE, which inherently constitutes a foundational element of American identity. Within the construct of AE, wherein the US is perceived as chosen, superior, and entrusted with a divine mission, it follows that the nation is disinclined to curtail its autonomy (Hodgson 15-16). As a result, the US is inclined to vehemently safeguard its constitutional principles and sovereignty, particularly when faced with endeavors to subject them to external international norms or rules (McDougall 101-102).

The ongoing course of unilateral internationalism can be easily identified within a series of significant historical turning points, such as the formulation of the Monroe Doctrine, the introduction of Manifest Destiny, the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, and the latter's widespread implementation. In this context, Woodrow Wilson stands out as a pivotal individual who had a long-lasting impact on US foreign policy (Mead 88). Woodrow Wilson's visionary approach resonated profoundly and would subsequently find resonance in the policies of Cold War-era presidents. Administrations under Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry Truman also drew upon the tenets of Wilsonianism as foundational principles informing their strategies for shaping the global order (Ikenberry et al. 2). Post-1945 democratization efforts undertaken by the US toward Germany and Japan confirm this point (Hodgson 42).

Conclusion

This article addresses the concept of AE, an important element in understanding American foreign policy. AE is defined by beliefs such as superiority, a sense of divine selection, and a divine purpose, and it is argued that these ideological structures shape the country's national identity and influence interventionist and unilateral foreign policy decisions. In the article, neorealism and neoliberalism are critically examined, and it is revealed how the United States' quest for global leadership and autonomy is affected by this country's assumed unique status. By focusing on material power dynamics, neorealism tends to ignore the influence of ideological elements such as AE. However, this approach overlooks the enduring impact of national identity on policy. Neoliberalism, on the other hand, recognizes the influence of ideological factors but often underestimates the extent to which AE drives the country's efforts to actively establish international norms. Neoliberalism places a strong emphasis on economic interdependence and international institutions. Constructivism, on the other hand, provides a powerful framework for understanding how identities and ideas influence state behavior, emphasizing the importance of AE in the development and implementation of American foreign policy. Historical and contemporary research shows that the idea of AE has consistently led the country toward an interventionist attitude that emphasizes dominance and leadership not in the sense of "imperial-style domination" but ideologically (Ikenberry et al. 199).

The relationship between American foreign policy and AE emphasizes unilateral internationalism, in which the United States often seeks to guide and shape the international system according to its values, independent of multilateral constraints. However, there are also criticisms of this constant search for autonomy and leadership. The limits and potential drawbacks of AE must be considered, especially the dangers of overreach and alienating foreign allies. As the US navigates the complexities of modern international relations, striking a balance between the goals of exceptionalism and practical policy considerations is critical. As a result, AE remains a powerful element shaping American foreign policy. Understanding the impact of this ideology through various international relations theories allows

us to better understand the country's international relations. Going forward, carefully considering both the strengths and limitations of this ideology will be vital to creating effective and sustainable foreign policy strategies.

Considering recent global shifts, AE also faces new tests that challenge its traditional influence on foreign policy, such as China's assertive rise and climate change policies. These prompted the US to reconsider how it projects influence in a multipolar world and to navigate the tension between maintaining its exceptional identity and engaging in multilateral efforts that may limit unilateral control. The evolving challenges illustrate how AE continues to shape US foreign policy while adapting to new global realities.

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Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*: The Borderland, Vulnerability, and the Need for Care and Attention

Elif Ergin *

Abstract

This article analyzes Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019) in the context of contemporary Mexican American literature, with a focus on vulnerability and the ethics of care. The novel deals with critical themes such as borders, culture, identity, and migration, with a particular focus on the experiences of migrants and their children. Drawing on her experiences, Luiselli sheds light on the 2014 immigration crisis and the plight of separated children at the border. The work highlights the vulnerability that undocumented migrants face and draws attention to human rights violations, family separation, and the isolation of children. Luiselli encourages readers to empathize, raise awareness, and advocate, showing that the border is not just a physical barrier but a complex, construct that profoundly affects lives and identities.

Keywords: Border, identity, vulnerability, ethics of care

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Valeria Luiselli'nin *Kayıp Çocuk Arşivi*: Sınır Bölgesi, Savunmasızlık ve Bakım ve İlgi İhtiyacı

Öz

Bu makale, Valeria Luiselli'nin *Lost Children Archive* (2019) romanını çağdaş Meksikalı Amerikalı edebiyatı bağlamında, kırılganlık ve bakım etiği çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Roman, sınırlar, kültür, kimlik ve göç gibi kritik temaları ele alarak, özellikle göçmenlerin ve çocuklarının deneyimlerine odaklanmaktadır. Luiselli, göçle ilgili kişisel deneyimlerinden yola çıkarak, 2014 göçmenlik krizine ve sınırda ayrı düşmüş çocukların durumuna ışık tutmaktadır. Eser, belgesiz göçmenlerin karşılaştığı savunmasızlık ve bakım ihtiyacını, kısıtlayıcı yasalar ve sosyal ayrımcılık nedeniyle vurgulamakta ve insan hakları ihlalleri, aile ayrılıkları ve çocukların tecrit edilmesi gibi konulara dikkat çekmektedir. Luiselli, etkileyici anlatıları aracılığıyla okuyucuları empati kurmaya ve farkındalık oluşturmaya teşvik ederken, sınırın sadece fiziksel bir engel olmadığını, aynı zamanda hayatları ve kimlikleri derinden etkileyen karmaşık, siyasi olarak yüklü bir yapı olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sınır, kimlik, kırılganlık, bakım etiği

Introduction

This article aims to delve into Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (2019) through the lens of the ethics of vulnerability and care, offering a nuanced exploration of the contemporary Mexican American border crisis and its reverberations in Mexican American literature. The primary objective of this research is to analyze how the *Lost Children Archive* gives voice to Mexican American immigrants and draws attention to the condition of children whose immigration patterns have received little attention from population geographers but whose actions are significant enough to warrant further research. As Luiselli states: "No one looks at the bigger map, historical and geographical, of a refugee population's migration routes. Most people

think of refugees and migrants as a foreign problem. Few conceive of migration simply as a national reality" (*Lost Children Archive* 50). This study aspires to provide a comprehensive overview of how immigration is portrayed within this literary tradition. However, it is essential to acknowledge that this analysis represents merely a fragment of the rich tapestry of literature addressing this poignant theme. In *Lost Children Archive*, the imperative to care for others—especially during times of upheaval such as immigration—comes to the forefront, compelling us to tend not only to our world but also to the needs of those around us. Through this lens, the article will illustrate the significance of understanding borders as a formidable phenomenon that shapes our reality, exposing the vulnerabilities inherent in the human experience amidst political and social turmoil. Moreover, it underscores the urgent necessity for empathy and mutual care, fostering a deeper awareness of the challenges faced by marginalized groups and the complexities of immigration—a pressing issue of our time—beautifully encapsulated within Luiselli's narrative.

The United States has consistently been a nation of immigrants, shaped by diverse waves of people seeking refuge, opportunity, and a new life. Historically, the US has been a nation shaped by waves of immigration, dating back to its founding in the 18th century, when European settlers sought new opportunities. Movements such as the Great Migration in the early twentieth century and the post-World War II influx of immigrants further demonstrate America's ongoing evolution as a land of opportunity for those fleeing hardship and pursuing their dreams. However, contemporary immigration has become increasingly contentious, with more complex challenges arising than in the past. With the apprehension of 11,500 unaccompanied Central American children at the US-Mexico border in May 2019 alone, the fiscal year was set to surpass the numbers seen in 2014, a year that marked the surge in arrivals of minors as a full-blown crisis (Selee et al.). Public outrage has intensified in response to recent reports detailing the inhumane and unsanitary conditions in Border Patrol facilities, exposing the inability of both the executive branch and Congress to adequately prepare for the growing demand for shelter and care. The continual rise in the number of arriving minors—reminiscent of the 2014 influx—indicates that this immigration pattern is not a temporary emergency but an

enduring and systemic issue. This situation underscores the need to reframe and respond to the crisis as a persistent reality requiring long-term solutions.

Issues such as heightened political polarization, stricter immigration policies, rising anti-immigrant sentiment, and the humanitarian crises faced by asylum seekers and undocumented migrants have intensified debates around immigration. The topic of immigration in the United States has led to intense debates between those advocating for strict border closures and those who support more lenient policies for asylum seekers and those seeking a better life. This situation highlights the complex nature of borders, which serve as both separators and connectors. While borders can bridge divides, they can also exclude individuals who do not fit neatly into either side or the space in between. Understanding the dual role of borders is essential, as they have different meanings and implications in various literary works. Although the notion of a "borderless world" is often discussed in the context of today's interconnected global society, the concept of borders encompasses various perspectives and theories that seek to understand their role, function, and impact in different contexts. Cathrine Olea Johansen describes borders as embodying "the notion of hybridity, diversity and doubling" (3). She suggests that borders not only mark divisions but also involve the "change between the visible and invisibility," inviting us to reconsider traditional binaries. In doing so, borders open the possibility for a "third space," a concept Johansen explores as a realm where oppositions dissolve, and a new hybrid space emerges beyond binaries. This third space becomes a site of transformation, where the convergence of diverse identities and perspectives fosters new understandings and potential for unity within diversity. The dynamic nature of borders remains a focal point of academic research, and it becomes important to shed light upon its representation in literature as well. Thus, the significance of borders stretches beyond their physical presence on a map and encompasses their symbolic, political, social, and economic implications. The notion of borders can be perceived in physical or abstract terms, yet their impact can be both divisive and unifying for people, nations, groups, and societies. Modern nation-states place immense importance on maintaining borders, which are commonly viewed as symbols of safety

and security. Yet, as Parker and Vaughn-Williams point out, borders are deeply entwined with "violence, force, and the deployment of a logic of exceptionalism," challenging the simplistic notion of borders as fixed, neutral lines (585). Similarly, Diener and Hagen describe borders as "social constructions" open to negotiation and change rather than rigid or inherently authoritative (3). Expanding on this, Anderson, Sharma, and Wright classify borders as connections that perpetuate separations and inequalities based on national identity (6). They argue that borders are often oppressive, as they follow individuals across different life domains, restricting access to labor, health, education, and civil protections (6). This perspective highlights the dynamic and, at times, restrictive nature of borders beyond their physical presence.

The concept of borderlands was vividly brought to life in Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, published in 1987. She puts emphasis, especially on border theory's cross-disciplinary influence. She defines the border as,

> Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. (25)

Her initial sentence portrays the boundary between the US and Mexico as "an open wound where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (Anzaldúa 25). She further states, "the lifeblood of two worlds" merge "to form a third – a border culture" (3). Through the metaphor of borderlands, Anzaldúa provides a fresh perspective on the border, which she expresses through her analysis of 'the mestiza' defined as a person with a blended Hispanic and American heritage and 'nepantla' which means 'the in-between space.' As AnaLouise Keating states, individuals living in 'the nepantla' 'who live within and among multiple worlds and develop what Anzaldua describes as a 'perspective from the cracks'; namely, a different perspective on borders between identities and 'systems of difference' (1). In that sense, she challenges our understanding of the limitations of physical and cultural borders.

The task of illustrating immigrant tales and the influence of oppressive borders on young people is more challenging than ever before. The current refugee crisis, wherever it is in the world and whatever its many causes are, is possibly the greatest political and humanitarian challenge facing the world, and yet the processing of new arrivals is handled by clunking overburdened government agencies. What distinguishes an asylum seeker from a refugee and a refugee from an immigrant? Is there a difference between an illegal alien and an undocumented immigrant apart from the emotions each term stirs? Numerous academic fields continue to pay attention to the expanding Mexican American community in the United States. Thirty-two million individuals identified as being of Mexican heritage according to the 2010 census, which accounts for two-thirds of the overall Latino/ population of nearly 50 million people, and this number continues to rise each day. According to Fox, the border has received a great deal of attention in recent literature and art, but this body of work has not yet been fully acknowledged by scholars and critics… this usage is rarely tied to the US-Mexico border (1-2). Considering this, a discourse on the US-Mexico border as a text situated in a specific location must consider the concept of the border, crossing the border, and those who undertake this journey. Even the visual appearance of a border fence challenges the concept of belonging and community, as it divides cultures and individuals.

The diverse expressions of immigration in Latina/o literature illustrate the multiple facets of life that shape and affect the immigration experience. Narratives, poetry, essays, and other literary genres of Latina/o culture demonstrate the varying nature of the immigration experience. Common motifs in these works are nostalgia, discrimination, hybridity, displacement, interculturalism, and survival. By engaging with these topics, Latina/o literature has shed light on the intricacies of immigration and Latina/o identity while disproving the single-dimensional and defamatory stereotypes about Latinas/os that are widespread in US mainstream society. Most significantly, it reveals to the public that those who go through immigration are human beings struggling to survive despite the complexities of the situation. In that sense, contemporary Mexican American writers draw attention to this problem from a critical point of view and provide a distinctive

perspective depending on their history, culture, and experience. These writers are united by several recurring themes, including their quest for self-discovery, their depiction of the immigrant journey, and their struggles with adapting to American society, which can be both challenging and emotionally charged. These authors reveal their longing for their homeland, their experiences of crossing the border and immigration, growing up multilingual, and the identity challenge of being in multiple places. In that sense, these writers provide broader views on these significant issues as they know the meaning of being between two languages, cultures, and countries. Some of these writers have crossed the border and become the voice of the invisible minority in the US, Mexican Americans whose lives are forgotten at the border and separated from their families. These Mexican American writers give realistic depictions of human suffering caused by displacement and immigration.

Vulnerability has become a central concept in recent ethical and political discussions. Although the term "vulnerable" is frequently used to describe certain groups, the broader implications of focusing on vulnerability remain underexplored. It is essential for understanding, assessing, and mitigating threats. As Schneiderbauer notes, "when a hazardous event occurs—be it natural, technological, or man-made—the vulnerability of exposed people, objects (e.g., critical infrastructure), and systems (e.g., socioecological systems) at different scales is key to determine the severity of the impact" (70). Similarly, Butler describes vulnerability as subjective and complex, with varying effects based on specific groups, locations, and situations (43). Although widely acknowledged, definitions of vulnerability differ across authors and disciplines. It is stated that vulnerability derives from the Latin word *vulnus*, meaning wound, and emphasizes the capacity for suffering embodied in human beings. According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, being vulnerable is being "fragile to damage, injury, failure, or abuse." Furthermore, vulnerability is defined as "the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally" by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Rose and Killien established the concept of vulnerability by distinguishing between personal and environmental factors and the related terms of vulnerability and risk (60-73). According to Goodin,

for instance, being vulnerable means being exposed to potential harm or danger that can affect one's interests, and it is closely tied to the relationship between certain agents and the specific threats they pose. In that sense, even though everyone is at risk from these dangers, certain people or groups are more susceptible than others due to their inability or weakened ability to defend themselves. Aday's influential sociological work in the 1990s broadened the concept to include the physical, psychological, and social health of both communities and individuals, in addition to the resources to deal with them. Upon transitioning into the twenty first century, vulnerability was viewed in the context of shifting demographics and multicultural, intercultural, and intracultural matters. The ideas examined about vulnerability changed, these being marginalization, social connectedness, and health disparity. As we progress further into the twenty first century, the usage of the language connected with vulnerability is constantly changing in the literature related to discipline and perspective. Different connotations of vulnerability remain present; however, the concept is usually accompanied by an adjective like societal or personal vulnerability, implying a broad understanding of the various interpretations of vulnerability.

Vulnerability theory illuminates the intricate fabric of human dependency, portraying vulnerability as a perpetual condition of exposure and interconnectedness, where harm is an ever-present possibility woven into the human experience. Fineman describes this state as one that "cannot be hidden," emphasizing that individuals are not isolated entities but rather deeply entwined within a web of relationships, social systems, and institutions (11). This universal vulnerability forms the ethical foundation for a strong welfare state, which seeks to address these inherent dependencies and provide support where needed. The concept of vulnerability is also richly complex, encompassing not only physical susceptibility but also the social and economic ramifications that ripple outwards, impacting relationships and institutions alike. This multiplicity reflects vulnerability as an enduring, layered condition that resonates through every facet of human life, deepening our understanding of the essential protections required to nurture and sustain communities. Both nationally and internationally, vulnerability as an idea and the vulnerable as a group are marginalized,

silenced, and othered (Russell and Schick 1-3). Therefore, as Robert E. Goodin addresses in *Protecting the Vulnerable*, we have "special responsibilities" for those who are not just a part of our family and friends but also a larger part of our community, society, or state (110).

Immigration, Resilience, And Vulnerability in *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli

Valeria Luiselli, born in 1983 in Mexico City, is a Mexican American writer and immigration advocate who lives in New York, where she writes her novels. She is the author of *Faces in the Crowd* (2011), *Sidewalks* (2013), *The Story of My Teeth* (2015), *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017), and *Lost Children Archive* (2019). She is one of the 5 Promising Young Writers Under 35 determined by the National Book Foundation in 2014 and distinguished among the new generation writers of Contemporary Latin American literature with her distinctive voice and has received praise, especially in the US and England with her works translated into more than 20 languages. After the publication of *Lost Children Archive*, considered among the best books of 2019, Luiselli received the Guggenheim Fellowship presented to gifted artists and scientific researchers in 2020. She has won Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Best Fiction (2016), the American Book Award (2018), the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction (2020), and was a finalist for the Booker Prize (2019), Women's Prize for Fiction (2019), Kirkus Prize, and National Book Critics Circle Award which one of only two Mexicans ever to be nominated in the US Valeria Luiselli's writing profoundly explores themes of silence, language barriers, cultural dislocation, and the feeling of being between worlds. Her work frequently addresses the experiences of displacement, isolation, and unbelonging, particularly within the context of immigration. As noted by Campisi, "the figure of misplaced baggage" in Luiselli's work symbolizes the broader Latin American literary exploration of the cosmopolitan experience and the loss of culture and identity while navigating the world (114). Luiselli's characters often remain unnamed and difficult to categorize, reflecting the complexities of identity and belonging. Her unique approach blends elements of novel and nonfiction, creating what could

be described as "documentary fiction," where documentary practices inform and shape the narrative. Having lived in various countries across four continents, Luiselli's personal experiences of nonbelonging and foreignness deeply influence her writing. Her work operates in the space between life and art, aiming to define and liberate identity from restrictive definitions. Through geographical metaphors—cities, maps, architecture, and navigation—she examines how her characters interact with their surroundings. Luiselli views language as a bridge between the material world and the inner life, which is evident in her portrayal of migrant stories. As she describes in an interview, these stories are often "shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order," illustrating their fragmented and unresolved nature ("Translating the Stories").

Lost Children Archive by Valeria Luiselli is a pivotal literary work that captures the immigration crisis, especially the challenges faced by unaccompanied and undocumented children at the US-Mexico border. The novel received critical acclaim, establishing Luiselli as a significant contemporary author. It offers a deep examination of the refugee crisis, highlighting the personal and systemic struggles of these vulnerable children. Luiselli's engagement with the crisis was hands-on; she worked as a translator in court for these children, which profoundly influenced her writing. Her direct involvement in the crisis fueled her political frustration, initially leading her to pause the novel in favor of writing a short essay, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions,* which addresses the legal battles faced by undocumented children. This essay provided an immediate outlet for her concerns and shaped the completion of the *Lost Children Archive*. The novel serves as a "sound map" of the socio-political realities along the US-Mexico border, with a particular focus on the US side, blending personal narrative with broader political and social commentary. The novel intricately weaves together the themes of displacement, loss, and systemic failure, reflecting the broader discourse surrounding the border. This border, stretching nearly 2,000 miles across California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, acts as both a physical and metaphorical divide, representing the complex and often harsh realities faced by those navigating its boundaries. The US-Mexico border is not merely a line on a map but a dynamic and contested space that embodies various socio-economic,

political, and geographical tensions. It serves as a locus for discussions about identity, migration, and human rights, challenging readers to consider the profound impacts of these issues on both individuals and communities. In essence, Luiselli's novel and essay collectively engage with the border as a site of intense human drama and systemic conflict. By integrating her personal experiences with broader socio-political commentary, Luiselli offers a nuanced and impactful perspective on the immigration crisis and its human cost (Aguirre and Simmers 99). Her work comes through a combination of anger and clarity or an attempt to find clarity in a world that is constantly filling us with fear and confusion. As the narrative progresses in the gaps between the cities of Arizona, the "ghost maps" denote the places where the skeletons of refugee children are discovered — their identities, stories, and causes of death are commonly a secret. As Luiselli states, "numbers and maps tell horror stories, but the stories of deepest horror are perhaps those for which there are no numbers, no maps, no possible accountability, no words ever written or spoken" (*Tell Me* 30). The story is set during the time of the Central American Diaspora, focusing on the summer when a large influx of Central American children arrived in the US seeking asylum. As the novel unfolds, amid a failing marriage, a family embarks on a road trip while 60,000 children are unaccompanied at the border, seeking asylum and praying for the chance to reunite with their families and avoid being deported back.

This book was born from the crisis and a sudden surge that was announced in 2014, even though children had been arriving alone in the US for many years. Immigration authorities noticed that 80.000 children had arrived alone without parents at the border between October 2013 and June 2014 – in such a short period. They were seeking asylum or some form of immigration relief. In that sense, Luiselli urges us to engage in the complicated task of converting language, experience, and bodies across time, thought, and culture. *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* pleads for a total reformation of the forces that have constructed present immigration into the United States and the way many Americans, removed from fact, view it. It also appeals for action. The very least we can all do is to hear these stories" (n.p.). According to Luiselli, the governments of Mexico, the US, and the northern triangle – Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are

co-responsible for this situation. Until those governments accept their shared responsibility – historical and current, it is not possible to find a real and long-lasting solution. One of the main problems in the US is that the situation is always described as another government's problem by the US instead of considering it as a transnational situation. Valeria Luiselli wishes to change the language around how we think about immigration. Violence against people starts with language, and calling an undocumented migrant illegal or calling deportation removal creates a very negative meaning, which leads people to feel lesser, criminal, and not entitled to anything. In her interview with *Rolling Stone* Luiselli discusses thinking of "children from the Northern Triangle as refugees and not as migrants – not that migrants should receive bad treatment or lesser treatment, but in particular, these children cannot be seen as migrants because they come from situations of war and need the kind of protections that refugees are entitled" ("Translating the Stories") In that sense, Luiselli stresses that educating Americans about the motives behind immigration is essential to reforming our dysfunctional system and going beyond the current government's aim to construct a wall.

Lost Children Archive is deeply informed by Valeria Luiselli's personal experience as an interpreter for migrants in New York City's federal immigration court. It provides a different perspective of serious happenings taking place at Mexico – the US border, which takes *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* as a basis. Children immigrants are at the center of Luiselli's latest novel, *Lost Children Archive*. In the novel, a group of Central American children approach the US–Mexico border from the south. At the same time, an unnamed family- a mother, a father, and two children who belong to each one of the parents- in New York heads for the border on a road trip across the US towards the borderlands. The husband is a soundscape recorder and documents the sounds around areas or events to understand them. On the other hand, the wife is a journalist, but she does similar audio projects that her husband does, but she is more of an archivist. They are working on a project for NYU's Center for Urban Science and Progress, recording the city's sounds and compiling an "archive full of fragments of strangers' lives" (Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* 30). Meanwhile, the wife is focused on her mission: Locating two young girls who disappeared from detention and documenting the broader

tragedy of underage migrants at the US-Mexico border. They bring seven boxes alongside them in the car trunk for their trip. They fill them up with images and traces of their experience throughout the journey and try to catch echoes of others by recording sounds that were not "a collection of sounds that have been lost—such a thing would be impossible—but rather one of the sounds that were present in the time of recording and that, when we listen to them, remind us of the ones that are lost" (Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* 141). The novel utilizes sound as a storytelling tool to highlight the political, historical, and ecological elements of the Desert Southwest. Through the efforts of two of the main characters, constructing an inventory of sounds and a sound documentary, a complex and multifaceted image of the region is given.

As the family travels through the deserts of New Mexico and Arizona, the narrative juxtaposes the experiences of displaced children with the historical background of Geronimo and his people. The children wonder: "What if Geronimo had never surrendered? What if he'd won that war? Then the lost children would be the rulers of Apacheria!" (Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* 75). This road trip represents both a physical and emotional odyssey as they visit various towns and landmarks to advance their project's goals. Throughout the journey, the wife grapples with political, personal, and psychological challenges. As Luiselli's first novel written in English, *Lost Children Archive* deals with various topics, including a Mexican American family's road trip and a marriage's disintegration, immigrant children and families. Moreover, a lot of things happen on the border, real and imagined, in the characters' minds. The novel questions how and where we should stand to document political violence. It is a story of survival, in-betweenness, and an example of how we depend on each other by stressing the importance of togetherness. With the clash of political realities and human values, the novel discovers the boundaries of place and people and how important it is to care for the other in times of crisis.

The plight of asylum-seeking children, therefore, remains a significant yet underaddressed issue in global discourse and policy, highlighting a need for more focused attention and action. *Lost Children*

Archive places children into the narrative of history and re-introduces them into the modern realm of humanity. It seeks to narrate the stories of children who have been split up from their families without any reference to the past, politics, or details. The children's narratives consist of the mother's memories of her children, the documents from the children in previous immigrations, the mother's conversations with two missing children in NYC, and the reports on children broadcast on the radio. The accounts of the countless, unnamed children from disparate social and historical contexts merge as Luiselli's novels collate and re-create their journeys of immigration on land, over deserts. Luiselli uses these diverse narratives to create a collective account of the journeys and struggles of immigrant children. The novel acts as a compilation and re-creation of their experiences, merging various stories and contexts into a singular, poignant commentary on the ongoing crisis of child displacement. The beginning of the novel features a rendition of the migrant's prayer: "To leave is to die a little. / To arrive is never to arrive." This poignant opening sets the tone for the book, emphasizing the profound sense of loss and unfulfilled hopes experienced by migrants. The prayer serves as a reminder of our shared humanity and the need for collective reconciliation. Luiselli's novel also critiques how the US handles the issue of migrant children. She points out the conflicting and often dehumanizing rhetoric used in media and political discourse. For example, the term "immigration crisis" and the labels "undocumented," "illegals," and "aliens" are used to describe these children, reflecting a lack of clarity and compassion in addressing their needs. Luiselli contrasts this with the argument that these children are refugees legally entitled to protection, highlighting the tension between legal definitions and human realities. Furthermore, *Lost Children Archive* addresses the broader issues of indigenous displacement and refugee immigration in Central America. By incorporating these themes, Luiselli underscores the systemic nature of displacement and the historical continuity of migration crises. Her novel serves not only as a reflection on contemporary issues but also as a commentary on the historical and ongoing injustices faced by displaced populations.

As care ethics is built upon the impulse to care for those who are in need and delicate and is fueled by memories of being looked after,

she gets frustrated by the current US political and social environment regarding her own family and other lost children at the border. Her search along the frontier reflects her vulnerability of not being able to take action to solve the immigration crisis and uncertainty of her own family's future, as well as trying to protect her status while trying to catch lost voices in the desert. All these become a worrying fact in her family's life, including her children, even though they are quite young, but aware of all unknowingly by experiencing the way which makes them vulnerable as they come closer to the border. In that sense, as Aparna Mishra Tarc states:

> The zone of displacement at the arbitrary and fragile border of nations is also the place where childhood and adult interests meet and collide. Both adults are in search of lost histories of colonized peoples—the father seeks to retrieve soundscapes of erased American Indian tribes, and the mother, the stories of refugee children at the border. (78)

Throughout 2018 to 2019, thousands of kids were incarcerated in metal enclosures, a lot of them based in detention facilities in the desert. Emily C. Vázquez Enríquez states that "this is the context surrounding the story of Manuela's missing daughters, and therefore the social and political frame for the wife's documentary project" (78). Unlike *Tell Me How It Ends*, where the author includes fragments of migrant children's stories, Luiselli avoids direct representations in her novel. The former conveys the voices of those kids who are in the midst of trauma and the risk of deportation, in the latter, she is addressing those who cannot be found.

The child has long been a potent symbol in literature, representing qualities such as innocence, fragility, and boundless potential. *Lost Children Archive* is a powerful work that delves into themes of displacement, relocation, and family dynamics within the context of the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facilities. The novel interweaves contemporary concerns about refugee crises at the US border with the historical narrative of the Apachería and the stories of lost children, highlighting the critical importance of care in today's immigration debates. Children

learn about their world through various influences—stories, songs, plays, and media—which shape their understanding and experience of reality. As Hunter notes, "children, especially in the early years, are like little sponges, absorbing all the information around them and then actively making sense of it" (n.p.). This makes children particularly vulnerable to negative environments and harsh conditions, with potential lifelong impacts on their development and well-being. Despite advances in children's literature, there remains a significant gap in the representation of certain ethnic groups, underscoring the need for continued exploration and inclusion.

Vulnerability is an important concept in ethical and philosophical discussions, highlighting its role in shaping ideas about harm, well-being, and rights. Despite its importance, it is often underexplored. In *Lost Children Archive*, this theme is central as the husband and wife delve into the experiences of the Apaches and missing children. They aim to piece together the fragmented stories of these vulnerable groups, revealing the inherent challenge of fully capturing past events through incomplete documentary evidence. Their focus on documenting the past leads them to become increasingly detached from their own family. The couple's efforts to reconstruct the experiences of others result in a growing emotional distance within their relationships. The novel depicts them as a family in limbo, suspended between past and present, struggling with their emotional disconnection. Luiselli's shifting narrative tones and pacing effectively mirror this sense of unresolvedness and fragmentation.

The American Southwest, with its vast emptiness and harsh landscapes, reflects the displacement and rejection faced by both the historical Apaches and contemporary migrant children. In *Lost Children Archive*, the region's echoes and hollows underscore themes of exile and the profound sense of being without a place. Historically, migration within the region has often exposed people to various forms of exploitation. While many academic and literary resources address the adaptation challenges of migrant children, few truly empathize with those who are lost and alone at the border. *Lost Children Archive* aims to represent these vulnerable children and foster an understanding of their plight. It underscores that while concerns about migrant

children are often highlighted by Mexicans, this issue is fundamentally a humanitarian one that demands global attention and compassion. The novel exposes the severe injustices faced by migrant children in the US, challenging readers and policymakers alike to move beyond apathy and address this critical modern issue with urgency and care.

In her essay *On Being Moved: Sympathy, Mobility, and Narrative Form*, Miranda Burgess explores how advancements in global transportation between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries increased people's sensitivity to the emotions of others. This period saw a shift from agricultural to metropolitan living and a proliferation of literature and visual media, which helped to blur social distinctions and foster greater empathy. In recent years, the rise of social media and the rapid news cycle have given many the impression that they are closer to their neighbors, particularly migrants from Mexico. Burgess also raises critical questions about whether the media's portrayal of migrants and their struggles truly conveys the depth of their experiences. She argues that real understanding requires more than just viewing images and news reports. In this context, Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* is highlighted as a crucial work that brings the human stories behind immigration issues into focus, reminding us that immigration reform discussions must center on the individuals and families affected by these policies.

Conclusion

Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* illuminates one of the most pressing issues of our time: immigration, displacement, and the harrowing journeys of countless children crossing borders. Luiselli masterfully explores the profound impact of linguistic choices on our perception of reality, urging us to see these children not as illegal Mexican American immigrants but as refugees deserving of compassion and dignity. In this context, her work—and Mexican American literature at large—stands as a testament to the ultimate care extended toward vulnerable immigrant families, giving voice to their struggles and aspirations. Luiselli finds herself at the heart of intense debates surrounding border governance and the treatment of migrants,

asserting that every human being must be treated with the respect they deserve, regardless of race, nationality, or economic status. This article argues for the necessity of understanding Mexican American literature through Luiselli's perspective as a contemporary Mexican American writer, emphasizing the moral imperative to offer proper care to everyone, especially those who are marginalized and vulnerable. In our interactions with immigrants and asylum seekers, we must consider the crucial importance of providing thoughtful and appropriate care. Those in our society who are vulnerable require specific protections, implemented with a keen awareness of their circumstances rather than dictated by rigid social contracts that outline our obligations to one another. Through her critical work, Luiselli brings to the forefront the responsibilities of states towards migrants, and *Lost Children Archive* emerges as a powerful voice for undocumented Mexican Americans who often remain silenced by the fear of deportation, rendered invisible in a landscape where they are frequently perceived as threats to national security. The structure of *Lost Children Archive* may appear straightforward, yet its themes resonate with complexity, exploring the agricultural struggles that propelled families into migration while grappling with a profound sense of disconnection from the rich customs of rural Mexico. Luiselli weaves a narrative that captures both the yearning to preserve these traditions and the challenges of forging a new identity in an unfamiliar land. In doing so, she invites us to reflect on our collective responsibilities toward one another in a world marked by division and uncertainty, urging us to recognize the humanity in every story.

Lost Children Archive artfully brings to light a multitude of pressing themes, including family, unity, and culture, while at its heart lies a deeply human narrative that emphasizes the often-overlooked lives of immigrants—people whose stories are too frequently reduced to distant images on screens or fleeting headlines in the news. While immigration can stir conflict, it's vital to acknowledge that society flourishes when newly arrived individuals are embraced and integrated into the workforce, schools, healthcare, and the very fabric of public life. Andrew Selee et al. insightfully notes, "even today, there is room for cross-border engagement at different levels of government and for efforts to visualize a different kind of bilateral cooperation for the

future" (4). In this light, we must reflect on the possibility of a new binational policy that genuinely acknowledges the shared realities of Mexico and the United States in addressing immigration issues, even if the current political landscape makes this challenging. Today, the US is grappling with an overwhelming backlog of asylum applications, where some cases remain unresolved for years. Streamlining the asylum process to facilitate quicker decisions would provide timely protection for those who genuinely need it. However, limiting access to asylum can lead to tragic unintended consequences, such as an increase in undocumented crossings—a reality poignantly depicted in the *Lost Children Archive*. The repercussions for those who undertake such perilous journeys can be devastating, particularly for children who often lack awareness of their circumstances and are guided by their families in search of safety. Once they reach the US, many of these children become lost, left without guardians in a system that seems to erase their existence, relentlessly pursuing their deportation after subjecting them to unimaginable physical and psychological hardships. Luiselli's narrative calls us to confront these stark realities and urges us to recognize the humanity in each individual seeking asylum. It challenges us to envision a society where immigrant stories are not marginalized but woven into our shared experiences, fostering empathy and understanding for their struggles and dreams. In doing so, the *Lost Children Archive* invites us to see these children and families not merely as statistics or headlines but as human beings deserving of dignity, care, and a chance at a better life.

Luiselli's texts present the first-hand experience and hardships of individuals, families, and children alone at the frontier, which demand an understanding of vulnerability and the practice of care for those in need regardless of their social status or nationality. They draw attention to scholarly texts that do not usually mention the ethical criteria used for establishing border controls. To act ethically, one must adopt the ethics of care, which states that we consider the welfare of others since our welfare and the welfare of the collective are contingent on our relationships with others. Human connections are not confined to the structure of the law; instead, they are broadened by considerations of empathy, affection, and care. It can be argued that the ethics of care is founded upon a shared humanity, thus establishing benevolence

and compassion as essential ethical duties between individuals. It is essential to be aware of our interdependence with other human beings, even those outside of our political community, when we consider the ethics of care. As our welfare and that of the collective relies on our relationships with them, we must act with the welfare of others in mind.

Movement and displacement have always been integral aspects of Mexican American literature, given the fact that these concepts are so deeply embedded in the US-Mexican experience. Immigration is a deeply personal experience for those who have gone through it; for others, it is an inherited memory that has been passed down from one generation to the next. Through Mexican American literature, we can explore the implications of immigration, which reaches far beyond the physical act of relocation and affects individuals, families, and communities on an emotional, psychological, and socioeconomic level. As Moreno states, "there is not only one typical Latina/o immigration experience, but rather there are multiple ones, and Latina/o literature offers a window into that diversity," including ideas such as displacement due to political and economic conditions, nostalgia, lack of roots, transculturation, cultural combination, dual culture, bilingualism, endurance, adaptation, exclusion, and discrimination (2). How immigration is seen as a beneficial or detrimental occurrence is reflective of its highly personal nature. Immigration does not take place in isolation; it is greatly shaped by economic, political, and social influences and structures beyond an individual's power. Thus, literary works often manifest the clash between individual and collective influences as of *Lost Children Archive*.

Examining the border as a space of transcultural communication deepens the discourse regarding nationhood and identity between the US and Mexico. In particular, the idea of the body as a border is crucial for understanding the association between Mexican identity and its presence and expression in US society. Fostering the welfare of people and communities that are vulnerable necessitates comprehension of the idea of vulnerability and a realization of the complexity of the interconnection between vulnerability and individual and social factors. To ensure a resilient response to vulnerability, strategies are typically called for at the individual and community levels. Enhancing resources

is vital to help individuals or populations become more resilient in the face of vulnerability. This will assist in the accomplishment of certain objectives. Thus, it is necessary to bolster the capacity to respond to vulnerability. Furthermore, providing care goes beyond the basics of supplying necessities and helping to alleviate pain; it also involves sensitivity, receptiveness, and consideration of those in need.

Luiselli draws a parallel between the reader's attachment to the 'lost children' and the insights into the perception of the world, which is shaped by language, and it also serves as a method of defining interactions with the unfamiliar, especially when faced with something beyond our comprehension. It is the obligation of those with greater power, knowledge, or possessions in any kind of human relationship to shield the weak and refrain from exploiting the less privileged. This must be kept in mind when exercising strength, knowledge, or any other possessions. In this manner, the ability of an ethics-based society to preserve national security initiatives linked to surveillance initiatives and protect privacy rights must urgently be evaluated. As Luiselli asserts in *Tell Me How It Ends*, "being aware of what is happening in our era and choosing to do nothing about it has become unacceptable" (30). Normalizing horror and violence is not an option. We must hold ourselves accountable and not turn a blind eye to what happens in our midst.

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Stairs and Jungles: Setting as an Existential Metaphor in Tennessee Williams's Drama

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams emphasizes the importance of setting as an integral part of drama under the concept of what he called "plastic theatre." Williams's use of settings and methods, such as the screen device, effectively establishes a sense of distance, which is also considered a crucial dramatic element by Brecht and Sartre. Williams's approach reflects a strong existentialist understanding, which is conveyed to the audience, particularly using settings that complement the dramatic text and dialogue. Based on Williams's notion of setting as a means that transcends the limited space of the stage, this article focuses on some of the most important stage elements in the playwright's settings and their significance in terms of symbolism, spatiality, and existentialism. These sets include images of jungles to depict the thematic notion of freedom (*Suddenly Last Summer*, 1958) and isolated spaces to illustrate anguish towards the facticity of current situations, but also towards the responsibility of decision-making and

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the uncertainty of the future (*The Two-Character Play,* 1979). As a response to these situations, the image of stairs pervades Williams's drama, especially in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *Stairs to the Roof* (1947), and *Camino Real* (1953). This article concludes that, in line with existentialist philosophy, escape, and movement are shown as the only viable solutions for the self to assert its individuality through settings that vary from literal fire escapes to abstract and complex images.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams, stairs, movement, plastic theatre, existentialism, human condition

Merdivenler ve Ormanlar: Tennessee Williams'ın Oyunlarında Varoluşsal Bir Metafor Olarak Mekân ve Dekor

Öz

Tennessee Williams, "plastik tiyatro" adını verdiği kavram altında, dramanın ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak mekanın ve dekorun önemini vurgular. Williams'ın mekân kullanımı ve "screen device" olarak adlandırılan belirli yöntemler, Brecht ve Sartre tarafından dramanın önemli bir unsuru olarak kabul edilen mesafenin etkili bir şekilde gerçekleşmesini sağlar. Williams'ın yaklaşımı güçlü bir varoluşçu anlayışı yansıtır. Mekân ve dekoru etkileyici bir şekilde kullanıp bu anlayışı izleyiciye aktarır, dolayısıyla dramatik metni ve diyaloğu tamamlar. Williams'ın mekanı sahnenin sınırlı alanını aşan bir araç olarak gördüğünü göze alarak, bu makalede yazarın mekan ve dekorlarındaki en önemli unsurlarından bazıları ile sembolizm, mekansallık ve varoluşçuluk açısından önemleri ele alınmaktadır. Devamında, bu mekan setlerinden bazı örnekler analiz edilmektedir: özgürlük temasını tasvir eden orman sembolleri (*Suddenly Last Summer*, 1958), hem mevcut durumlarına hem karar alma sorumluluğuna ve geleceğin belirsizliğine yönelik ıstırabı gösteren izole mekanlar (*The Two-Character Play*, 1979). Bu durumlara bir yanıt olarak, merdiven imgesi Williams'ın oyunlarında, özellikle *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *Stairs to the Roof* (1947) ve *Camino Real* (1953) eserlerinde

yaygınlaşır. Bu metinlerde kaçış, aksiyon ve hareket, gerçek yangın merdivenlerinden başlayarak, soyut ve karmaşık imgelere kadar değişen mekanlar aracılığıyla, varoluşçu benliğin bireyselliğini ortaya koymasının tek uygulanabilir çözümü olarak gösterilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tennessee Williams, plastik tiyatro, varoluşçuluk, insanlık durumu, merdivenler, hareket

Introduction: Tennessee Williams's Theater

Tennessee Williams's inclination to write for the stage, despite his body of work spanning across several genres, is closely related to his aim to create an art that reflects the human condition, with all the modes of existence and anxieties that it entails. Williams was interested in creating "something more animate than written language could be," indicating that he intended to transcend the limitations of the written text and fuse it with action and presence (Gassner 389). Indeed, in his afterword to *Camino Real* (1953), Williams states that "a play in a book is only a shadow of a play and not even a clear shadow of it . . . The printed script of a play is hardly more than an architect's blueprint of a house not yet built or built and destroyed" (xxxiv). The statement echoes Sartre's idea that "a book can speak in a murmur; drama and comedy have to shout," emphasizing the significance and necessity of extra-verbal elements (*Sartre on Theater* 65).

Indeed, Williams envisioned drama as truth expressed through the "language of theatre," as something that is conveyed not only "in the language of naked words, but in a symbolic complex of gesture, music, sound, light, and color; of line, mass, volume, and texture" (Jackson 12). Therefore, in creating a dramatic text to express truth – a notion that for Williams would evolve simultaneously with that of theater – the playwright must necessarily take into consideration all the aspects of staging a play, including setting, an element that plays an essential role in Williams's vision.

This article firstly discusses Tennessee Williams's idea of theater, particularly his plastic theatre and the use of the screen device, to demonstrate an affinity with the notions of Bertolt Brecht's alienation

effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) and Sartre's theories on theater. One of the fundamental and most effective elements that constitute Williams's theater is the use of settings that function as visual complements to existential thematic concerns like anguish, the struggle for freedom, and the individual's quest for meaning and authentic self-realization. The focus of the article is henceforth directed towards some particular staging elements that appear in Williams's drama, starting with the image of the jungle in *Suddenly Last Summer* and the confined space in *The Two-Character Play*, as respective depictions of the existentialist notions of freedom and anguish. Moreover, greater attention is dedicated to the recurring image of stairs in Williams's drama, which varies from the illustration of individual and more particular existential concerns in *The Glass Menagerie* to more abstract and complex images of escape and movement in *Stairs to the Roof* and *Camino Real*. Finally, a conclusion is drawn in terms of correlating Williams's use of setting devices and set pieces with a philosophical interpretation analyzed from a Sartrean approach to existentialist themes.

Williams's concept of theater, where text is removed from its traditionally central role, is the result of several influences, including a strong relation to cinematic techniques. Indeed, Williams's short-lived employment in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios of Hollywood left a considerable impact on his future writing. He was "deeply impressed with the wide-ranging, often poetic freedom of film itself, and this would influence his writing of *The Glass Menagerie* as well as other of his major plays" (Leverich 530). This impression is documented in greater detail in one of Williams's notebook entries dated back to September 1943, where he describes the effect left on him by Sergei Eisenstein's 1938 film *Alexander Nevsky*:

> In my dramatic writing prior to this I have always leaned too heavily on speech, nearly everything I have written for the stage has been overburdened by dialogue . . . I determined to think in more plastic or visual terms. To write sparingly but with complete lyricism and build the play in a series of dramatic pictures. No play written in such creative terms could be naturalistic . . . Written in verse, with a surrealist influence and a background of modern music, it would have to be independent of nearly all dramatic conventions. (Thornton and Williams 306)

This new kind of dramatically unconventional writing that integrates all the staging elements of a play into the written text points primarily to the role of the playwright, who does not merely provide directors and stage designers with a text ready for theatrical adaptation but is instead the first person that holistically envisions all the other non-textual elements of the theatrical performance.

Williams's novelty in the American stage would be presented in the form of what he called "plastic theatre," first defined in his production notes to *The Glass Menagerie*. According to him, this "new, plastic theater . . . must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as part of our culture" (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 7). More importantly, it aimed "to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression" by using and combining other art forms and unconventional techniques (7). This meant the creation of a "truly multi-dimensional theatre, integrating all the arts of the stage," with a particular emphasis on setting and space (Kramer). Williams's consideration of setting not merely as a decorative aspect of the dramatic text is also reflected in his novel *Moise and the World of Reason* (1975), in the words of the titular character – significantly a painter – as she states that plastic space "is alive, not empty and dead, not at all just a background" (136). Similarly, in Williams's plastic theatre, the setting becomes as substantial as the dramatic text.

This emphasis on the importance of setting was not exclusively limited to Williams. The tendency of a playwright to have complete control over his dramatic creation had already been prevalent in the tradition of modern American drama, where, most notably, Eugene O'Neill showcased a somewhat more obsessive approach. The stage directions of his play *Long Day's Journey into Night*, written in 1941 and first performed and published fifteen years later, suffice to give a clear indication of this fact. O'Neill's notes are extremely realistic to the extent that, apart from the detailed descriptions of the characters of the play, they include even the specific titles, authors, and physical state of an extensive list of books that should be placed in the small bookcase included in the set pieces.

Moreover, the American theater, starting from the 1920s, had already reflected disobedience to traditional settings and theatrical unities. The most indicative device was the so-called multiple set, a fragmented setting that does not change throughout the entire play but allows the action to happen in different parts of it. A set would include an entire apartment building, but the action of the play would flow through different rooms and sections without being interrupted by curtain falls and pauses between scenes, something that is best represented in Jo Mielziner's design for Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. However, while retaining this sense "of wholeness, of allness rather than singleness" (Brooks 32) that was pervading the American drama of the time, what distinguishes Williams's point of view is a preference progressively inclined towards unrealistic, expressionistic, and abstract settings that additionally reflect strong ties to an existentialist approach. This way, his settings complement the existentialist thematic concerns by adding a visual layer to the dramatic representation of the truth of the human condition.

Setting Devices as Means of Leading to Objective Truth

Williams veered away from the use of realistic settings throughout his entire career, from his early theatrical successes to later, less positively received plays. For example, *The Glass Menagerie,* being a memory play, uses a "nonrealistic" setting (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 21). The set of *Suddenly Last Summer* is "as unrealistic as the decor of a dramatic ballet" (Williams, *Suddenly Last Summer* 5). Similarly, in his production notes for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the playwright suggests a "far less realistic" set with walls that "dissolve mysteriously into air" (Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* 16). The multiple areas that comprise the setting of *Stairs to the Roof* include high buildings, offices, parks, and even a zoo, making it impossible to be accurately and realistically represented on stage. As he did with almost all his plays, Williams conveyed this lack of realism through the use of stage props, lights, background images, and other elements of his plastic theatre.

One of the most noteworthy devices that Williams utilized was the so-called screen device, a wall where images were projected throughout a performance. Although Williams had experimented with the screen device in earlier plays, it became particularly famous with *The Glass Menagerie*, where forty-three images and titles were to be projected on one of the walls of the set. Although this unconventional device was initially considered redundant and was not even featured in the original production of the play by Eddie Dowling in 1944, Williams insisted on its importance. He stated that the purpose of this device is to "accent certain values in each scene" and "strengthen the effect of what is merely allusion in the writing" (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 8), thus removing the classically central position of the dramatic text in a play and creating instead a structural fusion of text and setting.

In addition to this structural effect, Williams's screen device falls in line with his intention of conveying truth, and more particularly with Tom's aim as the main character and narrator of *The Glass Menagerie* to deliver this truth "in the pleasant disguise of illusion" (22). Since the play is a memory play, truth becomes obfuscated, being delivered solely from Tom's subjective perspective. In this sense, as critic Geoffrey Borny states, the screen projections play the role of a distancing device, preventing the audience "from empathizing too readily" with Tom's version of the story (113). Instead, by establishing this distance, the screen device makes it possible for the audience to perceive "the symbolic truth of the action of the play" (108) and prevents it from reading the performance as a "soap opera" (112). This allows audiences to see beyond Tom's subjectivity and reach for an objective interpretation of the play. Hence, Williams's use of unconventional and alienating setting techniques in *Menagerie* contributes to the purpose of presenting audiences not just truth but, more importantly, an objective truth.

A crucial step that audiences should take in realizing this truth is founded first and foremost in their rational realization that the play is neither real nor realistic. Therefore, the playwright should, in some way, make it clear that the play is merely a representation of reality rather than reality itself. This sense of alienation from instinctively identifying and empathizing with the play's characters echoes Bertold Brecht's notion

of *Verfremdungseffekt*, usually translated as the distancing or alienation effect. In his essay "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," Brecht elaborates that the efforts of creating a nonclassical theater "were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious place, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious" (Brecht and Willet 91). To reach this effect, Brecht would use "songs, montage, lighting, role reversals, and alike," which would indicate the representational quality of the performance in order "to disrupt the impulse towards realism" (Durmišević 103). Similarly, Williams's theatrical devices and the unusual position of Tom in *Menagerie* as simultaneously character and narrator are effective in establishing the same sense of distancing and alienation.

In addition, this notion holds a significant similarity to Sartre's ideas on modern theater. Distance is to Sartre, "the real origin, the real meaning of theater" (*Sartre on Theater* 12). Elaborating on what he called "theater of situations," Sartre furthermore argues that modern theater should "explore all the situations that are most common to human experience" (36). However, what is crucial is to show these situations at a certain distance so that audiences do not empathize with the character as a person with emotional and psychological traits but focus instead on the manifestations of his freedom through the deliberate actions he undertakes and his reactions towards the situations that he is thrown onto. This way, the emphasis remains on action, choices, and decisions rather than the psycho-emotional makeup of the character.

According to Sartre, distance is essential in achieving this effect, to the degree that the playwright "should not try to reduce it but should exploit it and show it as it actually is, even manipulate it" (12). This manipulation of distance is exactly the effect of Williams's screen device. It amplifies distance, disrupts the attention of the audience, and presents them with multiple targets to focus on, where action, spoken dialogue, and visually displayed words or images occur simultaneously. This tension pulls the theatrical performance away from realistic or naturalistic representation, where even the decision of the audience member to selectively direct their attention towards

one of the aforementioned elements of the performance becomes a manifestation of the importance of deliberate choice, a fundamental tenet of existentialist thought. This way, the screen device not only establishes the required distance effect but also forces the audience to experience first-hand this deliberate decision-making and the moment of choice.

While an argument about the similarities of Williams's vision to the theories of Brecht and Sartre can be made, a direct influence of them on his work is difficult to trace. Williams superficially confirms his interest in Sartre, "whose existential philosophy appealed to [him] strongly" (*Memoirs* 149). Williams was also familiar with Sartre's creative and dramatic efforts, as the plays *No Exit* and *The Flies* stand out as part of his reading list in 1948 ("My Current Reading" 26). As for Brecht, Williams would consider his *Mother Courage* as "the greatest of modern plays" (*Where I Live* 111), a statement that should certainly be taken with a grain of salt considering Williams's tendency to exaggerate and frequently change his position. Yet, strong assumptions can be made about his exposure to Brecht's ideas. Critic Downing Cless argues that this exposure is "almost certain" due to Williams's playwrighting studies at the New School's Dramatic Workshop in 1941 (42). This "private course in Epic Theatre techniques" under the supervision of Erwin Piscator, a close collaborator of Brecht, may have played a role in the development of Williams's plastic theatre and its devices (Kramer).

Moreover, in an essay titled "Tennessee Williams Presents his POV," the playwright would mention another connection with Brecht, indicating an additional relation to his notions of objective truth. In the essay, Williams defends his depiction of ugly acts and unlikeable characters by calling it an honest way of writing about life, with all its unpleasantries, naming Brecht as one of his "fellow defendants" in this notion (*Where I Live* 110). As such, Williams's sense of objective truth on stage is twofold: on one hand, he uses nonconventional and unrealistic devices to indicate that the play is just a representation of reality, hence enabling the audience to go beyond the representational level of the play, beyond the aforementioned "pleasant disguise of illusion" (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 22), and towards a rational

perception of truth; on the other hand, by arguing for an honest representation of reality, he opts for the depiction of the human condition with all its ambiguities, dilemmas and dark sides.

Nevertheless, the extent of objectivity in Williams's represented truth can be questioned. After all, the truth conveyed in *The Glass Menagerie* cannot be purely objective since it stems from Williams's perspective. He would state that he "couldn't create anything outside [his] own experience" (Spevack 223). Similarly, as a stand-in for Williams, Tom also presents his own experience, making it possible to read him as "the only character in the play" (Crandell 4). Indeed, the truth that Williams explores in his early works is focused on personal and individual concerns. The action of his early plays is focused on small-scale representations of the characters' struggle to establish their existence among the circumstances that surround them. Therefore, the central theme becomes that of the conflicting friction between isolation and the desire for freedom. Tom wants to relieve himself from family responsibilities to follow his ambitions; Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* creates her version of reality under Stanley's overbearing presence; Myra longs for a new life by saving herself from the domineering pressure of her much older husband in *Battle of Angels*. All these characters depict the individual drive to find new meaning in existence, rooted in the desire for freedom.

Settings of Isolation and Confinement

As in all of Williams's plays, setting is integral in depicting this aspect of the human condition, the struggle to acknowledge and assert one's freedom in the face of facticity, of circumstances that are out of one's control. A notable example that depicts this struggle is the setting of *Suddenly Last Summer*, which strikingly features "a fantastic garden which is more like a tropical jungle, or forest," with "violent" colors and "massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body" (Williams, *Suddenly Last Summer* 5). Other than foreshadowing the violent action described later in the play, the setting becomes a metaphorical representation of the wilderness of human nature. The garden/jungle participates significantly in the action throughout the entirety of the

play. When characters laugh, "jungle birds scream in the jungle" (22); when there is an overlapping of the characters' speech, "the jungle is loud with the sounds of its feathered and scaled inhabitants" (28).

More importantly, the jungle carries a twofold function concerning individual existence. On one hand, it represents Sebastian's wild nature. The Venus flytrap, the insectivorous plant in the garden to which he devotedly used to feed flies, as described by his mother in the first lines of the play, becomes a direct representation of his instinct to feed his homoerotic desires with very young boys. The garden in *Suddenly Last Summer* purposely does not have the typical appearance of a tamed space; on the contrary, it is presented in the appearance of a jungle: wild, unbridled, and consuming. Rather than carrying the classical connotations of gardens as safe, idyllic spaces, the garden/jungle of the play is not a *hortus conclusus* of peace and beauty but a place of horror and darkness instead. As such, while Sebastian – being already dead – never appears in the play, the garden/jungle becomes his stand-in as a ubiquitous presence and illustration of his character. In this sense, the setting does not simply integrate into the text of *Suddenly Last Summer* but becomes a character in itself.

On the other hand, the garden/jungle can also be read as a depiction of the circumstances around the individual, that is, the world that surrounds – and even confines – the character in his struggle for personal freedom. Sebastian's desires and mode of existence cannot be satisfied under the frame of a traditional world. The character finds himself "engaged in a world of values" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 38), but the problem arises from the fact that these are not Sebastian's values. They stifle the character's inclination to freedom because their "foundation can in no way be being" (38). The imposition of these externally established values and norms of what is considered normal for a young man clashes with Sebastian's desires. Therefore, just as the Venus flytrap consumes flies in the garden/jungle, Sebastian is eventually consumed by the world around him. He gets his first vision of the wilderness of reality in his journey to Encantadas, where carnivorous birds devour the newborn turtles that are trying to get to the sea. Similarly, Sebastian gets mutilated and devoured in Cabeza de Lobo by a band of naked and hungry young boys. Taken from this

perspective, the garden/jungle comes forth as the image of a world that isolates and consumes the individual without allowing him to freely express his existence. If freedom is not allowed to manifest itself, the individual will eventually and inevitably fall prey to the destruction of his selfhood.

This inner-outer conflict between the individual and the world is present throughout most of Williams's oeuvre. The freedom – or even wilderness – of human existence is countered by a strongly isolating world. Williams's use of space in his settings frequently depicts this notion. The house of *The Glass Menagerie* is positioned in one of the buildings of "hive-like conglomerations" in overcrowded cities (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 21). Stella and Stanley's house in *A Streetcar Named Desire* becomes a suffocating space for Blanche, where the only two rooms of the house do not allow for individual privacy. The entire action of *Small Craft Warnings* takes place in a small bar. The conflicts of *Vieux Carre* unravel inside the small, shabby rooms of a boarding house. *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* takes place largely in a mental asylum guarded by interns, doctors, and nurses. The use of such settings points toward two different aims: they illustrate the playwright's focus on small-scale individual concerns and simultaneously depict the isolating effect of a larger external environment as opposed to the confined individual's existential instinct for freedom. This situation creates a sense of anguish, which "arises from the negation of the appeals of the world," where the Self rejects the stifling norms and values systems of an external world, recognizing that they are built upon a basis that exists outside of self's being, and thus, realizes that it is personal freedom that becomes "the foundation of values" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 39).

The most extreme sense of isolation is depicted in the setting of Williams's *The Two-Character Play*, where the main characters, Felice and Clare, are trapped in a theater building. The play has the structure of a play-within-a-play, where the characters are two actors trying to finish their performance of a play written by Felice. In the play-within-the-play, the characters are likewise confined, this time in a house where tragedy has taken place, shutting them in with the fear of going outside to face the outer world, a fear that borders on

madness. Williams states in his stage directions that this setting, confusingly mixing Williams's play to that of Felice's play-within-the-play, must depict "the phantasmagoria of the nightmarish world that all of us live in at present, not just the subjective but the true world with all its dismaying shapes and shadows" (*The Two-Character Play* 1). Opposed to Clare's outburst to go "out, out, out" (56), the set of *The Two-Character Play* becomes a metaphor for the existential angst of the individual against confining circumstances.

The experience of the characters showcases several layers of anguish that are additionally represented through the setting of the play. Felice and Claire being locked in the theater building is a situation out of their control. Thus, it depicts a thrownness into a situation that the individuals are forcefully forced to face on their own. Nothing external permeates the space that is created through this event; therefore, Felice and Claire must express their freedom in facing, interpreting, and reacting to the current circumstances. In a sense, this shows an affinity to Sartre's notion of theater of situations. For the characters, the situation is indeed "an appeal: it surrounds [them], offering [them] solutions which it's up to [them] to choose" (*Sartre on Theater* 4). Thus, the isolated setting, although seemingly confining, provides the characters with the opportunity to make choices and decisions.

Yet, this reveals another layer of anguish. As stated above, the individual has to face the fact that they are the foundation of their values, that is, the self creates the only values that give meaning to true and free existence. In turn, this creates a new type of anguish, where the individual is faced with a sense of responsibility. If values are created by the self, then the self is the sole responsible for everything that happens to it. Choices will bring consequences for which the self can blame no other than itself. In this situation, the self can either acknowledge, accept, and act based on its freedom and responsibility or can turn its back in denial, following what Sartre calls "patterns of flight" (*Being and Nothingness* 40). In the case of Felice and Claire, this anguish manifests itself in the form of fear, particularly in the face of the possibilities of the future. Imprisoned by the events of their past, additionally represented through the fact that they keep performing a play much like their own life, Felice and Claire do not know how to

exist outside of this bubble. They want to be free; however, freedom is scary due to the responsibility it imposes.

This freedom is represented as a powerful and beautiful desire, illustrated through the sunflowers that appear behind the windows in the setting. Yet, the setting, through the density of these sunflowers in the background, also implies the difficulty of navigating this newfound freedom that scares the characters through its unfamiliarity as a terrain that has never been approached before. Moreover, it also represents the idea that this sense of freedom is seemingly not normal for the two characters, who have always lived in isolation. The very tall, two-headed sunflower in the setting is abnormal, something that would not – and should not – exist in a normal course of events. All these elements of the setting represent the isolation, not only of the current situation but, most importantly, the self-isolation of the individual, who, because of his fear of freedom and responsibility, makes the deliberate choice of continuing to stay in the isolated space.

Stairways to Personal Freedom

The suffocating environments and settings of the aforementioned plays are inseparably related to the expression of a general desire for freedom in the face of current situations. In William's drama, this desire is usually reflected in the form of escape and presented through what is perhaps the most recurring image in his settings: stairs. This image appears in numerous plays, including *The Glass Menagerie, Stairs to the Roof, Battle of Angels, Orpheus Descending,* and *Camino Real*. For Williams's characters in these plays, stairs become the means of movement away from their present condition, and they constitute a transitional space from confinement to freedom. The most significant image of stairs in Williams's early work is again depicted in *The Glass Menagerie.*

As explained in the stage directions of the play, the apartment found in between the enormous building compound can be entered through "a fire escape, a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all these huge buildings are burning with the slow

and implacable fires of human desperation" (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 21). Being the representative of this state of desperation, Tom is the only character in the play who repeatedly visits the landing of the fire escape, "leaning against the grill, smoking" (68), as if he were perpetually attracted to this space, the only one where he feels free enough to express his thoughts. It is in this section of the stage where he holds a meaningful conversation with his friend Jim, confessing that he is "starting to boil inside," intending to abandon his home and workplace (80). While movies have become his coping mechanism against the pressures of his home and work life so far, he expresses for the first time the desire to escape altogether, stating that he is "tired of the *movies* and . . . about to *move*" (79).

In addition, the stairs of the fire escape are the only place where Tom can get a glimpse of the Paradise Dance Hall, an image of the outer world of freedom he longs for. In other scenes of *Menagerie*, Tom looks at even more distant and symbolic representations of this external world, such as the moon, to which he expresses a secret wish (58). It is this same moon that his mother curses him to go to after their final heated argument by the end of the play. As he addresses the audience for a closing monologue – again speaking from the fire-escape landing – he admits that he went to a "much further" place than the moon (114), implying that freedom and escape are not merely concepts of physical space and distance, but states of the human condition and existence instead. Thus, ironically, instead of playing their initial function of an entrance point as described in the stage directions, the stairs eventually become Tom's exit from the apartment and, consequently, his previous life.

The stairs of *Menagerie*, depicted as a fire escape, are not a particularly complex metaphor. As their name indicates, they foreshadow an eventual act of escape. As such, this image is closer to Williams's treatment of explicitly individual and small-scale concerns. It is merely a single individual acknowledging his freedom and making a deliberate choice to free himself from an isolating – yet small-scale and ordinary – space. After all, *The Glass Menagerie* is, first and foremost, a semi-autobiographical story of a young man and aspiring artist longing for personal freedom, subjectively narrated by that very

same young man. It is true that, from an existentialist perspective, the play depicts what Sartre considers "the most moving thing the theater can show," that is, "a character creating himself, the moment of choice, of the free decision" that eventually leads the character to "a whole way of life" (*Sartre on Theater* 4). Yet, being focused on a single individual and a very tangible concern of the time, the play, the act of escape, as well as the image of the stairways are quite literal and do not hold great complexity. Nevertheless, as Williams's idea of theater evolved, so did his depiction of stairs as a prevalent element in the setting of his plays.

From Personal to Universal: Stairways to the Unknown

Indeed, the "personal lyricism" of Williams's earlier work gradually transformed into a quest for "a level of objective interpretation," largely reflecting more universal psychological and philosophical concerns (Jackson 11). His later work showcases a distancing from his previous position that the artist can only write based on his own experience. Instead, he argues that "the playwright in the modern theater cannot afford to use his art simply for the description of his peculiar sorrow" and that his initial idea of theater "is not yet enough excuse for personal lyricism that has not yet mastered its necessary trick of rising above the singular to the plural concern, from personal to general import" (15). This indicates a new notion of truth on Williams's behalf: truth is not defined only by what a certain individual has experienced firsthand, but it is instead a concept that must encapsulate the human condition as a whole. This becomes his newfound "essence of art and theater: the portrayal of a common fund of inner experience" as something that binds all audience members together in recognition of the themes depicted on stage (Spevack 224). He becomes so intent on voicing this new position that he even intrudes on the action of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to add a personal confession within the stage directions, where he argues that:

> … the bird I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution to one man's psychological problem. I'm trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people that cloudy, flickering, evanescent – fiercely charged! – interplay

> of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis. (Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* 116-117)

Nevertheless, the main representative of man in this common crisis remains similar to the protagonists of his earlier plays. Usually, he takes the form of the outsider, the fugitive, or the aspiring – yet unsuccessful – artist. However, apart from the individual perspective depicted in his early work, Williams's later drama employs an additional function to this "doomed soul," not only as an individual but as a "representative of man as a figure in a cosmic drama" (Spevack 229-230). The truth conveyed by his characters is not a small-scale concern anymore but evolves into a universal cause that concerns all humanity. Williams's imagery shifts in a parallel direction to this notion. The recurrent image of stairs in his work expands from merely a means for a young man to set himself free from the constraints of his household and eventually transforms into a transitional space between two worlds, importing more abstract and surreal nuances.

What makes Williams's use of stairs interesting is the fact that he does not abide to the typical notion of up and down in the traditional sense that up indicates an ascension to something better, whereas down implies a descent to a worse condition. On the contrary, the levels found in the extremities of Williams's stairs are often ambiguous. Sometimes, they even subvert this traditional understanding, positioning a far worse condition upstairs, as happens in *Orpheus Descending*, where upstairs becomes the place of the imminent "knock, knock, knock" (73) of death and its inescapable threat on human life.

The ambiguity of the metaphorical implication of stairs is evident in *Stairs to the Roof*, a play that premiered not more than four years after *The Glass Menagerie*. The similarities between both plays are instantly recognizable. Ben, the main character, is again a troubled young man who finds his job insufferable and longs to escape his present condition. However, the image of the titular stairs is significantly different and indicative of Williams's later focus. The stairs to the roof lead to the top of the sixteen-floor building where Ben works and initially becomes his place of temporary escape, where he smokes, feeds a flock of pigeons, and looks at the outer world, not much

differently from what Tom does in *Menagerie.* However, Ben's grasp on the constraints forced upon him transcends the realistic pressure of work. Differently from Tom, he does not simply long to set himself free from superficial and individual issues but voices a greater cause. He longs to get out of "the universal cage – The Cage of the Universe" (Williams, *Stairs to the Roof* 50) and become "the first and original HOMO EMANCIPATUS! Meaning – COMPLETELY FREE MAN!" (50). As such, Ben envisions freedom not merely as an escape from his current situation to a different one but instead as an absolute state of liberation from the constraints of the human condition.

Accordingly, Williams transforms the function of stairs into something beyond reality. He plays with his audience's perception, particularly in the last scene of *Stairs to the Roof*, further beclouding the image of the roof and describing that the stairs have instead led to "the transcendental," to "light, light, light," and the "last high reach of the spirit, matter's rejection" (90). Mr. E, the mysterious character who laughs offstage by the end of each scene, finally appears as Williams's stand-in for the creator of the universe, the omnipresent observer that follows the actions of humans on Earth. He offers to send Ben to a new star to populate a new version of the world, presenting Ben with the opportunity to create a new meaning for his – and consequently humanity's – existence, far from the deterministic factors of the present world. Therefore, the image of stairs – and the entirety of the play, for that matter – get employed with more complex existential themes that concern not only Ben but humanity. In addition, to further emphasize the universal relevance of the play, Williams exposes in the final monologue of Mr. E a different version of the hero, that of the "ordinary little white-collar worker" as the "tragic protagonist of a play called 'Human Courage'" (97), putting on him the garb of the ordinary man, an image that can be relevant and relatable to every viewer and reader of the play.

The idea of a new world, a new version of reality, and stairs leading to something beyond the real are present in *Camino Real* as well. In the foreword to this play, Williams is more vocal regarding his intentions and his theory of plastic theatre. He states that the purpose of the play is indeed universal, as it aims to construct "another world, a

separate existence . . . outside of time in a place of no specific locality" (Williams, *Camino Real* xxxi). The language he utilizes to achieve this purpose is that of metaphors, symbols, and allegories, rooted in the "great vocabulary of images" that we have in our minds, which Williams finds more efficient than the written text, for "it would take page after tedious page of exposition to put across an idea that can be said with an object or a gesture on the lighted stage" (xxxiii). Among the plastic elements of this set, not surprisingly, stairs are featured prominently.

The setting of *Camino Real* is a small city square surrounded by an ancient wall, yet again reflecting Williams's affinity for confined spaces as illustrative of isolation and existential anxiety. The stage directions further mention "a great flight of stairs that mount the ancient wall to an archway that leads out into 'Terra Incognita,'" a desert positioned between the walls of the town and the mountains further away (5). Similarly to *Stairs to the Roof,* the stairs of *Camino Real* lead to an ambiguous destination, literally to "unknown land." Just as the audience is not offered any explanation of World Number Two in *Stairs to the Roof*, they do not know whether Terra Incognita is a better place or not. Thus, stairs become a means of connection and communication between two worlds, two levels of existence, without explicit indications of whether one is better than the other.

Nevertheless, stairs in *Camino Real* still provide a way out. Many characters express their intention to climb up the stairs – some of them even attempt to do so – during the entire play, however, without success. When Kilroy finds himself almost at the top of the stairs, he climbs back down because the desert he has to pass is "too unknown for [his] blood" (36). Jacques echoes the same concern, however, with romantic nuances. His terror of the unknown is depicted as the fear of crossing that unknown alone. Marguerite, his romantic interest, answers him with a long speech full of philosophical and existentialist remarks. She acknowledges his fear, stating that "the questions that torment [them]" cannot be asked to anybody (72) since no one in Camino Real knows where they are or what they are supposed to do. She describes the city as "a port of entry and departure" (73), where there is no way to know what happens if you get out of it. This perception echoes the

concern mentioned earlier, the anguish perceived by Felice and Claire in *The Two-Character Play* when they are faced with the possibility and, consequently, the unfamiliarity and uncertainty of the future.

The only character of the play who musters the courage to climb up the stairs leading to Terra Incognita is Lord Byron. Asked about the point of his decision, Byron proudly responds that he is doing it: "For *freedom!* You may laugh at it, but it still means something to *me*" (56). This answer points to a notion that pervades almost the entirety of Williams's oeuvre: that of a constant state of movement. Byron suggests that "there is a time for departure even when there's no certain place to go" (59), and his last words before crossing the archway at the top of the stairs are, "*Make voyages! – Attempt them!* – there's nothing else" (60). As happens for the other doomed souls of Williams's plays, here as well, "travel seems essential . . . [it] encompasses the *was*, the *is*, and the *to be*, . . . the whole 'history' of man" (Spevack 230). After all, "man is nothing else by that which he makes himself" (Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* 22). Man, for Sartre, is first and foremost "something which projects itself into a future and is aware that it is doing so" (23). Therefore, despite the intensity of anguish towards the uncertainty of the future, movement and action are crucial. Instead of passivity, anguish should manifest itself in movement and the desire for action because, not only in life but also in theater, "*doing* reveals *being*" (Sartre, *What is Literature* 193). That means that characters are not limited to their deterministic past or their psycho-emotional background, but instead, they create themselves and their characteristics through their actions.

Conclusion

In Williams's drama, "everybody is a traveler," and this state of movement and departure is "the force that informs all his work" (Rogoff 88). Movement is Williams's response to the pervasive existential angst of the human condition, not only as a solution but also as an expression of freedom from a philosophical point of view. In existentialist terminology, freedom is "the first condition of action" and, more importantly, of action that is "on principle *intentional*"

(Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 433). As such, the deliberate decision of Williams's characters to climb up stairs as an act of freedom and as an indication of their own will to face the true nature of their existence is telling of the newfound focus of his later drama. Therefore, stairs become the most consistent metaphorical image in his plastic theatre. They are not merely a point of spatial movement but, most importantly, a symbol of the departure from ourselves to ourselves, that is, to a new recognition of self, depicting thus "*the furthest* departure a man could make" (Williams, *Camino Real* 56). It is a difficult departure, it causes suffering, but "suffering, in the drama of Williams, is consciousness;" it is the "enactment of man's movement toward a tragic knowledge of his human condition" (Rogoff 88). His heroes – or, more accurately, antiheroes – do not have the good and virtuous qualities of the classical hero. Instead, they are common people with many faults, without any deep knowledge of themselves and reality, and in a constant state of searching for truth and meaning in their existence.

In all, Williams's plastic theatre is an attempt at a new presence on stage. Like many American playwrights influenced by European theatrical experimentations that started in the 1940s in the form of existential theater and followed by the theater of the absurd, Williams, too, intended to present "a kind of theater that embodied an existential world-changing dramatic structures to mirror a new philosophical vision" (Prosser 15). By depicting man as "an actor on the great stage of the universe," Williams showcases his universal and philosophical concerns far wider than his previous personal lyricism (Jackson 17). His vision of theatrical presence, although initially originating from the playwright's personal experience, aims to create a discourse with the audience to reach a point of common understanding of objective truth as related to the general human condition. After all, to him, "it is only in the theater that modern man may discover true meaning in his experience" (10), and the recurring image of stairs is a metaphorical representation of the constant state of movement, of the existential drive and purpose to deliberately go forward. As such, *En avant*, the signature phrase that he used in his notes and correspondences to encourage the act of moving forward, becomes the motto that informs Williams's oeuvre and his understanding of theater.

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Digital Revolution that Evokes a Vintage Thriller Movie: Rereading Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*

Katarzyna Machała *

Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* is set in a post-apocalyptic world after a financial crash in the US, where people struggle to survive without a home or a job. The Positron Project grants the only escape – the perfect community imbued with vintage charm. What seems to be an optimal solution, though, is a trap for the volunteers, as it is a dystopian world powered by the digital revolution and aimed at exploiting others for personal gain. This article analyzes the novel as a horror story modeled on a slasher movie. Using a format familiar to modern audiences allows Atwood to ask fundamental questions about the value of freedom and the power of the media in trapping the most vulnerable social groups – especially those at risk of losing their homes and jobs. Juxtaposing the novel with Atwood's article "We Are Double-Plus Unfree," published earlier in *The Guardian*, grounds the story within the contemporary sociopolitical context.

Keywords: Digital revolution, survival, freedom, media, horror story

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Eski Bir Gerilim Filmini Çağrıştıran Dijital Devrim: Margaret Atwood'un *The Heart Goes Last* Romanını Yeniden Okumak

Öz

Margaret Atwood'un *The Heart Goes Last* romanı, ABD'de yaşanan finansal bir çöküşün ardından evlerinden ve işlerinden olan insanların hayatta kalmaya çalıştığı post-apokaliptik bir dünyada geçer. Positron Projesi, nostaljik cazibesiyle mükemmel bir toplum sunarak tek kaçış yolu gibi görünmektedir. Ancak, ideal çözüm gibi görünen şey aslında gönüllüler için bir tuzaktır; zira, dijital devrimle beslenen bu distopik dünya, bir grubun çıkarları için diğerlerinin sömürülmesine yöneliktir. Bu makale, romanı, şiddet içeren korku filmlerini örnek alan bir korku hikâyesi olarak analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Modern izleyiciye aşina bir format kullanmak, Atwood'un, özgürlüğün değeri ve medyanın en hassas toplumsal gruplar (özellikle evlerini ve işlerini kaybetme riski altındakileri) üzerindeki etkisi hakkında temel sorular sormasına olanak sağlar. Romanın, Atwood'un daha önce *Guardian* gazetesinde yayımlanan "We Are Double-Plus Unfree" başlıklı makalesiyle bir arada incelenmesi, hikâyeyi çağdaş sosyopolitik bağlama oturtur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital devrim, hayatta kalma, özgürlük, medya, korku hikâyesi

Introduction

Dramatic events of recent years – the financial crash of 2008, the Covid-2019 pandemic, wars fought on most continents, and social unrest in many parts of the globe, additionally magnified by the newest developments in the field of AI and the fear of humans soon being replaced by machines, led to a general sense of insecurity shared by many people in the world. It all resulted in a renewed interest in dystopian stories, which outline the possible bleak futures that we still may escape. Critics agree that Margaret Atwood is a master of such stories, using speculative fiction to issue a warning and to show

a 'what if' scenario (Waltonen XVI; Howells *True Trash* 298). With the release of *The Handmaid's Tale* serial, the popularity of her writing skyrocketed, and audiences started looking for new novels, set in different circumstances (Harris; "Statistics"). Given how timely her narratives turn out to be, this is the right author to turn to – after all, "each novel is about something people become incredibly interested in half an hour later," as remarked Atwood's former publisher, cited by Howells (*Cambridge* 1). Hence, in the face of a new digital revolution and the uncanny, humanlike properties that AI is gaining, readers may turn to *The Heart Goes Last*, where such a scenario is played to its fullest. Even though it is not the most popular of Atwood's novels (as evidenced by "Margaret Atwood Statistics"), arguably it deserves more attention, as it touches upon the issues that have been extremely relevant ever since it was published.

The Heart Goes Last, published in 2015, is set shortly or parallel present, in the world of mayhem and destruction caused by a financial crash in the USA, where people struggle to survive without a home, a job, or valuable possessions. The only escape from such a reality is granted by the mysterious Positron Project – the perfect community of twin cities that operates in a bimonthly cycle: people have a normal stable life for a month and spend the next one in prison. The story is narrated by two volunteers to the project, a married couple, Stan and Charmaine, who decide to trade their hopeless existence in the real world for the comfort and safety that the ideal community promises. They soon discover, though, that the pretty retro façade hides an ugly truth, an escape from the threats posed by the digital revolution is not so easy, and the sense of security comes at a price.

The novel addresses the general theme of survival – here, survival in the face of force majeure, is too powerful for any individual to handle. As Wisker observes, an apocalypse and the ensuing strife for survival is an important motif in Atwood's oeuvre, usually manifested in the form of eco-Gothic. Here, however, the apocalypse has its roots in an economic crash that results in anarchy and abuses of power (Wisker 413). What the protagonists witness is the end of their world, and hardship caused by human weakness. Consilience, which seems to be a safe haven, also proves to be a dystopia only disguised as a dream.

As Fraile-Marcos argues, this community forces alienation among people, since even spouses cannot talk openly about the month they spend apart, in the Positron prison (Fraile-Marcos 30-31). Moreover, as the prison hides its founders' dirty secrets involving organ trafficking and technology misuse, the story showcases the negative impact that scientific developments can have on society if used improperly, or for the wrong reasons.

The novel is a satire, and it includes many lowbrow elements readily recognizable by the twenty first century audience. Atwood often uses pop culture and new media (like her Facebook or Twitter/X accounts, or the fan fiction platform Wattpad) to make a stronger point, better resonating with younger readers, who may not be familiar with the classic works like Milton's *Paradise Lost* but are closely acquainted with pop culture and the internet discourse (Howells *Reinventions* 16; Howells *Margaret Atwood* 52). Moreover, as many authors point out (e.g., Howells *Cambridge* 2; Irvine 204), she is a great enthusiast for blurring genre boundaries and mixing elements that seem to be discrepant at first, but which enrich the story and make it more relevant for her readers. She strongly believes that popular forms combine into a collective mythology (Howells *True Trash* 297) that contains the ready-made cultural patterns rooting the story in the main themes of contemporary culture, and she often rewrites popular genres as parts of her works (Wilson 215; Howells *True Trash* 297). Arguably, *The Heart Goes Last* can be read as a horror story modeled on a slasher movie. This article aims to analyze the novel from this perspective to discover how such a reading may enrich its perception, and how it may open a debate on the value of personal freedom in the age of digital revolution and widespread addiction to new media.

Is such a reading – or rereading – legitimate? In her non-fiction piece *In Other Worlds*, Atwood distinguishes between what she calls "the novel proper" and the novels "of lesser solemnity" (57-58), i.e., genre fiction, in which she draws inspiration from the genre itself, subverting it and using it to her purpose. She challenges conventions and constructs new meanings by transgressing the established codes of practice. While doing so, she often uses patterns and images that are recognizable to the audience, as it makes the story more relatable

for the reader. As Kowal argues, in *The Heart Goes Last* she uses the 1950s aesthetic that is "a simulacrum of bygone reality" (147) to bring the narrative closer to home, and to make the reader realize the significance of the issues that are central to the tale. Since horror films are a crucial part of popular culture, using such a package would communicate the message much more efficiently. Satirical as such a vision may appear, it is also very persuasive in conveying the picture of American mass consumerism and the abuse that comes with too much power that inevitably leads to exploitation.

Characteristics of a Horror Film

Horror films, as one of the oldest cinematic genres, have been intertwined with the development of the medium itself (Dixon 3). In the United States, they have been a staple since cinema's inception, allowing audiences to develop an affinity for the genre and an understanding of its narrative logic (Dixon 3-5). Over time, this familiarity helped the genre evolve and gain popularity, culminating in a significant proliferation during the 1970s and 1980s, when horror movies became particularly prominent (Dixon 138). During this period, the genre pushed boundaries by depicting the monstrosity humans are capable of, often showcasing violent and gory scenes that did not shy away from brutality (Dixon 143).

While horror films have not occupied as central a role in Canadian cinema as they have in Hollywood, they have nonetheless carved out a niche and found a devoted following. Canadian horror distinguishes itself in notable ways from its American counterpart, though. As Freitag and Loiselle observe, a key difference lies in the location of terror's source: rather than focusing on external threats, Canadian horror often situates the monster within, blurring the line "between external threat and internal dread" (4). This emphasis on internalized horror reflects societal anxieties, producing a pervasive unease that resonates deeply with viewers (Freitag and Loiselle 21). The possibility that the monster resides both inside and outside intensifies the discomfort, making these tales particularly haunting (Vatnsdal 28).

This framework of horror, with its focus on internal and external dread, provides a compelling lens through which to examine *The Heart Goes Last*. True to the conventions of Canadian horror, the monstrosity in the novel is not confined to its villains, Ed and Jocelyn—the founders and main beneficiaries of the Positron Project. Instead, the monster extends into the community itself, which collectively chooses to ignore the disturbing realities of their world. It is also present within the individual characters, who willingly participate in the system for personal gain, revealing the moral compromises that sustain the nightmare. Moreover, in alignment with the tradition of Canadian horror films, as described by Vatnsdal (29), the terror in *The Heart Goes Last* lingers beyond the conclusion of the narrative. The book does not offer closure, instead leaving the reader with unsettling possibilities and unanswered questions that echo long after the final page. This open-endedness deepens the sense of unease, solidifying the story's place within the horror genre.

While *The Heart Goes Last* aligns with the characteristics of Canadian horror by exploring the internal and societal sources of monstrosity, its setting in crisis-stricken America lends it a structure that closely follows the typical pattern of a slasher movie. As Carol J. Clover outlines in her seminal study of the genre, this structure is highly formulaic and rooted in familiar narrative elements (Clover 9). Much like a folktale, it features a hero, a villain/monster, a terrible place, a series of victims, and a simple yet effective weapon. Similarly, its linear plot mirrors the simplicity of fairy tales: after the conflict is resolved (i.e., the villain dies or is captured and the hero escapes), the order is restored. This predictable framework ensures that every spectator knows what to expect and how the story will unfold, as each narrative is essentially a variation on a well-worn theme. Yet, this familiarity does not diminish its impact. Instead, the story remains compelling because it taps into deeply ingrained fears, playing them to their fullest through the on-screen conflict (Clover 11).

There are frequent references to film and cinematic metalanguage in general throughout the novel. Some of them are direct, like the description of Consilience as "a town in a movie, a movie of years ago" (*Heart* 32), the house after Stan's disappearance

that feels alien, "like one of those scary movies" (*Heart* 180), or the restaurant where everything is made "to look like an old movie" (*Heart* 223-24). Vintage movies are shown continuously on the Consilience TV channel – "comic movies, tragic movies, melodramatic movies" (*Heart* 111) – and although they seem mild and rather innocuous, not to excite the citizens excessively, they do include some dramatic moments that remind the characters of their lives from the times before the project. More violent films also appear as protagonists visualize such scenes in moments of distress. For example, Stan is fantasizing about "last-minute escapes, and tunnels, and trapdoors" (*Heart* 143) as he is drugged and strapped, waiting for his uncertain future in the prison ward, and then he is envisioning his release from the trap "if this were a spy film" (*Heart* 164). Similarly, Charmaine sees herself as "a fatal woman, like Marilyn in *Niagara*" (*Heart* 189) as she is getting ready for Stan's funeral. These references to film not only enrich the narrative but also serve as a metaphorical framework, highlighting the characters' desires for escape, identity, and control in a world that increasingly feels scripted and out of their hands.

While such references evoke the influence of film on the characters' perception of reality, some scenes are presented using cinematic metalanguage, further blurring the lines between life and the constructed narratives they inhabit. The whole novel is narrated by two first-person narrators, Stan and Charmaine, interchangeably. As both are getting ready for the Procedure in which Charmaine is the killer and Stan is the victim, their thoughts and their points of view are intertwined, which feels like the shot/reaction shot technique in film narration (*Heart* 150-51). The narrators change during one chapter ("Choice"), which further reinforces the idea of this cinematic technique. In another instance, Jocelyn is getting out of a car, "feet first. Shoes, ankles, grey nylon" (*Heart* 104). This description reflects a camera movement, the upward tilt that is typical for introducing a femme fatale to the scene, especially in vintage productions. By employing such cinematic techniques, the novel not only mirrors the metalanguage characteristic of the film but also enhances the readers' engagement with the characters' psychological states. This way, the narrative experience feels more immersive.

Reading *The Heart Goes Last* as a Slasher

Typically for Atwood's novels "of lesser solemnity" (*Other Worlds* 58), *The Heart Goes Last* transgresses the generic conventions of the style it embraces – the slasher in this case – and uses them to convey a deeper meaning. Hence, the stylistic elements are not copied literally. What the author offers is an adaptation of the genre, "a repetition with variation," to use Hutcheon's words (8). She uses the horror style but at the same time, she distances herself from it by introducing crucial changes.

The setting reflects what Clover describes as the Terrible Place (30-31). It looks more or less decrepit, and it usually feels repulsive for no apparent reason, but what makes it the perfect location for a horror story are the things that happen there behind closed doors, which are yet to be discovered by the protagonists. Notably, as Clover observes, the building may at first seem to be a safe haven and an escape from the peril that is commonplace outside (31). Indeed, that is the case of the Positron Project in the novel, which seems to be the ideal society from the 1950s, surrounded by the total mayhem and devastation that has become the reality after the economic crisis. The fifties were "chosen for the visual and audio aspects" (*Heart* 41) because it feels safe and familiar at the same time, with a nostalgic vibe that heightens the sense of security. Even the Positron prison feels reassuring like "a nest, with a golden egg shining within it" (*Heart* 42), where "it felt safe to be caged in" (*Heart* 56), away from the dangerous passions that may take control over one's life, and away from the burden of making one's own decisions. In contrast, the world outside the walls of Consilience is a battlefield, where zombie-like, "dead-eyed teenagers armed with broken bottles" (*Heart* 42) are ready to murder anyone at any moment. Stan and Charmaine have to sleep locked inside their car for fear of being attacked and killed by such human monsters.

However, it soon turns out that Consilience is a Terrible Place rather than a Paradise on Earth. Just like in a horror movie, the terror unfolds slowly and gradually, starting with simple things that seem to be discrepant for some reason, unknown to the protagonists at first. The reader observes the setting and starts paying attention to the unusual

elements, such as the blue teddy bears, produced in piles by the women in the knitting circle in prison (*Heart* 70). As the protagonists gain more knowledge and experience, a new face of the project emerges. The prison changes from a safe haven to a nest of terror and fear, with screams and high hysterical laughter to be heard (*Heart* 136), and a sense of insecurity is instilled once someone realizes they have lost control over their life. When Charmaine gets scared and unsure about her fate (*Heart* 137), the voices of the drugged convicts awaiting the Procedure resemble "a slobbering zombie sound" (*Heart* 136). The gradual unveiling of the project's true nature mirrors the tension characteristic of the horror genre, leaving the protagonists – and the readers – overwhelmed by a growing sense of dread.

Another crucial element for a slasher movie is the killer – a "psychotic man usually propelled by psychosexual fury" (Clover 27), or a person (a man or a woman) presenting overt gender confusion and often wearing clothes typical for the opposite sex (Clover 28). In *The Heart Goes Last* there are two masterminds behind the Positron Project, and they fit into this description closely enough to be deemed part of the slasher poetics. The first one, Ed, is the face of the project. He appears in the marketing campaign promoting it outside, and he is then responsible for the regular motivational speeches that are televised and aired for all the residents of the Consilience project to boost their morale. He has the smile "of a born salesman" (*Heart* 40), he uses the right intonation (*Heart* 38) and the perfect body language: "a wave of the hand, like Santa Claus" (*Heart* 44). He is full of big words: "like the early pioneers, blazing a trail, clearing a way to the future" (*Heart* 37). However, these words are empty, as both Stan and Charmaine come to realize. They are "bursts of sound, like a scratched CD. *Brought together malfunction regrettable sacred deplorable admirable brave enduring heroic forever.* Then, *Join loss spouse help hope community*" (*Heart* 207, emphasis original). Such words and such public performances are his methods to build his empire, and he uses them like a weapon to squash any opposition and take complete control over the population of Consilience. Using propaganda repeated regularly, he can convince the people "to recognize the greater good and choose the lesser evil" (*Heart* 119), and thus persuade them to turn a blind eye to all the irregularities and violations that are happening

there. Ed's charismatic yet manipulative persona embodies the power of psychological control: not only is he a figure of authority, but his marked benevolence conceals his true monstrous nature.

After Stan and Charmaine become disillusioned with the project, Ed is presented as a predator, a monster, and a "potential baby-blood vampire" (*Heart* 226). He approaches "like a manta ray in one of those deep-sea documentaries" (*Heart* 224), and he plays a cat-and-mouse game with Charmaine after Stan is gone. The steak he orders for her at a restaurant, "seared and brown, branded with a crisscross of black, running with hot blood" (*Heart* 224) implies cruelty and the violent behavior he is capable of should the situation require so. His motives become clear after Stan's disappearance, when it is revealed that Ed had a sex bot made in Charmaine's image (*Heart* 213), and he will go to any lengths to get her, as well. In his obsessive pursuit, he is an emblem of the slasher villain driven by psychosexual fury, ready to risk much to get hold of the object of his infatuation. Like a maniac, he is extremely dangerous because he is so unpredictable in his passion. As it is revealed, the whole point of setting up the Positron project for him is to obtain a sex slave – a woman with her brain adjusted by neurosurgery to become obsessed with him alone (*Heart* 263). The only alternative to this kind of bondage is death – "think Henry the Eighth" (*Heart* 213).

While Ed's predatory nature and manipulative tactics are clear, Jocelyn's role as a ruthless figure within the project unfolds more gradually, with her subtle yet formidable control over the lives of the residents of Consilience becoming increasingly apparent. She is strong and influential, and her power reaches beyond the agreed constraints of Consilience. She has access to the key data, so she can reprogram the system, reset the arrangements, and fiddle with someone's life. Like a master of puppets, she can ruin the life of her Positron Alternates, Stan and Charmaine, by arranging two extramarital affairs – Charmaine's with Max, and hers with Stan. Also, she is the only person capable of smuggling people out of Consilience. Her power seems to be unlimited: "she could just wave her hand and reduce him to zero" (*Heart* 110). So is her penchant for cruelty and violence, as Stan supposes: she could kill him any time and for no reason and dispose of the body by putting

it "into the chicken-feed grinder" (*Heart* 124). She is iron-fisted and capable of anything.

As such, Jocelyn plays the male part in the vintage universe of Consilience – in other words, she presents gender confusion. With all the women in the community acting like the perfect housewives from a poster advertising the 1950s, she is more powerful and clever than all the men in the Management of the project, including Ed. She travels in a black Surveillance car, instilling instinctive fear in the people she passes by. She has a scary smile, and she is "prowling around" like a predator (*Heart* 296-97), which invokes Ed's manner. She seems ruthless when trying to achieve her goals, which makes Stan wonder if she is a psychopath (*Heart* 129). Finally, she can dispose of Ed using his weapon against him – neurosurgery turning him into a love puppet of another woman – and hence escape liability. Jocelyn's subversion of traditional gender roles and her relentless pursuit of power make her a far more dangerous figure than the men she manipulates, including Ed. As her manipulations unfold, they reveal a darker undercurrent in the project's power structure, namely the blurred lines between control and submission.

While Jocelyn embodies ruthlessness, her manipulations and cruelty require a counterbalance – one of survival, endurance, and eventual resistance. In slasher films, this role is filled by the 'Final Girl' – "the one who did not die, the survivor" (Clover 35). She begins as one of a group of prospective victims of the manic killer. She witnesses the violent deaths of her friends and can see their mutilated bodies. She can see the full extent of the danger; she is chased and attacked vehemently but she endures and in the end, she either escapes and is rescued, or she fights back and kills the monster herself. Given that she survives the killer's onslaught, this character serves as a foil to the antagonist, suffering immense violence but triumphing in the end.

The Final Girl is presented as the main character – the only character to be given any psychological depth, in fact (Clover 44). She is intelligent, reasonable, and calm. She does not panic but can think instead, which helps her notice the danger before her friends get suspicious or fall into the trap and start dying. Moreover, as Clover

observes (40), the protagonist is boyish, or at least "not fully feminine," which can be noticed not only in her rationality (stereotypically attributed to male characters in exploitation movies), but also in her appearance (wearing unisex clothes), and often in her name, too. She is also sexually reticent: unlike all the other female characters, she seems not to be attracted to the boys in the group and she often acts as if she were a virgin. In the time of trial, though, she may scream in fear at first, but at the end, she fights like a man and usually stabs the killer with his weapon, which Clover (58) calls "her symbolic phallicization."

The viewers take the Final Girl's perspective for a large part of the movie (Clover 44). With the camera-narrator, which equals the omniscient third-person narrator in the novel, she is the focalizer of the events, and her perspective is intertwined with the killer's perspective throughout the entire narrative. The viewers observing the story through her eyes get insight both into the situation and into her mind. They can sense her fear, feel her resolve, and observe her determination to survive. Taking her perspective in the last scenes adds the element of jump-scare, but it also helps the audience to identify with the victim more closely. *The Heart Goes Last* is told by two narrators, Charmaine, and Stan. It may be argued that the generic character of the Final Girl is split between the two of them, and whereas Charmaine seems to fit the description better because of her gender, some aspects typical of it can also be observed in Stan.

Charmaine is the main character that undergoes development in the story. At first, she is presented as pure, innocent, and naïve, almost virginal: she is "so clean, so crisp, so blue and white, so baby-powder-scented" (*Heart* 67), "safe, simple, clean. Armored in pure white undergarments" (*Heart* 93), with a "quasi-virginal restraint" (*Heart* 250). She seems to be the perfect fit for the Consilience project since there is "the retro thing about her, the cookie-ad thing" (*Heart* 48). She is also amiable and happy all the time as if she were cut out of an old-fashioned advertisement. She smells of cinnamon – "such a cheerful smell" (*Heart* 145), and she has a "chirpy, childishly high Barbie-doll voice" (*Heart* 94). In other words, she is described as an ideal victim who would never even try to defend herself. However, her innocence is misleading, and in fact "bland is good camouflage" (*Heart* 51). "Fluffy,

upbeat Charmaine" (*Heart* 130) is much stronger than she lets on, able to play the part of the "angel of mercy" and kill prison inmates without wavering. Her iron resolve is unfeminine when considered against the standards of the fifties. Then again, it is precisely her level-headedness and her determination that make her the perfect counterbalance for the killer, capable of confronting him in the end.

The perception of the character changes once she starts her affair with Max. Just like the Final Girl becomes vulnerable once she loses her virginity or restraint, Charmaine is revealed to be a killer in the Positron prison after she starts dating her Alternate. Her appearance changes then, too, as the pure whites are replaced with fuchsia and cherry-colored garments. She is "swept away. Drugged with desire" (*Heart* 53), but the price she must pay is high: the hardship and disappearance of her friends, Veronica and Sandi (*Heart* 140-41), the elimination of her husband (*Heart* 153), and her final confrontation with Ed.

The resemblance to the Final Girl motif is also clear in Charmaine's handling of the killer. She resorts to her apparent innocence, giving him "her blue-eyed look, her child's look" (*Heart* 225) and painting her toenails Blush Pink, which is "very popular among the 12-year-olds" (*Heart* 251) but in fact, she is far from intimidated. What she is doing there is giving him a false sense of security, using his weapon – his penchant for young girls, and his infatuation with her timid self (*Heart* 194). She can defeat him because she notices the danger soon enough to avoid falling into the trap, and she is determined to go to any lengths to defeat him.

Stan is the other reflection of the Final Girl in the novel. Even though he is male, he bears many traits of this generic protagonist of the slasher movie, and in many respects his and Charmaine's characteristics are complementary. Strangely enough, though, in many ways, Stan matches the role of the standard female victim of the slasher much better than Charmaine. While she pretends to be or is perceived as, weak, harmless, and completely reliant on others, she successfully plays the role of the angel of mercy and is therefore a crucial element of the organ harvesting system. Even though she does not know the

real reasons behind her job at the Positron, she chooses not to ask. Stan, on the other hand, is a puppet in the hands of Jocelyn. He is objectified for most of the novel, as he is used as a sex toy, then a tool for Jocelyn's revenge, and finally as a cog in Jocelyn's intricate plan to destroy Ed's project. He is honestly scared of what she may do to him when they share a house (*Heart* 93), which is reminiscent of the image of a passive, terrorized female victim in an exploitation horror movie. Moreover, the fact that he is smuggled out of Consilience dressed up as Elvis, in a box full of teddy bears, is emblematic of his helplessness and the victim position. And yet, he survives while the killers – Ed and Jocelyn – are removed from the picture, and he can enjoy a peaceful life like the one they had with Charmaine before they discovered the truth about the Positron project. His story reflects the fate of the early Final Girls, as described by Clover (35) – delivered to safety by others and leaving the monster behind without actually defeating him themselves.

Stan is very quick to sense that there is something wrong with the project; he has a "slightly uneasy feeling" (*Heart* 34) even before they sign the deal to join Consilience. He is also highly skeptical of Ed's pep talks at a time when everyone else seems to be completely taken in – he considers it "bullshit" (*Heart* 37) and "some sort of pyramid scheme" (*Heart* 44) from the very start. He can understand the thing others seem to disregard, namely that there must be some ulterior motives behind the beautiful words, and that in fact "some folks must be making a shitload of cash out of this thing" (*Heart* 81). Charmaine also has her doubts, but she chooses to silence them, whereas Stan applies cold logic and discovers that the talk is a marketing campaign full of empty words, with the truth hidden from a discerning eye. Like the Final Girl, he can sense the danger before anyone else can see anything alarming there.

A slasher must involve a specific kind of weapon (Clover 31) – something pretechnological, requiring brute force and causing carnage. Typically, it is the kind of weapon that brings the attacker and the attacked into close contact, and that penetrates the victim's body (the exploitation motif), such as a knife, a hammer, an axe, a chainsaw, or a needle. The weapon is first used by the killer but at the end, it is appropriated by the Final Girl, who often uses it to incapacitate or

execute the murderer. Charmaine is equipped with needles when she executes the prisoners, but it is Stan that is often depicted in a horror-like pose, with a hedge trimmer that he uses as his armament. He fantasizes about committing violent acts when working on the hedge. His fantasies usually involve Jocelyn, which makes the situation an act of revenge of the Final Girl on the killer. He daydreams of the "sharp saw whizzing around" (*Heart* 83) and slicing "neatly through a neck with a lightning-swift move, as in the Japanese samurai films" (*Heart* 93). He bases his visions on horror films, thinking about "leather gloves, only with gauntlets, and a leather face mask" (*Heart* 93), thus clearly referencing Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974). He also envisions detaching Jocelyn's head from the rest of her body using a sharp tool, possibly an axe (*Heart* 94). He becomes empowered at the end of the novel, just like the Final Girl, because he gets to keep the weapon even though the killer is far away and his family is safe – when in Las Vegas a year later, he still spends weekends "trimming the cactus hedge" (*Heart* 301). It is a confrontation of the Final Girl with the killer, but the Final Girl is armed and ready this time.

Sharp pretechnological weapons entail using graphic violence, which is another element typical for a slasher. The body is mutilated so strikingly and explicitly that it evokes disgust and terror in the audience. In *The Heart Goes Last* carnage is not so literal, but rather it is implied in the fragmentation of the body when describing a person or a technical device. In the automatized world of the Positron, Charmaine is given instructions by "a head box," "a canned image of a head" (*Heart* 68), which is so lifelike that it is hard to decide if it is real or not. The head is not disconcerting or scary, since such images are just a fact of life there, as "no doubt there are eyes embedded everywhere" around Consilience (*Heart* 92). Yet the single body part that is emphasized the most strongly is the eyes, for instance, "those darn teddy bears with their bright, unseeing eyes" (*Heart* 113), or the subject of the Procedure, whose "eyes are horrified" (*Heart* 69). As Clover (166) argues, it is the human eye that is the strongest vehicle of terror, therefore horror films often include extreme close-ups on the victim's eyes to convey their intense fear. The eyes used by Atwood in the most extreme parts of the story play a similar part and have a similar effect on the reader.

Fragmentation is also used by Charmaine as a strategy of emotional detachment during the Procedure when she kills a person but prefers to consider them a collection of body parts rather than a human. Hence, she "strokes the man's head, smiles with her deceptive teeth" (*Heart* 69). It is a survival technique, which is made still more obvious when she is trying to disconnect herself from the act of executing Stan. She tries not to see him, but to analyze his face bit by bit instead: "she knows every feature of his head so well, each eye, each ear, and the corner of the jaw, and the mouth with Stan's teeth in it, and the neck, and the body that's attached to it . . . This body doesn't have a future" (*Heart* 153). Doing so, Charmaine can persuade herself to persevere and continue the Procedure even though it is impossible "to use her head and discard her heart because the heart goes last" (*Heart* 180).

However, in other instances, fragmentation and body mutilation are used to intensify the terror, which is mostly done using the uncanny valley effect. The effect, first described by a Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori in 1970, refers to the feeling people experience when encountering patients with prosthetic limbs or when interacting with humanoid robots (33-34). As Mori argues, people like robots that look human, and they appreciate their similarity to real human beings. However, this affinity increases only up to a certain point. Once the object has too many human characteristics, such as moving eyes or skin, it becomes revolting to the onlookers. Mori calls this sudden drop in appeal the uncanny valley. Once scientists go past this point and build a robot that is indistinguishable from human beings, the eerie feeling passes, and the audience likes the object again. Subjective as the sensation is, it is surprisingly universal: it is observed in all people, although the exact point at which it occurs differs from person to person (Mori 35). The moment of its occurrence also changes depending on the object's movement: it is reported to happen much earlier once a person notices that a robot can move and interact with them on their own as if it had a mind. Hence, robots (or prosthetic limbs) that are still may be classified as appealing, but once they start moving, they become creepy.

The uncanny valley effect is frequently used in horror movies to magnify the audience's fear and repulsion (Strait et al.). It also occurs

in *The Heart Goes Last*, arguably to the same end. It is reinforced in the novel by the introduction of the fragmented bodies of robots, which is a clear reference to the feeling of eeriness as originally described by Mori. The robots here "come in units. Arms, legs, torsos, basically the exoskeleton. Standard heads, though we do the customizing and skinning here" (*Heart* 185); "There are moving belts conveying thighs, hips, joints, torsos; there are trays of hands, left and right" (*Heart* 187). As the narrator admits, the effect is "ghoulish" (*Heart* 187). Moreover, the body parts are in motion, thus magnifying the onlooker's and the reader's disgust: "a dozen of headless, naked plastic bodies miming the act of copulation;" "the space is filled with the motion of thighs and abdomens, like some grotesque art installation" (*Heart* 200). It makes Stan feel as if he were in a morgue or a slaughterhouse, and the readers are bound to share his disgust when trying to picture the image. The disembodied parts are all the more uncanny because of their constant robotic movement, and the fact that they are lifelike enough to give the wrong impression at first. They therefore cause an atavistic fear in the observer. Kosa (126) links the fear to what she calls the "transhumanist potentialities of biosciences" – hence, the horror is linked with the misuse and the uncontrolled development of technology.

The robotic body parts described in the novel are disturbing not only because of the uncanny valley effect they give but also because they reflect the exploitation that is to be found in the real world. The disembodied heads lying around on the table evoke the reader's primal fears, but it is the fact that it is "Charmaine, gazing up at him out of her blue eyes" (*Heart* 193) that makes the scene more intimate and therefore truly repulsive. Even though it is only a prosthesis, its application is obvious: it is going to be connected with one of the wriggling bodies from the assembly line and will be used as a sexbot to satisfy Ed's fantasies of owning and subduing the real person (*Heart* 274). Other Possibilibots, equipped with different heads and different functions, reflect the global exploitation of the female body, as they are prepared to be exported to different parts of the world. Worse still, there are kiddybots, packed with the knitted blue teddy bears, to satisfy the pedophiles' tastes, too (*Heart* 200-201). The terror evoked by the novel, then, is not limited to the eerie appearance. On the contrary, it is made tangible and real because of such a close connection of the images to real-life problems.

The prevalent commodification of the (mostly female) body that is facilitated by scientific developments and the use of advanced technology in the Positron is the focal point of the story, its climax before the final denouement. The assembly line full of robotic body parts is the most significant revelation of the narrative. Even though it is not one of the typical elements of a slasher – although it may be said to belong to the field of biomedical horror – it is the prime focus of the narrative. It is gradually ushered in by the structural elements of the horror, such as the manic killer, the Final Girl, or the Terrible Place, which prepare the reader for the central message of the story.

Double-Plus Unfree

The significance of the novel, in which the reality is satirically distorted, becomes clear once Atwood's work is juxtaposed with her article "We Are Double-Plus Unfree" from *The Guardian* which was published around the time of the release of *The Heart Goes Last* (Atwood "Double-Plus"). In it, she discusses the question of freedom – "freedom to" and "freedom from" – and, as she argues, people nowadays are more and more willing to give up the first to gain an illusion of the latter. As life, in the real world, is slowly but surely turned into a prison with constant digital surveillance by the authorities, Ed becomes even more authentic as a manic villain from a horror story. His master plan also becomes palpable, and the readers are more than ever willing to believe that "once you've got a controlled population with a wall around it and no oversight, you can do anything you want" (*Heart* 126). Consilience is built on the foundation of words, the language of marketing, which may become a powerful tool in the hands of a skilled salesman. The perfect images aired day and night on the Consilience TV lull the residents and make them disregard the evil things that are happening around them. This willful ignorance is reinforced by the careful choice of words, as the regular propaganda broadcast on TV becomes white noise, further dulling their awareness. Since "nobody has much to say about it" (*Heart* 120), people stop paying attention and they are unwilling, or maybe even unable to return to reality with all its problems.

The final warning that Atwood issues in her novel is included in the last conversation between Charmaine and Jocelyn, closing the whole tale. Charmaine is told the truth, and she is given her free will back: "Take it or leave it . . . The world is all before you, where to choose," to which she can only reply, "How do you mean?" (*Heart* 306). As Jocelyn is putting the power back in her hands, Charmaine is reluctant to take it. Arguably, the scene resonates more profoundly with the audience because of the deliberate use of the horror story format in the novel. The tension created by the slasher narrative, where the Final Girl often faces her oppressor one last time, makes the audience view the encounter with suspicion and unease. By positioning Jocelyn, who caused much of the terror in the story, as the one seemingly granting Charmaine freedom, Atwood subverts the expectation of clear resolution typically found in such narratives. This ambiguity forces readers to question whether the offer of free will is genuine or yet another manipulation, heightening their emotional engagement with the scene and underscoring the novel's central themes of control and autonomy. The central question remains open, then. Are we double-plus unfree, or are we still capable of taking our own lives in our hands?

Conclusion

In her 1983 piece "An End to an Audience?," Atwood argues that "fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community" (346). In *The Heart Goes Last*, she proves that it still holds. A dystopian tale set in a world resembling ours, the novel shows the dissolution of social ties powered by the AI revolution in the face of an economic crash. The Positron Project is the place of horror – a modern-day slasher – where the terrible truth is packaged as the American Dream to make it irresistible for potential victims. By applying a well-known pop-cultural frame and by referencing new technologies that have been in the spotlight of public debates for a few years now, Atwood can successfully engage readers in a discussion concerning crucial ethical issues that need to be addressed urgently. Given that she is always the first one to recognize "the need for literary culture to keep up with the times" (York 148), it is clear that she exploits the appeal of popular culture to make an important statement and to voice her opinion in the discussion on the most pressing questions:

How can we see the value of "freedom to"? How can we escape the trap of "freedom from"? At a time when digital technologies start to control our lives more and more completely, a generic horror story like *The Heart Goes Last* might be a real wake-up call for the reader even a few years after its publication.

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Sustainable Barbie? Barbie at the Intersection of Plastic Fantasy and Ecological Awareness

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Abstract

Although first introduced as a doll designed for young girls aged between 4-13, Barbie has become more than that, transforming into a variety of meanings: a cultural text for Material Culture Studies, the glamorous product of the culture industry, a lifestyle, a fashion icon, an object of desire. Despite the popularity of Barbie-mania, the doll has often been harshly criticized for selling fake dreams to young girls about beauty and youth, misrepresenting female identity, legitimizing capitalist ideology and consumer culture norms about the self, society, and, recently, about the environment. It is claimed Barbie is harmful in many ways, but especially in terms of its effects upon the environment, where "pink" carbon emission equals "648 grams of carbon for every 182 grams of Barbie." Today, the plastic toxicity of Barbie is a crucial factor in emphasizing its danger to human and non-human environments in direct and indirect ways. Despite several academic studies focusing on Barbie from feminist or semiotic

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perspectives, Eco-critical and New Materialist approaches to Barbie are quite rare. So, it is the intention of this study to configure Barbie on a new level between material and discursive practices that treat the doll both as a "thing" and as a "cultural text." In other words, where does Barbie stand at the intersection of plastic fantasy and ecological awareness? How does the plastic matter of the doll function in a (social) environment? Is sustainable Barbie possible, or is it only a greenwashing of capitalism? This research, aiming to deconstruct the physical and symbolic plasticity of Barbie and its representations in consumer society with an Eco-critical and New Materialist awareness, centers on "Barbie footprint" as a contemporary ecological problem that leads to climate crisis and ecological degradation.

Keywords: Barbie, climate crisis, toxic plasticity, carbon footprint, New Materialism

Sürdürülebilir Barbie? Plastik Fantezi ve Ekolojik Farkındalığın Kesişiminde Barbie

Öz

Barbie adındaki oyuncak bebek 4-13 yaş aralığındaki kız çocukları için tasarlamıştır ancak Barbie yıllar içinde büyük bir popülariteye kavuşarak, hedef kitlesinin ve amacının ötesine geçmiştir. Günümüzde Barbie, kültür emperyalizmin parıltılı nesnesi, bir moda ikonu, arzu nesnesi, yaşam tarzı, maddeci-kültürel okumalara uygun bir metin, vb. gibi pek çok farklı kavrama dönüşerek, oyuncak bebekten fazlasına işaret etmektedir. Barbie çılgınlığı tüm popülaritesine rağmen, temsil ettiği tüketim toplumu normları, kapitalizmi meşrulaştırması, kız çocuklarına gerçek olmayan bir kimlik algısı özendirdiği için sıklıkla eleştirilmiştir. Bu eleştiriye son zamanlarda çevreye olan zararı da eklenmiştir. Oyuncak bebeğin hammaddesi olan plastik ile bebeğin üretim, satış ve pazarlama aşamasında kullanılan teknikler göz ününe alındığında, Barbie'nin karbon ayak izi (her bir 182 gram ağırlığındaki Barbie için 648 gram karbon salınımı mevcuttur) sanıldığı kadar masum bir pembe olmamakla beraber, azımsanamayacak kadar

fazla bir toksik yapıya sahip olduğu ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bu durum, çağımızın en önemli sorunsalı olan iklim krizini olumsuz yönde etkilemesine rağmen Barbie'nin Çevreci Beşeri Bilimler ve Yeni Maddecilik gibi disiplinler açısından ele alınmasına son derece nadir rastlanmaktadır. O halde, Barbie'yi söylemsel ve maddeci yaklaşımlar çerçevesinde farklı bir açıdan ele alınmasını gerektiren bu çalışmada şu gibi soruların cevapları aranacaktır: Plastik hayaller satan Barbie, iklim krizi farkındalığının neresinde durmaktadır? Barbie'nin plastik yapısının çevreye etkisi nedir? Sürdürülebilir Barbie mümkün müdür yoksa bu kapitalizmin "yeşil aklama" pratiği midir? Tüm bu sorular ışığında bu çalışma, Barbie'nin plastik yapısını ve tüketim kültürü tarafından "plastize" edilmiş farklı temsillerini sorgulayarak, çağımızın en büyük sorunsalı olan iklim krizine olan olumsuz etkilerini Çevreci Beşeri Bilimler ve Yeni Maddecilik öğretileri açısından tartışmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Barbie bebek, iklim krizi, plastik, karbon ayak izi, Yeni Maddeci Eleştiri

Introduction

Dolls are not always the innocent, delicate, passive figures of one's childhood. The French poet Rainer Maria Rilke claims dolls represent the darker side of childhood, the uncanny figures of one's past, or, in Baudelaire's words, dolls may serve as melancholy (Gross 12-13). However, dolls are more than the images collected in the past. A doll may stand in time and beyond. They are active, manipulative, powerful tools for transmitting ideological norms and codes about race, class, gender, and ethnicity across time and place. Dolls are shaped by the generational zeitgeist and represented through their varied stylistic manifestations, and they convey the essential practices of a changing environment. Dolls are regarded as cultural texts designed, produced, and consumed. In this vein, a doll as a cultural object, according to Griswold's The Fabrication of Meaning, is "evidence about the culture itself" because "objects are part of the human circuit of discourse" (1077). They shape meaning and behavior through the ideological codes of one culture and can be regarded as symbolic representations

within certain contexts in terms of social media, popular culture, literature, and fashion. As Brunell and Whitney argue, "today, dolls are understood as complex texts that represent layered versions of realities, mediated by the often-contradictory ideologies, values, or worldviews of doll creators, producers, consumers, and players" (qtd. in Zaslow 37). In other words, Barbie, the world's most iconic doll, designed for young girls aged between 4-13 by the American company Mattel in 1959, has gone beyond its real meaning as a doll, transforming into a cultural text with symbolic meanings in popular culture, media, fashion, and literature. However, apart from the symbolic plasticity of Barbie, the plastic materiality of the doll matters even more in our age, defined by the climate crisis. Despite a number of academic studies focusing on Barbie from feminist or semiotic perspectives, Eco-critical and New Materialist approaches to Barbie are quite rare. Thus, it is the intention of this study to configure Barbie on a new level between material and discursive practices that treat the doll both as a thing and as a cultural text and to see where the doll stands at the intersection of plastic fantasy and ecological awareness This brings into mind the ecological implications of a doll as a thing in its vitality. Thing power flourishing as the new discursive practice of the New Material Studies underlines an awareness of the "vitality of matter" (Bennet 348). This explains how a doll may have inherent value as a thing other than its symbolic plasticity, which is formed by the perceived meanings labeled on it by the receiver, owner, producer, and ideology. To put it in a theoretical way, a doll's plastic matter, on the material-semiotic level, is involved "within the huge web of intra-actions that exist among objects and meaning" (Brown 4). Configuring materials as things with "agency" rather than positioning them as objects in symbolic contexts is a recent phenomenon associated with the New Material Studies, which, in Baradian terms, provides a new perspective on the existence of things as "active agents" rather than inert, inorganic structures. In this line of thinking, things may offer meaningful explanations for the problems in our time as the "environment is materially and conceptually reconstituted" (Coole and Frost 6), and such matter "intervenes in the building blocks of life, altering the environment in which the human species among others persist" (24). Additionally, the plastic materiality of the doll, other than the contextual/symbolic meanings attributed to

its presented image in social life and popular media, may pose ethical questions about nature, environment, food, health, and sustainability. With this intention, this study argues that Barbie, in a material-semiotic discourse that borrows from the New Materialism and Ecological Humanities, is harmful to the environment as the Barbie footprint leads to the climate crisis and ecological degradation.

Barbie, at the intersection of ecological awareness and plastic fantasy, is argued to stand apart from the ecological realities of our society. It becomes necessary then to learn the (anti) environmental story behind Barbie as the world's most iconic doll, starting from its first arrival at the market up to the contemporary time. It is, however, important to clarify that this study tries to handle more than one critical point while intending to explore the material-semiotic existence of Barbie in today's world. The first intention is to configure the representation of Barbie as a consumer product of capitalist ideology in a socio-political context. The second point revolves around the doll as a material on thing level where its plasticity matters in human and nonhuman natures, which automatically parallels the third point, re-positioning Barbie in ecological awareness, trying to reduce its plastic footprint for the sake of a sustainable future. In this frame, the first part of this study centers on the historical background of the doll, where and how it was designed, produced, and consumed, along with different manifestations of the doll across time. This critical section handles Barbie generally from an ideological aspect, which is grounded on the critique of capitalism and consumer cultural norms about female beauty, whereas the second part forms the theoretical background, mainly focusing on Barbie in the frame of New Materialism and Ecological Humanities. Centering on the doll's matter to see how it matters in the material world and nature, this part attempts to configure Barbie as a "thing with agency" connecting with other objects in the larger web of meanings. Borrowing from the New Materialist notions about "vibrant matter" and "agency" along with the Eco-critical claims on the "Anthropocene," "Capitalocene," "Plasticene," "toxic colonialism," and "environmental racism," part three aims to underline the critical materialist approaches to the varied influences of late capitalism on climate change. The last part, considering the doll's alarming position in an endangered world, aims to exemplify

the negative side-effects of Barbification/ Barbiecore as concepts to indicate how symbolic plasticity and plastic materiality of the Barbie doll is popular, permanent, and widespread in society in terms of mass media, fashion, cosmetic and health industry. Overall, this work aims to deconstruct the physical and symbolic plasticity of Barbie with an Eco-critical and New Materialist awareness, centering on the "Barbie footprint" as a contemporary ecological problem that leads to the climate crisis and ecological degradation.

Historical Background: A Blonde Is Born

In the beginning, there was Barbie. Ever since its first appearance on the global market by the world's greatest toy company, Mattel, in 1959, Barbie has been synonymous with beauty, glamour, color pink, and plastic. Barbie, first designed as a toy for female children aged between 4-13, today has been transformed into a fashion icon for haute couture, a cultural text for academic study, an artistic piece for Andy Warhol, a fantastic idol for cosmetic surgery, an invitation to anorexia, and sadly a huge contributor to the global climate crisis. Gerber, in her book *Barbie and Ruth,* argues that Ruth Handler, as the co-founder of Mattel, had no idea about the carbon footprint of the doll when she first introduced Barbie to the world with her husband in the garage of their Hollywood house in 1959. On the contrary, she was concerned more about Barbie's being an inspirational role model of female empowerment for young girls, especially when Ruth Handler would face gender discrimination in the male-dominated market or even in the world of Mattel, where she worked solely as the only female for a long time. When Ruth Handler noticed her daughter Barbara -after whom Barbie was named- was unhappy while playing with dolls as they were not in adult shape and were far from satisfaction, she came up with the idea to create something new, a three-dimensional doll with an adult look and body, allowing the child "to project her future adult life upon the doll" (Lord 29-30).

Ruth Handler came across the toy she had in mind accidentally during a trip with her children across Europe, and she immediately transplanted it to America. The world's famous doll, Barbie, was

originally based on a German toy, "Bild-Lilli," created in the image of a popular comic-strip character. It was sold as a gag gift for men in Germany. As Bild-Lilli was more of a femme-fatale, Ruth Handler worked with a team of designers to produce the ideal toy suitable for children. The American doll would be mainstream and nice-looking, justifying the commonly accepted norms about female beauty in patriarchal Western societies, and would not pose a risk or cause distress for parents who were concerned about the psycho-sexual education of their children. Working with Japanese manufacturers, chemists, and fashion designers from different parts of the world, Mattel soon introduced Barbie to the world: She was named Barbara Millicent Roberts and was fictionally from Wisconsin, US, but later became a Malibu girl. She was born as a white, heterosexual, American fashion model doll with an adult body with long legs, tiny shoulders, huge breasts, and pointed feet. It was not only her size that looked unreal, but also what she represented revolved around a fantasy. She was the best of everyone, went to the best places, wore the best clothes, and drove the best cars (Gerber 9-10).

In 1961, Barbie had a boyfriend, Ken –named after Ruth Handler's son Kenneth, but he remained a supporting role among many other props in Barbie's social network, as "Ken was just Ken" (Gosling, "Barbie Album") when Barbie could be anything. Rogers argues that Barbiecore, despite being an illusion, appealed to many consumers who were willing to buy that image (3). The reason why we knew more about her appearance rather than her family, educational, and social background lies in the fact that the doll was created to appeal to as many children as possible, hailing to the status quo. This consumer strategy resulted both in negative and positive ways. To some feminist critics, she was the antithesis of feminism, whereas some were satisfied to see that a feminine doll was created for female children by a woman who had higher expectations about female children's future careers in life. According to M. J. Lord, the author of *Forever Barbie*, "to study Barbie, one has to hold seemingly contradictory ideas in one's head at the same time. People project wildly dissimilar and opposing fantasies on her. She is a universally recognized image, but what she represents is entirely personal" (qtd. in Tulinski 48). Similarly, Tamkin notes that the dolls are at once idealistic and materialistic, offering a

characteristically American fantasy. Although the doll represents a fake lifestyle, false beauty standards, and unreal body size, Barbie has become an epitome of perpetual youth and individual glamour ("A Cultural History of Barbie).

Other than appealing to the status quo, I argue that Barbie glorifies American individualism, which is a big part of consumer capitalism. Emphasis on individuality is not only for economic reasons, which is likely to increase sales but also for teaching the Barbie audience how to organize life in a capitalist way in public and private spheres of life. Barbie makes it possible in two ways: First, there is a Barbie for everyone; no matter who you are or where you come from, you can get the Barbie that suits your taste –with a price. With one plastic Barbie in hand, young consumers achieve higher expectations about (unreal) beauty, youth, and popularity; as for the elder ones, they can even realize the illusionary promise of Barbification through cosmetic surgery, clothing, and consumption in real life. The justification of patriarchy as a marketing strategy is my next claim, which I consider another effective strategy for imposing individuality that hails to audience reception. Here, I use the term patriarchy not as a concept for signaling male domination over the female. On the other hand, I consider the term as a discursive motif of power and control in every single corner of Barbie's life where she has the leading role. To give an example, one can observe the doll's hegemonic existence upon receivers in terms of its imposing the commonly expected norms about body, beauty, career, and social life. Barbie, as a popular medium in shaping and maintaining consumer culture norms, legitimizes its role as a coercive structure that depends on acquiring the symbolic modes of discipline and punishment not through force but through the practices of the Western beauty myth. In essence, rather than offering difference and authenticity, Barbie imposes conformity and status quo through the colorful "masquerade of the body" (Rogers 159). According to Kathy Davis, "Barbie reflects the cultural landscape of late modernity: consumer capitalism, technological development, liberal individualism and belief in the makeability of the human body" (qtd. in Rogers 144). Barbie, legitimizing consumer capitalism through its emphasis on (fake) individuality and status-quo, maintains its role as the cultural agency, actively working through the Griswoldian pattern

of "producer-receiver-and social network" as explored in her book, *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World.* Therefore, it is not wrong to argue that Barbie's bio-politics is based on the discourse of capitalist corporates that determine the creation, production, distribution, and reception of the doll as well as its post-receptive extensions in media and social life.

Despite the negative claims for Barbie's legitimizing normative femininity and supporting consumer society practices, the doll was considered inspirational in time due to the variety of roles she offered female children in terms of career choices: She was the Executive career girl in the 1960s, UNICEF Ambassador in the 1980s; she ran for the presidential elections in the 1990s when no American woman was able to do so; she went to space as an astronaut four years before mankind landed on the moon; she served as a paleontologist, she ran as an athlete, worked as an arctic rescuer, and recently became an eco-warrior, to save nature. Apart from myriad career choices, Barbie also offered young females alternative beauty standards via different clothing and body displays: Barbie has transcended its stereotypical representation to become corpulent, darker, curvy, amputee, or even blind. Today, "dolls are produced in more than 22 ethnicities with 35 different skin tones, 94 hair colors, 13 eye colors and within nine body types including disabled ones with wheelchairs, prosthetic legs, with Down syndrome or any other disability" (Mattel, "Barbie Introduces"). Barbie's endless possibilities in terms of physical appearance and occupational positions allow young girls to dream about their own identities in multiple ways and to identify themselves with these forms in an escapist manner; however, the endless possibilities sold to young females also point to the underlying capitalist interests which justify the ideology in a way that indicates options are endless and equal for everyone, who is willing to control how they look and what they maintain in life. This is a verisimilitude of reality, a way of veiling the hegemonic discourse of power structures in capitalist society.

Mattel's commitment to ecological awareness started in 2019 through its collaboration with "National Geographic" to produce dolls that would emphasize climate awareness. The dolls included a Polar Marine Biologist, an Astrophysicist, an Entomologist, a Wildlife

Conservationist, and a Wildlife Photojournalist. In 2021, the company started the campaign "The Future of Pink is Green" and introduced the "Barbie Loves the Ocean" collection of recycled Barbies, intending to produce plastic-free dolls by 2030. Eco-Leadership series launched in 2022 promoted the sale of recycled ocean-bound Barbies. Initiating partnerships with prominent figures of wildlife such as the ethologist and conservationist Jane Goodall, young eco-activist Greta Thunberg, and Hollywood actress and environmental advocate Daryl Hannah, Mattel increased the social impact of Barbie as a sustainable toy in the popular imagination. Approaching 2025, one can see a new dimension of Barbiecore: She is all going green! However, to what extent does Mattel internalize all these changes? Especially when one considers Barbie's growing environmental consciousness, is Barbie going green, or is it a greenwashing of capitalism? Is Mattel dedicated to its new role of producing sustainable dolls? Questions rise as more Barbies are introduced into our lives at a time of climate crisis. Accordingly, the next section will focus on Barbie's plastic cultural agency in reinforcing and/or subverting the "Plasticene" discourse.

Theoretical Frame: Environmental Concerns and New Materialism in the Plasticene

As Environmental Humanities has introduced plastics as a major environmental issue to the academic agenda, a new, distinct interest has occurred in the discipline of Material Culture Studies that elaborates on the material-semiotic agency of plastics in social life from an ecological view. According to Oppermann's *Material Ecocriticism and the Creativity of Storied Matter*, "ecocriticism has always retained a distinct interest in the significance of the material world, recently framing its dynamics within the conceptual horizon of the New Materialist paradigm" (55). Referencing Bill Brown's *Thing Theory,* she argues in *From Ecological Postmodernism to Material Ecocriticism*, "things speak in a world of multiple interacting processes, such as climate change or the consumption of global capitalism, entailing geopolitical and economic practices and thus reminding us of the act that 'the linguistic, social, political and biological are inseparable'" (Hekman qtd. in Oppermann 83). This perspective signals a departure

from the anthropocentric worldview and instead, connects humans as "hybrids of nature and culture" (Latour 11) to the nonhuman world. *Things* or, in other words, inorganic substances and the nonhuman world connect, affect, or configure with the human world via their *material agencies,* which means that (living) matter is in constant "intra-action" (Barad 33) rather than "interaction" with the nonhuman world. Things in such a situation -termed an "assemblage" position- can exist merely and perhaps more vividly as things when they are embedded in varied material-semiotic contexts (Bennett 351). This means that things, before becoming objects turning out to be subjects, remain as active agents that have inherent value on a material level, actively participating among multiple entities, both human and nonhuman, affecting meaning and structure. Bennett labels this as "enchanted materialism," ascribing agency to inorganic phenomena (Coole and Frost 9) with which they act as bodies with agentic capabilities in the way they structure their milieu and respond to significant patterns (20). This New Material approach, as argued in *From Posthumanism to Posthuman Ecocriticism,* allows us "to understand why all agencies matter and why we should be more attentive to their agentic role in today's world and be ecologically aware of the crisscrossing of strands of their stories" (35).

From this perspective, it is noticed that plastics as material agencies operate largely in the wide spectrum of human and non-human life, and at this point, ecological implications of thing-discourse are given credit, especially in the *Plasticene,* which is used as a new definition for describing our age. "Plastisphere," coined by the microbial ecologist Eric Zettler in 2013, refers to a new marine microbial habitat formed by plastics and microplastics (Zettler, Mincer, and Amaral-Zettler 7137). This is a huge part of our present ecosystem, which is a sub-division of the *Anthropocene.* Formulated by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000, the Anthropocene is a definition for "our geological time which has been immensely marked by human activity forming a 'planetary crisis'" (Moore, "Anthropocene or Capitalocene" 3). Likewise, Schneider-Mayerson et al. claim that we are living through an extraordinary time of crises whose primary manifestation is anthropogenic climate change. Having entered this new epoch, it is acknowledged that plastics occupy a huge part in human and nonhuman

nature, affecting climate change. Rangel-Buitrago, Neal, and Williams argue that plastics, since their invention in the early twentieth century by Leo Hendrik Baekeland, are transformed from "yesterday's hero to today's villain," taking hold of daily human life and further dissolving in nature. According to the UNEP Environment report, "every year, 19-23 million tonnes of plastic waste leaks into aquatic ecosystems, polluting lakes, rivers and seas" (UNEP).

The disposal of plastics is yet another climate problem. Due to the long-lasting, flexible structure of plastics, they remain in nature for a long time, dissolving into harmful chemicals and synthetic materials that affect human and nonhuman bodies through intra-action. Kolbert argues that according to a 2021 report on microplastics, children are feeding on these small particulars even before they can eat; moreover, microplastics are found in human placentas. One can never underestimate the danger of inorganic entanglement of microplastics with our bodies at this point. However, the fact that our bodies are open sites for such entanglement also reminds us that "bodies are no longer seen as purely discursive constructs nor as biological substances with boundaries. Bodies are sites of material interchanges between 'various bodily natures' directly engaged with the environment and other bodies" (Oppermann, "From Posthumanism" 61). Conceiving matter as self-transformative, direct, and active disturbs the conventional sense that the only agents are humans who possess cognitive abilities (Coole and Frost 10). However, matter is also a significant player in games of power (20). This line of thought is similar to Heather Davis' claims on the "queer toxicity of plastics" penetrating within the hormonal systems of humans and animals or food chains. According to Davis "the queering of our bodies via particular chemicals is not altogether apocalyptic," ("Plastic Matter") on the contrary, it is novel and challenging. The morphed bodies might be alternative sites for meaning in the Plasticene:

> They gather in the environment in the forms of blighted landscapes, bags fluttering in the wind, or lighters and wrappers found in ditches, masses of untold plastic items piled in garbage dumps, and in the gyres of the ocean, where they swirl and are eaten by many forms of marine life, from bacteria

> to birds, tortoises to whales. Plastics also accumulate what is around them, particularly by adsorbing persistent organic pollutants, which, due to a similar chemical structure, tend to latch on to oil-based plastics. It influences its environment while remaining mute to that environment's influence. (Davis, "Life and Death in the Anthropocene" 351)

As plastic agencies, toys are positioned at the core of this (anti) environmental sensibility. Toys are formed by fossil fuels, which contribute to global warming. The toy industry, from Mattel to Lego, is synonymous with such plastic waste. This explains why 280 million tons of plastic were produced worldwide in 2012, with a projected increase to 33 billion tons annually by 2050 (Davis qtd. in Rochman, Browne, Halpern et al. 349). One can clearly understand the reason for this tremendous toxic existence when the plastic materiality of Barbie is documented in terms of its ingredients, which generally remains veiled by the doll's symbolic plasticity:

> At least five types of fossil fuel-based plastics are used for making Barbie: polyvinyl chloride (PVC), ethylene vinyl acetate (EVA), acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS), and hard vinyl—plus additive chemicals. One of these plastic additives, called Di(isononyl) cyclohexane-1,2-dicarboxylate (DINCH), has been used in newer Barbies to replace phthalates, which are additives linked to asthma, metabolic disorders, obesity, cancer, and other health problems. However, research on human cells suggests DINCH could have adverse outcomes similar to that of other toxic plasticizers in children's toys. Plastic toys also release toxic microplastics and nanoplastics, which are easily inhaled and ingested. Plastics commonly contain hormone (endocrine) disrupting chemicals, and this shows that we are absorbing these chemicals into our bodies. Hormone-disrupting chemicals are linked to serious health problems, including developmental, growth, metabolic, and reproductive issues. (Plastic Pollution Coalition)

The above reference, which emphasizes the toxic plasticity of Barbie, is necessary information that helps us see what we consume

when we buy a single doll, which otherwise remains unnoticed and embodied in the symbolic plasticity of the doll. Barbie causes significant carbon emissions, with one 182-gram Barbie doll emitting about 660 grams of carbon (Young) besides the manufacturing process and transport. This means Mattel is utilizing at least 10.9 billion grams of plastic in addition to producing 39.6 billion grams of carbon emissions annually on one product alone (Plastic-reimagined). What is worse, only a limited number of toys can be recycled due to the complex structure of plastics used. This means that during disposal, the Barbie –with capital B- becomes any barbie, turning into a waste product, among many other things in nature, ready for landfill. At this point, Barbie, erasing its subject position as a fashionable icon in popular media and losing its meaning as an object on an ideological-semiotic level, starts to exist as a plastic on thing level, mediating among different agencies. This reminds us how Barbie, in its inorganic plasticity, works with other organic and inorganic matters through intra-action, underlining its presence as a material agency with inherent value. The "enchanted materiality" of the doll in this state then allows us to perceive its existence more carefully in an eco-sensitive context. The sooner the Barbie is thrown away in a landfill and becomes a thing among many other agencies, the faster it rids of its given cultural value in a subject position that justifies capitalistic interests. The doll parts in the pile of plastic waste now prevail as active agencies in contact with a variety of other possible agencies in terms of nano-plastic chemicals and petro-substances, all of which directly or indirectly intervene in human and nonhuman natures, leading to ecological degradation.

It is also true that, ironically, the plasticity that forms the doll makes it even more real, reachable, and durable, but at the same time, more disposable. According to Bennett, "American consumerism works against itself as too much stuff in too quick succession equals the fast throw from object to thrash" (351). Once the child is done with the Barbie at hand, it becomes a waste. The same is also true for the company: After the new collection is released, Mattel then begins to design a new one, replacing the former. This shows that although "Barbie has become an extension of girls" (Tulinski 75) through its inspirational representations, it is also an extension of capitalism; produced, consumed, perceived, and disposed of very fast

to be replaced with a new one on the shelves. This fits into the idea of *Capitalocene* -rather than Anthropocene- termed by J. W. Moore, who attempts to define our present condition and our age as the product of capitalism, designed, shaped, and destroyed according to the interests of huge financial conglomerates ("Anthropocene or Capitalocene" 1). This is a sign that indicates "ideology has a material existence reflected on material actions which are defined by the material" (Coole and Frost 34). Other than Barbie's material toxicity, which matters on a thing level in the Plasticene, its symbolic toxicity on an ideological level point to the doll's existence in the Capitalocene. Barbie indeed sells a (capitalist) dream, which is not fantastic but all in plastic, harmful to kids' imagination as well as to the environment because "92 % of American girls aged 3-12 own an average of 12 Barbie dolls" (Carbon Credits). In other words, Barbie, at the waste level, now exists as a new entity, freed from the semiotic meanings attached to it. From a New Materialist point of view, this is a crucial point allowing us to consider the vital materiality of the doll as a toxic thing and allowing us to see how it functions among other elements in the physical environment, translating into "7,776g or 7.8kg CO2e per child" (Carbon Credits). This signals Barbie's plastic cultural agency in reinforcing the Plasticene discourse. However, there are some claims that Barbie-mania has recently stepped into ecological awareness, and Mattel is trying to reduce Barbie's plastic footprint. In the next part, we will see whether climate change exists in Barbie's world or not.

Is Barbie Really Going Green?

Once the sign of plastic glamour, Barbie is now the indicator of green, making an eco-friendly mark on sustainability. Mattel claims to have taken the initiative for a "greener" Barbie, aiming to teach children about nature conservation and climate change. Mattel's commitment to ecological awareness started in 2019 through its collaboration with the "National Geographic" to produce dolls that would emphasize ecological awareness. The dolls included a polar marine biologist, an entomologist, and a wildlife photojournalist, all of which were partially made from recycled ocean-bound plastic, excluding the main parts

of the doll, such as the hair, head, and torso. Other than these series, Mattel introduced the "Playback Program," which allowed customers to send back old toys for recycling. In 2021, the company started the campaign "The Future of Pink is Green" to produce 100 % recycled bio-based plastic materials and packaging by the end of 2030, which sounded unreal. This again signaled the impossibility of reducing the plastic footprint of the doll because they were made from a complex mixture of plastics, metals, and electronics (Pears).

Parallel to the eco-campaign, Mattel launched the collection of the "Barbie Loves the Ocean" series in collaboration with a jewelry brand to sell Barbie bracelets made from recycled materials, which are designed by artisans in Bali, Indonesia. Not to mention the profit of manufacturing Barbie and her accessories in countries where the workforce is cheaper, teaming up with artisans in Asia makes Mattel hardly an ecological role model for toy companies all around the world. In the frame of "environmental racism," which is defined as the act of disposing hazardous waste at places that are mostly populated by marginalized people and poorer nations (Chavis), Mattel's collaboration with the Asian workforce is somewhat similar to Mattel's dumping its plastic waste in developing or under-developed countries where, according to Lerner, local sites are considered "sacrifice zones" for waste disposal. The dumping of the industrial waste of the West on the territories of developing or under-developed countries is termed "toxic colonialism" (Pratt 584), and this partially functions as a part of "slow violence," which is defined as the large-scale ecological violence often occurring in unnoticed threats of climate crisis across time, mostly visible in under-developed or developing nations. According to Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, the most common examples of slow violence are "petro-imperialism, the mega-dam industry, out-sourced toxicity . . . forces that disproportionately jeopardize the live hoods, prospects, and memory banks of the global poor" (5).

Moreover, "environmental racism" has a huge role in the climate crisis. Coined by the African American activist and author Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis Jr., the term is broadly perceived as the intentional siting of polluting and waste facilities in communities primarily populated

by African Americans, Latines, Indigenous People, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, migrant farmworkers, and low-income workers (Chavis). People living in those areas are mostly likely to be exposed to environmental degradation due to the results of mining and oil extraction, chemical production, and extensive agriculture. According to Ihejirika, the world's most developed economies produce 80 % of global emissions from coal, oil, and gas, but it's the developing or under-developed nations that bear the burden of global warming. The local population who is already living in the neighborhood or is responsible for cleaning out the waste is exposed to danger in the first place as they do not have adequate technology to handle the disproportioned waste, and they are eventually exposed and become vulnerable to toxic contamination. This also parallels what Joan Martinez-Alier claims in his significant book, *Environmentalism of the Poor,* that "economic growth, unfortunately, means increased environmental impacts and emphasizes geographical displacement of sources and sinks," which is mostly visible in the rainforests of Indonesia, where trees are cut and used for Barbie packaging. "Indonesia is a target for paper sourcing because of its abundant, carbon-rich rainforests. Thinning their trees makes a huge impact on increasing carbon emissions worldwide" (Postconsumers).

As green authorities have long criticized Mattel and other toy companies for their toxic colonialist strategies, many capitalist corporates now feel the urgency "to go green," such as Mattel's launching of the Barbie series, made from ocean-bound plastic in Mexico's Baja peninsula, knowing that plastic disposal on the site meets the ocean and air. The company has also been in collaboration with noteworthy eco-activists such as Jane Goodall and Greta Thunberg and worked with the Jane Goodall Institute to introduce a "Jane Goodall Inspiring Woman Doll," which highlighted one of the renowned authorities of nature conservation and wildlife protection. In addition, the company has launched the "Eco-Leadership" collection in 2022. The series consists of four different Barbies (one chief sustainability officer, one conservation scientist, one renewable energy engineer, and one environmental advocate) all, according to Mattel, are made from carbon neutral and recycled ocean-bound plastic, which means "doll plastic parts are made from 90 % plastic, sourced within 50 km of

waterways in areas lacking formal waste collection systems; the doll head, hair and accessories excluded" (Mattel, "Future of Pink").

The customer feedback about the collection was mostly positive. A 2021 survey showed that 60 % of consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable dolls. However, according to an academic critique, the collection is an example of greenwashing as the "recipe for sustainability the dolls embody only requires a heavy dose of science and technology, whipped up by well-meaning entrepreneurship, with a little love for the planet sprinkled on top" (Boesenberg). What the writer means with her remarkable interpretation is that although the collection very generally underlines themes related to ecological consciousness, such as "slow violence," "global warming," and "green energy," it is not enough to stress the causes of the problem. Moreover, the collection consists of Barbies from different ethnic backgrounds, but ethnic diversity does not include indigenous Barbies at all. Therefore, it lacks the representation of Indigenous people who are, in reality, more exposed to environmental crises rather than other groups of people in the US, and this is an example of "environmental racism" (Boesenberg). Moreover, the writer argues that the series is far from encouraging ecological awareness; on the contrary, it doubles conspicuous consumption. The most important critique Boesenberg underlines in her article is related to the materiality of the dolls, which are only *partially* made from recycled plastic, contrary to what Mattel has claimed worldwide.

As the study argues, the company's taking a green step in raising climate awareness in children is an important point, but capitalistic concerns and consumer society strategies always stand out clearly. What we see in the collection, after all, is still the same: pretty Barbie only in different clothes, made from the same plastic material, claimed to be *partially* recycled. In other words, the carbon footprint of Barbie contributes to the climate crisis on a large scale in terms of "slow violence," "environmental racism," "toxic colonialism," and "toxic plasticity." This contribution, far from being prevented, unfortunately, continues to increase in terms of Barbie side-effects, which I define as the indirect yet persistent and widespread effects of Barbiecore visible on the human body and social environment in terms of mass media,

fashion, and health industry. I argue that these negative effects can be classified as de-environmental side-effects of Barbiecore, which are embodied in different human practices, implying that Barbie myth is a well-established consumer phenomenon all around the world.

To begin with, Mattel has always benefited positively from mass media, especially the cinema industry, releasing a variety of Barbie animations, video games, and movies since 2001. Especially after the release of the blockbuster *Barbie* in 2023, known as the first live-action Barbie movie starring Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling in leading roles as Barbie and Ken, Barbiecore enlarged its dimensions in many sectors, from fashion and decoration to health and food. The movie has been overwhelmingly successful in reaching the target audience with its ironic emphasis on plastics and consumption, at the same time encouraging the audience to consume more. It is estimated that people have spent millions to buy pink Barbie products, consume pink Barbie food, and even make an Airbnb reservation to stay overnight at the pink Barbie dream house in Malibu.

The movie has contributed to the purchase of Barbie dolls and Barbie-themed merchandise all around the world in a very short time. Sixty million dolls were sold annually before the movie's release (Shaw), causing a shortage of pink color at the market. This is due to Mattel's cooperation with more than 100 popular brands, from Balmain and Zara to McDonalds and Apple, to increase the prevalence of the doll. Adding to the cinema industry, the fashion world is argued to be responsible for popularizing Barbification and disseminating Barbie-themed clothing and accessories across the world. It is claimed that the fashion industry already owns three of the world's CO2 emissions and 20 % of global water pollution (Catabui), not to mention the ecological effects of Barbie-merchandize products, which doubled after the movie was released. According to Tatlerasia, the color company Pantone has launched a new shade named Barbie color: 219 C, which is officially credited as Barbie Pink. Greta Gerwig, the director of *Barbie,* along with producers Warner Bros. and Mattel, have written history, earning $1.4 billion worldwide, making the movie the top box office film of the year. However, it is understood that Mattel has contributed immensely to plastic pollution and over-consumption with one movie, excessively

using plastic and paint materials and triggering carbon emissions indirectly.

Another possible de-environmental side-effect of Barbiecore is visible in the healthcare and beauty industry in which plastic/cosmetic surgery functions, indirectly contributing to climate change. Beauty is a long-established criterion in Western society whose origins are traced back to Antiquity. The Platonic/ideal form attributed to the female body flourishes from ancient sources where the ideal spirit merges with the perfect body, creating the Western beauty myth transmitted across centuries in the long (his)tory of man. In contemporary Western societies, beauty, according to the feminist critic Naomi Wolf, has become a form of currency in circulation among men (12) and a religion of domesticity (66). In other words, "beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power (13). Because of consumer society codes and patriarchal enforcements on standard beauty norms in imposing a perfect, slender, docile female body image that can be modified, enhanced, and idealized, more women are observed today to step into a variety of cosmetic/plastic complications with a Barbie picture in their hands.

Either through surgery, chemicals, extreme body sports, or excessive dieting, which may lead to anorexia, women try to modify their bodies following the expected beauty norms of the West. Bordo argues in *The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity* that "at the farthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead women to demoralization and death" (14). In *Reading the Slender Body,* Bordo signals the fact that "the body today has become cultural plastic," meaning more people tend to standardize their physical appearances concerning the promoted images of Barbie (qtd. in Rogers 124). This also reminds Foucault's claims on docile bodies, which are subjected, used, transformed, and improved. Depending on cosmetic/plastic surgery, young girls think that they can act as liberated authorities, making free choices about how they look; however, this is nothing more than legitimizing the practice of oppressive institutions of patriarchy (qtd. in Collins 106). Barbie is thus an "icon of consumerist somatics, a technology of the body driven by the idea that our bodies can be whatever we like if we devote enough money to them. This

development makes the body an aerobic instrument, a surgical object, a dietary experiment, a fleshy clay capable of endless remolding" (Rogers 112).

Because of the negative influence of Barbie and similar iconic pressures triggered on women, today, cosmetic/plastic surgery has become a tremendous industry, compromising 4.4 % of the global climate footprint. More women are rushing into clinics for facial/bodily transformations, especially after the release of the *Barbie* movie. After the first week of the film's opening, a doctor from Beverly Hills Plastic Surgery Group claimed to receive patients asking for Barbie's waist and breasts or about rib removal to clinch their waist like Barbie (Rubin). Bodily/facial modifications either rely on plastic surgery such as liposuction, Barbie nose rhinoplasty, Barbie waist plasty, Barbie rib removal, Barbie vaginoplasty, Barbie abdominoplasty, Barbie breast augmentation, or on non-invasive alternatives like Barbie face and Barbie shoulder Botox, Hollywood Smile dental whitening procedure, silicone adjustment, fillers and thread lifts (Ulusoy). It is widely acknowledged that carbon emission estimates are mainly from the procedures above. For instance, breast implants can contain PVC and 40 other chemicals, including xylene, benzene, Freon, and platinum salts (Siegle). Besides the chemicals used in surgery, the process of manufacturing and shipping plastic surgery materials contributes to environmental degradation. Energy consumption during plastic surgery operations is another point because of the extensive usage of electrical tools and infrastructure. In short, both toxic chemicals and the disposal of hazardous medical waste contribute to climate contamination (Thompson).

As the study argues, Barbie, with its unrealistic proportions, promotes a very dangerous and harmful image for young women. Other than sports and dieting, which offer restricted changes to the body, women rely on cosmetic/plastic surgery for more permanent and fast transformations to reach the unattainable and unhealthy body highlighted by the Western beauty myth. Many doctors, psychologists, and feminist critics are concerned with the alarming side of Barbification, but who is considering the negative side-effects of Barbiecore in terms of ecological degradation? Although Barbification in the health and

beauty industry has an immense but indirect effect on the climate crisis, people are slow to re-consider its urgency. However, this results mainly in two things: the subjection of women and secondly in the exploitation and degradation of the natural world. In light of the de-environmental side-effects of Barbification in terms of mass media, fashion, and health industry, this section handles ecological endangerment and self (destruction) as the drastic outcomes of Barbiecore.

Conclusion

Academic research on Barbie has treated the doll mostly within the fields of Cultural Studies and Feminist Studies; however, discussing Barbie from the perspective of Ecological Humanities and New Materialism is very rare, although Barbie contributes to the climate crisis immensely with its huge carbon imprint in a world of plastic where the climate crisis is the biggest problem of our time. This article argues that Barbie is not moving from a plastic fantasy towards a more sustainable future with a lesser carbon footprint. Unfortunately, Mattel's attempt looks like greenwashing. In this light, this study has indicated that Barbie, both in its plastic toxicity and symbolic plasticity, stands closer to ecological degradation and material consumption than subverting the Plasticene discourse.

This argument is further explored in the article in terms of two sections. The first part, centering on the historical background of Barbie and its different representations across time, has considered Barbie as a cultural product of Western society mainly shaped by capitalist ideology and its so-called consumer practices. In that sense, Barbie is handled within its symbolic plasticity on an ideological level that makes Barbie a preferred medium for what it represents. Barbification highlights the desired norms and beauty codes of the consumerist Western society in terms of invisible "coercive practices" such as body shaping, dieting, cosmetic/plastic surgery, and fashion, all of which provide a means of control over the body. These enforcements imply that Barbie is not sustainable at all; on the contrary, it is (self) destructive and harmful both for the individual and society.

The study further argues that the doll, on a material level, is harmful because it is made from a plastic substance that is almost too hard to be recycled in nature, which (in)directly causes danger for land, air, and ocean in a fast or slow way, depending on the means of "intra-action of matter" in the web of relations. Moreover, the toxic plasticity of the doll affects (non) human health and the food chain in myriad ways due to the dissemination of nano-chemical particles, which may soon flourish in the food we eat, on the clothes we put on, in the things we touch, even in the placenta of a mother's womb. Other than that, the cutting of rainforests for the supply of doll packages, relying on cheap labor and waste disposal in developing or under-developed countries, in short, the carbon emission before and after the whole process of creation, distribution, and consumption of the doll is a big reminder that Barbie is not a sustainable product. All these negative effects become visible when the doll is rid of its symbolic interpretations as a cultural icon so that its reception as a thing with inherent value becomes clear in ecological contexts, allowing us to perceive the toxic plasticity of the material.

To conclude, Barbie has remained an inspirational figure for female children at some points. However, the doll is widely remembered for imposing standardization of gender norms and normative beauty standards of patriarchal culture and, recently, for its carbon imprint in the age of the *Plasticene*. As it is generally acknowledged that plastics are harmful chemicals that affect human and nonhuman natures in multiple ways, plastic Barbie, from ecological and New Materialist perspectives, is argued to be an example of "environmental racism" and "slow violence" besides showcasing how toxic materiality is visible in the "waste's embeddedness in ecological networks" (Oppermann, "From Posthumanism" 30). Barbie, in the vitality of its matter, is precisely making a serious call for our endangered planet.

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Daily Rituals: How Artists Work. By Mason Currey (Alfred A. Knopf, 2013. 278 pp. ISBN: 978-0-307-96237-9. $20.99)
Daily Rituals: Women at Work. By Mason Currey (Alfred A. Knopf, 2019. 416 pp. ISBN: 978-1-524-73295-0. $14.49)

Buket Doğan *

> Time is short, my strength is limited, the office is a horror, the apartment is noisy, and if a pleasant, straightforward life is not possible, then one must try to wriggle through subtle maneuvers (Kafka 21-22).

The passage above is excerpted from a letter Franz Kafka wrote to his beloved Felice Bauer in 1912. In the letter, Kafka conveys his dissatisfaction with his cramped living conditions and monotonous job, reflecting his belief in using subtle, strategic maneuvers to remove his constraints. Mason Currey, a Los Angeles-based writer and journalist, cited this excerpt in his book titled *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* (2013 83-84). *Daily Rituals* books illustrate how successful individuals overcome numerous challenges in their creative pursuits. In the first book, titled *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work*, Currey explores the

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daily routines and habits of what appears to be a random selection of 161 creative individuals, including writers, artists, composers, and other influential figures, to provide insights into how they structure their days, balance their work and personal lives, and find inspiration. Currey utilizes direct e-mails, magazine profiles, newspaper obits, and biographies, as well as direct quotes from letters, personal diaries, and interviews to let them speak for themselves. In other cases, he has assembled a summary of their routines from secondary sources, and if another writer has produced the perfect distillation of their subject's routine, he has quoted it at length rather than try to rewrite it himself. Mason Currey assures readers that they will "find more information on particular subjects' routines, habits, quirks, and foibles" (237). This book, in the form of vignettes, caters to intellectual curiosity while also offering readers a fascinating look into diverse ways that creative people such as Franz Kafka, Soren Kierkegaard, Arthur Miller, and Jane Austen manage their time and productivity.

Focusing on the themes of routine and creativity, Currey emphasizes that there is no single formula for creativity but rather displays a wide range of routines and habits that work for different people. Some individuals thrive on strict schedules, while others prefer a more spontaneous approach. Among the sources of the habits of cultural icons, Ludwig van Beethoven had a "strict routine" in which he would start each day with a precise coffee-making ritual, counting out exactly sixty coffee beans for his morning brew. And then would spend the rest of the morning composing until 2 or 3 pm, taking frequent breaks to walk outdoors (Currey, *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* 17-9). Maya Angelou, on the other hand, preferred a hotel room rather than a study to which she would arrive at 6:30 am with a dictionary, a Bible, a deck of cards, and a bottle of sherry (122-124). She would write until around 2 pm, then return home to relax and read what she had written on that day. Haruki Murakami maintains a strict routine when working on a novel (60-61). He wakes up at 4 am and writes for five to six hours; in the afternoon, he runs or swims, then spends the rest of the day reading and listening to music. He goes to bed at 9 pm. Twyla Tharp, the choreographer, starts her day early, at 5:30 am; she begins with a two-hour workout, which includes weight training and cardio (222-223). Tharp believes that this routine sets the tone for a

productive day and primes her for creativity. These examples highlight the unique and often idiosyncratic routines that different artists and creatives follow to foster their work.

Mason Currey's first book addresses a very recent fascination with daily routines and quotidian realities that have become prevalent concerns in our contemporary era in which nearly everyone struggles to focus amidst the distractions brought by technology and social media. From this book, it can be inferred that small steps lead to significant differences and that success is achieved through discipline and adherence to daily routines. The word "routine" (Currey, Daily *Rituals: How Artists Work* xiv) might suggest ordinariness, triviality, or being on autopilot. However, as Currey suggests, sticking to a daily routine is a deliberate choice, and by the end of the day, these routines often become rituals for these creative profiles.

Six years after the publication of *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work*, Currey published "a sequel" and "a corrective" titled *Daily Rituals: Women at Work* (xiii). He indicates that the fact that only 27 out of the 161 of the figures he focused on in his former book were women was "a major flaw" (xiii). Thus, this second volume can be taken as a meaningful belated effort to correct that gender imbalance. In the first book, Currey tries to explore answers to questions like "[D]id they write or paint or compose every day?" "If so, for how long, and starting at what time?" "Did that include weekends, too?" "How did they do that and also earn a living, get enough sleep, and attend to the other people in their lives?" "And even if they could manage the logistical side of things – the when and where and for how long- how did they cope with more slippery crises of self-confidence and self-discipline?" (xiv). In the book, it is revealed that for male profiles, most of these obstacles have been alleviated by female contributions in the form of "devoted wives, paid servants, sizable inheritances, and centuries of accrued privilege" (xiv). This perspective may yet appear somewhat blunt to a contemporary reader who may not benefit from such entitlements. However, when the focus shifts to women, the situation appears significantly more severe, characterized by frustration and compromise. Despite this prevalent milieu for most women creatives, there are still some women in the second

book coming from privileged backgrounds, like Lillian Hellman, the American playwright. She could flee New York for a farm, a 130-acre property, and hire maids, cooks, and farmers to give her some time and space to write (27-29). However, most of the women included in the book faced substantial obstacles in their daily lives. Many grew up in societies that either overlooked or actively rejected women's creative endeavors, and numerous of them contended with parents or spouses who opposed their efforts to prioritize self-expression over traditional roles as wife, mother, and homemaker. Additionally, many of these women were burdened with the responsibilities of child-rearing and endured the internal struggles of anger and resentment stemming from their experience as a disadvantaged gender within a patriarchal society.

Mason Currey, in the second book, groups women's creative profiles under some interesting themes like "Oysters and Champagne," "The Vortex," or "Boredom and Suffering." Among these creative profiles, Shirley Jackson appears as one who had to divide her time between her art and managing a household of four children, several pets, and a husband who was not willing to take part in parenting duties (Currey, *Daily Rituals: Women at Work* 269-271). Another female figure suffering from a sexist mindset is the actress and scriptwriter Ida Lupino, who "employed a calculated maternal façade" to work in cooperation with males on sets and to avoid criticism (97-99). Most women included in the book are reported to have faced substantial gender-based barriers in their careers, and their works were often undervalued or dismissed. Despite the challenges of overcoming traditional norms and managing the demands of familial and social obligations, these women discovered various methods to foster their creativity and maintain productivity. Each profile illustrates how they structured their days, motivated themselves to engage in their work, and stimulated their creativity.

In conclusion, although Currey modestly refers to his work as "a superficial book" in *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* (xiii), it is anything but. As he explicitly states, the books are concerned with "the circumstances of creative activity, not the product" (xiii). While readers may appreciate the final product in their unique way, the creative process itself—such as the one that led Beethoven to compose

the Ninth Symphony—possesses immense potential to inspire and offer fresh perspectives on the product. By providing intimate details and insights into the inner workings of creative minds, these books foster a profound connection with their audience.

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