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Contents

Literature and Culture

- Patrycja Austin
Searching for One's Self at the Crossroads of the Cosmopolitan World: Determining the Importance of Roots for Those Who Travel through Diversities in Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's Americanah.....7
- Pradip Kumar Patra
Moving towards an Ecosocial Transformation: An Ecocritical Reading of Selected Poems of Contemporary Indian Women Poets Writing in English.....17
- Jakub Vala
Many Californias: Different Representations of California in Popular Music25
- Małgorzata Martynuska
Incorporating Mexicanness into American Culture: the Case of Mariachi.....33
- Silvia Baučeková
Hearty or Delicate? Food and Gender in the Novels of Agatha Christie.....43

Linguistics and Translation Studies

- Naděžda Kudrnáčová
On the Holistic Status of Direct Object Participants.....57

Book Reviews

- Jane Mattisson Ekstam
Committed Styles. Modernism, Politics, and Left-Wing Literature in the 1930s (Benjamin Kohlmann)71
- Ivana Řezníčková
Presentation Sentences (Syntax, Semantics and FSP) (Martin Adam)72

News, Announcements

Miriam Gogol <i>Teaching American Literature in Post-Velvet Ostrava: The Challenge of Dialogue</i>	77
Martin Drápela <i>Libuše Dušková's Birthday: Four Score Years and Five</i>	83
Stanislav Kolář <i>A Great Loss in the Field of American Studies</i>	86

Literature and Culture

Searching for One's Self at the Crossroads of the Cosmopolitan World: Determining the Importance of Roots for Those Who Travel through Diversities in Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the response to migration depicted in Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's novel Americanah. It employs the structure of the classical katabasis in order to identify the stages of assimilation into a foreign culture and the psychological effects of migration. It recognizes the novel as proposing a new form of belonging, stressing one's rootedness in the home culture while remaining open to global influences.

Keywords: migration, roots, cosmopolitanism, home, katabasis

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (Lahiri ix)

This epigraph to Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, borrowed from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Custom House*, presents the experience of migration as desirable. Planting in a new soil ensures stronger, healthier fruit, despite or even by virtue of the struggles and difficulties which need to be faced in the new environment. The intensified mobility of people following decolonization and globalization has been widely studied and examined

not only by creative writers, but also by thinkers and scholars who attempt to achieve a better understanding of the manifold effects of leaving one's country of origin, psychological as well as cultural, and to define the figure of the migrant. One of the most common words used to describe the latter is cosmopolitan, a heavily loaded term frequently taken to be obliterating the issue of class, the fact that voluntary migration is more often a privilege rather than the norm. As Bill Ashcroft puts it: "The idea of citizen of the world is a compelling one but who exactly is cosmopolitan? It can be a useful adjective but it's a failure as a noun. The problem I have with the term is one I also encounter in places such as India and Africa: 'cosmopolitan' is often referred to as 'white', polluted by the lingering aura of urbanity sophistication and wealth that surrounds it" (Sarangi and Austin 134). In a similar way, in his essay *Cosmo-Theory* Timothy Brennan warns that the expression of well-intentioned cosmopolitan sentiments everywhere deserves careful intellectual scrutiny. He sees a close link between cosmopolitanism and globalization; he says that the practitioners of "cosmo-theory", in their euphoria and well-meaning, blind themselves to their own corporate instrumentality as carriers of cultural oppression and exploitation (Brennan 686).

In contrast to these views, Edward Said believes in the existence of "a fascinating cosmopolitan space" animated by internationally prominent writers from the Arab and Islamic world as well as the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Indian subcontinent, who intervene forcefully not only as novelists but also as commentators and essayists (Said 329). Likewise, Bill Ashcroft and Kwame Anthony Appiah, among others, recognize that many Western-educated elites from the former colonies had a considerable advantage in the fight for local causes, including the struggles for independence.

This divergence of opinions indicates the complexity of the phenomenon. New terms have sprung up, such as rooted, indigenous or vernacular cosmopolitanism, which combine one's belonging to the world at large with attachment to home culture. What we observe here is a double oxymoron: etymologically, in the word cosmopolitan itself, as when it was coined in the fourth century BC it was made up of *politēs* – a citizen belonging to a particular polis to which he or she owed loyalties, and *cosmos*; and in the adjectives that are attached to it today. The term currently seems to be retrieving its original sense of local loyalties.

Indeed, as Edward Said comments on contemporary exile, widely understood as leaving one's home country: it is "predicated on the existence of, love for, and a real bond with one's native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss" (Said 336). Yet, while Said finds that the gains of migration far exceed the losses, and considers the loss of attachment to a place to be a desirable condition, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie in her novel *Americanah* (2013) celebrates the opportunities and possibilities that open up when her characters journey from Nigeria to the West. At the same time the author unrelentingly exposes and mocks the appeal of things Western in place of the more readily available local options. Her position can be summed up as a refusal to choose between the two desperate options that are seemingly offered today; in Sheldon Pollock's words: "between, on the one hand, a national vernacularity dressed in the frayed period costume of violent revanchism and bent on preserving difference at all costs and, on the other, a clear-cutting, strip-mining multinational cosmopolitanism that is bent, at all costs, on eliminating it" (Pollock 17). In

his essay *Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History* Pollock proposes a model for responsible cosmopolitanism in which the choice between the global, or what he calls “American globalization”, and the local, or “ethnonationalism”, may be resolved in transcending the dichotomies. He believes “that the new must be made precisely through attachment to the past, and by recognizing that only such attachment enables one to grasp what can and must be changed” (46).

Americanah is a migration novel which represents this new kind of responsible cosmopolitanism. It moves across three continents: Africa, Europe and North America. Ifemelu, the main protagonist, grows up in the Nigerian city of Lagos, where she meets and falls in love with Obinze. She then travels to America, where she spends thirteen years. The novel begins at the moment when she is about to return to Nigeria. In the non-linear narrative we learn about her life in Nigeria and the ups and downs of her American adventure. But then the narrative progresses to her new life in Nigeria and her reunion with Obinze. This circular as well as forward-oriented movement in the novel suggests the structure of the classical katabasis, the story of a descent into Hell and a return, experienced by a living human being. Virgil, Dante, or Conrad (in an ironic revision of the latter) noticed the potential of this form of narrative to become for the protagonists a quest for selfhood, the passage through hell being central to this process. There are different types of katabatic stories. In some, descending to the lowest level allows the protagonist to ultimately discover his or her true identity. This is what happens in Dante's *Commedia*. In others, the journey entails a series of metamorphoses and ultimately no single identity can be decided upon. It ends with *sparagmos*, or the dismemberment of the katabatic hero – as in the case of Orpheus, who goes to the underworld in search of his beloved Eurydice. After failing to rescue her from Hades, he refuses to look at any other woman, and is eventually killed and torn to pieces by a mob of maenads.

There are several defining moments of a katabatic narrative. First, the protagonist **crosses the threshold** between our world and the underworld and **journeys downward**. At this point he or she experiences the hostility of the underworld and reacts defensively. Then the protagonist arrives at the **zero point**, or epicenter, of the underworld, from where his or her ascent from the underworld begins. Finally, he or she **returns** to our world, altered by the experience. Adichie's novel follows these stages and eventually becomes a type of katabatic story that is compatible with Pollock's vernacular cosmopolitanism. The section that follows will focus on the journey's pressure points in *Americanah*.

Threshold crossing

The crossing of the threshold is the moment at which the protagonist physically crosses the border between his or her natural world and the underworld. This moment of the passage across the actual barrier between our world and the realm beyond also defines his or her strength, as only the strongest characters are able to enter hell and survive the journey. What is more, underworld itself often lies beyond our perception and needs to be accessed by some magical entrance somewhere in our world, which may be in the form of a river, or via a gatekeeper who must be negotiated with before the protagonist is allowed to begin his or her descent.

The gatekeeper in the case of the Nigerians who try to enter America is the immigration officer. To Ifemelu's surprise her visa application is approved without difficulties: "She applied for a visa, convinced that a rude American would reject her application, it was what happened so often, after all, but the grey-haired woman wearing a St Vincent Paul pin on her lapel smiled at her and said, 'Pick up your visa in two days'" (233). A few years later Obinze is less fortunate. Even though since his early years he has set his heart on travelling and he has considered America his ultimate destination, he is refused permission to enter the country. He applied for a visa at the American embassy in Lagos, "bloated with knowledge about America" and heard the blank reply: "Sorry, you don't qualify. Next person!" (233) – a rejection which left him stunned. The tight immigration laws in the US are still a considerable obstacle for lower class travellers. Even though Obinze's mother is a university professor, he will be granted a US visa without difficulty only after he acquires wealth and becomes a member of the Nigerian elite. On his first trip to America, "the immigration officer was chatty and warm, asking him, 'So how much cash you got?'" (27). Yet, being "the kind of Nigerian expected to declare a lot of cash at the airport" was a disorienting experience to Obinze as "his mind had not changed at the same pace as his life, and he felt a hollow space between himself and the person he was supposed to be" (27). Thus, travelling to the West remains predominantly the privilege of the elite groups; a visa is not granted on the basis of one's mindset, knowledge or ambitions but the contents of one's pockets.

Still, Ifemelu succeeds at this stage of her journey and arrives in America, crossing the threshold while wrapped in the warmest sweater she had been able to find at the market in Lagos. This is the moment when she physically crosses the border from her homeland to an alien territory and metaphysically experiences disorientation. The real America turns out to be at odds with the image of America she has been carrying with her through the passage. On leaving the airport she is struck by the heat: "[A]ll her life she had thought of overseas as a cold place of wool coats and snow" (103). In the "landscape of her imagination" there was also no room for the battered old hatchback in which Auntie Uju arrives to pick her up from the airport, "a patch of rust on its side and peeling fabric on the seats" (104–5) as well as the shabby buildings and billboards and poor people she notices during her first ride. Over the first few weeks in the US, she discovers America, but her perception is filtered through her memory of Nigeria. Rachel Falconer argues that "in the disorientation of crossing the threshold, the migrant protagonist does not seek change, or throw himself bravely and eagerly into the abyss. On the contrary, he seems desperate to retain his grasp on a familiar selfhood, while reality shifts and slides around him" (Falconer 484). The protagonist thus needs to remain true to his or her old self. Correspondingly, Ifemelu insists on speaking her native language Igbo to Dike, Auntie Uju's son, who was born in Nigeria. She disapproves of how much Auntie Uju, who has been living in America for a number of years, has changed, and she finds naïve her explanation that in a country which is not your own you need to conform in order to succeed, including relaxing your hair before interviews for the position of a family physician (119). Likewise, Ifemelu assesses Auntie Uju's boyfriend Bartholomew, who "was one of those people who, in his village back home, would be called 'lost'. *He went to America and got lost*, his people would say. *He went to America and refused to go back*" (116, original emphasis).

She is also baffled in social situations: “[S]he had struggled to hide her bafflement at the boundaries of hospitality, and also at this business of tipping – paying an extra 15 or 20% of your bill to the waitress – which was suspiciously like bribing, a forced and efficient bribing system” (129). The final disorientation comes with the need to use a social security card belonging to another person, and thus being forced to apply for a job under a different name, which ultimately threatens her identity. What is more, from being an individual person in Nigeria she is being turned into a person identified primarily in racial categories, as black. When she protests that she does not resemble the owner of the social security card, Aunt Uju assures her: “All of us look alike to white people” (120). At this stage of her journey Ifemelu stays in regular contact with Obinze; he is her anchor, keeping safe her sense of self.

Zero Point

Slowly she begins to lose her grasp on reality: “her autumn of half blindness had begun, the autumn of puzzlements, of experiences she had knowing there were slippery layers of meaning that eluded her. The world was wrapped in gauze; she could see the shapes of things but not clearly enough, never enough” (131). Unable to find a job, and increasingly desperate for money, she eventually arrives at the door of a tennis coach seeking a female personal assistant. This is when she will reach the lowest point in her katabatic journey, the zero point. This is how Linda Lappin (n.pag.) describes the zero point:

As [the protagonist] maneuver[s] this terrifying environment, [h]e may encounter a helper to prepare [him] for the confrontation with the reigning entity: the shadow. ...It may... be a person, an animal, a form of addiction, a self-destructive tendency, a fear, a disease, an unpleasant side of ourselves, an evil twin. Whatever or whoever the shadow may be, it must be dealt with before [the protagonist] can go up again. Confrontation with the shadow is a dangerous undertaking that marks the hero's or heroine's initiation. At the resolution of this confrontation, [the protagonist] will receive a boon: power or knowledge to take back up again to the world ... left behind and to which [h]e will return transformed.

The coach perfectly fits the role of the King of the Underworld. The reference to the devil immediately precedes the description of the coach when Ifemelu remembers her mother's habit of blaming everything on him. Then the coach opens the door and leads her to the basement. The descent is thus literal as well as metaphorical. At that first encounter she rejects his offer of a hundred dollars and goes to the station with a stabbing sensation of homesickness. Interestingly, on the way back she notices red and yellow autumn leaves – used as a symbol for dead souls in the classical katabatic (see e.g. Pemberton, n.pag.). After a few more weeks of joblessness and unpaid bills she returns to the coach's house and experiences the lowest point in her journey.

Afterwards she walked to the train, feeling heavy and slow, her mind choked with mud, and, seated by the window, she began to cry. She felt like a small ball, adrift and alone. The world was a big, big place and she was so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around empty. Back in her apartment, she washed her hands with water so hot that it

scolded her fingers, and a small soft welt flowered on her thumb. She took off all her clothes and squashed them into a rumpled ball that she threw at a corner, staring at it for a while. She would never again wear these clothes, never even touch them. She sat naked on her bed and looked at her life, in this tiny room with the mouldy carpet, the hundred dollar bill on the table, her body rising with loathing. (154)

Here, with clear transparency, the protagonist sees herself through the eyes of the ultimate other – Hades, Satan, God – in this case the tennis coach. She is naked; nothing can be hidden. She cuts off her ties with home, changes her phone number and deletes unread emails from Obinze. At the zero point, in contrast to the threshold moment, the protagonist's task is to take risks, to abandon the boundaries of the self, and break unwritten rules prescribed by the Father-god. After Ifemelu shakes off the shock of the encounter she grows more distant from Nigeria: "[I]t seemed suddenly foreign to her, and home itself a distant place" (159), which she sees in the sepia tones of her memories. She has a rich white American boyfriend whom she meets while babysitting for a wealthy upper middle class family. On the surface, the relationship seems to be the epitome of any girl's dreams, and yet eventually it bores her. She also gets a well-paid job at a magazine. She starts an anonymous blog which provides her with a space to voice her observations on America, especially its attitude to race and foreigners. The blog becomes quite successful, and the number of visitors grows steadily, the conversations her posts provoke leading to invitations to give talks at universities. Eventually, she earns a fellowship at Princeton. She comes to adopt American pronunciation – "the blurring of the *t*, the creamy roll of the *r*, the sentences starting with 'So', and the sliding response of 'Oh really'" (173), even if it took an effort, "the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue" – as well as style. Before an interview she relaxes her hair, repeating what she had so disapproved of Auntie Uju. "It was a new adventure, relaxing her hair." [...] "Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin" (203).

Still, there is a sense of loss: "The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died" (203). During the interview the woman shook her hand and told her she would be a 'perfect fit' – but this expression takes an ironic turn, as her experiments with hair do not stop. After her hairline begins to recede because of the chemicals used in relaxers, she decides to wear her hair in a natural afro. Years later, after she resigns from her job, a woman in the office will say: "Sorry, hon. They need to treat folk better around here. You think your hair was part of the problem?" (212). Then, on a sunny summer day she resolves to return to her Nigerian accent while purchasing a train ticket. This is an exhilarating experience and she feels "a rush of pleasure from giving the *t* its full due [...], from not rolling her *r* [...]. This was truly her; this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from a deep sleep during an earthquake" (175).

Interestingly, the risks she takes bring her closer to her home culture. Nevertheless, a clear sense of identity keeps eluding her. "She did not know what it was but there was something wrong with her. A hunger, a restlessness. An incomplete knowledge of herself" (289). She destroys the two relationships she forms in America by infidelity and lying,

which is especially striking as back in Nigeria the trait Obinze admired in her the most was the “vivid honesty about her” (20). This is not the only instance of her dishonesty in the US. She also lies to the hairdresser about the number of years she has spent in America and about the purpose of her return – to marry Obinze. She is thus creating fictions, inventing her many selves; however here again she subconsciously decides on the version that brings her nearer to home and nearer to Obinze – the two becoming nearly synonymous for her. Eventually she embarks on the last stage in the journey – the return.

The return

Though not typically described in as much detail as the journey downward – and, in fact, often passed over with some brevity – the return of the protagonist marks the end of the katabasis. Typically, this part of the text emphasizes the protagonist’s experiences after returning. Linda Lappin (n.pag.) points out, “After katabasis, the return to our ordinary realm may not necessarily bring perfect happiness – Orpheus cannot bring his dead wife back – but it does confer upon us a new identity and a new awareness of our strengths and limitations as human beings subjected to greater laws in which both faith and hope have a role to play.”

Unlike a typical katabatic story, *Americanah* makes this point in the journey central. A large part of the novel’s space is devoted to Ifemelu’s visit to a hair salon just before her trip back home, where she muses on her decision. She compares the courage it requires for a woman “thrice her size” to display her legs in a mini skirt on a train platform: “[I]t was safe and easy, after all, to display legs of which the world approved – but the fat woman’s act was about the quiet conviction that one shared only with oneself, a sense of rightness that others failed to see” (8). Her decision seems nearly heroic, especially as “everyone she had told she was moving back seemed surprised, expecting an explanation, and when she said she was doing it because she wanted to, puzzled lines would appear on foreheads” (13).

Her decision reverses the direction of most migration tales whose ending point is America, such as Lahiri’s title story in the collection *The Unaccustomed Earth*, whose major lesson for the characters is how to negotiate the cultural background of their country of origin and the new soil, in other words, how to successfully adapt in the new environment. Ifemelu has achieved her American Dream, “and yet there was a cement in her soul. It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness” (Adichie 6).

Lappin explains that after spending a great deal of effort traversing the underworld, the protagonist could very easily become accustomed to that type of lifestyle, causing the return home to be anti-climactic. *Americanah* does quite the opposite: it makes the end point of the journey the most important moment, becoming in the process a new kind of migration novel. It recovers the concept of home in the contemporary world in which it has lost its validity. Caryl Phillips, in his collection of essays entitled *A New World Order*, comments on the phenomenon: “These days we are all unmoored. Our identities are fluid.

Belonging is a contested state. Home is a place riddled with vexing questions” (6). For Ifemelu home acquires a different sense. It is where she belongs, and it helps her understand who she is – like Obinze, who, since the beginning of their relationship, “made her like herself. With him she was at ease; her skin felt as though it was her right size. [...] It seemed so natural, to talk to him about odd things. She had never done that before” (61). These feelings are usually associated with intimacy, with trust that one can find at home, among those we love. Home, however, is not synonymous with Nigeria. When Ifemelu talks about it, she mentions particular localities such as Lagos or Nsukka which produce particular memories and associations for her – her school years, her time at university, her visits to Obinze’s house, and many others. She does not idealize Nigeria; quite the contrary, the country is presented as corrupted, “an ass-licking economy. The problem is that there are many qualified people who are not where they are supposed to be because they won’t lick anybody’s ass, or they don’t know which ass to lick or they don’t know how to lick an ass” (77). The economic and political reality is thus rather bleak and in need of improvement. Another problem is the starry-eyed admiration and assimilation of Western culture by Nigerians. This stretches across a range of cultural practices, from food to languages. During a conversation a character recommends a French school in Lagos for it “can only be good for the child to learn another civilized language, since she already learns English at home” (28). Another character advocates the British curriculum at schools. Obinze, who himself used to admire people with foreign accents, “had come to sense as unvoiced yearning in them, a sad search for something they could never find. He did not want a well-educated child enmeshed in insecurities” (29). Kwame Anthony Appiah, in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, defends the assimilation of Western cultural products by non-Westerners as these may make life easier, safer and more pleasurable. Cultural purity itself is an oxymoron, “the odds are that, culturally speaking, you already live a cosmopolitan life, enriched by literature, art, and film that come from many places, and that contains influences from many more” (Appiah 113). Although *Americanah* does not elaborate on it, this intermixing of cultures and influences works in two directions. Yet, for that *mélange* to work, for difference to thrive, for new cultural forms to emerge, a sense of history is needed. Returning to Sheldon Pollock, “affective attachment to old structures of belonging offered by vernacular particulars must precede any effective transformation through new cosmopolitan universals; care must be in evidence, a desire to preserve, even as the structure is to be changed” (Pollock 47). Pollock seems to be suggesting here the key moment in the assimilation of new cultural forms which leads not to homogenization, but to the world’s expanded heterogeneity of cultures. When accepted through the prism of history, adapted to fit the local environment, the foreign forms will necessarily become domesticated, they will differ from their original counterparts whether in the West or East, and they will better serve the local needs and purposes.

Ifemelu likewise applies the knowledge she gained during her years in the US to inspire changes in the Nigeria to which she returns. However, her acceptance of the American influence does not imply the rejection of her roots. She goes back and initially experiences a form of reverse disorientation at the changes that have taken place in Nigeria during her absence. However, she does not join the ranks of other American émigrés who organize meetings during which they can complain about Nigerian ways and look back in nostalgia

at America. Aware of Nigeria's shortcomings and weak points, she decides to start a new blog, which will be a site for more constructive criticism. The form she learned to use – and succeeded in using – in America will be applied to the Nigerian reality. Unlike other American returnees, the eponymous *Americanahs*, she learns to accept her identity and all that comes with it – from the structure of her hair to the propensity of Nigerian women to indulge in their food habits. As mentioned above, the katabatic hero has two options: either he or she will accept the knowledge of himself or herself, or, like Orpheus, he or she will opt for the metamorphic. *Americanah* decides on the Dantean model. In contrast to the Orphic version, Ifemelu's journey has been one of self-discovery, ending on a positive note. She opts for belonging and a sense of self which she hopes to find on her return, and she finally feels complete when she is reunited with Obinze at the end of the novel.

This kind of ending is very rare in contemporary katabatic novels, especially in stories of migration such as Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), an Orphic story ending tragically for most of the characters involved. The difference lies, I believe, in the very way in which the author allows her characters to feel rooted to a place, in this case Nigeria, and at the same time to remain open to other influences. It is precisely through recognizing her attachment to her roots that she can retain her integrity while accepting new cosmopolitan ideas and ideals. In this way Adichie seems to be avoiding the traps of cosmopolitanism that Bill Ashcroft and Timothy Brennan write about, when the term is associated with having an advantage over others and using it, even if unconsciously, in a damaging way. However, even these thinkers have a rather ambivalent attitude to it; they agree with Edward Said and Antony Appiah about the positive role such cosmopolitan elites (including politicians, writers, essayists, and commentators) can play in improving local conditions. Adichie has symbolically crossed the barrier between literature and lived reality and has transferred Ifemelu's blog online under the name of "The Small Redemptions of Lagos". In it she provides constructive criticism and valid commentary on the current situation, ranging from the Ebola epidemic – Ifemelu directly addresses the Nigerian Health Minister – to the financial practices of Nigerian priests or the harmful women's care products available in supermarkets. She proves that Western forms arriving in Nigeria do not necessarily need to be rejected on the grounds that they are global or foreign but, especially with the expanding information technology, can be employed in improving local conditions.

To conclude, Ifemelu fails to become the eponymous *Americanah*. The term by which her friends in Nigeria refer to people who return from the States: "They roared with laughter, at that word 'Americanah', wreathed in glee, the fourth syllable extended, and at the thought of Bisi, a girl in the form below them, who had come back from a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding slurry r to every English word she spoke" (65). "American passport is the coolest thing" they added. In fact, the idea does not appeal to her. The narrator says: "[A]nd the suggestion that she was somehow irrevocably altered by America, had grown thorns on her skin" (17). On announcing to her American boyfriend her plans to return to Nigeria, she receives from him a plant: "It was his house-plant, hopeful green leaves rising from three bamboo stems, and when she took it, a sudden crushing loneliness landed through her and stayed with her for weeks" (7). That plant belonged at Blaine's house. Its removal from that place

symbolized the loss of the possibility of their life together. Likewise, Ifemelu's transplantation to America symbolized the loss of the life she could have led with Obinze, back at home. On her return she finds herself "at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being" (475). *Americanah* is thus an attempt at a new type of a migration story, one which shows that human nature can flourish even if it returns home to strike its roots.

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Moving towards an Ecosocial Transformation: An Ecocritical Reading of Selected Poems of Contemporary Indian Women Poets Writing in English

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Abstract

Although ecocritical approaches have become widespread in India due to large-scale environmental pollution and receding forest cover, they have yet to filter down through society into the general consciousness; they still remain more theory than practice. In view of burgeoning population growth, unless something concrete is done in the form of policies to check this expansion, it will remain a tough task to protect our ecology. However, ecocritical sensibility does find its expression in Indian literatures in general, and in contemporary Indian writings in English in particular. The selected poems of contemporary women poets writing in English discussed in this paper depict the ecosystem – without which mankind cannot survive with health and vigour.

Keywords: ecology, modernization, nature, culture, rupture, innocence and experience

Ecocriticism, which came into being in the 1990s, has significantly changed the traditional way of reading literature; nature is foregrounded, enabling us to properly understand environmental degradation and threats and to highlight positive steps we ought to take, not just for nature-friendly policies, but also to build nature-centric relationships. Modernization has greatly eclipsed the delight and pleasure of directly coming into contact with various natural phenomena. Although William Rueckhart contributed enormously to the debate relating to ecocriticism as early as 1974, the movement received a strong response with the publication of the book *The Ecocriticism Reader Landmarks in Literary Ecology* by Cheyll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996). The authors attempted to link nature to the ideological structures of culture. Ideological ramifications take a complicated form because of the deliberate attempts by humans to achieve immediate benefits for mankind, bypassing the

cause of ecology. The paper studies selected poems by Jane Bhandari, Anjum Hassan, Rachna Joshi, Anjum Katyal, Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Rizio Raj, taken from the anthology *We Speak in Changing Languages: Indian Women Poets 1990–2007* (edited by E. V. Ramakrishnan and Anju Makhija, 2009) in the light of ecocritical thought.

In the poem “Hard Frost”, Jane Bhandari creates a natural world which is fresh and lively. There is a description of the vivacity of nature, with rain reigning supreme. However, there is a rupture in the natural phenomena described by the poet:

As the rain of the last week
Lies cupped in the fields,
Sky splintered across the grass,
Flat sheetslike foil
Beside the grey turmoil
Of the river , swollen
Almost out of its bed. (42)

The poet captures the attention of readers by giving an image of “grey turmoil”, which adds extra significance to the status of the river during the rain. Such “grey turmoil” of the river may occur because of land-slides or the river bursting its banks. It indicates the widespread deforestation of river banks, deposits of silt, and the draining of toxic waste from towns and cities into the river bed, due to which the river is almost out of control. Such a disaster could be posited on the ecocritical thoughts put forth by Glotfelty and Harold Fromm:

Regardless of what name it goes by, most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging our planet’s basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways or face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse. (xx-xxi)

In the poem “Beachcombers”, the poet gives a gloomier picture of life (43). It is about a cyclonic devastation that has taken place and has destabilized life in the sea. This has its genesis in global warming. It is the ecology of the planet that is at stake, and this sends a spasm of shiver down the human spine. “The beach grew a green crop,” the poet says in the second line of the poem, reflecting the loss of green land with which she is deeply concerned. It is not that in reality the beach is green. The previous consciousness of being habituated to an abundance of greenness pervades the reality of the devastated ecology. There is a clash of two different consciousnesses. The lamentation over such a loss is inextricably linked to the desire to restore the previous ecology. The title “Beachcombers” signifies the imposition of capitalist culture in which large numbers of lower-class people are jobless. Since they do not have any livelihood, they pick up selected objects, largely plastics, from the dumped sea-shore garbage to support themselves. Without the ecological destruction, the same people would have had a decent livelihood by utilizing jungle plants and agricultural products.

Anjum Hassan, who writes with a similar consciousness and spirit, lives in Bangaluru. She was born in Shillong. Bangaluru, located in the southern part of India, is not only the capital city of Karnataka state, but also one of the few big cities of India to be known as a centre of education and employment opportunities, particularly in the field of information technology. Shillong is the capital of Meghalaya state, lying in the hilly terrain of the scenic North Eastern part of India. Looked upon as the Scotland of the East, it has a temperate climate throughout the year. The city has a unique multicultural mosaic, yet its aboriginal culture is a prominent component of the city's life. As the poet hails from such a cultural background, she cannot avoid reflecting these origins. In the poem "My Folks", as a representative of the aboriginal people, she sadly speaks about her growing up out of tune with nature. Aboriginal cultures, which used to be at one with nature, are nowadays heading towards modernity. As a result, their original cultures are on the wane. The sordid growth of contemporary cultures gives no importance to the eco-cultural ethos. Hence, she writes:

We have hills in our blood
but end up smelling fat cars on city streets
and garbage strewn under rain.

We speak in stories:
raconteurs, mimics, chronicles all,
with vast memories and no name-plates.

We shall never lose our shyness
or build house unselfconsciously
or live outside books.

[...]

We look through an open window
and like the predictable movies,
the leaves and sky melt and signal
that we're making the blurry journey
to another place and time. (133)

In the first two lines, the poet projects the deep-rooted innocence of the aboriginal people of Meghalaya, to whom the hills are the centre of their existence. But the lines show a transition that takes place over the course of time. Modernization takes over the region, at the cost of the vitality of their life: hills are cut, roads made and ecosystems disturbed. "Garbage strewn under rain" by the road-side is a part of modern life, not of primeval life. Moreover, the way aboriginal people speak has a magic of its own. They speak in stories, and it is their memory which is a repertoire of enlightenment and knowledge. The poet is very much worried about the preservation of such stories. The aboriginal people are shy and tradition-bound. Innocence is their greatest virtue. They build houses as per their customs and live by whatever is written in their books. It is their innocence and shyness which prevents them from becoming critical. They never used to hanker after identity. Hence, the

idea of hanging up a name-plate never occurred to them. The poem, however, concludes with a note of pessimism, as the poet is well aware that these people are set to lose their original identity under the impact of modern life-style. Hassan's creativity synchronizes well with contemporary ecocritical thought:

Overexploitation of natural resources and man's disregard of the air, water and soil that sustain him have given rise to the question of the survival of both man and the planet (Earth). The end of the twentieth century showed clearly that *everyone* had to do something to help the Earth survive. Ecocriticism is one of the ways in which humanists fight for the world in which they live. The reflection of that difficult struggle in the area of culture and spirit speaks for the urgency of action or the urgent need to do something in this respect. (Tošić 44)

Rachna Joshi's poem entitled "Jageshwar", the site of twelve ancient Himalayan temples, presents not only the change of mindset among humans, but also the corresponding change of ecology. Ecology is affected by human insensitivity, which is the result of poor and unhealthy thinking. Joshi speaks about the suffering of those existing at the lowest levels of caste and gender, which covertly expresses the ecological deterioration. This poem implies that ecology is not just a topic of concern, it is an integral part of life. If there is a decline in living standards, ecology too suffers. Our religious consciousness could include ecological awareness and look at life with fresh attitude and insight. Joshi's views could be contrasted with deep ecology.

Deep ecology emphasizes the role of the individual who is invited to behave as a citizen of the World and Earth and to take responsibility for it. It is important to see that this philosophy involves *all* the aspects of human life and thought. The inspirational quality of such an approach is enormous and the Deep Ecology Movement is gaining in influence year by year, particularly in America. It is holistic and it involves the acknowledged unity of man and all the creatures and the environment around him. (Tošić 45–46)

The following lines quoted from the poem "Jageshwar" make clear Joshi's love for innocence and earthly love, not for culture based on falsehood and hypocrisy.

My blood wants the palpability of earthly love –
not to obscure the predatory passions
within the sanctified code. (141)

Joshi refers to the genealogy of mankind, which is in tune with "earthly love", delicately sandwiched between existence and ecological exuberance. As time passes by, ecological concern is bypassed. "Predatory Passion" remains camouflaged in the "sanctified code" developed by mankind. Politics is at work in any form of cultural configuration. Jageshwar is closely connected with the highly mythicized Hindu deity in the hills. The poet is highly critical of the site's transformation into a major pilgrimage destination at the cost of its ecological health.

Joshi's move towards deep ecology is evident in the later poems such as "The Death of my Grandmother" and "Periplum". In "The Death of my Grandmother" she seeks her grandmother amidst the richness of nature. Her melancholy is more for the loss of the bountiful nature, which is now in a fragile state. It is the nature amidst which the poet's grandmother lived. Hence, after her death it was this nature which served as a source of consolation for her. The present fragility of nature is an obstacle to such communication. Ultimately, the poet loses the spiritual existence of her grandmother because of the depletion of ecology. The poet's grandmother being synonymous with nature can be observed in the following lines.

Midnight, you stared at the deep stars,
the washed, blue sky,
remembering old railway stations: Phaphamow, Triveni, Kankhal;
cold morning journeys with the women to the Ganges,
passing ponds choked with water hyacinths,
flat expanses of bulrushes, cold dust by the riverside.
You drank hot tea from earthen mugs,
shivered and gossiped in the cold stream. (145)

As in the above poem, also in the poem "Periplum" Joshi situates her mother in a troubled ecosystem. Here also the entire poem is in the form of a memory with a strong spiritual impact.

Mother, I see you
blooming once again. My arms,
is around your waist...pigeons
sit on our joined shoulders.

[...]

Life revolves
in its own feathery way.
The swirling, crowded
pigeons screech at us
a thick chorus
of benedictions. (147)

Anjum Katyal projects her ecological sensibility in the poem "Cliff". Katyal views the cliff from a typically human point of view. By frequently referring to the natural landscape being poisoned, she points out the high level of pollution. However, she tries her best to rise above her own consciousness and looks at everything from the angle of the natural world. The natural world, the poet feels, is either not aware of such pollution or transcends it intentionally, as it does not possess a terrestrial mindset. Polluted or unpolluted, its spirit remains undisturbed, and it also rises above the mortality experienced by humans.

The cliff, sliced, searing,
falling (to live on the edge, gasp

of space, vast, vast) and still, just
the air, breathing, and birds,
All the wells are poisoned
yes, there could be
birds, calling and nesting
and the sea, *all the wells* sighing,
pulsing like blood, unceasing
are poisoned and the light lying clear,
cool as water, the wells lapping
at eggshell walls of room which
open to each other *the wells*
like grain poured from hand
to hand and you *are all* moving
like a promise, like hope, like
peace itself just
beyond my poisoned
sight. (155)

In the poem “Gulmohar”, in similar fashion, Rukmini Bhaya Nair speaks about the ecological imbalance due to which the Gulmohar tree is in utter discomfort. The monsoon which the poet describes as a ‘hooligan’ brings less rain to the soil, which is the root cause of the gulmohar losing heart. The Gulmohar is an active participant in the discourse of the Indian spring. With decreasing rain because of the ecological disturbance, the spring season in India is in decline. A healthy and abundant spring contributes to the collective memory of the people of this subcontinent, representing a source of joy and creativity. This forms the basis of a larger cultural configuration:

Today, the sky is a bowl
each ribbed gulmohar leaf
an imprisoned angel-fish

swimming round and round
in the cold, grey licence
of the hooligan monsoons

but unable to escape, play
her deft wit off against
a loutish rain cloud.

The gulmohar loses heart
sheds her vivacious fins
her wild, scarlet flowers.

Is this the nature of a tree
to be tied down eternally
or can the gulmohar be free

Can she? (167)

Rizio Raj writes “Poem” in honour of an Arunachalee poet named Mamang Dai (a poet of Arunachal Pradesh, a state of immense natural beauty in North-East India, close to China); writing in English, Mamang Dai speaks about the land, its aboriginal people and the culture of Arunachal Pradesh. Up to a point, the information about Arunachal Pradesh Rizio receives from Mamang Dai has an impact. Beyond that, Rizio becomes herself. She is swayed away more by innocence, and less by her experience and knowledge of culture, customs and rituals of the land – a knowledge to which Mamang Dai has made a major contribution. The “dawn”, as the poet says, is a confluence of innocence, happiness and ecological health. With the increase of the day, such purity dwindles, and what comes in its place is human experience, which is not altogether compatible with ecology.

I know the meaning of this departure:
a dawn alone can bear witness
to such assemblage of variance,
for, before the morning sun
everyone – man, tree,
flower, fish, bird, beast –
is a child waking from sleep. (212)

Ecological sensibility, as we find in the poems discussed, sides more with innocence, and is in harmony with the yearning for purity and virtue. To preserve our ecology, we will have to retreat from the pressing issues of the contemporary world in nostalgic reminiscence of a world that we have lost; we will have to attend to and value what is good in earthly existence, here and now.

All human making, including the largely unintentional remaking (or rather, undoing) of the earth's ecosystems remains dependent upon physical processes which precede and exceed human knowledge and power. All human being, meanwhile, remains interwoven, albeit often invisibly, with the life of countless nonhuman beings, who continue as best they can to pursue their own ends in the midst of an increasingly anthropogenic environment. (Rigby 154)

While living on this Earth, our lives can embody the ethos of an ecosocial relationship that is more relevant today than ever. We can be inspired by the ‘greening’ of those many and varied places, however urban, where we actually live today, and where we might yet learn to dwell equitably and sustainably in the future. “... [W]hat is probably most needed is not the capacity to think beyond the humans, but the courage to imagine new ways in which human and non-human societies, understood as being ecologically connected, can be creatively transformed” (Huggan and Tiffin 215). We are aware of human rights and their abuses. We have neither extended the rights to other species, nor have we rethought the bridging of the gap between the human and animal. Rights are undoubtedly an important safeguard. Most of the Indian women poets writing in English address the question of these wrongs, “less through legal or rationalistic frameworks than in imaginative writing that is both finely attuned to the injustices attached to the racism-speciesism nexus and consistently attentive to the emotional lives of animals and our relationship to animals – lives and

relationships in which our instinctive empathy with animals is neither scornfully dismissed nor systematically suppressed” (Huggan and Tiffin 202).

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Many Californias: Different Representations of California in Popular Music

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Abstract

This paper presents recurring ideas and themes related to the state of California as represented in popular music lyrics. Particular attention is paid to those lyrics that have contributed to the narrative of the “Californian Dream” in popular culture, as well as those that criticize and challenge it.

Keywords: California, Golden State, paradise, popular music, song lyrics, Los Angeles, San Francisco

This essay is a result of the project SGS8/FF/2014 “Paradise Lost: The Changing Image of California in Historical and Cultural Contexts“ (Ztracený ráj: Proměny obrazu Kalifornie v historických a kulturních souvislostech) supported by the internal grant system of the University of Ostrava.

California is one of the most distinct regions of the United States of America. Just as the U.S. has been viewed as the land of opportunity, California is often regarded as the pinnacle of the American Dream. Economically speaking, its GDP rivals that of entire countries such as Italy, France or Brazil (Van Vechten 1). In terms of popular culture, California is probably most famous for being the unofficial home of the American film industry. However, California has also been crucial in the development of popular music, and consequently it has remained a recurring topic in popular culture for many decades. To illustrate, in 2011 *Rolling Stone* magazine published a list of popular songs called “The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time” that contained songs written from the 1940s to the early 2000s.¹ The place which is featured and sung about more than any other in these five hundred songs is,

in fact, California. Four song titles include the word “California” and a total of fourteen songs make references to it. The aim of this paper is to present some frequent themes in song lyrics concerning the Golden State and to analyze the resulting images and representations. Moreover, the contribution of popular music to various narratives concerning California will be discussed. The songs analyzed in this paper were all recorded after 1945 and are not limited to the 2011 list from *Rolling Stone*. They were not chosen solely on the basis of their popularity; rather, they were selected to demonstrate the variety of approaches utilized in popular music with regards to the Golden State.

Probably the most prevalent view of California is that it is a paradise on Earth, evocative of sunshine and promise. This concept dates back centuries and predates the actual discovery of California by European explorers. The name “California” itself is derived from a mythical island kingdom ruled by a fictional female warrior named Calafia. The kingdom appears in an early 16th-century Spanish novel. Several key events in the history of California have contributed to it being perceived as a promised land. The most famous of them is probably the Gold Rush, which started in 1848, shortly before California became one of the United States of America. Other important factors include the discovery of oil, many waves of immigration which greatly diversified the population in ethnic and social terms, and finally the post-WWII cultural boom, during which many movies and songs featuring California were made (May 9).

Before the actual song lyrics are analyzed, it should be pointed out that California gave birth to several notable genres of popular music. It is noteworthy that artists associated with these subgenres often belonged to some sort of subculture and/or countercultural movement which sought to distinguish themselves both from their fellow Californians and the broader musical trends in the U.S., which had dominated in the rest of the country, particularly on the East Coast (Romig 108).

The first of these subcultures emerged in Southern California in the early 1950s around surfers. These young men were often WWII draft dodgers who rejected working day jobs in favour of their passion for the waves. The bands that were founded around these communities in the 1950s developed a style which was musically very much influenced by rock and roll, but the song lyrics endorsed the surfer boards, the ocean, and the sunshine of Southern California. The most famous surfer rock band was the Beach Boys. Their song “Surfin’ USA” is a classic example of surfer rock.² According to the band, the leisurely surfer lifestyle is highly desirable, to the point that the rest of the country should be able to experience it as well by becoming a single happy Golden State with a similarly golden coast. Another song by the Beach Boys, called “California Girls”, also explores the exceptional nature of California.³ In this case, the girls of California are seen as more attractive than their counterparts from other regions, owing mostly to their suntans and bikinis.

The unprecedented popularity of early-1960s surfer rock definitively put Southern California on the musical map and helped make a local, relatively obscure lifestyle highly fashionable. The images of California as a paradise, a place where leisure, sunshine and surfing are prized above all else, were implanted into the public consciousness so powerfully that they have remained there to this day (Lawler 2–6, Romig 52–54).

Another genre associated with California is psychedelic rock, which emerged in the mid-1960s. Though it was an international style which was developed at several places

in the U.S. and the U.K. simultaneously, California played a key role in its development. The hippie countercultural movement of the time advocated peace, non-violence, a return to community-based living and spiritual experiences brought on by the use of psychedelic drugs. Unlike surfer rock, the centre of this movement was San Francisco, a distinctive city and a major cultural hub of northern California. College students from the city were some of the first hippies, and they formed the core of the vibrant San Francisco scene. Some of the California-based artists within this genre include The Doors, Jefferson Airplane, Buffalo Springfield and the Grateful Dead. Psychedelic rock addressed a range of topics, from sexual freedom to avoiding the draft. However, California was also often addressed, as exemplified by the 1965 song “California Dreamin’” by The Mamas and the Papas: “I’d be safe and warm/ if I was in L.A. / California dreamin’ on such a winter’s day.”⁴ This group consisted of members from various parts of the U.S. and even Canada, but two of them came from Southern California. Their most famous song is a call for the return to California, contrasted with the cold weather of New York, which is where the band were living when they wrote the song. For them, the desire for safety and sunshine is even stronger than religion, and the people of the East coast can hardly understand it. This image of California is rather similar to the surfer rock representations, but this song as a whole has a more melancholic tone. Another well-known song from the psychedelic era is “San Francisco” by Scott McKenzie, released in 1967.⁵ This single was released shortly before the 1967 Monterey Pop festival, which took place in Monterey, roughly halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. The song was used to promote the festival. The lyrics invite the listener to come to San Francisco, which is said to be teeming with love and gentle people wearing flowers in their hair. To this day, it is one of the best-known songs of the Summer of Love and the hippie movement, and one of the most famous, though idealized, representations of San Francisco, which has contributed to its sustained image of a free-thinking, liberal city (Romig 54–57, 110).

Surfer rock and psychedelic rock were instrumental in spreading the image of California as a promised land; however, this image has also been spread by artists in other forms of popular music. During every decade since the 1950s, there has been a plethora of very popular songs that have glorified the Golden State. This has been by no means restricted to California-based artists; representations of the state through music and other media have caused it to be seen as a paradise by people around the world. An example of this is the 1971 song by the Canadian singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell, entitled simply “California”.⁶ Similar to “California Dreamin’” in its yearning for the state, the lyrics of this song detail the author’s experiences of visiting various places in Europe, including Paris, Spain and a Greek island. Magnificent though they might be, every chorus reaffirms her desire to return to California, a place she calls home. Another case from the early 1970s is “Going to California”, a 1971 song by the English band Led Zepplin: “Made up my mind to make a new start/ Going to California with an aching in my heart.”⁷ The song depicts California as a place where one can take refuge and have another chance at life. Furthermore, it addresses earlier depictions of Californian hippies, and the singer hopes to find a woman with the attributes that had been sung about so much. More recent songs which promote an idealized or predominantly positive image of California have been written by such diverse

artists as Neil Young (“California Sunset”, 1985), LL Cool J (“Going Back to Cali”, 1987), Phantom Planet (“California”, 2002), and Alice in Chains (“Check My Brain”, 2009).

Although some of the best-known popular songs refer to California as a promised land, the opinions on California as expressed in popular music are far more varied. For example, in the late 1960s, though the hippie movement was spreading to all corners of America, not all contemporary artists viewed this positively. Frank Zappa was one such case. In his autobiography *The Real Frank Zappa Book* (1989), he writes that many young people were drawn to the counterculture movement not because of their sincere convictions, but rather due to the movement being fashionable and synonymous with a good time. The following is an excerpt of a 1968 song by Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention called “Flower Punk”: “Hey Punk, where you goin’ with that flower in your hand? /Well, I’m goin’ up to Frisco to join a psychedelic band.”⁸ Musically, this song is a parody of “Hey Joe” made famous by Jimi Hendrix and, like the original, it features a question/answer style of lyrics. The lyrics reveal an alternative version of what the San Francisco hippie scene looks like. From Frank Zappa’s viewpoint, it seems to be dominated by what is trendy rather than thoughtful, and banal rather than inventive or spiritual. The song is a notable example of popular songs engaging with each other in terms of subject matter, since the lyrics of this piece discuss (and lampoon) images of hippies very similar to those in the song “San Francisco” by Scott McKenzie.

By the 1970s, the hippie movement lost much of its influence and innocence, and California as well as the values associated with it began to be evaluated more critically (Romig 65). In 1977, The Eagles, an American band based in Los Angeles, released the single “Hotel California” which was also featured on an album of the same name released a year earlier.⁹ Like many other songs on the album, the song is a critical statement about America and, in this instance, uses a hotel as a metaphor for California. The poetic, almost surreal lyrics tell a story about a weary traveller who decides to spend the night at Hotel California and discovers that it is a place of materialism, drugs, and excess. The lyrics are also arguably depicting acts associated with drug use, such as overdose and withdrawal. When the protagonist wants to leave, he discovers that this is no longer possible: “You can check-out any time you like /But you can never leave!” A possible reading of those lines is that although anyone is free to leave California at any time, the experiences and lifestyle alter them forever and cannot be disregarded or simply forgotten.

One of the more critical songs concerning the Golden State is “California Über Alles”, first released in 1979 by the San Francisco-based punk band The Dead Kennedys.¹⁰ Being Californian, the band was unique in achieving renown in the late 1970s, an era during which the majority of punk music made outside of Britain was shunned (Petridis n.pag.). Sung from the perspective of California’s then-governor Jerry Brown (who became governor again in 2011), the song “California Über Alles” is a bitter satire of his Presidential ambitions, as well as the values he endorsed. The title and chorus is a reference to the first stanza of the national anthem of Germany, which was banned due to its association with Nazism. The lyrics blend liberal attitudes and images often associated with California with fascist rhetoric (e.g. die on organic gas, the suede-denim secret police, jog for the master race and always wear the happy face, etc.), in order to warn that any belief system, no matter how progressive on the surface, can become oppressive if forced on the public.

The song remains one of the most critical statements about Californian values and politics. Interestingly, the Dead Kennedys recorded another version of the song in 1981, called “We’ve Got a Bigger Problem Now” which satirizes the newly elected U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who was also a former governor of California, along with his conservative Republican policies.

After positive representations of California from the 1960s and 1970s met with varying degrees of criticism, a synthesis was achieved in songs written during the final years of the 20th century. Lyrics which simultaneously praise California yet also discuss some of its less glamorous aspects became somewhat more common in the face of California’s continuing prevalence in popular culture. For instance, Randy Newman’s 1983 song “I Love L.A.” starts out as a straightforward ode to this city, and to driving around California, although the following lines complicate the message: “Look at that mountain, look at those trees/ Look at that bum over there man, he’s down on his knees.”¹¹ This ironic statement shows how easy it is to see only the beautiful side of California and its landscape and to completely disregard the many problems which might not be as obvious. This ambiguous view is reinforced by the author listing the names of the most famous streets in Los Angeles followed by some of its poorest streets, while the choir’s response is always the same: “We love it!” Another example can be found in the 1998 song “Malibu” by the band Hole.¹² The singer is addressing a beloved person who seems to be hurt and tired of life, and is offering advice to save them. At various times, the concerned person is supposed to drive *from* and *to* Malibu and “swim in the sea to drown their scars”, though this act can refer both to getting better and dying. Although the lyrics are ultimately tragic, as the narrator and the addressee are separated, a part of California is represented as being capable of both healing and hurting.

The mass popularity of hip-hop in the mid-1980s gave rise to gangsta rap, a highly controversial subgenre of popular music. Gangsta rap songs were usually performed by young African American men from poor communities, such as South Central Los Angeles. The subject matter involved sex, drugs, partying, fighting between gangs, as well as representing the place of one’s origin, which led to the East Coast-West Coast rivalry between rappers from both areas. Most of the criticism came due to the frank depictions of violence and misogynist treatment of women in the song lyrics (Romig 57–59). However, West Coast-based gangsta rap was one of the most influential place-based rap subgenres. Furthermore, West Coast rappers offered a new, more complex perspective on California (Krimms 77). This can be seen in 2Pac’s 1995 song “California Love”: “The life of a west side playa where cowards die and it’s all ball/ Only in Cali where we riot not rally to live and die!”¹³ This song depicts the West Coast as a dangerous paradise, where one can party and become rich, but where death is always close due to the feuding gangs, crime and the police. This reality does not lead to caution; instead, a *carpe diem* outlook on life is adopted. On the one hand, the lyrics convey exclusivity due to the high amount of slang words used. On the other hand, the sense of belonging to a common place is reinforced by listing many Californian cities and proclaiming that they are all great. Furthermore, lines from songs by the Beach Boys and the Mamas and Papas are quoted and recycled. These songs maintain a positive view of California, and “California Love” ultimately fits a similar narrative.

For many people both from and outside the U.S., California is synonymous with the filmmaking industry, which has had an immense influence on popular culture. This fact is discussed in the 1999 song “Californication” by the Red Hot Chili Peppers, a band whose songs prominently feature California in their lyrics.¹⁴ The term *Californication* originally referred to the influx of Californians into adjacent U.S. states, which their inhabitants found undesirable. This song depicts and condemns the less savoury ideas and practices caused by the Hollywood film industry, such as wanting to become a star, undergoing plastic surgery to look young, creating films that endorse wars, sex being ubiquitous to the point of pornography, and appropriating artists from other regions of the U.S. (Kurt Cobain) and from the U.K. (David Bowie). Although it is somewhat less vicious in its assessment than some other examples mentioned above, this song nevertheless gives a critical view of an industry that is often uncritically admired (Kiedis and Sloman 214).

The act of moving to California from other parts of the United States or from other countries has also led to some negative appraisals. For instance, the pop punk band Yellowcard was formed in Florida but later moved to Los Angeles. Their 2003 song “Back Home” details their childhood dream of moving to the West Coast and how the reality of that dream failed to live up to their expectations.¹⁵ Although they acknowledge the beauty of their new home, they see California as a place of loneliness where people live in fear of “falling out of line”, where casually forming relationships and breaking them down, hurting many people in the process, is just another way of passing the time. Anyone living there for long enough eventually becomes “blinded” to this lifestyle and learns not to worry about it. For other outside artists, California is not an attractive destination, or, when experienced, leads them back home. For instance, Rufus Wainwright’s 2001 song “California” mocks the notion that the rest of the world should adopt the Californian lifestyle and states that “life’s the longest death in California.”¹⁶ Ultimately, being a New York City-based artist, Wainwright describes the Golden State as so overwhelming that it is better to “just stay in bed” and avoid it altogether.

This paper has sought to demonstrate that popular music lyrics often transcend entertainment value in their subject matter. Rather, they are cultural artefacts that can play a significant role in shaping public opinion of or informing about a particular issue. The analysis of the song lyrics has made it clear that California is a place of contradiction, eliciting both praise and scorn. Generally speaking, views on California as represented in popular music have changed from mostly positive in the 1950s and 1960s to either outright critical or more layered, ambiguous views in later years. The Golden State has remained a frequently recurring theme in popular music and, due to its cultural prominence, will likely maintain its status in the following years.

Notes

¹ The full list is available at <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/the-500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-20110407>

² Wilson, Brian. “Surfin’ USA” In *Surfin’ USA*. Capitol, 1963. Album.

- ³ Wilson, Brian, and Mike Love. "California Girls." In *Summer Days (And Summer Nights!!)*. Capitol, 1965. Album.
- ⁴ Phillips, John and Michelle Phillips. "California Dreamin'." In *If You Can Believe Your Eyes and Ears*. Dunhill, 1966. Album.
- ⁵ Phillips, John. „San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair).“ Ode, 1967. Single.
- ⁶ Mitchell, Joni. "California." In *Blue*. Reprise, 1971. Album.
- ⁷ Page, Jimmy and Robert Plant. "Going to California." In *Led Zeppelin IV*. Atlantic, 1971. Album.
- ⁸ Zappa, Frank. "Flower Punk." In *We're Only in It for the Money*. Verve, 1968. Album.
- ⁹ Felder, Don, Glenn Frey and Don Henley. "Hotel California." Asylum, 1977. Single.
- ¹⁰ Biafra, Jello, and John Greenway. "California Über Alles." Optional Music, 1979. Single.
- ¹¹ Newman, Randy. "I Love L.A." Warner Bros., 1983. Single.
- ¹² Corgan, Billy, Eric Erlandson and Courtney Love. "Malibu." Geffen, 1998. Single.
- ¹³ Shakur, Tupac et al. "California Love." Death Row, 1995. Single.
- ¹⁴ Kiedis, Anthony et al. "Californication." In *Californication*. Warner Bros., 1999. CD.
- ¹⁵ Key, Ryan et al. "Back Home." In *Ocean Avenue*. Capitol, 2003. CD.
- ¹⁶ Wainwright, Rufus. "California." In *Poses*. DreamWorks, 2001. CD.

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Incorporating Mexicanness into American Culture: the Case of *Mariachi*

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Abstract

The rapid growth of the Hispanic population in the USA is leading to a Latinization of many areas of American social life. The paper examines the development of mariachi iconicity and its transformation from a rural tradition to a national construction symbolizing Mexican identity in the American urban setting. In the process of transculturation the 'mariachi movement' keeps its ethnic traditions of Mexicanness and undergoes constant changes while incorporating new trends from American popular culture. Mariachi bands are required to maintain an extensive repertoire of traditional Mexican music as well as performing interpretations of current popular music. US transnational media corporations have promoted the image and sound of mariachi and have popularized this music to a broader ethnic audience than just the Chicano community in the USA. Mariachi iconicity in the USA has become a unique part of American Mexicanidad.

Keywords: Mexican Americans, mariachi, music, identity, transculturation, authenticity, Mexicanidad

The USA has recently been experiencing major demographic changes, with a rapid growth of the Latina/o population originating in the Spanish-and Portuguese-speaking countries of Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. In 2000, the US Bureau of Census showed that the number of Hispanics in the United States (excluding the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico) had reached 35.3 million, which constituted 12.5% of the total population. The statistics for 2010 indicated that the number of Latina/os in the USA had increased to 50.5 million and accounted for 16.3% of the population. In 2010, people of Mexican origin comprised the largest Hispanic group, representing 63% of the total Hispanic population in the USA (up from 58% in 2000).¹ Three quarters of Latina/os remain concentrated in

the South and West, with just two states, Texas and California, containing about half of the Hispanic population (Portes 271-272). Although this is a highly heterogeneous group, the US Latina/os are often represented as sharing a common identity, giving rise to the concept of *Latinidad*, defined by Valdivia as “the process of being, becoming, and/or performing belonging within a Latina/o diaspora” (53).

The great proportion of *Latinidad* comprises Mexicans, who are the main subject of this article. Mexican immigrants who cross their northern border for political, economic or social reasons leave a mark on the places they left behind and transform the place of their destination; thus, by creating their diasporic communities, they incorporate *Mexicanidad* into the American mainstream and enrich American culture with elements of their Mexican heritage. This article describes the development of *mariachi*² iconicity and its transformation from a rural tradition to a national construction symbolizing Mexican identity in the American urban environment. The essay presents the process of transculturation in which the ‘*mariachi* movement’ is gaining popularity in the USA due to two reasons: it retains the ethnic traditions of *Mexicanness*, while at the same time undergoing constant changes and incorporating new trends from American popular culture.

Transnational mobility is a process which has a major impact – not only on the lives of migrants who travel to another culture, but also on the host culture itself. Because of the increasingly globalized nature of the world, cultural differences are no longer as clearly defined as they were in the past. The theory of transculturation challenges the traditional idea that cultures are internally cohesive and homogenous; instead it builds on the notion that cultures are interconnected and deeply intertwined. Thus, transculturation is based on a continuous change and transformation of cultures (Flüchter and Schöttli 2). This article analyses the transcultural phenomenon of *mariachi* music, which crossed the Mexican border and, once in the USA, evolved into a collective identity combining both a distinct Mexican heritage and a variety of cultural features characteristic of different ethnic groups in American society. It deals with the transformation of the *mariachi* tradition from a rural to an urban context, and it presents theories concerning the origin of the word ‘*mariachi*’ in French and indigenous languages. The following sections describe the pioneer bands performing in Los Angeles, traditional instruments and costumes worn by the *mariachis*. The themes of the *mariachi* lyrics also reflect the process of transculturation, as the songs are not only Mexican in character, but often tell the stories of immigrants living in the USA. The article then presents the *mariachi* tradition in more formal American contexts, as festivals and conferences devoted to this musical style began to be organized in the USA and *mariachi* training entered the American school system. The following section concerns *mariachi*’s influences on other aspects of American social life, such as food and drink, religion and movie production. The analysis points out how the fusion of cultural elements popularized the *mariachi* tradition in broader ethnic circles, both Latino and non-Latino, and created a diverse range of performers not only in terms of ethnicity, but also in terms of gender and class. *Mariachi* is an example of *Mexicanidad* that has entered different spheres of American social life and still continues to transform itself.

Mariachi music can be found in almost all places in the United States, and it appears to appeal to different social classes of Chicano communities, whether they are Mexican immigrants or acculturated members of the second generation. *Mariachi* music has

become a symbol of Latino identity for Latinos of Central and South American or Caribbean heritage. *Mariachi* refers to a collection of musical styles played by orchestras that evolved over many centuries. The *mariachi* groups clearly present Mexican identity, and their music is associated with the *ranchera*³ tunes of Mexican country music. *Mariachi* music has its origins in rural regions of western Mexico, in the state of Jalisco, and the city of Guadalajara, and it gradually grew to become the national Mexican style in the early 20th century. The urban *mariachi* tradition emerged in the post-revolutionary period of the 1920s (Murphy 115). In the urban context *mariachi* moved into public spheres, and performances started to take place in plazas and restaurants, but at the same time *mariachi* continued its traditional ways of performing in the forms of *serenatas*⁴ and participation in family celebrations. “In this way, mariachi maintained continuity with the past while adapting to the needs of a diverse urban population that desired entertainment mixed with social meaning” (Henriques 7).

Although it is difficult to trace the origin of the word ‘mariachi’, there are a number of theories. According to one of them,⁵ the word ‘mariachi’ comes from one of the languages of the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica and means ‘musician’ or the tree from which *mariachi* guitars are made. Other scholars⁶ trace its meaning back to Franco-Mexican contacts, claiming that ‘mariachi’ is a corruption of the French word ‘marriage’ since mariachi music is typically played at weddings. According to another theory the name originates in a festival in honour of the Virgin Mary H. (pronounced may-ree-ah-chay)⁷ (Shaw and Dennison 20).

The world’s centre of *mariachi* activity is Plaza Garibaldi in Mexico City. When Mexican immigrants started to come to the American Southwest, they brought their music with them. Los Angeles has become as important a centre for *mariachi* music in the USA as Mexico City south of the border. The pioneer band that made this music popular among non-Hispanics was *Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano*, formed in Los Angeles in 1961. Another group, *Mariachi Uclatlán*, formed in the same year at the University of California, promoted the inclusion of *mariachi* classes in the teaching curriculum of American schools. Some bands, like *Los Camperos* or *Mariachi Combre*, formed in Tuscon, Arizona in 1971, are traditionalists, whereas other groups perform a fusion of different music genres: e.g. *Sol de México* of Los Angeles include jazz and pop in their musical performances, while *Campanas de América* of San Antonio play a mixture of Tex-Mexican and Caribbean music (Shepherd et al. 43).

Traditionally, the instruments used by the *mariachis* included a harp, violins, the *vihuela* (a five-string guitar), guitars and a *guitarrón* (a guitar with a bass sound). Later, a majority of the bands abandoned the harp due to its size, and in the 1930s the trumpet was introduced. All players normally sing during the performance, though sometimes a vocalist accompanies them (Denzin 37). In addition to the unique set of instruments, mariachi bands are immediately recognizable due to the performers’ costumes. Today, mariachi groups wear a *traje de charro* (Mexican horseman’s attire), an elegant suit consisting of tight-fitting pants, a white shirt and a short coat. In the 18th century the Mexican ranchers of rich families started to use colours and adornments on their *charro* suits. Another accessory was the *botonadura*, the silver buttons that line the outer side of the pants. *Botonadura*, together with the black colour, began to symbolize wealth and power. “Today,

the codes of the *charro* suit in the United States elicit ethnic pride and emotions tied to the many important life events at which mariachis perform” (Pérez 148). Nowadays, the *charro* suit symbolizes manhood, nationhood and power and is an important symbol of Mexican identity (Denzin 36).

The Mexican identity of the performers is emphasized by distinctive artefacts such as sombreros and serapes. The performance venues are decorated with Mexican flags and frescos of haciendas bringing immediate associations with Mexico. The lyrics include various themes, such as folk ballads about the Tejanos’ clashes with the Texas Rangers, stories about immigrants living in the border region, or accounts of Latino drug dealers (Murphy 116). Other topics of *mariachi* songs refer to love, machismo, betrayal, death, politics and revolutionary heroes. An important part of *mariachi* music is *grito*,⁸ which involves audience participation during the instrumental solo of a song (Denzin 37).

The *mariachi* bands perform in both public and private locations. They are hired for performances at Mexican restaurants or at family events such as birthdays and weddings. Some informally attired groups wander from bar to bar, offering their services to the customers. Sometimes they play *al talon*, which means that they are paid a fee per song. *Mariachis* are expected to play any song the audience requests. While performing in public places the *mariachi* bands gain popularity, and then they are often hired to play at private family events (Denzin 36).

The mass communication media, such as press, radio, television and film, have also contributed to the emergence of the *mariachi* icon. “In fact, it was the golden age of Mexican cinema that forged the visual and sonic stereotype of the mariachi as a rustic jaiscence ensemble composed of mestizos with an image closer to Europeans and distanced from the indigenous and the black” (Torres 239). The *mariachi* icon brings immediate associations with Mexican traditions; however, the fusion of different cultural elements gave the *mariachi* popularity in various non-Spanish-speaking countries. At first, *mariachi* music was perceived as exotic in nature, but it soon began to represent Latin American heritage (Torres 139). The Mexican government has promoted *mariachi* music as a symbol of Mexican identity by organizing worldwide tours for mariachi groups, e.g. *The Ballet Folklórico de Amalia Hernández* (Stavans 467).

The popular media⁹ helped to reinforce the folkness of *mariachi*. *Mariachi* music has gradually developed as the quintessence of Mexicanness in the USA. Firstly, the songs are sung in Spanish and therefore seem more exotic for the American audience. Secondly, the performers play the *guitarrón* and *viuela* – instruments which are unfamiliar to the majority of Americans. Thirdly, the *charro* suits worn by the *mariachi* bring immediate associations with Mexico. This commoditization of *mariachi* has prompted interest in this music in wider ethnic circles than just the Chicano community (Lornell 264).

It is interesting that *mariachi* music enjoys higher prestige in the USA than in Mexico, the country where it originated. “Chicano and Latino populations in the US have a greater tendency to regard mariachi with pride (and at times nostalgia) as a Latin cultural achievement, and as a communicative bridge to their culture of origin, whereas in Mexico it has become a feature of the cultural landscape” (Stavans 467). The development of *mariachi* music from its origin in the rural celebrations of Mexico to its contemporary position in American society reflects its growing prestige. *Mariachi* music emerged as the primary

musical representation of Mexican nationalism, and this meaning was sustained and elaborated when Mexicans migrated to the USA. The rural folk music has been transformed into an urban phenomenon symbolizing ethnic pride for both Mexicans and Mexican Americans, especially as the *mariachis* appeal to broad audiences including members of other ethnic groups, both Latinos and non-Latinos. *Mariachi* has proliferated throughout the USA, entering new entertainment spaces and creating a diverse range of performers in terms of gender, ethnicity, and class. Additionally, the *mariachi* ensembles have become an environment where tolerance, respect for diversity and destabilization of exclusion can be achieved by members of ethnic groups who feel marginalized in the US society. The performances also prove that despite stereotypes concerning Mexicans in the USA, *mariachi* skills deserve respect.

The Chicano movement of the 1960s and 70s brought issues of racism against Mexicans in the USA to the forefront of American politics in the Southwest. As a consequence of political struggles from that period, cultural expressions of Mexicanness, such as mariachi iconicity, became permanent markers of Mexican identity. Another result of greater publicity for Mexican issues was the creation of *mariachi* groups in American public schools and the creation of the phenomenon known as the *mariachi* conference (Henriques 18). It has been possible to study *mariachi* music in American universities since 1962. The first International Mariachi Conference, held in San Antonio, Texas in 1979, started the so-called “mariachi movement”; since that time, many similar events have been organized in various American locations, generating new audiences (Shepherd et al 43).

The popularity of festivals and conferences, especially the *Tuscon Mariachi Conference* in 1983, encouraged the organization of the *International Mariachi Conference* in Guadalajara in 1994 (Torres 139). Tuscon has become one of the centres of *mariachi* music, and its conference is held annually, attracting *mariachi* artists from both Mexico and the USA. There are numerous other festivals taking place in the USA at different times of year, e.g. Corpus Christi, Texas; Phoenix, Arizona; Whittier, California; Houston, Texas; Fresno, California; Brackenridge, Texas; Wanatchee, Washington; Anaheim, California; Albuquerque, Texas; San Jose, California; Chicago, Illinois; Las Vegas, Nevada; Washington D.C. and Las Cruces, New Mexico (Tatum 46). By the middle of the 1970s *mariachi* music was taught in the schools of Texas, and later in Arizona and California. This music was often heard in small restaurants and cantinas, and then larger restaurants started to hire *mariachi* ensembles to perform more formal shows on stage. “These changes in status and performance situations have helped mariachi to a somewhat more diverse audience and have also diversified its racial and gender makeup” (Lornell 265).

After the introduction of *mariachi* training into the American school system, hundreds of women of all ethnicities started to learn *mariachi* performance. The first known female *mariachi* group in the USA was *Las Generalas*, formed by María Elena Muñoz in Los Angeles in 1976. Another group, formed in Topeka, Kansas in 1977 by Teresa Cuevas and Consuelo Alcalia, was *Mariachi Estrella*. As the response to the public’s demand to see more female *mariachis*, professional groups started to form, such as *Sol de México* and *Mariachi Los Camperos* (Ruiz and Sánchez-Korrol 421). Nowadays, mixed male-female *mariachi* bands are becoming popular (Shepherd et al 43).

During the *mariachi* performance it is possible for women to display behaviours not traditionally ascribed to females; however, the distinctions between male and female roles have become accentuated. The female *mariachis* meet the gender expectations that characterize the traditional Mexican culture. Women *mariachis* emphasize their sexuality and wear feminized versions of the traditional *charro* suit. “By creating women as a highly feminized Other, traditional mariachi directors protect the macho image of the *mariachi* genre” (Pérez 156). The female *mariachis* replace the traditional black colour of the *charro* suit with pastel colours. The all-female group *Reyna de Los Angeles* (Queen of LA) wear pink suits to emphasize their femininity. Another group, *Mariachi Angels Del Cielo* (Angels from the Sky), from San Antonio, Texas, wears powder blue and white suits symbolizing goodness and purity. These visual codes symbolizing femininity stand in opposition to the traditional black *charro* suit that is identified with male conceptions of wealth and power (Pérez 156).

Female *mariachi*'s sexuality is also emphasized by the instruments women play. They are guided towards playing certain instruments which allow the women to look nice while performing with them. Women are discouraged from playing the trumpet because it requires the exposure of saliva and distorts the face. Another instrument which is not aesthetically pleasing for female *mariachis* is the *guitarrón*, which because of its size hides most of the female body (Pérez 158).

The iconic status of the *mariachi* in the Southwest has influenced aspects of American social life which are not connected with musical entertainment, e.g. gastronomy or religion. In Laredo, South Texas, there is a type of flour tortilla taco called a *mariachi*. This Mexican dish is a version of a taco filled with meat, folded and grilled (Arreola 171). The religious issue concerns the incorporation of *mariachi* music into the sung sections of the Roman Catholic Mass. This idea originated in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where it is called the *Misa Panamericana* or *Misa de Mariachi*. This concept has been adopted in Los Angeles, where the first *Misa Panamericana* was performed in 1968 at Saint Joseph's Church on the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe (Loza 92).

The Mexican media industries have maintained a close relationship with U.S. transnational media corporations such as NBC in the promotion of Mexican music, thus popularizing the image and sound of *mariachi* throughout Latin America, Spain and the American Southwest. The international audience was able to see and hear selected versions of *mariachi* as an authentic representation of Mexican identity. In this way “mariachi became part of a media-produced expression of Mexicanidad that mixed entertainment with nationalist sentiment through idealized versions of the past” (Henriques 23). The exemplary director of Hollywood movies with *mariachi* icons in the main roles is Robert Rodriguez. The title character of his film *El Mariachi* (R. Rodriguez, 1992) is a musician seeking employment, who carries forward his family's proud traditions. He is mistaken for a notorious killer and a drug dealer (a Mexican called Azul) because both carry guitar cases and wear black. However, the content of the cases differs: *El Mariachi*'s case contains a guitar, while Azul's hides a weapon. This mistake triggers a series of events which finally transform the honest musician into a killer. *El Mariachi* is a generic Latino who fights as best as he can for the just cause of providing protection to his surroundings. The film tells the story of how a legend is created (Kleinhans 100). The sequel to *El Mariachi*, titled *Desperado*

(R. Rodriguez, 1995), tells a story of a Mariachi who pursues the infamous Mexican drug dealer, Bucho. In this movie Rodriguez provides new role models for Mexican-Americans, as they are not depicted as bad guys and as a Mexican actress, Salma Hayek, became a female lead in this Hollywood production (Levy 136).

Nowadays, *mariachi* has become so popular that more and more Mexican Americans are sending their children to *mariachi* lessons as a way of keeping them in touch with their ethnic heritage. Chicano music is constantly undergoing changes and incorporating new trends from American popular music. *Mariachi* bands are required to maintain an extensive repertoire of traditional Mexican music as well as performing interpretations of current popular music. What makes *mariachi* music distinguishable despite its broad repertoire is the use of traditional musical instruments, the unique costumes the performers wear, and the form of delivery. *Mariachi* iconicity in the USA has become a unique and undisputable part of American *Mexicanidad*. Selected versions of the *mariachi* tradition are offered to audiences in the USA as an authentic representation of Mexican cultural heritage. However, it is increasingly difficult to define the cultural expressions as authentic and indigenous since the migration of rural populations to urban regions and the constant influence of other popular trends, prompted by mass media, alter whatever has been considered genuine and authentic. What we can observe is the process of transculturation, in which two cultures in contact – Mexican and American – are both influenced by each other. American culture incorporates Mexicanness, and *Mexicanidad* becomes a permanent feature of the US cultural landscape, influencing it in broad ways.

Notes

¹ <<http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf>>.

² *Mariachi* is traditional Mexican music played by *mariachi* ensembles who wear regional costumes.

³ *Ranchera* is a genre of traditional music from Mexico, literally meaning ‘music of the ranches’. *Rancheras* are closely associated with the *mariachi* groups which evolved in Jalisco in the post-revolutionary period. *Ranchera* was conceived as a symbol of a new consciousness in reaction to the aristocratic tastes of that era.

⁴ *Serenatas* – a form of 18th century vocal music combining many features of *cantata* (a composition played instrumentally) and opera. The *serenata* is semi-dramatic in form, shorter and not as elaborately staged as opera.

⁵ The theory is presented on the website of *Mariachi History and Tradition*: <<http://www.mariachi-plaza.com/mariachi-history.html>>.

⁶ This theory is presented on the website of *History of the Mariachi Puro Mariachi Foundation*: <<http://www.mariachi.org/history.html>>.

The theory comes from the time in the 19th century when Maximilian, a Frenchman, was Emperor of Mexico. According to this myth, the *mariachi* was named by the French after the wedding celebration. However, this explanation of the word ‘*mariachi*’ has recently been discredited; the use of the word has been found to predate the arrival of the French in Mexico.

⁷ The theory is presented by Camille Collins in her article “What is the mariachi?” published in *Mexconnect* on 1st September 1998. <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/1875-what-is-the-mariachi>

⁸ *Grito* is a shout similar to the ‘yeehaw’ of the American cowboy. It is usually performed by a singer after singing a patriotic song or by a very excited member of a crowd.

⁹ Popular media refers to types of media that have become popular in today’s technologically advanced societies. The term is also used in connection with interdisciplinary approaches bridging mass media and popular culture, including posters, videos, comics, cyberculture, internet blogs and music. In fact, mass media often determine what does and, does not make up the popular culture scene.

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Hearty or Delicate? Food and Gender in the Novels of Agatha Christie

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Abstract

This paper examines Agatha Christie's usage of food imagery in the construction of her characters' gender identities. Gender is defined as constructed and performed, rather than pre-determined and fixed. In addition, both, crime fiction and food are understood as strongly gendered phenomena. It is argued that Christie created a number of characters who use food to construct alternative and transgressive gender roles for themselves. This is especially visible in the desexualization of her two famous detectives, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, which enabled Christie to transform the genre of the classical crime novel and eventually to introduce a female detective.

Keywords: Agatha Christie, classical crime novel, food, gender, desexualization, transgression

In 1920, when Agatha Christie published her first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the genre of detective fiction was already “firmly established” and immensely popular among a growing circle of British readers (Clarke 1–2). However, a number of literary scholars have pointed out that up until the beginning of the twentieth century, the detective fiction genre had been dominated by men – the detectives in most stories were male and the stories themselves promoted traditionally masculine values, such as heroism and rationality (Scaggs 20).

Although quite a few women wrote crime fiction in the Victorian period, none of their female protagonists achieved such levels of popularity as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin. However, this trend was about to change. The number of female writers, as well as readers, rose steadily throughout the

Victorian period, and at the end of the nineteenth century more detective fiction readers were women than men (Knight 68). As a result, the crime fiction genre underwent a dramatic reconstruction: the traditionally masculine values, protagonists and settings, which characterized the original formula, were gradually replaced by more feminine ones. Agatha Christie was one of the first authors to attempt to feminize the classical Holmesian formula, and she did so not only to accommodate the taste of her growing female readership, but also to challenge the patriarchal assumptions inherent in the genre itself (Scaggs 20).

In this paper I argue that Christie was able to feminize her crime stories by creating characters who did not conform to traditional gender roles, but even more importantly by shifting the focus of her stories from the urban and public towards the private and domestic, especially towards the ultimate traditionally feminine domain: that of food and cooking. It is the aim of the present paper to demonstrate some of the ways in which food and gender are interconnected in our culture, and to show how Christie made use of her readers' preconceived notions about this interconnection in order to subvert the gender stereotypes that had hitherto dominated classical crime fiction.

Eating Gender: Performance through Food Choice

Gender is one of the crucial elements of an individual's identity. Moreover, it is an institution that is "embedded in all the social processes of everyday life and social organizations" (Risman 430). However, it has been argued that the category of gender is not predefined as a given, but rather, in Judith Butler's words, it is "performed" – and various gender identities "are continuously (re)created" and (re)negotiated through one's actions in a given social setting (Lyons and Willott 694). As Butler puts it:

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gender self. (519, original emphasis)

In other words, Butler views gender identity not as permanent, but rather as temporary, made up of "acts which are internally discontinuous" (520). As such, gender remains a mere social construct, "a performative accomplishment," which is staged for the benefit of a "social audience, including the actors themselves." However, the staging of such performances can serve not only to uphold and justify the performed identities, but also to challenge and question them, or even to help achieve "gender transformation" (520). The transformation, or even deconstruction, of gender identities is made possible because "there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates [sic] the idea of gender, and without these acts, there would be no gender at all" (522). Nevertheless, despite its constructed and temporary nature, gender difference is "universally used to justify stratification" (Risman 43), and as a result it can have a profound influence on the lives of individuals. It follows that the construction of gender is a two-way process

in which individuals engage in acting/producing their gender identities and these gender identities subsequently shape the individuals (432). Gender becomes “embedded not only in individuals but throughout social life” (431).

Food and food choices play an important part in constructing, altering, or disrupting gender identities. Food is an extremely gendered phenomenon connected with the body, sex, power, patriarchy, and oppression. The association of food with gender was noted by Claude Lévi-Strauss as early as the 1960s (36–37). More recently, scholars, including Deborah Lupton, Eric B. Ross and Sidney Mintz, or Warren Belasco, have been discussing the influence of gender on food choice and eating styles. In a study conducted by Deborah Lupton, respondents were asked to decide whether different foods were appropriate for different genders, and if so, to specify which foods pertained to which gender. The interviewees almost unanimously responded positively to the first question. Moreover, in a large majority of cases the respondents agreed on whether particular foods were masculine or feminine. Feminine foods were characterized as “light, sweet, milky, soft-textured, refined and delicate” (Lupton 106), whilst masculine foods were “[h]eavy’ foods [...] those that are hard to digest, weight on your stomach, are chewy, rich or filling, or are ‘unhealthy’” (107). The two types of foods highlighted by the respondents as quintessentially feminine and masculine were sweets or candy and red meat, respectively (104). According to Eric B. Ross and Sidney Mintz, the evolution of this distinction can be traced throughout history. Prehistoric hunters, unwilling to give up the nourishing meat, kept the killed prey to themselves, leaving women to exploit vegetarian alternatives. This situation did not change even in the modern period. In the nineteenth century, English workmen consumed the bulk of the households’ stock of meat, while women were expected to rely on less nutritious foodstuffs, such as bread and jam, to feed themselves (qtd. in Belasco 51).

The distinction between masculine and feminine food has not only physiological, but also cultural and social significance. Warren Belasco observes that sweetness is traditionally connected with innocence and love, and meat connotes sex (37), and that while sexuality is acceptable, even required from men, it is regarded with suspicion in women. Consequently, in Western societies women who ate meat used to be seen as excessively sexual and immoral. To avoid the impact of meat they were advised to eat vegetables, sweets or at least disguise the taste of meat with (preferably white) sauces (50).

Meat is an extremely nutritious food, high in calories, fats, and protein, and as such it is often considered the only “real” food and meatless dishes are frequently despised. At the same time, men are seen as best suited to eat meat (50); women, children, the elderly or sick are all marked as inferior and unable to digest it. The relationship between meat and sugar in the domain of food is reflected by that of alcohol and abstinence in the realm of drink. Non-alcoholic drinks, light drinks, and coffee are associated with women (Lupton 106), while strong drinks and spirits are seen as predominantly masculine. Thus, the very nature of the foods and drinks women consume marks them as physically, and, consequently, symbolically and socially inferior to men.

The gendered nature of food and drinks is visible not only in the choice of specific food items, but also in the distribution of foodwork and in assigning the responsibility for making decisions about food. The findings of research conducted by Alan Beardsworth et al. demonstrate that in contemporary Britain “a married woman’s obligation to

produce elaborately prepared traditional meals for her husband provides an expression of her domesticity and subordination” (473). What is more, while the “tasks of preparing food still firmly belong to women” and men only rarely engage in foodwork, women “do not enjoy the power which would allow them meaningfully to control their own and their families’ food intake” (Charles and Kerr 58, qtd. in Dixey). In other words, the “choice of meals is determined by husbands’ preferences” or by “the man’s work pattern,” and the male of the house must be provided with the required meals even if the family suffers from a constrained budget (Dixey 38). On the other hand, Rachael Dixey, as well as Warren Belasco (41–43) observe that while women are frequently oppressed and restricted through their role as main food producers, this role can also become a source of power. Some women deliberately choose to dissuade men from cooking. Their kitchens become a space where they can exercise authority and “responsibility for this vital area of life can give [them] some control over the household and a sense of self-worth” (Dixey 38).

Gender in Crime Fiction: From Male Power to Female Intuition

It is evident that food and cooking are domains permeated by gender stereotypes. The same can be said about the genre of crime fiction. Up until the Golden Age, crime fiction was a predominantly masculine form dominated by the rational larger-than-life male detective hero (Knight 10, 68). However, with the rise of the classical crime novel at the beginning of the twentieth century, various feminine elements were gradually introduced into the genre (Knight 90, 99; Rzepka 145). Not only did the number of female crime authors rise rapidly, but the stories themselves started to depart from the male-centred formula developed by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, the prototype of a classical amateur detective, can be understood as a kind of archetypal hero figure: he is a lonely warrior, who has embarked on a quest to rid society of evil (Rowland 120). This character embodies a number of values which are – in Western society, at least – traditionally considered masculine; he is rational, independent, courageous, and confident. The setting of Doyle’s stories is masculine too. His crimes generally take place in public, in the dark streets of a big city, which are juxtaposed with the peace and order of the detective’s private study (Scaggs 48). The public nature of crime represents yet another feature that contributes to the masculinity of the Holmesian formula, as in Victorian Britain public spaces were generally considered a sphere reserved for men.

Agatha Christie’s novels, on the other hand, depict microcosms dominated by women. Her novels are populated by numerous female characters, her investigators rely on intuition, psychological insights and domestic knowledge, rather than scientific data and mathematical reasoning, and her stories are set in traditionally feminine spaces: the home and the kitchen (Rowland 120–21). Food, as an indispensable element of any household and as a domain traditionally strongly associated with women, represents one of the tools Christie employed in order to further feminize her detective novels.

Agatha Christie and Food Stereotypes

The references to food that appear in Christie's novels attest to the omnipresence of gender-based stereotypes. Her minor characters often fit into stereotypical gender roles and these roles are often reflected in their food habits. Christie exploited the contrast between the vigorous man with a healthy appetite and the fragile lady or young girl, who eats little and lightly. Her male characters can frequently be observed enjoying breakfasts of toast and marmalade, scrambled eggs, bacon, yesterday-cut cold ham, cereal, kidneys and had-dock on plentifully heaped plates, while their female counterparts seem to be content with only a piece of toast, coffee and orange juice (*A Pocket Full of Rye* 27), with weak tea (*Why Didn't They Ask Evans* 222), or they even skip food entirely (*Endless Night* 210).

Christie also made use of the traditional view of men as meat-eaters and women as sugar-eaters. While the staple of a true gentleman's diet is a Porterhouse steak (*The Mystery of the Blue Train* 263), women seem to believe that, as Ariadne Oliver, a middle-aged writer, put it, "[s]weet things [...] really give you a lot of vitality" (*Elephants Can Remember* 108). In *The Man in the Brown Suit* the protagonist Anne explains her choice of comfort food after being held captive for a couple of hours in the following way: "A man, I suppose, would have had a stiff peg; but girls derive a lot of comfort from ice-cream sodas. I applied myself to the end of the straw with gusto. The cool liquid went trickling down my throat" (223). Similarly, if afternoon tea is served in a man's household, it is accompanied by cooked sausages (*Hallowe'en Party* 54), but when the tea is served by a woman the menu includes scones with homemade strawberry jam or "little drop cakes" (*After the Funeral* 156).

The inferiority or weakness of stereotypically feminine characters is highlighted not only by their choice of "weaker" foods and drinks, but also by the fact that their eating habits resemble those of physically and socially powerless individuals, i.e. invalids and children. Not only the food that women eat, but also the manner in which they consume it closely resembles the food and eating patterns of the sick. While delicate ladies are expected to eat in bed (*Evil Under the Sun* 191), the same behaviour would indicate sickness in men (*After the Funeral* 41). Moreover, the craving for sweets typically ascribed to women parallels the same craving experienced by very young children, who often are appeased by or find comfort in candy (*After the Funeral* 11, *The Murder at the Vicarage* 51). Thus, by their assigned foodways women are rendered weak, vulnerable, childish, and consequently incapable of taking care of themselves: they become people who need to be managed by others, i.e. by men.

Similarly to children or the sick, "proper" women are expected to abstain from alcohol, as well. When women entertain each other they serve tea, coffee, cake, and sweets (*Passenger to Frankfurt* 252). Many of Christie's female characters can be seen drinking only under extreme circumstances, such as in the case of Mrs Hubbard, who was offered a glass of cognac as a remedy after fainting (*Murder on the Orient Express* 223). However, "refreshments," i.e. alcoholic drinks, represent an inevitable part of meetings between men. Alcohol-drinking rituals serve as a testing ground for traditionally masculine virtues: competitiveness and aggression. In a working-class pub, the one who manages to stand on his feet last is the winner. Failing to take part in a round of drinks or not being able to "hold

one's liquor" leads to loss of rank and subordination (Schivelbusch 171–73). Here again the idea that a woman, a person not fit to drink alcohol, is equivalent to a weak man is perpetuated. Even alcoholism, unpardonable for women, is tolerated in men. Such is the case in *Murder on the Orient Express*, where the drinking habit of the detective Mr Hardman is tolerated by the other characters and viewed as rather natural in a man (234).

Role-Reversal: Christie's Unconventional Detectives

Although Christie frequently made use of stereotypical masculinity and femininity in characterization, she equally frequently employed food to subvert the traditional notions of what a man or a woman should be like. Gender role reversal appears throughout Christie's novels. The young adventuress is one of Christie's preferred stereotype-subverting character types. Lynn, a former army nurse and the protagonist of *Taken at the Flood*, dreams of an adventure-filled life and is reluctant to settle down and become a country housewife. She tries to avoid being placed in a position of weakness by emphatically refusing to take her meals in bed like a lady (13–14). Similarly, teenager Linda rebels against the patriarchal society – represented by her extremely feminine stepmother obsessed with men and with thinness – by refusing to breakfast in her room (*Evil Under the Sun* 132). Joanna, the young and modern protagonist of *The Moving Finger*, is described as drinking alcohol: “[She] is very pretty and very gay, and she likes dancing and cocktails, and love affairs and rushing about in high-powered cars” (6), and the young adventuress Tuppence equals her male partner Tommy in intellect as well as in appetite (*The Secret Adversary* 11, 13). Similarly, in *Murder Is Easy* the young New Woman Bridget underscores her independence, courage, and intellectual capabilities by drinking alcohol, and she is annoyed when she is offered a traditionally feminine drink of tea in cups made of “dainty” china (285).

Instances of men robbed of their power through food appear in the novels, as well. In *Murder Is Easy* Mr Horton is a henpecked husband controlled by his wife and forced to do all the housework, including cooking (149). For decades, women were confined to the domestic sphere, they were burdened with the care of the household and of food supplies, and their public voices were silenced (Belasco 44). Moreover, even women's achievements within the domestic sphere were attributed to men: although women did all the shopping, cooking, serving, and cleaning, it was always the man of the house who was the “breadwinner.” In professional kitchens the male cook was generally the superior one, the chef, while women were delegated to the role of helpers (47). In Mr Horton's case these roles are reversed and his invalid wife takes over power and delegates him to the feminine role of household help and cook. To reassert his masculinity, Mr Horton indulges in drink (*Murder Is Easy* 113–16).

Food as a means of gender role reversal serves as a useful tool in characterization. However, Christie used the same method in order to feminize the genre of crime fiction as such. At the beginning of the twentieth century, traditional detective stories required a male protagonist. However, the newly emerging classical crime novel attracted a growing number of female readers – and the authors, many of whom were female as well, started to feminize various aspects of their novels (see above). Nevertheless, the introduction of

a female protagonist remained problematic, as the traditional detective was placed firmly in the realm of the mind, the rational, and the masculine (Knight 99; Sayers 356).

Christie tried to overcome the masculinity inherent in the detective hero not by creating a completely female protagonist, but instead by strongly desexualizing her detectives. To do so, she exploited what Counihan labels the “possibility of destruction of gender identity” (66), i.e. she attributed stereotypically female traits to her male detective, and vice versa. First, she invented Hercule Poirot – a male character defying many of the preconceived ideas about masculinity. Later she proceeded to employ a woman as her detective. However, in the case of Miss Marple Christie also relied on the technique of desexualization in order to prevent her character from clashing with the established masculine detective formula.

Firstly, Christie drew on the dictum of traditional Western society which tells women that their identities are made up solely of their bodies and appearance (Counihan 89). Christie’s female detective, Miss Marple, is depicted as rather messy, definitely not elegant, and not in the least concerned with her looks. Poirot, on the other hand, pays extreme attention to his attire – he even sacrifices comfort for elegance (*Hallowe’en Party* 102, 126), his trademark moustache is always impeccably groomed, and his surroundings are neat and tidy. He is depicted as delicate and of fragile health, for instance when he overdresses for a short summer drive in an open car in *Dumb Witness* (44) or when he suffers from motion sickness in *Death in the Clouds* (23). What is more, Poirot does not stop at worrying about his own health and comfort; he also makes a fuss over the health of other characters, just like a mother would over her small children. When Captain Hastings complains that a cold might be coming over him, Poirot immediately adopts the role of an over-anxious nurse:

“Awfully sorry, old boy,” I said. “But to tell the truth, I’ve got such a blinding headache I can hardly see out of my eyes. It’s the thunder in the air, I suppose. I really have been feeling quite muzzy with it – in fact so much so, I entirely forgot I hadn’t been in to say good night to you.”

As I had hoped, Poirot was immediately solicitous. He offered remedies. He fussed. He accused me of having sat about in the open air in a draught. (On the hottest day of the summer!) I refused aspirin on the grounds that I had already taken some, but I was not able to avoid being given a cup of sweet and wholly disgusting chocolate!

“It nourishes the nerves, you comprehend,” Poirot explained.

I drank it to avoid argument and then, with Poirot’s anxious and affectionate exclamations still ringing in my ears, I bade him good night.” (*Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case* 169)

It is significant that the drink Poirot offers is neither warm tea that a doctor might prescribe, not a shot of whiskey, a strong drink that Hastings would probably prefer, but a cup of “disgusting,” or rather feminine chocolate. Indeed, in order to reverse the gender identities of her characters, Christie relied on depicting their foodways even more frequently than on depicting their appearance.

In his approach to food, Poirot is distinctly feminine. He takes delight in delicate and ornamental food, he consumes large amounts of chocolate and other sweets, and he even prepares food himself. In *The Mystery of the Blue Train* Poirot serves food to his counterpart, an English gentleman (263), and in *Dumb Witness* he even attempts to share some of his culinary techniques with his partner, Captain Hastings. However, his effort is met with disapproval (223). Other men do not wish to discuss cooking and find it an activity unfit for males.

Chocolate – Poirot’s staple treat – has a special status among sweets, as it is not only a food, but also a drink. After its introduction in Europe, chocolate was considered the opposite of coffee, which was at that time perceived as a masculine drink. While coffee was associated with the mind, intellect, self-control, and masculinity, chocolate represented indulgence, body, pleasure, and femininity (Schivelbusch 87). Unlike in the case of coffee, the associations of chocolate have remained more or less unchanged until the present day. Today, cocoa is a drink of women and children, and especially in the Puritan Anglo-Saxon world it is seen as unfit for men (93). It is no wonder then that Poirot’s habit of drinking chocolate for breakfast is considered revolting by Hastings, a stereotypical Englishman (*Dumb Witness* 37).

Poirot’s other drinking habits are equally unconventional and un-masculine. Unlike other male characters, who believe that “[n]o gentleman is happy unless he drinks something with his meal,” be it a “good prewar whisky” or a glass of vintage wine (*The Mystery of the Blue Train* 259), Poirot avoids strong alcohol. Instead, he usually opts for non-alcoholic or light alcoholic alternatives, or an occasional cocktail (*Three Act Tragedy* 26). When Ariadne Oliver wants to ask the detective a favour, she knows exactly what selection of food and drinks to offer:

“It’s rather early to ring you up, but I want to ask you a favour.”

“Yes?”

“It is the annual dinner of our Detective Authors’ Club; I wondered if you would come and be our Guest Speaker this year. It would be very very sweet of you if you would. [...] Come and have tea with me.”

“Afternoon tea, I do not drink it.”

“Then you can have coffee.”

“It is not the time of day I usually drink coffee.”

“Chocolate? With whipped cream on top? Or a tisane. You love sipping tisanes. Or lemonade. Or orangeade. Or would you like decaffeinated coffee if I can get it – “

“*Ah ça, non, par exemple!* It is an abomination.”

“One of those sirups you like so much. I know, I’ve got half a bottle of Ribena in the cupboard.” “What is Ribena?”

“Black-currant flavour.”

“Indeed, one has to hand it to you! You really do try, Madame. I am touched by your solicitude. I will accept with pleasure to drink a cup of chocolate this afternoon.”

(*Third Girl* 9)

Clearly, Poirot’s eating and drinking preferences are distinctly feminine: he enjoys sweets, coffee, chocolate, sugary syrups and whipped cream, rather than the stereotypically masculine steaks, whisky, and beer. As a result, other male characters often underestimate or

even ridicule him. Because of his food choices, Poirot is believed to be effeminate, and consequently weak and insignificant. In *Elephants Can Remember*, Superintendent Garroway is very amused at seeing Poirot drink *sirop* of blackcurrant instead of the customary whisky and soda, and when he is later told that Poirot drinks *tisane* (“herbal tea”), he remarks: “Ah. Invalid dope of some kind” (135). The parallel between the drink choice of the feminized detective and that of the sick, which the Superintendent draws, seems as a direct reference to the above-mentioned food associations. Similarly in *Three Act Tragedy*, when Poirot asks his host, Sir Charles, for his staple “glass of *sirop*.” the request is met with incomprehension and Poirot soon discovers that “*sirop* [is] not included in Sir Charles’s conception of drinkable fluids” (26).

Unlike Poirot, Miss Marple – as a woman – cannot be depicted as completely feminine in order to fit into the detective formula. Therefore, in her case food and eating habits are used to make her conform to the masculinist requirements of a classical detective story. Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot represent opposite poles in terms of their approach to food: while Poirot tends to over-indulge in food and is famous for having a sweet tooth, Miss Marple believes in controlling one’s bodily desires and is generally indifferent to food, which is visible in her attitude to her garden – she likes taking care of her flowers, but finds growing vegetables “dull” (*Nemesis* 17). While Poirot defies Western culture’s perception that body and its passions and pleasures are set apart from mind and reason (Counihan 82) by merging a plump body and love of pleasure with exceptional intellectual capacities, Miss Marple combines stereotypically feminine methods of detection, i.e. chatter and gossip, intrigues and tricks, intuition and reminiscences, with a masculinized approach to food.

To enforce her desexualized image, Christie rendered Miss Marple’s drinking habits masculine, as well. While proper women are supposed to indulge only in non-alcoholic beverages, as is shown in *A Caribbean Mystery*, when Miss Marple is offered fresh lime juice while the rest of the party enjoy a glass of Planter’s Punch (10), Marple is not opposed to drinking alcohol in the least. When entertaining a police inspector, she does not offer him tea or coffee, but a glass of cherry brandy, which she claims to have distilled herself according to her grandmother’s recipe. However, the inspector declines, stating that he does not drink before lunchtime, and this role reversal further emphasizes the uncharacteristic nature of Miss Marple’s drinking habits (*The Murder at the Vicarage* 54).

Conclusion

In this paper I observed some of the many ways in which food and gender interact within the detective novels written by Agatha Christie. It was my aim to shed light on the methods Christie employed to break from the traditional masculinist crime fiction formula developed by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Christie was an influential actor in the gradual feminization of the detective genre which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, and she eventually succeeded in introducing a female protagonist into the formula. The analysis presented in this paper explores the role of food imagery in this process of feminization. It argues that while Christie often employed food as a tool for characterization and made use of food-related gender stereotypes to construct conventional characters, equally

frequently she used food as a means of desexualizing and subsequently feminizing her two most popular detectives: Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. The unconventional eating and drinking habits of these two characters function as “stylized” acts which helped Christie to deconstruct their “seemingly seamless” (Butler 520) gender identities, and thus allowed her to gradually introduce feminine elements into what had before been a predominantly masculine genre of fiction.

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Linguistics and Translation Studies

On the Holistic Status of Direct Object Participants

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Abstract

This paper looks into certain principled connections between total object inclusion, affectedness and causality in transitive structures with self-agentive locomotion verbs. It shows that causally affected direct object participants display a holistic status involving total affectedness by the action, which imposes heavy restrictions on the repertory of verbs admitted into transitive structures. In locomotion situations in which the participant in the direct object position is not causally affected by the action, the participant's total inclusion in the action is a mere potential feature and correlates with the telicity of the motion situation.

Keywords: Locomotion events, transitive structures, affectedness, causality, holistic coverage

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1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that direct object position is prototypically taken up by arguments that are included in the event encoded in the verb in their entirety. The total object inclusion, i.e. the holistic status of direct object arguments, was first formulated in Anderson (1971). An often cited example illustrating the effect that the direct object position has on arguments which appear in it is the one with verbs from the *spray/load* verbal class:

- (1) a. They loaded the hay onto the wagon.
b. They loaded the wagon with the hay.

In (1a) the whole quantity of hay was loaded onto the wagon, in (1b) the whole of the wagon was loaded with hay. This type of alternation (locative alternation) serves as a clear example of the operation of what is sometimes referred to as “the holism effect” (Pinker 1989, Gropen et al. 1991).

Apart from the locative alternation, similar meaning contrasts are encoded in other types of object/oblique alternations, for example those with verbs of consumption, hitting and cutting (cf. e.g. Broccias 2003, Levin 1993).

- (2) a. John ate the cake.
b. John ate at the cake.
(3) a. John hit Peter.
b. John hit at Peter.
(4) a. John cut the bread.
b. John cut at the bread.

The conative alternations in (2b), (3b) and (4b) yield an atelic reading, whereas the direct object alternations yield a telic reading. In (2b), only a piece of the cake was consumed. In (3b), Peter may or may not have been hit. In (4b), the bread may or may not have been cut.

A similar contrast in meaning can occasionally be found in motion events, cf. the following example from Levin (1993: 42):

- (5) a. I pushed the table.
b. I pushed at (/on /against) the table.

As opposed to the object alternation, the oblique alternation encodes “an ‘attempted’ action without specifying whether the action was actually carried out” (Levin 1993: 42).

Similar meaning contrasts between prepositional (oblique) constructions and their non-prepositional (direct object) counterparts can also be found in an alternation which Levin (1993) terms “preposition drop alternation”:

- (6) a. They climbed Mount Everest.
b. They climbed up Mount Everest.

As opposed to the prepositional construction (6b), the path in the prepositionless variant (6a) yields a telic (holistic) reading (cf. e.g. Dixon 2005, Moravcsik 1978, Schlesinger 1995). The preposition drop alternation is open for several verb classes, including self-agentive verbs of locomotion (as in ex. 6).

Now, consider the following constructions which also employ self-agentive locomotion events. The direct object position is taken up not by a path (as is the case in the preposition drop alternation) but by a participant that changes its state (or its location) as a result of the movement lexicalized in the verb. The XP phrase then specifies the type of result:

- (7) a. John walked himself (/Peter) to the door.
- b. John walked himself (/Peter) to exhaustion.

In anticipation of the discussion presented in this paper, let me state here that these constructions are, maybe surprisingly, also instantiations of the holism effect.

The paper will look into the semantics of transitive structures with self-agentive locomotion verbs (i.e. those exemplified in ex. 6 and 7). More specifically, it will be concerned with how the principle of total object inclusion manifests itself at the syntax-semantics interface and how it is related to affectedness and causality.

2. Causally Affected Direct Object Participants

The direct object participants in the following examples are causally affected by the motion denoted by the verb:

- (8) John marched himself to the store.
- (9) John marched Peter to the store.
- (10) John danced himself to exhaustion.
- (11) John danced Peter to exhaustion.
- (12) John ran the pavement thin.
- (13) John walked his shoes to shreds.

These transitive constructions with locomotion verbs have a complex, i.e. a causative structure (on the complex status of causative events see esp. Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1999). They involve two arguments and two events, the causing event and the caused event. The external argument is represented by the causer, and the internal argument (the participant in the direct object position) by a patient (ex. 10–13) or a patientive causee (ex. 8–9). John causes himself (or some other participant) to change location (ex. 8–9), or induces a certain change of state either in himself (ex. 10) or in some other participant (ex. 11–13) by means of moving in a certain manner.

These structures encode a direct causal link between the movement and the patientive causee's change of location or the patient's change of state: being causally affected by the action lexicalized in the verb, the direct object participant undergoes some change, be it a change of location or a change of state. The close link between patienthood, affectedness and change of state (or change of location) has been frequently noted in the literature (cf. Dowty 1991 or Rappaport Hovav 2001, among many others). As Foley and Van Valin (1984: 61) put it, there exists "a clear correlation between the occurrence of an argument as an undergoer and a reading of total affectedness".

These direct object participants are thus fully-fledged patients, subject to a change whose cause is the force imparted to them by the participant in the subject position. It is a well-known fact that causativity is transitive in nature (e.g. Bierwisch 1975 or Lyons 1978) and that it involves transmission of energy (e.g. Croft 1991, 2012 or Langacker 1990). It cannot be overlooked that the transmission of energy in the locomotion events in

question is made possible precisely by the fact that the direct object position is taken up by an entity which can “absorb” the energy exerted by the mover and, as a result, can change its location or its state. In actual fact, all the constructions in question are instantiations of secondary resultative predication. As Goldberg (1995:188) observes, resultative phrases can only be applied to arguments which undergo a change as a result of the action denoted by the verb.¹ In addition, such arguments must be force recipients (cf. Rappaport Hovav and Levin 2001). In sum, then, direct object participants in resultative constructions are subject to change owing to the fact that they are receivers of energy which changes their external properties (their location in space) or their internal properties (their state).

As is well known, the participants in the direct object position must be totally included in the action lexicalized in the verb (Anderson 1971). Closer scrutiny reveals that this fact has one very important ramification. Direct object participants in causative structures encoding motion events can only be subject to causal force if all the aspects of the caused event are covered by the causing event. Put another way, the holistic status of such participants includes their total affectedness by the action, which, in turn, imposes heavy restrictions on the repertory of self-agentive locomotion verbs admitted into these structures (cf. Kudrnáčová 2013).

To repeat, the total affectedness of direct object participants is a reflection of the complex, i.e. causative character of the locomotion situations in question. As observed by Kudrnáčová (2013), causative structures with affected direct object participants only admit verbs that designate basic physical aspects of a motion. Aspects of movement that point to the state of the mover (or to some aspects of the overall situational frame in which the movement is set) cannot fulfil a causal role because they are not subject to the mover’s conation (cf. Kudrnáčová 2014). In other words, additional (supplementary) aspects do not have the capacity to effect the movement. The upshot, then, is that verbs bearing reference to them are not admitted into causative structures.

Let me illustrate the point by way of the example of limping. When one limps, one walks with a limp – walking is core and limping is merely supplementary. In other words, the mover’s translocation is effected by the core component of movement (walking), not by its supplementary part (limping). Therefore, the supplementary, non-core components of movement can be causally related neither to the change of location (or change of state) of the subject argument nor to the change of location (or change of state) of the object argument. Consider:

(14) *John limped himself to the kitchen.

(15) *John limped Peter to the kitchen.

(16) *John limped himself to exhaustion.

(17) *John limped Peter to exhaustion.

Last but not least, general circumstances of the motion are not subject to causal force either, cf.:

(18) *John jogged Peter to the park.

(19) *John waded Peter to the shore.

The verb *jog* encodes reference to the purpose of the motion (*jog* means, roughly, “run slowly for exercise”), the verb *wade* encodes reference to the specific type of medium in which the movement is carried out (mud or deep water).

From what has been adduced thus far it follows that the causal force, whose source is the subject participant, necessarily encompasses the caused event (i.e. the direct object participant’s change of location or change of state) in its entirety, not just its parts. This is, then, the reason why, in constructions denoting locomotion events with causative structures, all aspects of the direct object participant’s change of location or change of state are totally included in the event. Put another way (cf. the discussion above), causally affected direct object participants display a holistic status precisely owing to the fact that they fulfil the role of receivers of energy - that which is responsible for inducing their change of state or their change of location.

In sum, then, the holistic status of causally affected direct object participants is a logical outcome of the transitive causative nature of the locomotion events in question.

3. Causally Nonaffected Direct Object Participants

3.1 Bounded Paths

Consider examples with a path of motion in the direct object position:

- (20) John swam the lake.
- (21) John climbed the mountain.
- (22) John jumped the fence.
- (23) John ran a mile.

In these examples, the direct object participants cannot become receivers of energy (whose source is the subject participant), hence they cannot acquire the status of patients. In these motion situations the direct object position is taken up by a phrase representing a path, be it a path represented by an entity existing independently of the movement (*the lake, the mountain, the fence*) or a path represented by a measure phrase (*a mile*). What the two types of path have in common is the fact that they are totally included in the locomotion event, i.e. they both display a holistic status. As observed by e.g. Dixon (2005), Taylor (1995) and Schlesinger (1995), all these transitive constructions yield a telic interpretation.

If the path of the motion appears in the oblique phrase, the telicity of the situation (i.e. the total inclusion of the path in the motion event) is a mere potential feature and depends on the semantics of the verbs and the semantics of the path (note, however, that measure phrases cannot appear in prepositional structures, hence one cannot say **John ran over (/ across) a mile*). Consider:

- (24) John swam across the lake. (invariably telic)
- (25) John swam in the lake. (invariably atelic)
- (26) John climbed up the mountain. (telic or atelic, depending on the context)
- (27) John jumped over the fence. (invariably telic)

As is well known, one of the factors that determine the telicity of the motion event is the boundedness of the path. Using Tenny's (1992: 8) terminology, the path "measures out and delimits the event described by the verb". Seen from the point of view of what Beavers (2006) refers to as "holistic coverage", the path has a holistic status if it is totally included in the motion. The telicity of a motion event and the total inclusion of the path in the motion are thus natural correlates.

A question arises as to whether, in prepositionless structures, the holistic status of the path is correlated with its affectedness. Seen from the point of view of transmission of energy, the lake (the mountain, the fence) are not patients because they are not recipients of force whose source is the mover. Certainly, there is direct physical contact between them and the mover, but the contact does not involve the transmission of force.

Although Beavers (2010, 2011) argues that telicity is among those features that add to the direct object participant's affectedness (in his conception, affectedness is a gradual concept), he shows, too, that affectedness and lexical aspect only display a partial correlation. Affectedness involves some change and one cannot reasonably argue that the path undergoes one. As Beavers (2010: 852) observes, "coverage of the path is not itself a type of affectedness". Schlesinger, on the other hand, contends that "a participant will be more affected when the action has been successfully completed" (1995: 66). It should be realized, however, that Schlesinger takes affectedness as aspectual-based (therefore he stresses a close connection between telicity and affectedness) whereas Beavers sees it as a genuinely semantic phenomenon.²

In sum, telicity of the path in this type of motion situation is not correlated with affectedness. Beavers (2006) also observes that affectedness must be kept distinct from telicity even though these two aspects may co-occur. Although the motion event is telic, one can hardly consider its path as affected. Admittedly, an affected argument is an argument "which measures out and delimits the event described by the verb" (Tenny 1992: 8), which, in its effect, would qualify this path as affected. It should be realized, however, that Tenny's treatment of affectedness is purely aspect-based and that affectedness in her approach is a concept that does not necessarily involve a change that the argument undergoes.

At this point in the discussion, it should be pointed out that a direct object position itself is not a guarantee that the path is totally included in the motion, i.e. that the motion event is telic. I take up this question below, in section 3.2. That the path is not affected can be verified by its failure to pass the classic diagnostic question of the *What happened to X* type (cf. e.g. Cruse 1973, Jackendoff 1990, Rappaport Hovav and Levin 2001):

- (28) *What happened to the lake is John swam it.
- (29) *What happened to the mountain is John climbed it.
- (30) *What happened to the fence is John jumped it.

As Rappaport Hovav and Levin (2001) observe, the *What happened* question is a diagnostic test for singling out force recipients, i.e. participants that are subject to transmission of force.

The potentially holistic status of the path in direct object alternations can be captured from a different, ontological perspective. The holistic nature of the path is also underlain

by the fact that the paths in question (*the lake, the mountain, the fence*) are not created in the course of the motion. They are entities (*qua* places) whose physical boundaries mark the boundaries (i.e. the extent) of the motion. Consider the following situation:

(31) John walked to the store.

Here, the path that John traverses does not exist independently of his movement. That is, the path in this motion event is not an entity (*qua* a place) that exists in space (and as such can be pointed at) but is created in the course of the movement. In other words, if the motion event did not occur, this path would not be existent. In John's walking to the store, the initial point of the path is marked by the beginning of John's movement and its end-point is marked by the end of his movement (put in spatial terms, the end-point of the movement is determined by the position of the store). In this sense, then, John "creates his way" to the store, as Goldberg (1995) puts it. The upshot is that this type of motion event (that which involves creation of the path) cannot be rendered by means of a transitive construction (one cannot say **John walked the store* meaning "John walked to the store"). In this type of motion situation, telicity (the total traversal of the path) is dependent on the type of preposition – cf. the difference between the telic *John walked to the store* and the atelic *John walked towards the store* (the path phrase with the preposition *towards* designates a mere spatial orientation of the movement).

3.2 Unbounded Paths

The paths in the following examples are of a different type than those in the preceding section; cf.:

(32) John walked the corridor.

(33) John walked the streets of London.

The paths in these motion situations are not bounded, i.e. the spatial boundaries of the place (*qua* a path) do not mark the temporal boundary of a given motion. Owing to event-object homomorphism (Krifka 1998), the unboundedness of the path is correlated with the unboundedness of the motion. That is, the motion situations in question are atelic, as shown by the classic diagnostic test with temporal adverbials and with the phrase '*V X halfway*' (cf. Tenny 1994):

(34) John walked the corridor for ten minutes (/the streets of London for five hours).

(35) *John walked the corridor in ten minutes (/the streets of London in five hours).

(36) *John walked the corridor halfway (/the streets of London halfway).

Now, a question arises, namely, why these motion events are atelic. The reason most probably lies in the fact that the omission of the preposition effects the backgrounding of the directionality of the motion. This certainly does not mean that such a construal deprives the movement of its one-dimensionality (on one-dimensionality of movement see Jackendoff 1992, 1996). The backgrounding of the directionality of the motion means that the

movement is presented as a mode of the mover's dynamic existence which takes the form of a continuous change of the entity's location. Related to the (relatively) suppressed directionality of the movement is the fact that the directionality component in the semantics of the path is, to a certain extent, backgrounded too. Since a path is a one-dimensional piece of space that has a direction (Jackendoff 1996), and since directionality may be seen as having the capacity to convert a static piece of space into a path (Kudrnáčová 2008), the (relative) suppression of a directional dimension leads to the foregrounding of the path's spatial component. The result, then, is that the path functions as a spatial setting of the mover's movement rather than a strictly unidirectional axis of the movement (cf. e.g. *John wandered the streets of London*, which may serve as a clear example of the relative suppression of the path's directionality).

However, what remains to be answered is what deprives the path in prepositionless structures like 'walking the corridor (/the streets)' of the potential to be totally included in the motion, i.e. to acquire the holistic status. This question gains in importance in view of the fact that both the unbounded paths in examples 32 and 33 (*the corridor, the streets of London*) and the bounded paths in examples 20-22 (*the lake, the mountain, the fence*) belong to the category of "locative objects" (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 749).³ It may be that, as Taylor (1995) suggests, the inability of the path to appear in prepositionless structures is simply a matter of an idiomatic property of a verb. This question thus awaits further investigation.

4. Conclusion

The discussion has attempted to demonstrate that causally affected direct object participants in transitive constructions encoding self-agentive locomotion display the feature 'holistic (total) affectedness'. The constellation of features 'causal affectedness + total object inclusion', characterizing these participants, must appear in its full form, i.e. none of the components can be missing. Although causality and affectedness may seem to be the most natural (because they are conceptually related) correlates and, as such, may seem to be the core features of a causative locomotion situation, the fact is that total object inclusion is not appended to the situation as a mere potentially realizable component. Its obligatory status conceptually follows from the inherently transitive nature of causation, involving transmission of causal force to the direct object participant and the ensuing holistic coverage of this participant (in other words, all aspects of the caused event must be subject to causal force).

In actual fact, the holistic coverage of an affected participant may be captured from a more general perspective: an affected participant can only be subject to causal force if all the aspects of the caused event are covered by the causing event, i.e. if the causing event and the caused event display a total overlap.

The discussion has also demonstrated that in transitive constructions encoding locomotion events in which the direct object position is taken up by a path, i.e. a participant that is not causally affected by the movement, the holistic status of the path is determined by its boundedness, which naturally correlates with the telicity of the situation. That is, if the

path is totally included in the motion, the motion is telic. By contrast, if the path is not totally included in the motion, the motion event is atelic. That is, in the latter type of situation, the feature ‘total object inclusion’ is naturally missing.

Notes

¹ As was first pointed out by Simpson (1983), resultative phrases can only be predicated of direct objects. The reflexive (ex. 8 and 10) thus fulfils “the syntactic need for the resultative phrase to be predicated of an object” (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1992: 255).

² Hopper and Thompson (1980: 252–253) take affectedness as “the degree to which an action is transferred to a patient”. In their multifactorial account of transitivity, the degree of affectedness of the direct object participant and the telicity of the event are two of the ten parameters which they propose as determinants of the degree of transitivity of an event.

³ Measure phrases (*a mile* in ex. 23) may also be classed along with them because they represent, according to Quirk et al. (1985: 749), a related category. Nevertheless, the fact is that, as noted above, measure phrases (“phrases of extent” in Quirk et al.’s terminology) cannot appear in prepositional phrases, which marks them as a separate category.

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Book Reviews

Benjamin Kohlmann

Committed Styles. Modernism, Politics, and Left-Wing Literature in the 1930s

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014

Kohlmann's subtle and extremely informative study of the literature of the 1930s addresses the uses to which literature was put, encompassing the troubled neutrality of William Empson, attempts to unite the demands of artistic innovation and political revolution among the Surrealists and members of the Mass-Observation movement, and artistic commitment to the cause of communism as exemplified by Edward Upward. While critics in the past have tended to focus on the extent to which the literature of the period took sides, Kohlmann takes a more nuanced view as he highlights its "deep-seated anxieties" and "political articulacy" (5).

Much of the left-wing literature is complex, necessitating a re-thinking of the terms on which criticism of the period should be premised. What does the term "the politics of writing" mean? asks Kohlmann. Unravelling its ambiguity by focusing on the notion of artistic autonomy is one of the major concerns of *Committed Styles*. Kohlmann identifies a tension between artistic autonomy and historical self-consciousness which, he demonstrates, rather than being resolved resurfaces in the works he discusses. The aim of Kohlmann's study is "to illustrate the variety of politicized writing during the 1930s and, in doing so, to reopen some key debates regarding the politics of writing during that decade" (13). Kohlmann highlights the various polarized political positions within the literary field and demonstrates the need for left-wing writers to come to terms with the artistic tensions and contradictions of the period.

In the first chapter Kohlmann looks backwards as he discusses I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot and modernist poetry and their contributions to the Cambridge magazine *Experiment*. This chapter forms a basis for all subsequent discussions because it shows how Richards influenced the young generation of thirties writers. Kohlmann convincingly demonstrates that *Experiment* questions literature's contextual ties; its adherence to a modernist paradigm of writing came to be associated with an a-historical outlook, thereby blurring the conventional literary-historical boundary between the modernist 1920s and the political 1930s. Writers such as William Empson were inspired by *Experiment* to search for a "type of critical impartiality and political neutrality that would be capable of registering the decade's (1930s) political pressures (52). The writers discussed in *Committed Styles* did not merely follow modernism but wrote against it.

The four chapters on Empson, Surrealism, Mass Observation and Edward Upward focus on four keywords: honesty, revolution, fact and dream because these mirror the indeterminacies of the decade's political and artistic commitments. They bring together different ways of seeing culture and society and feature not only in the writers' literary works but also in their essays, treatises, reviews, diaries and letters, providing a vocabulary with which to negotiate conflicts. They also acted as an important stimulus for their writing.

Chapter five, the final chapter, is a worthy conclusion to Kohlmann's study. Based on a collection of essays that Kohlmann edited in 2014, it argues that Upward and other politically committed writers have been largely ignored due to an anti-1930s bias which emerged in the 1940s and 1950s and which continues to influence critical orthodoxy to this day. In his discussion of Upward's poems, letters, Montmere stories (co-authored with Christopher Isherwood) and his fiction and criticism from the 1930s, Kohlmann demonstrates that Upward, an ardent communist, was unable to find a style that mirrored his ideological certainty. Wavering between fantasy and prophecy, Upward's works "indicate the pervasiveness of the search for a literary style that would be capable of conveying the seriousness of political commitment, even when this preoccupation with the right kind of poetic voice could look like a holdover from an earlier, bourgeois era" (17). Kohlmann concludes that Upward was caught between his commitment to "historical particularity" and his desire to find "the vaster subtext of historical development", which created tonal ambiguities that indicate his thorough immersion in "the profoundly conflicted political commitments" of the decade (196).

All the writers discussed in *Committed Styles* – T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, William Empson, David Gascoyne, Charles Madge, Humphrey Jennings and Edward Upward – were to a greater or lesser extent subject to diverse and apparently conflicting impulses: "the wary anticipation of poetic disappointment and the refusal to settle into a kind of comfortable failure" (200). Their concerns about the politics of writing in the 1930s are indeed reflected in the current debates about the relationship between political commitment and literature.

Committed Styles is a scrupulously researched study of a period that seems both remote and close. Meticulously annotated and with an extensive bibliography, Kohlmann's study is invaluable for scholars of 1930s literature interested in the relationship between literary production, critical reflection and political activism. Each chapter is richly historicised and elegantly written. *Committed Styles* is a worthy contribution to the Oxford English monographs series and a fine complement to Kirsty Martin's *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy. Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence* (Oxford English Monographs, 2013).

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Kristianstad University, Sweden

Martin Adam

Presentation Sentences (Syntax, Semantics and FSP)

Brno: Masaryk University, 2013

Martin Adam has been involved in the field of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) since the start of his academic and research career. He applies the Brno concept of FSP theory, drawing primarily on the approach developed by his teacher Jan Firbas. Adam has focused on the realization of FSP on the level of macrofields, with special attention paid

to religious texts. In recent years he has dedicated his research to the issue of Firbasian presentation scales, and he has published many studies on the topic. The monograph – with the simple but apt title *Presentation Sentences* – represents the most complex study on the issue of presentation scales published so far.

As mentioned above, this monograph draws on Adam's numerous studies of Firbasian presentation scales; it further develops and thoroughly elaborates the concept not only by expanding the range of texts analyzed (with respect to size as well as text types), but also, and most importantly, by considering various phenomena which help other FSP researchers view the concept of dynamic semantic scales from a more complex and precise perspective. He contributes to the body of knowledge on this issue not only by presenting a thorough picture of FSP, but also by viewing FSP via other more or less related approaches to information structure, such as the Prague concept of topic-focus articulation, Chafe's activation, or other linguistic approaches represented by e.g. Halliday or Quirk and Greenbaum. Since the type of a semantic scale is often determined by the verb it includes, Adam also considers a large number of approaches to the semantic and syntactic characteristics of a verbal construction, subsequently enabling him to select his own approach, suitable for an analysis based on FSP.

The main analytical parts of the monograph are based on the classification of Pr-sentences and the syntactic-semantic analysis of the Pr-verbs, the latter attracting the most attention. Nevertheless, the first topic, i.e. the classification of Pr-sentences, also offers several interesting conclusions. Adam proves that there may be significant differences in this regard between two different text types. The study reveals that the English narrative texts (in accordance with previous studies) prefer the end-focus of rhematic elements. This is an important notion, as linguists often emphasize the grammatically fixed word order in English against the functional (theme-rheme sequence) word order in Czech. Nevertheless, it should be understood that although it plays a grammatical role, the English word order also mostly follows the theme-rheme sequence (the SVO pattern generally follows the interpretative arrangement of the quality scale, which occurs in approximately 90 % of all distributional fields). It has generally been thought that the only exception to this theme-rheme sequence are presentation scale structures, although the existential construction *there+to be* also serve to shift the subject into the final position. Nonetheless, whereas Adam proved the existence of end-focus in narrative texts (meaning in presentation sentences), the religious texts demonstrate different tendencies. Mostly they prefer the rhematic subject in preverbal position, which, as Adam notes, is most probably due to the specificities arising from the literary style and the ideological character of the texts under scrutiny.

The second analytical part of the monograph deals with the verb, especially with respect to its ability to perform the function of the presentation (i.e. its ability to express the notion of existence or appearance of a rhematic subject on the scene). It has been proved that a verb performs a crucial role in the formation of a perspective; nevertheless, the verb's static (lexical) semantics are versatile enough to perform both quality and presentation functions if the dynamic semantics are taken into consideration. Adam presents the syntactic-semantic conditions under which the verbs are able to implicitly perform the function of presentation. To prove the scope of potentiality, he introduces the verbs

expressing presentation against the background of those expressing quality. The study then offers a thorough classification of the semantic classes of the verbs of presentation in the texts under investigation, and the author comments on their capacity to express existence/appearance either explicitly or with sufficient implicitness and on the potential disposition of individual types of presentation sentences to express existence/appearance on the scene. Adam demonstrates that the most usual verbs with the explicit capacity to express existence/appearance are those of appearance, motion and existence. Those which have an implicit capacity to express existence/appearance include those of emission or of animal sounds. Surprisingly, it appears that the verbs expressing existence/appearance explicitly form a minority; in fact, the verbs expressing existence/appearance implicitly slightly prevail. What seems to stand at the root of the verbs' ability to perform the function of presentation is the so-called subject-verb semantic affinity – not as a necessary condition but as a key factor that enables the non-presentation verb to perform the function of presentation.

There is no doubt that this study makes a significant contribution to the field of functional sentence theory since it offers a more complex picture of the ability of verbs to perform a presentation role than any other studies to date. Nevertheless, it leaves enough space for further investigation of the individual issues and poses several questions for further discussion. Although the topic may appear to interest mainly experts in FSP, I believe that it has plenty to offer also to linguists or students who are interested not only in FSP but also in the general syntactic/semantic characteristics of the verb as such. To conclude on a more personal note, I greatly appreciate the fact that we can now draw insights from another complex study on the issues of FSP – a study which deals with matters that have so far been touched upon only marginally, and which thus shines light on some of the more obscure corners of FSP theory and contributes another valuable piece to the mosaic of our knowledge.

Ivana Řezníčková
University of Ostrava

News, Announcements

We have received an article by our former colleague, Fulbright teacher Miriam Gogol in which she writes about her teaching experience at the University of Ostrava from her American perspective. Although many things have changed since her stay in Ostrava in 1999, we believe that this article will be still of interest of our readers.

Teaching American Literature in Post-Velvet Ostrava: The Challenge of Dialogue

Miriam Gogol

Mercy College, New York

Abstract

I had the privilege of teaching American literature at the University of Ostrava as a Senior Fulbright Scholar in 1999. To acknowledge the subjectivities surrounding teaching in a foreign culture, I offer my observations in the first person. As a feminist scholar, I provide anecdotal insights on the values of my students and cultural differences in dialogic engagement of contemporary American literature. I comment on literary pedagogy in a formerly Communist nation during the transitioning period of the late 20th century and on the nature of interpretation and introspection in literary analysis across national and cultural borders.

Keywords: American literature, dialogic analysis, feminist theory, cross-cultural pedagogy, psychoanalytic literary theory, post-Communist pedagogy

This article is based on a presentation made by the author at Columbia University in New York City on April 18, 2013 entitled “The Czech Republic and Education: A Comparative Study of American Literature Taught in the Czech Republic and in the United States.”

An American Feminist in Ostrava, 1999

I will focus on my teaching experiences with the senior students in the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Ostrava, located on Reální Street in Ostrava. As a woman — a mature woman at that—it was a challenge navigating a foreign culture while living alone in Ostrava. I lived there among the Romani, an ethnic group best

known in the English-speaking world by the pejorative exonym *Gypsies*. I did not speak Czech, but found ways to communicate through the vibrant intellectual life around me — the ubiquitous local theater productions, frequent lectures, the love of the Czech people for books (very little television watching as compared to the United States!). The culture of Ostrava and its university opened my mind and changed my life; this was the privilege of a new perspective.

My Students and “Working Women”

The highlight of my experience in Ostrava and what grounded me there was teaching. I taught seniors in a multi-genre American literature course entitled “Working Women in the United States.” The course included essays by third-wave feminists (a term coined by American feminist Rebecca Walker; in an article in *Ms. Magazine* entitled “Becoming the Third Wave”).¹ The course included memoirs from both famous and unrecognized women such as Anzia Yezierska and Maxine Hong Kingston, to fiction by and about working women such as Rebecca Harding Davis, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Willa Cather.

The “Working Women” class was well attended. The students were predominantly women and at first uncomfortable about extensively participating in classroom discussion. They strongly desired information from me, especially facts about working women in the United States, but almost protested when I asked them to be dialogic, after Mikhail Bakhtin’s use of the term, to mean an active engagement of readers/speakers with the text and other texts.² They were also reticent about self-identifying in relating to their reading.

In general, my students seemed reluctant to engage in a comparative interpretation or introspection about this literature and unwilling to relate it to their own experience; they did not wish to reflect upon or reveal aspects of their own lives in class evoked by their reading.³ Whether this reluctance was a sort of privacy, or a devaluing of their personal experience, or a vestige of a totalitarian education system or antiquated one-way system of education (teacher talks and students listen), I could not be fully certain. Yet, there was an intense curiosity about the daily lives of American “working women” — what their work hours were like, their salaries, their rights, their work titles, and their relationships in the home.

Just the Facts, Please: Feminism and Student Positivism

Although they were advanced students in literature and, ostensibly, teachers/scholars to be immersed in theory, my students were mainly interested in, if not obsessed with, facts. The overwhelming majority of students preferred the essay genre to fiction. Nonfiction was the hands-down preference of these readers, who wanted real-world events and information, and not fictive or supposed texts.

After beginning the course with several works of fiction, I introduced essays on female sexuality. These included Anne Koedt’s essay, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm.” I also taught essays on women’s rights to equal pay from Emma Goldman and others. These essays were at the top of their lists of preferred topics. Brushing aside the works of fiction, my students exclaimed, “We should have read these (the essays) *first!*”

Looking at this preference for “just the facts,” like the detective on *Dragnet*, I noticed a rejection in my class of introspection and intuitiveness in favor of empiricism. My students were largely positivists in their approach to literature. They preferred concrete and “real” nonfiction essays to fiction, perhaps seeing the former as more authoritative. They sought empirical evidence for conclusions about women’s lives, and seemed to distrust the personal and intuitive readings called for by contemporary fiction. Perhaps this was a relic of a positivist and authoritarian tradition of literary pedagogy under Communism; perhaps this was the practical nature of students brought up in a formerly industrial city that had known economic crisis and revolution, even a nonviolent one, in their young lives.⁴

Analyze This: Avoiding Psychotherapy and Introspection

As students in literature at the turn of the twenty-first century, I wanted to acquaint my students with contemporary psychoanalytic theory as it pertained to the interpretation of literature. My students were largely innocent of all acquaintance with psychoanalysis either personally or in literary analysis. Psychoanalysis itself, outside of Prague, seemed to be a largely unpracticed science in the Czech Republic. “Therapy,” as we generically call it, that is, regular visits with psychiatrists, psychologists, or social workers, was virtually unheard of at the time, even in Prague. This was possibly because what therapy was available was very expensive.

Students who had psychological issues, problems, or concerns, sometimes (but not often) had access at their high schools and universities to guidance counselors who might have offered some psychological advisement. My Ostrava students said that therapy for the average person was not a consideration. Basically, the method of dealing with issues, if extremely serious, was institutionalization or if not so serious, not to intervene in any way at all.

Here again, in this teaching instance, was the absence of the dialogic, of the two-way discussion of psychoanalysis as it pertained to literature as well as to daily life. The introspection and self-examination characteristic of psychoanalysis was not part of the experience of these Czech students, who could not bring its interactive and intuitive methods to our reading. This would be a stumbling block in my student’s appreciation of American literature, so deeply steeped in psychoanalytic precepts, and would deprive them of an important theoretical tool with which to analyze influence on the authors and the themes and characterizations in our literature.

The Velvet Revolution and the American Canon in Ostrava

I came to Ostrava some ten years after one of the most significant events in the Czech Republic’s history, the Velvet Revolution. It is significant to a teacher that this period of upheaval and transition that ended Communism and Soviet dominance in Czechoslovakia was student-led. We who study literature as our profession admire the Czech’s choice of a literary figure for its first president, Vaclav Havel.

The flowering of Czech literature after the Velvet Revolution and its plurality and freedom in form and theme was demonstrated by writers such as *Jan Křesadlo*, *Ivan Blatný*, *Petr Šabach*, *Ivan Martin Jirous*, *Jáchym Topol*, and *Miloš Urban*. By contrast, the “canon”

of American literature still taught at Ostrava University seemed anachronistic to me. Most authors read were white male authors pre-dating the Velvet Revolution.

At the University of Ostrava, American authors who wrote about Communism and Communist countries, such as Theodore Dreiser, were read in the classroom. Other authors included the American naturalists, such as Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Hamlin Garland, authors who espoused the use of empiricism in fiction and practiced a documentarian and journalistic approach to literature. This is the fiction that was closest to the genre of essay (“just the facts”) preferred by my students. Czech readers had been steeped in this kind of American fiction under communism.

On the undergraduate college level at Ostrava University, even at the turn of the twenty-first century, the most popular American authors continued to be Ernest Hemingway, Edgar Allan Poe, John Steinbeck, Mark Twain and Jack Kerouac (the students were intrigued by the “Beat Generation.”)⁵

The efflorescence of Czech literature after the Velvet Revolution in the last decade of the twentieth century was not matched by modern and pluralistic American voices in my teaching experience. This “white male” and older literature was still how my students primarily engaged with American writing. There was a keen interest in a positivist approach to literature and once again, a rejection of introspective, intuitive, and most notably, *female* voices.

Interpretation and the Absence of the Dialogic

As a professor in a graduate faculty of literature, I take for granted the role of interpretation in the study of literature. However, in my Ostrava experience, the interpretation of literature did not play a major role in the study of English and American literature. To me, one of the most fascinating aspects of teaching in Central Europe was the role that literature plays in its cultures. However, I found that even for students with a B.A. in American and English Studies in Ostrava at the time, the study of literature, paradoxically, did not play a major role. Practical languages, linguistics, theoretics, phonetics, and phonology were the leading courses of study during my time there.

At the University of Ostrava in 1999, literature offerings involved two survey courses and an introductory course to literature. In the high schools, English was taught primarily as a language, not as literature. Based on the report of my students, literature courses in the high schools and the technical schools taught facts about writers, that is, the positivist approach was used. Literature was not used to interpret texts.

One of the areas my Czech students most appreciated was the writing by American women—they gravitated toward ethnic writers who explore encounters with the “other”: Kate Chopin (*The Awakening*), Maxine Hong Kingston (*The Woman Warrior*), Amy Tan (*The Joy Luck Club*), and Jamaica Kincaid (*Annie John*). Perhaps this interest among future academics and writers counterweighed the tendencies I saw in 1999 toward literary positivism in the study of American literature and moved it toward an interpretative, dialogic, and holistic approach.

In Conclusion: My Dialogue with Ostrava

Engaging in dialogue with the text and the other is the task of the reader and critic, and especially that of the instructor. As I stated at the outset, I do not claim to be an omniscient narrator, but wished to share perceptions of how American literature was perceived and understood in an important Czech cultural center at a pivotal point in its history.

My experience in the Czech Republic unearthed a new sense of being in me. I lived with a people who did not necessarily practice religion but were deeply spiritual; who did not always have an abundance of money, but did not embrace or value a materialistic culture; a people who could be hard to get to know but once known, embraced you for life. I was pleased to bring feminist voices to readers and scholars who might otherwise associate American literature only with a white male “canon.” And I was honored to offer new perspectives besides positivistic literary analysis to my students. I will forever cherish my dialogue with them.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

¹ Walker stated, “I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the third-wave.”

² Mikhail Bakhtin’s term *dialogic* appears in his work of literary theory, *The Dialogic Imagination*. Bakhtin contrasts the dialogic and the *monologic* work of literature. The dialogic work engages other works of literature and other authors continuously and is constantly informed by them beyond mere citation and refutation. I sought to engage my students in this process using their own experience and reading as a basis of literary analysis in our class

³ This reluctance toward comparative analysis and the intertextuality of Bakhtin’s dialogic may have been unique to the students I encountered. It did seem characteristic of the students I taught as a whole.

⁴ Nonfiction might be more accessible than idiomatic and metaphorical fiction to an English-as-a-second language reader, which might explain this preference. However, this trend toward a positivistic approach, seeking facts and data rather than delving deeply into (possibly) more challenging personal themes did obtain throughout my teaching. Identification with the literature and a personal, introspective approach to it took second place to a direct reading of content, as in the nonfiction work I taught.

⁵ This ranking is based on my questioning of my students and other Ostrava faculty.

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Libuše Dušková's Birthday: Four Score Years and Five

Reflecting on someone's achievements on the occasion of their birthday is a task that is normally suitable for somebody who is (at least professionally) senior to the person whose birthday is being celebrated. From this point of view the following lines are somewhat inappropriate, because they were written by a person who not only is two score years Libuše Dušková's junior, but who, with regard to the depth and breadth of the knowledge she has acquired during her life-long study of the English language, can at best accord himself again the status of a university student. Moreover, the fact that the present author has made a marginal contribution to the topic of information structure in language does not help either, even though the idea was that it would be an advantage given Libuše Dušková's interest in information structure during the last ten years. For it is Libuše Dušková who truly sets research standards even in this area, the field of information structure in language or Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) – despite the fact that this constitutes only a fraction of her research interests. This can be clearly evidenced by the respective chapters in her well-known and so far unrivalled comprehensive and contrastively oriented grammar of the English language, which has been freely available online at emsa.ff.cuni.cz since 2009. Her forthcoming monograph titled *From Syntax to Text: The Janus Face of Functional Sentence Perspective*, a collection of her most important papers dealing with FSP, only serves to offer additional proof.

Realizing the sheer impossibility of the task of giving an informed overview of Libuše Dušková's countless in-depth contributions to the study of the English language, I will restrict the scope of the present review only to the topic of information structure, in order to achieve at least partial success in this task. Due to this limitation I kindly refer readers who are keen to learn more about Libuše Dušková's academic work to already existing biographies written by her closest colleagues, available for example in *Linguistica Pragmensia* (2/2000, 1/2005), and especially the 'Afterword' to her *Studies in the English Language* (1999). By adopting this strategy I will only hope that this very short overview will be looked upon kindly by those who have had the fortune to learn from or to collaborate with Libuše Dušková.

The title of her latest monograph (forthcoming in 2015) relating syntax to text via FSP says almost everything, and with sufficient clarity: the investigation of language phenomena in general, and FSP specifically, always constitutes a complex and not infrequently a deceptive process involving several levels in the hierarchy of the structure of language, not just the levels of morphology and syntax – levels in which Libuše Dušková nevertheless revels and excels. We can observe her distinctive approach to the study of language as early as in 1971, the year in which she wrote arguably her first major paper exploring the interaction of syntax and FSP, 'On some functional and stylistic aspects of the passive in present-day English'. One could easily fail to notice this paper in her voluminous bibliography, as it is one of her earliest contributions to the study of syntax and FSP, but

make no mistake here. Judged by the items included in the lists of references in major academic grammars of English, this study actually represents one of her most important contributions, as it is featured in both Quirk et al.'s *CGEL* (1985) and Biber et al.'s *LGSWE* (1999). Furthermore, in the case of *LGSWE* this study is one of only two papers written by a Czech linguist that were included in the grammar, the other one also being a paper written by her. And it is no surprise that the two papers are listed there under the heading 'Corpus-informed studies of specific areas of present-day English grammar', since not only these two papers but in fact almost all studies by Libuše Dušková draw their theoretical conclusions from a manual but uncompromisingly rigorous corpus-based analysis of language. This methodology is consistently applied by her even in her investigations of the FSP phenomena in language.

The topic of FSP is a common denominator for the 1971 paper, her forthcoming monograph, and almost fifty papers published in the intervening years. The FSP approach to the study of information structure in language, which is also sometimes referred to as the Brno approach to FSP, was developed mainly by Jan Firbas on the foundations laid by Vilém Mathesius; its main principles, as is already widely known, are summed up in Firbas's seminal treatise *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication* (1992) – a work that has over the years acquired a canonical status within the FSP community. Leaving humility aside, today it is Libuše Dušková who forms the very core of this community. She has been a faithful caretaker of FSP for more than forty years, not only in her papers and conference talks, but also in her role as a thesis supervisor and thesis reviewer at any academic level imaginable: graduate, postgraduate, doctorate, and postdoctorate. For Libuše Dušková, however, the process of pushing further the dynamics of FSP research and language research in general has always been connected – as a matter of course – with learning from, and applying the results of, her own students, making her a living embodiment of "I'm not a teacher: only a fellow-traveller of whom you asked the way. I pointed ahead – ahead of myself as well as you." (G. B. Shaw). A chapter titled 'Constancy of syntactic function across languages' and published in *Language and Function: To the Memory of Jan Firbas* (2003) is an example *par excellence* of this. This chapter could also be considered a pilot paper, with zero negative connotation intended, for a whole series of papers on syntactic constancy, beginning in 2003 and forming a large part of her forthcoming monograph.

As has already been mentioned above, Libuše Dušková's range of interests spans a number of areas connected with the study of linguistic structure and linguistic function, and her numerous contributions to the study of FSP reflect this. Thus, while many of us junior scholars may still struggle to understand the workings of FSP at the sentential (clausal) level, Libuše Dušková easily moves to both the higher and the lower levels, fruitfully extending research pioneered by two other major names in the Czech Firbasian tradition of FSP research: František Daneš and Aleš Svoboda. It should therefore come as no surprise that anyone wishing to thoroughly explore aspects of thematic progressions related to register variation will have to seek in reference lists and online databases for entries beginning with Dušková, L. To my knowledge, however, she is the only scholar to have thoroughly explored functional perspective at the subclausal level, an intricate

area of research inspired by Aleš Svoboda's 1980s papers and especially his *Chapters in Functional Syntax* – published so far only in Czech as *Kapitoly z funkční syntaxe* (1989).

It is virtually impossible to express in two or three pages how significant the work of Libuše Dušková has been for the study of English and FSP especially. I nevertheless hope that at least my fellow 'aktuální členisté', borrowing a phrase coined by Libuše Dušková,¹ will fully support the following concluding statement and request. In 2015 we celebrate not one, but two important events: Libuše Dušková's birthday and the publication of a third representative Czech monograph working within the Firbasian approach to functional syntax. With respect to this achievement by Libuše Dušková, I kindly urge everyone in the field of English and general linguistics to abandon forever the attribute 'Brno' in the term 'the Brno approach to FSP' in favour of an FSP-neutral (unmarked) attribute 'Firbasian'.

Note

¹ I must admit that history repeats itself here, because it seems rather difficult to find a convenient English equivalent for the Czech phrase 'aktuální členisté'. Perhaps something like 'FSPers' could be used.

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A Great Loss in the Field of American Studies

Last year on 9 December, Sacvan Bercovitch, one of the most distinguished and respected American literary critics, died at the age of 81. He was born in 1933 into a family of Ukrainian Jewish immigrants in Montreal. After his studies at Sir George Williams College in Quebec and Claremont Graduate School in California, he taught American literature and culture at Brandeis University, the University of California, San Diego, Princeton and Columbia University, before finishing his dazzling academic career at Harvard University. In his research he focused on the colonial period of American literature and the period of the American Renaissance, in which he explored the works of such canonical authors as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Herman Melville. However, his scope was much wider than this, including another American writer of the 19th century, Mark Twain (and his classic work *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in particular), as well as English literature (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Shakespeare, Milton) and even authors from non-English speaking countries (Dostoyevsky and Thomas Mann). Bercovitch's origins led him to take a keen interest in Jewish literature and inspired him to translate works by some Yiddish writers from Eastern Europe (e.g. Itzik Manger and Sholom Aleichem).

Sacvan Bercovitch was the author of highly valued books of literary criticism that always shed an innovative, unconventional and at times provocative light on significant works of American fiction. His work included a seminal study of the colonial period of American literature, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975), and *The American Jeremiad* (1978). In 1991 he published *The Office of the "Scarlet Letter,"* a thorough study of Hawthorne's best-known novel. This book was awarded the prestigious James Russell Lowell Prize of the Modern Languages Association for the best scholarly book in 1992.

Another important facet of Bercovitch's work was his editing and organizational activity. He became the General Editor of the eight-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature*, a source that is widely used not only at American universities but also outside the United States, including universities in the Czech Republic. From 1982 to 1984 he was the President of the American Studies Association, and during his life he was also active in a number of other organizations linked with American studies. He was a member of the editorial boards of numerous important scholarly journals such as *American Literature*,

Early American Literature and *20th Century Literature*. In an advisory role, he helped to shape the edition of a wide-ranging collection of American writings published by the Library of America. Bercovitch was an excellent teacher, very popular among his students,



Sacvan Bercovitch

and so he was invited to many universities all over the world. He taught in Israel, Russia, Japan, China, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Portugal, Italy, Hungary and other countries.

Twelve years ago, in 2003, Sacvan Bercovitch visited the University of Ostrava as a Fulbright Senior Specialist and delivered two unforgettable lectures on American literature. This visit was preceded by my personal experience of hearing his fascinating lecture entitled “What Is Funny about Huckleberry Finn” at the University of California, Berkeley, in 2000. Since I was fascinated by his brave interpretative approach to Twain’s novel, I decided to invite Bercovitch to the Czech Republic, though first I was quite skeptical about the success of my attempt. Yet eventually, after nearly a year of mutual correspondence and preparations for his visit, thanks to the financial support of the Fulbright Commission in Washington, D.C., Sacvan Bercovitch came to this country and lectured at four Czech universities: the University of Ostrava, Charles University in Prague, Masaryk University in Brno and Palacký University in Olomouc. At the

University of Ostrava he delivered two lectures – “The Myth of America” and a more specific lecture entitled “Democratic Aesthetics: Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*.”

Sacvan Bercovitch was an extraordinarily charismatic person and a hugely knowledgeable scholar, whose death is a great loss not only for the academic public.

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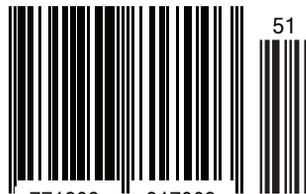
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