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Voyages

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VOYAGES

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Introduction: Voyages

EMILY DI DODO AND RACHEL HAYES

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[...] Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.¹

Li miei compagni fec' io sì aguti,
con questa orazion picciola, al cammino,
che a pena poscia li avrei ritenuti [...]¹

(Inferno XXVI.118–23)

Ulysses's invocation to his companions before their fateful journey towards a 'montagna bruna' (XXVI.133),² which unbeknownst to him was Mount Purgatory, provides a perfect encapsulation of the desire for knowledge through literature as a voyage, both physical and intellectual. Though their journey ultimately fails, as they are shipwrecked in a storm before reaching their destination, the sentiment expressed by Ulysses in these lines has inspired a wealth of literary production, precisely because of the emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge (and virtue), which is at the core of any creative endeavour. Indeed, it has been widely explored how the act of writing the *Commedia* is in and of itself a Ulyssean undertaking, both because of the unprecedented nature of the poem which portends to describe the realms of the afterlife, and because of its transgressive aspect in which Dante-poet bestows authority onto himself (as pilgrim) to gain a universal understanding of human existence, which would normally be reserved for the Divine.³ Where Ulysses's attempt is cut short, Dante (both as poet and as pilgrim) succeeds.

¹ "Consider ye the seed from which ye sprang; / Ye were not made to live like unto brutes, / But for pursuit of virtue and of knowledge." / So eager did I render my companions, / With this brief exhortation, for the voyage, / That then I hardly could have held them back'. Italian text taken from Dante Alighieri, *La commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67). English translations taken from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, 3 vols (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1897). Both accessed via *Dante Lab: Next Generation Reader* <<http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu>> [accessed 15 September 2023].

² 'a mountain dim'.

³ See Teodolinda Barolini, *La Commedia senza Dio*, trans. by Roberta Antognini (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013), pp. 81–87.

William Blake's interpretation of *Inferno* XXVI on the cover of this volume⁴ depicts Ulysses, trapped in a twin flame with Diomedes, as he recounts his final voyage to Dante-pilgrim, who is undertaking his own Ulyssean journey through the realms of the afterlife alongside Virgil, his moral-intellectual guide and literary model.⁵ It is worth exploring the trajectory of Ulysses's words from the *Odyssey* to Blake's painting:⁶ the words would have supposedly been uttered by Odysseus in Doric, then relayed in the Homeric epic composed between 7th-8th centuries BCE, translated into Latin during the Roman Republic, repeated to Dante-pilgrim during Holy Week in 1300 CE after the transmutation of Ulysses/Odysseus's spirit into a flame, recounted by Dante-poet some years later (translating his words into Florentine dialect), to be read and transposed into a painted image by Blake five centuries later. If we consider the relevant texts as the works of fiction they are, the intertextual progression is more fascinating still, as Dante's reinterpretation of this character is not based on Homer's text, nor on the early Latin translations, but on 'a pastiche of classical Latin sources — especially Virgil, Statius, Ovid, Horace, Cicero, and Seneca', as in Dante's time Homer's poems were not available to Western readers.⁷ Literature, or knowledge, is thus characterised by a necessary mutability and voyage across time, space, language, perspectives and media.

This issue of *Working Papers in the Humanities*, then, explores this liminal space, considering applications and intersections of travel across literature, and how literature itself travels and is transformed across and through history. Last year's issue of *WPH*, 'On Forgetting', traversed realms, states of consciousness, time, space, and materiality with the ultimate aim of reaching an understanding of the role and function of forgetting across literature, literary scholarship and history. Now it is necessary to shift the gaze away from the product and onto the process by which literature not only is created but how it travels. Though confined to ink on paper, a text is never static. Whether before or after it is put into writing, any literary work moves through an expanse of space, time, versions, media, ideas, and identities. This issue of *WPH* thus aims to better understand how a literary work (alongside its author and its audience) embodies or recounts the journey from conception to reception, and beyond.

Taking travel writing and its subsequent reception and transmission as a starting point, this volume begins with two travel accounts. The first is that of Francisco Álvares, a Portuguese chaplain who accompanied a Portuguese embassy to the Christian exploration of Ethiopia between 1520 and 1526. One of the five Italian rearrangements of Álvares's travel account provides the focus

⁴ William Blake, *Ulysses and Diomed Swathed in the Same Flame*, 1824–27, pen and ink and watercolours over pencil on paper, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

⁵ However, unlike Ulysses, Dante's journey is divinely sanctioned (see *Inferno* II.43–126).

⁶ At this juncture it is necessary to take for granted the historical veracity expressed in the relative texts and, of course, leave to one side the question of Homer's identity and the authorship of the text.

⁷ Teodolinda Barolini, 'Ulysses', *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. by Richard Lansing (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 842–47 (p. 842).

of this article; a manuscript from 1542 that was written by Italian humanist Ludovico Beccadelli and features forty-two *addizioni* based on exchanges with Ethiopian scholars in Rome. Mathilde Alain examines these additions and notes how they represent Ethiopian contributions to knowledge production and transmission, thereby foregrounding the multiplicity of voices in Beccadelli's rearrangement of the text. This serves, Alain argues, to highlight that there was never a final version of such travel accounts, as the texts were continuously amended and circulated.

The second travel account moves eastwards into the Soviet Union in 1936. Through an exploration of novelist E M Delafield's *Straw Without Bricks: I visit Soviet Russia*, Nicholas Hall reflects on how the writer navigates questions of truth and sincerity in her observations of the Soviet world and the people she saw there. As a writer and a non-expert traveller, Delafield is tasked with articulating and framing her experiences, relying on both empirical facts and her imagination. It is this complex positionality, Hall suggests, that allows for Delafield to use fiction as a means of gaining an understanding of her time in the USSR, as well as contending with the intricacies of travel writing.

As these two travel accounts show, literature provides the means to (re) locate discourse through different perspectives. Along similar lines, a theme that unites the next two articles in this volume is how this can occur through the creation of a new language or practice with which texts and their historical contexts can be viewed, . Giuseppina Gemboni focuses on travel in the work of postcolonial writers, noting that this often takes the form of migrant experiences, as in the novel *La linea del colore* (The Color Line) by Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego. Gemboni suggests that this text's use of various media — including letters, memories and emails — creates a new language to speak about diasporic experiences and the ways in which they might be understood, both in terms of Italy's colonial past and current debate about migration in the Mediterranean.

Hannah Overton-Gill also concentrates on how language can travel temporally and stylistically in her analysis of how texts can be transformed through the process of translation. Drawing upon the feminist translation strategy of 'hijacking', in which the text is recast in line with the translator's aims, Overton-Gill argues that the roots of Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis's *La femme philosophe* (1803) can be found in Charles Lloyd's *Edmund Oliver* (1798). Identifying textual changes made in line with Genlis's political intentions, Overton-Gill discusses how this translation practice in the French novel steers it away from its English counterpart and into new linguistic and cultural territories.

This dual focus on traversing the linguistic borders of national and gender identity is the locus of the last two articles of this volume. Veselina Dzhumbeva analyses Ekaterina Bakunina, a figure of the first-wave of Russian emigration to Paris, as an important female voice in the interwar diaspora. Concentrating

on Bakunina's last novel, *Dzhumbeva* explores how the representation of gender and national identity evolves throughout Bakunina's work, particularly with regard to female sexuality. *Dzhumbeva* achieves this by showing how these identities intersect in Bakunina's life, transforming and being transformed by her roles as wife, mother, and lover, as well as the interplay of her Russian heritage and her life in Paris.

Aman Sinha also contends with the effects of nationhood and identity on gender in a collection of letters entitled *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001). This work provides a glimpse into the life of Mona Ahmed, a famous *hijra* personality from Delhi and includes images of Mona taken by photographer Dayanita Singh. Sinha argues that the interspersing of text and image reworks traditional ideas of autobiographical writing, refusing linearity and narrative closure. It is through this analysis that Sinha thus deems *Myself Mona Ahmed* a site of protest through which bodies can escape binary framings of gender and assimilation into essentialist discourses.

These tales of travel, translation, transgression, and transformation that span some five hundred years attest to the dynamic interpretations of the theme of 'Voyages'. The journeys described in this volume are discursive, gendered and geographical, foregrounding multiplicity and mobility, as well as the different and fruitful ways in which these trajectories might be approached. It is perhaps fitting, then, that this volume be inspired by the *Commedia*, a fulcrum work in Western history that has been endlessly adapted, referenced, and reimagined in literary and artistic media. Such a rich embracing of the mutable, the interrogative, and the creative finds echo in the following thoughtful reflections on the theme of voyages.

‘Dicono li Ethiopi’: Ethiopian contributions to Francisco Álvares’s travel account to Ethiopia (c.1540)

MATHILDE ALAIN

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Abstract. From 1520 to 1526, the Portuguese chaplain Francisco Álvares accompanied a diplomatic embassy to Ethiopia. Following his journey, he wrote the travel account *Ho Preste Joam das Indias*, published in Portugal in 1540. The original manuscript, presumably in Portuguese, has been lost but five Italian manuscripts survive, several of which were composed posthumously to Álvares. These manuscripts bear differences to the Portuguese publication. The 1542 revision by the Italian humanist Ludovico Beccadelli, *La historia d’Ethiopia*, is particularly interesting because it includes forty-two *addizioni* based on exchanges with Ethiopian scholars in Rome, together with additional information disseminated across the account. These Ethiopian *addizioni* and contributions, mainly about religious and royal customs and geographical information, are the focus of this article. The *addizioni* open a window onto the presence and contributions of Ethiopian scholars to contemporary intellectual life in Renaissance Europe. They concern details about which Europeans would have been ignorant, even those who had travelled to Ethiopia like Álvares. They show that African as well as European scholars contributed to knowledge of African countries like Ethiopia in Europe — in this case by correcting Álvares’s text during the process of its reception and transmission amongst other European scholars like Beccadelli. These clarifications sought out by Beccadelli for an Italian revision of a text written in Portuguese about a journey through Ethiopia demonstrate the multiplicity of actors involved in a text’s voyage from its composition to its dissemination.¹

Between 1520 and 1526, Francisco Álvares visited the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia as part of an embassy sent by Portugal’s King Manuel I to establish diplomatic relations with the Ethiopian king, Ləbnä Dəngəl. Álvares’s travel account, *Ho Preste Joam das Indias*, printed in Portugal in 1540, recounts the embassy.² The title, referring to the Ethiopian sovereign, means ‘The

¹ I thank Pierre Botcherby, Paul Botley, Nathalie Bouloux and Natalya Din-Kariuki for proofreading drafts of this article.

² Francisco Álvares, *Ho Preste Joam das Indias: Verdadera informação das terras do Preste Joam / segundo vio & escreveu ho padre Francisco Aluarez, capellão del rey nosso senhor. Agora novamente*

Prester John of the Indies'. The mythical Prester John was thought to rule a powerful Christian kingdom in Asia, the 'Indies', or — since the fourteenth century — Africa, specifically Ethiopia.³ The embassy brought back Mateus, an Ethiopian ambassador sent to Portugal in 1514, and also hoped to conclude a military alliance to fight off Muslims in the Red Sea.⁴ This eventually led to an Ethiopian-Portuguese rapprochement and the sending of Portuguese troops to help Ethiopia defeat the sultanate of Barr Sa'd ad-Din's army in 1542.⁵

The textual history of Álvares's account is challenging. Versions exist in several languages, but there is no known Portuguese manuscript; the original is presumed lost. The Portuguese printed edition aside, five known Italian manuscripts contain slightly different versions.⁶ Three manuscripts are held in the Vatican Library. The oldest, the anonymous Ott.lat.1104, includes a preface by Álvares and four additional chapters absent from the Portuguese edition, describing the beginning of the journey before the embassy reached Ethiopia.⁷ Ott.lat.2202, dated 6 October 1540, is an unfinished revision, likely of Ott. lat.1104, by the Italian scholar, Archbishop Ludovico Beccadelli.⁸ Ott.lat.2789 has likewise been revised by Beccadelli, with forty-two additions in Italian at the end by Ethiopian scholars living in Rome.⁹ It is dated 1542 but Beccadelli does not seem to have known the 1540 Portuguese edition, as he mentions only Italian translations.¹⁰

impresso por mandado do dito senhor (Lisbon: Luís Rodrigues, 22 October 1540).

³ Adam Knobler, 'Contacts with Ethiopia — Prester John Found (to 1559)', in *Mythology and Diplomacy in the Age of Exploration*, ed. by Adam Knobler (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2016), pp. 30–56; Camille Rouxpetel, 'La figure du Prêtre Jean: les mutations d'une prophétie. Souverain chrétien idéal, figure providentielle ou paradigme de l'orientalisme médiéval?', *Questes. Revue pluridisciplinaire d'études médiévales*, 28 (2014), 99–120; Marco Giardini, 'The Quest for the Ethiopian Prester John and its Eschatological Implications', *Medievalia*, 22 (2019), 55–87.

⁴ On this, see: Verena Krebs, *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2021), pp. 149–52.

⁵ The Barr Sa'd ad-Din is named kingdom of Adal/Adel in Ethiopian Christian sources and in Portuguese sources, including by Álvares. See Amélie Chekroun, *La conquête de l'Éthiopie. Un jihad au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2023).

⁶ For a study of these manuscripts, see Roberto Almagià, *Contributi alla storia della conoscenza dell'Etiopia* (Padua: La Garangola, 1941); Charles Beckingham, 'Notes on an unpublished manuscript of Francisco Álvares: Verdadera informaçam das terras do Preste Joam das Indias', *Annales d'Éthiopie*, 4.1 (1961), 139–54. Beckingham focuses on the differences between the Italian manuscript Ott.lat.1104, the Portuguese version of 1540, and Ramusio's version (1550).

⁷ Vatican City, Vatican Apostolic Library, Ott.lat.1104. Available online: <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Ott.lat.1104> [accessed 31 July 2023].

⁸ Almagià, pp. 17–18. Alongside his scholarly activities, Beccadelli (1501–1572) was an important figure in ecclesiastical circles. See Gigliola Fragnito, 'Ludovico Beccadelli. Identité ecclésiastique et identité municipale chez un prélat bolonais du XVI^e siècle', trans. by Anaïs Bokobza and Guy Le Thiec, in *Érudits collectionneurs et amateurs. France méridionale et Italie, XVI^e-XIX^e siècle*, ed. by Emmanuelle Chapron, Isabelle Luciani and Guy Le Thiec (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2017), pp. 29–40.

⁹ Vatican City, Vatican Apostolic Library, Ott.lat.2789. Available online: <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Ott.lat.2789> [accessed 31 July 2023].

¹⁰ Osvaldo Raineri, *La historia d'Ethiopia di Francesco Alvarez ridotta in italiano da Ludovico Beccadelli* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2007), p. 27.

Two other manuscripts — Fondo Palatino 977 volumes I and II, held in Parma's Biblioteca Palatina — contain Beccadelli's revision of Álvares's text. Volume II is a later copy of volume I; in both, the Ethiopian additions appear as marginalia.¹¹ Ott.lat.2789 was copied from an early stage of volume I, as the latter was still used after.¹² The first draft with the Ethiopian additions was probably written around the time the Ethiopians were consulted about Álvares's account, sometime between 1540 and 1542.

This article focuses on the Ethiopian contributions to Álvares's travel account, specifically the forty-two 'addizioni' or notes at the end of Beccadelli's Ott.lat.2789, edited by Osvaldo Raineri in 2007, also found in Fondo Palatino 977 volumes I and II. These 'addizioni' were made after Beccadelli consulted Ethiopians living in Rome at the time. They include geographical information and details about religious and royal customs. They constitute an interesting case-study, opening a window onto the presence and contributions of Ethiopian scholars to contemporary intellectual life in Renaissance Europe. The Ethiopians' notes concern details about which Europeans would have been ignorant, even those who had travelled to Ethiopia like Álvares. They show that African as well as European scholars contributed to knowledge of African countries like Ethiopia in Europe. Not just passive and observational, they were as active informants as travellers like Álvares.¹³ These clarifications, sought out by Beccadelli for an Italian revision of a text written in Portuguese about a journey through Ethiopia, demonstrate the multiplicity of agents involved in a text's voyage from its composition to its dissemination. They highlight the many intermediary steps in the journeys taken by texts like travel accounts in Renaissance Europe.

The Ethiopian presence in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Rome is well-attested.¹⁴ Álvares mentions meeting Ethiopians who had visited Italy at the

¹¹ I refer to these additions as 'Ethiopian additions'. On the differences between the manuscripts in Parma, see Gabriele Natta, 'L'enigma dell'Etiopia nel Rinascimento italiano: Ludovico Beccadelli tra inquietudini religiose e orizzonti globali', *Rinascimento*, 55 (2015), 275–309.

¹² Natta, pp. 302–03.

¹³ Paul Smethurst defines the notion of travellee, opposed to the traveller, as 'a person who is travelled to or [...] over, a passive rather than active entity, observed rather than observing'. This definition does not take into account the fact that travellees, in this case Ethiopians, were active informants and were observing as much as Álvares, both in Ethiopia and in Italy. The travellees' perception shaped travel accounts, although not as much as the traveller's. See Smethurst, '91. Traveller/travellee', in *Keywords for Travel Writing Studies*, ed. by Charles Forsdick, Zoë Kinsley, Kathryn Walchester (London-New York: Anthem Press, 2019), pp. 268–70.

¹⁴ Samantha Kelly, 'Medieval Ethiopian diasporas' in *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, ed. by Samantha Kelly (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2020), pp. 425–53; Sam Kennerley, 'Ethiopian Christians in Rome, c.1400-c.1700' in *A Companion to Religious Minorities in Early Modern Rome*, ed. by Emily Michelson and Matthew Coneys (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 142–68; Olivia Adankpo-Labadie, 'A faith between two worlds: Expressing Ethiopian devotion and crossing cultural boundaries at Santo Stefano dei Mori in early modern Rome', in *A Companion to Religious Minorities in Early Modern Rome*, ed. by Emily Michelson and Matthew Coneys (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 169–90.

Ethiopian royal court.¹⁵ Most were pilgrims, although some were ambassadors.¹⁶ In the late fifteenth century, a small Ethiopian community settled in Santo Stefano dei Mori, which became the Ethiopian residence in Rome.¹⁷ Some actively participated in producing works about Ethiopia, both in collaboration with Italian humanists and independently.¹⁸

In Beccadelli's revision, these Ethiopian contributions are acknowledged several times. In his preface, he explains how he worked:

Finalmente dopo tre anni, quello che in uno mese fare doveva, vi mando la *Historia d'Ethiopia*, nata da Don Francesco Alvarez Portuguese, la quale non alterando in modo alcuno la sustantia di quanto scrisse molto semplicemente, ho ordinata, et divisa, et ridotta a quella maggior chiarezza, che per me s'è potuto, facendovi solamente alcune additioni in certi luochi, dove li nostri Ethiopi di Roma non s'accordano con quanto è scritto. Per che dovete sapere, che [...] io l'ho conferita col nostro da ben Ethiope, fra Pietro, et altri delli suoi.¹⁹

Beccadelli's revision consisted mainly of reordering, dividing (in three books), reducing, and adapting Álvares's account, but also adding information from the Ethiopians themselves.²⁰ Consulting Ethiopians to verify Álvares's information shows that Beccadelli intended to provide the most accurate and up-to-date information possible. The opening formula also suggests that these Ethiopians had read Beccadelli's account and identified minor errors. This shows that they were highly literate in Italian and that they were engaging in collaborative scholarly dialogue, with a view to promoting the dissemination of more accurate information about their culture.

Identifying the Ethiopians is difficult. Beccadelli refers to them as 'li Ethiopi', 'Ethiopi nostri in Roma', or 'da bene religiosi Ethiopi in Roma'.²¹

¹⁵ Francisco Álvares, *Verdadeira informação das terras do Preste João das Índias*, ed. by Neves Águas (Mira-Sintra-Mem Martins: Publicações Europa-América, 1989), p. 154: 'Este frade andara em Itália e sabia algum tanto de latim'. 'This monk had been to Italy and knew a little Latin'.

¹⁶ Benjamin Weber, 'Gli Etiopi a Roma nel Quattrocento: ambasciatori politici, negoziatori religiosi o pellegrini?', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome — Moyen Âge*, 125–31 (2013) <<https://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/1036>> [accessed 31 July 2023].

¹⁷ On this, see Olivia Adankpo-Labadie, 'Accueillir et contrôler les pèlerins éthiopiens à Rome aux XVe et XVIe siècles', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome — Moyen Âge*, 131–32 (2019) <<https://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/5864>> [accessed 31 July 2023].

¹⁸ See for instance the involvement of the Ethiopian scholar Täsfa Şeyon in Giovio's 'Description of Africa' or his *Testamentum novum*, a commented edition of the Ge'ez New Testament. James De Lorenzi and Matteo Salvatore, 'An Ethiopian scholar in tridentine Rome: Täsfa Şeyon and the birth of Orientalism', *Itinerario*, (2021), 17–46 (pp. 25–30).

¹⁹ Raineri, p. 27. 'Finally, after three years, what I ought to have been able to complete in a month, I am sending you the *Historia d'Ethiopia*, from Don Francesco Alvarez Portuguese, which, without altering in any way the substance of what he wrote very simply, I have ordered, and divided, and reduced to the greatest clarity that was possible for me, making only a few additions in certain places, where our Ethiopians in Rome do not agree with what is written. Therefore you must know that [...] I have consulted about it with our good Ethiopians, Fra Pietro, and others of his countrymen'. Unless otherwise stated, the English translations are mine.

²⁰ Beccadelli also mentions the Ethiopian contributions in his prologue in Fondo Palatino 977 volumes I and II, absent from Ott.lat.2789. Raineri included the prologue in his edition. See Raineri, p. 32.

²¹ Raineri, p. 32: 'the Ethiopians', 'our Ethiopians of Rome', '[...] the good religious Ethiopians in

Only ‘fra Pietro’, better known as Täsfa Şeyon, a well-known Ethiopian scholar living in Rome at the time, is named.²² A cleric, originally a monk in Däbrä Libanos, Täsfa Şeyon arrived in Rome in 1538, having fled Imam Aḥmad’s *jihād* in Christian Ethiopia.²³ He became an important figure of the small Ethiopian community: a multilingual scholar, he oversaw teaching in Santo Stefano, befriended Pope Paul III, and produced several works related to Ethiopia. Täsfa Şeyon is mentioned by Beccadelli several times: in his preface, in some *addizioni*, and in additional paragraphs on people mentioned in Álvares’s account. One of the most important Ethiopian scholars of the time living in Rome, Täsfa Şeyon’s knowledge was particularly valuable to Beccadelli and he was probably his main informant.

Ott.lat.1104 (c. 1539)	The oldest Italian version of Álvares’s account	No Ethiopian additions
Ott.lat.2202 (6 October 1540)	Beccadelli’s oldest revision	No Ethiopian additions
Fondo Palatino 977 Vol. I (c.1540 and up to after 1550)	Draft of Beccadelli’s revision	Ethiopian additions in the margins of the main text
Ott.lat.2789 (3 November 1542)	A copy of Fondo Palatino vol. I	Ethiopian additions at the end of the account, with the references in the text
Fondo Palatino 977 Vol. II (after 1550?)	Later copy of Fondo Palatino vol. I	Ethiopian additions in the margins of the main text
<i>Ho Preste Joam das Indias</i> (22 October 1540)	Portuguese printed edition	No Ethiopian additions

TABLE 1. The different versions of Álvares’s text and the Ethiopian additions

The ‘additions’ at the end of Ott.lat.2789 all follow the same pattern. First, a reference to the page of the account guides the reader to the corresponding location in the text, because each addition concerns a specific passage. Following this is the number of the note and then the note itself, which always opens with the expression ‘Dicono li Ethiopi’, meaning ‘the Ethiopians say’. In the margins of the text, a short reference refers to the corresponding endnote, providing the page number where the addition can be found (pp. 113–16 of the manuscript) as well as the number of the addition (addition number 1, 2, 3, etc.).²⁴

Rome [...].

²² Raineri, p. 28.

²³ De Lorenzi and Salvatore, p. 18.

²⁴ See Ott.lat.2789, view 8 for the first mention to an addition in the margin and views 117–21 for the corresponding endnotes. Available online: <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Ott.lat.2789> [accessed 31 July 2023].

The Italian word to describe them, ‘addizioni’, reflects the miscellaneous nature of the Ethiopian notes, concerned with small details in Álvares’s account. These additions consist mainly of comments on religious customs (twenty-seven), politics and royal customs (eight), but also cultural customs (three), geography (two), narration (one), and animals (one). They reflect the identity of Beccadelli’s Ethiopian informants, as Täsfa Şeyon was a cleric, part of the intellectual elite and close to the Ethiopian monarchy.²⁵ Beccadelli also reported details about Däbrä Libanos, likely given by Täsfa Şeyon as he had lived there as a monk.²⁶ The high number of Ethiopian comments on religious practices reflects the era’s complicated religious backdrop. Revisions clarifying aspects of Ethiopian Orthodox doctrine sought to pre-empt and assuage critics of Ethiopian Christianity.²⁷

Looking closely at a few additions gives an idea of the multiple stages of writing and editing which Álvares’s account underwent. The seventh, for example, focuses on geography:

A car: 35: a.n.^o7: dicono li Ethiopi che quel lago non è il maggiore del Regno di Amara, ma un’altro detto, Saf, il quale contiene isole, o, scogli XXXIII.²⁸

Saf is a sixteenth-century Ethiopian name for Lake Ṭana.²⁹ In Beccadelli’s revision, the reference comes before the following sentence:

Questo lago è molto habitato intorno, et dicono che vi stanno XV. sumat, cio è capitani, et è questo laco il maggior di tutti li laghi del Regno d’Amara, nel quale ne vedemmo molti [...].³⁰

According to Osvaldo Raineri, who edited Beccadelli’s Ott.lat.2789 in 2007, ‘Sumat’ comes from the Amharic word *šumat*, meaning dignitary. The manuscript Ott.lat.1104, the 1540 Portuguese version and a later Italian edition by Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1550) all add ‘questo è il maggiore che ancora habbiamo visto; [...] e este é o maior **que lá vi**’; ‘[...] ma questo è il maggiore di tutti quelli che **io abbia veduto**’.³¹ Beccadelli had reduced parts of the text, apparently for clarity. However, without the inclusion of this phrase, the

²⁵ De Lorenzi and Salvatore, p. 19.

²⁶ De Lorenzi and Salvatore, p. 27.

²⁷ De Lorenzi and Salvatore, p. 26.

²⁸ Raineri, p. 179. ‘At page 35: addition n^o7: the Ethiopians say that this lake is not the largest of the Kingdom of *Amara*, but another one named ‘Saf’, which contains thirty-three islands or rocks’.

²⁹ Maxime Lachal and Alain Gascon, ‘Ṭana’, in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica Volume 4 O-X*, ed. by Siegbert Uhlig in cooperation with Alessandro Bausi (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 855–57 (p. 856).

³⁰ Raineri, p. 77. ‘This lake is very inhabited around, and they say that fifteen *Sumat* live there, that is captains, and this lake is the largest of all the lakes of the Kingdom of *Amara*, in which we saw many [...]’.

³¹ Ott.lat.1104, view 101. Available online: <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Ott.lat.1104> [accessed 8 November 2023]; Álvares, *Verdadeira informação*, pp. 127–28; Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Navigazioni e viaggi*, II, ed. by Marica Milanese (Turin, Giulio Einaudi editore, 1979), p. 203. ‘this is the largest [of the lakes] that I [Álvares] have seen’.

Ethiopians consulted by Beccadelli could not have known that Álvares meant the largest of the lakes he had seen, hence their correction.

Another addition similarly focuses on information which appears in other versions of the account:

‘A car: 29 a n.º 5 Dicono li Ethiopi che il Re che fece fare dette chiese si chiamava Lalibelà, et ch’è sepolto nella chiesa detta Golgotà.’³²

There is no information about King Lalibäla in Beccadelli’s version, but this information can be found in the Portuguese version, the earliest Italian manuscript (Ott.lat.1104), and in Ramusio’s version.³³ This raises questions about the version Beccadelli used for his revision. Beccadelli’s preface mentions that he relied on ‘quella scrittura così confusa che noi vedemmo in Roma [...]’.³⁴ According to scholars Roberto Almagià and Gabriele Natta, this is a reference to Ott.lat.1104.³⁵ If Beccadelli had access to the information in Ott.lat.1104, why was it missing from his revision? Another explanation could be that in the draft of his revision, Beccadelli or a scribe chose not to keep the passage on King Lalibäla or did not copy it carefully enough. As with *addizione* seven, the Ethiopians, finding this information missing, could have provided it. Either way, this example shows that studying the Ethiopian additions helps to better understand the history of this text. This is especially important given some versions are missing. The Ethiopians likely commented directly on Beccadelli’s revision, so either Ott.lat.2202 or Fondo Palatino 977 vol. I, where the additions first appear.

Other additions aim to correct information given by Álvares on the political situation in Ethiopia, such as the following:

A car: 78: a n° 26 dicono li Ethiopi che il Manfudi non entro mai nelli regni d’Amara et Scioa, i quali sono lontanissimi da Mori ma entro nel Regno di Fatigar, Adigò, Doarò, Sciağura, Ifat, Ghedem, et Coali.³⁶

This refers to the passage where Álvares describes the relations between the Bar Sa’ad ad-dīn and the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, and mentions the ‘Mafudi’ raids in Christian Ethiopia, relying mainly on Pêro de Covilhã, a Portuguese who had been living in Ethiopia since 1494.³⁷ ‘Manfudi’ (also spelt ‘Mafudi’) probably refers to Maḥfūz, Emir of the Barr Sa’d ad-Dīn, who had died long before (c.1515) the Ethiopians were consulted by Beccadelli.³⁸ Not only

³² Raineri, p. 178. ‘At page 29, addition n°5. The Ethiopians say that the King who ordered the building of this church is named Lalibelà, and that he is buried in the church named Golgotà’.

³³ Álvares, *Verdadeira informação*, p. 110; Ramusio, II, pp. 177–78; Ott.lat.1104, views 78–79 <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Ott.lat.1104> [accessed 31 July 2023].

³⁴ Raineri, p. 27. ‘[...] this confused manuscript that we saw in Rome [...]’.

³⁵ Almagià, p. 19; Natta, p. 277; Raineri, p. 13.

³⁶ Raineri, p. 181. ‘At page 78: addition n°26 the Ethiopians say that the *Manfudi* never entered in the kingdoms of *Amara* and *Scioa*, which are very far from the Moors, but he entered in the kingdoms of *Fatigar*, *Adigò*, *Doarò*, *Sciağura*, *Ifat*, *Ghedem*, and *Coali*’.

³⁷ Raineri, pp. 129–30; Álvares, *Verdadeira informação*, pp. 225–26.

³⁸ Chekroun, *La conquête*, pp. 99–110. It is worth noting that on p. 104, Chekroun indicates that

did the Ethiopians correct Álvares but they provided further information as the Portuguese traveller only mentions the kingdoms of Amara, Scioa (Šāwa) and Faṭagar (Faṭagār). According to them, the kingdoms of Adigò (maybe Hadiya), Doarò (Dawāro), Sciagura (Šagurā), Ifat (Ifāt), Ghedem (Gedem), and Coali (maybe Bāli) were also raided by Emir Maḥfūz.³⁹ In her study of the Barr Sa'd ad-Dīn's *jihad* in mid-sixteenth century Ethiopia, historian Amélie Chekroun mentions 'at least' three raids in Christian Ethiopia, namely in the Bāli, the Dawāro and the Faṭagār, between 1495 and 1517.⁴⁰ The other kingdoms mentioned were neighbouring the Barr Sa'd ad-Dīn, which could explain why raids happened there, too, according to the Ethiopians of Rome.⁴¹ This shows that the Ethiopians were careful to rectify Álvares's information as they were better informed than the Portuguese traveller.⁴²

The Ethiopians in Rome may also have contributed in terms of the names of places and people, and words from Ethiopian languages. According to Almagià, Ott.lat.2789 is 'more correct' than Ott.lat.2202, the 1540 Portuguese version, and Ramusio's version, especially for the transcription of Ethiopian names and words, which are closer to modern Ethiopian forms, facilitating their identification.⁴³ Charles Beckingham, meanwhile, compared the place names and Ethiopian words and titles between Ott.lat.1104 and the Portuguese edition and showed that these are in general more accurate in Ott.lat.1104.⁴⁴ The Ethiopian title 'abeto', for instance, reads as 'aalto' in the Portuguese text, 'abetu' in Ott.lat.1104, and 'abeto' in Ott.lat.2789.⁴⁵ This suggests Ott.lat.1104 was amended with the help of someone who was familiar with Ethiopian terms, likely the Ethiopians in Rome. However, elsewhere in the Portuguese version, the word 'abeto' does appear, likely used to refer to the same Ethiopian

'Mafudi' might refer to the sultan Muḥammad b. Azar: there was confusion between Maḥfūz and Muḥammad in Álvares's account, and the Muslim sources of that time talk of the sultan Muḥammad b. Azar's raids rather than Maḥfūz's. Moreover, the sources do not make clear whether 'emir' is the appropriate title: *jarād*, *vizir* and *capitaine* are also used.

³⁹ For the identification, I relied on Charles F. Beckingham and George W.B. Huntingford, *The Prester John of the Indies: A true relation of the lands of the Prester John being the narrative of the Portuguese embassy to Ethiopia in 1520 written by Father Francisco Alvares*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1961), p. 411 and Raineri, p. 181.

⁴⁰ Chekroun, *La conquête*, p. 106.

⁴¹ Chekroun, *La conquête*, p. 258.

⁴² At other instances, however, they seem to provide inaccurate information, such as about the bears and rabbits found everywhere in Ethiopia (addition number 7). See Raineri, p. 178. This could be because of a misunderstanding in the transmission of information. A close study of every addition in relation to all the versions of Álvares's text might help to clarify them.

⁴³ Almagià, pp. 23–24.

⁴⁴ Beckingham, 'Notes', pp. 143–44. No systematic comparison between the place names in all versions has been made; such work would permit a better understanding of the relations between the different versions of the text.

⁴⁵ Beckingham, 'Notes', p. 144; Raineri, *La historia d'Ethiopia*, p. 90; Álvares, *Ho Preste Joam das Indias*, p. 108. For the proper nouns, I refer to the 1540 Portuguese edition because Neve Águas changed 'aalto' to 'alto'. Beckingham does not specify if he means the modern Ethiopian form or a sixteenth-century form.

title as Álvares explains that it means 'Senhor'.⁴⁶ The form 'aalto' could be a typographical error in the Portuguese edition, or an error in an earlier draft of Álvares's which he failed to correct. The translator of Ott.lat.1104 could therefore have corrected it based on Álvares's later spelling.

The Italian versions are not, however, always closer to the Ethiopian form. The Portuguese edition has 'Xoa' for the kingdom of Šāwa, whilst Ott.lat.1104 has 'Oxia' and Ott.lat.2202, 'Dixioa'; Ott.lat.2789, meanwhile, has various spellings including 'Scioa' 'Xioa', 'Xoa', 'Zooa', and 'Sceva'.⁴⁷ Here, the Portuguese version is closer to Ott.lat.2789 and, following Almagià and Beckingham's reasoning, could be considered as more correct. Overall, Beccadelli's version seems therefore more accurate, though not infallible, meaning it is easier to identify place names and Ethiopian words; this corresponds to Beccadelli's wish to provide a clarified text.

Perhaps the names and words from Ethiopian languages were corrected by Täsfa Šeyon.⁴⁸ Alternatively, Beccadelli could have had access to other information on Ethiopia. Ott.lat.2202 includes, among other documents, a copy of Poggio Bracciolini's fourth book of *De Varietate Fortunae*, in which he describes Ethiopia based on information provided by Ethiopian monks he met in Italy.⁴⁹ In his preface, Beccadelli also mentions Damião de Góis' *Religione Aethiopum*, based on Góis' interview with the Ethiopian ambassador Šägga Zä'ab.⁵⁰ Beccadelli could have completed his account with this information, in addition to that provided by the Ethiopians he consulted in Rome. Fondo Palatino 977 volumes I and II contain references to Ramusio's first volume of the *Navigazioni et Viaggi* in the margins, showing that Beccadelli at this time had access to Ramusio's version of Álvares's account.⁵¹ However, this was not the case with Ott.lat.2789, therefore the spelling of names in Beccadelli's earliest revision had nothing to do with Ramusio's text.

Ethiopian contributions to Beccadelli's revision of Álvares's travel account show that Ethiopians were actively involved in the process of producing knowledge on their own country in Renaissance Europe. They highlight that a travel account's voyage involved many people from its composition to its dissemination. These included Álvares himself and his Ethiopian informants in Ethiopia, but also the people who participated in translating (Italian scribes), revising (Beccadelli), correcting (Täsfa Šeyon and other Ethiopians living in

⁴⁶ Álvares, *Ho Preste Joam das Indias*, p. 89 (misprinted '99'). 'Sir'. For the meaning of 'abeto', see Merid Wolde Aregay, 'Abetohun', in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica Volume 1 A-C*, ed. by Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), 40.

⁴⁷ Beckingham, 'Notes', p. 143; Almagià, p. 24; Raineri, p. 200.

⁴⁸ Almagià, p. 24.

⁴⁹ On this, see for instance Nathalie Bouloux, 'Du nouveau sur la géographie de l'Éthiopie. Poggio Bracciolini, Biondo Flavio et le témoignage de l'ambassade éthiopienne au concile de Ferrare-Florence', *Afriques, Varia* (2017) <<https://journals.openedition.org/afriques/2008>> [accessed 31 July 2023].

⁵⁰ Raineri, p. 29. Better known as Damião De Góis, *Fides, religio, moresque Aethiopum* (Leuven: Rutgeri Rescjj, 1540).

⁵¹ On this, see Natta, p. 297.

Rome), printing, or editing the account (Ramusio). Texts were circulated and amended; there was never a final product.⁵² This also demonstrates how the study of compositional and editorial voyages of a text can throw new light on transcultural and transnational encounters. It is thus crucial to look at all versions of and contributions to Álvares' account to understand its history. Beccadelli's revisions should be considered as texts in their own right, providing additional information.

⁵² See for instance Rogier Chartier, *La main de l'auteur et l'esprit de l'imprimeur* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).

‘I guess what you didn’t understand,
you could make up’:
Elizabeth Delafield in the Soviet Union —
Travel, Travel Writing, Truth-Telling

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Abstract. The British novelist E M Delafield (1890–1943) visited the Soviet Union in 1936. She published her account of the trip as *Straw without Bricks: I Visit Soviet Russia* (Macmillan, 1937). Many thousands of foreigners went to the Soviet Union in the 1930s to find ‘truth’ there, and published hundreds of accounts of their visits. Delafield’s book is one of these works — and also one that rewards closer study. The title of her account was self-deprecating. It contrasted Delafield’s offering of the ‘chaff’ of trite experience as against bricks formed of ‘solid’, empirically-mined facts that other travel accounts purported to offer. Yet this text brings us not only a depiction of a journey, but also the chance to interrogate the role of a novelist in truth-telling. Delafield was most famous for her semi-autobiographical novel, *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, and *Straw without Bricks* was published as *The Provincial Lady in Russia* in the United States. Delafield’s self-construction, and the strategy of her publisher, merged with a discourse where questions of sincerity and truth were wide-reaching and important — both to Soviet people, and to their foreign guests. This paper explores Delafield’s position in this discourse. It explores how Delafield’s concern with the imaginative capacity inherent to literature both helped her navigate the Soviet world, and relate elements of it that other accounts often did not show. Thus, we can consider a novelist’s exploration of the lived experience of the ‘Other’, and reflect on the complexity her work represents.

The British novelist Edmée Elizabeth Monica Dashwood (1890–1943), better known as E M Delafield, saw her greatest success as the author of *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930), the story of a country lady’s life told in comedic diary form.¹ Delafield and her character have often been considered synonymous — but they were not identical.² This interweaving of persona and author — a ‘provincial lady’ living near Kentisbeare in Devon, mother and wife; a

¹ Her pen name of Delafield was from her maiden name, de la Pasture.

² Maurice L. McCullen, *E M Delafield* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), p. 51; Faye Hammil, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 182.

professional writer who kept a flat in London, a director of *Time and Tide* — is instructive when considering her writing on the Soviet Union. This was a minor part of her career, but the USSR was a major focus throughout the 1930s for British minds turned abroad. Stalinism provoked many questions, and one of the most subtle was consideration of how to find truth via travel.

In 1936 Delafield joined thousands of foreigners in going to the Soviet Union. They published scores of often-similar accounts, superficial differences notwithstanding — indeed, Angela Kershaw wrote of their ‘generic variety’.³ Yet these travel accounts have been under-examined: consideration of how travellers approached their task, and the wide range of travellers who wrote on Soviet experiences, has been limited. Study of travellers like Elizabeth Delafield shows how such works help us better understand the complexity of contemporary cultural discourse in Britain and the Soviet world. Delafield’s account was initially published as *Straw without Bricks* in 1937, and this article considers her approach to the Soviet Union by examining her appreciation of literature as a lens and a framework for her observations, and her related focus on encounters with a varied cast of individuals — prominent in her *reportage*, just as in her novels. In recusing herself from consideration of both the weight of facts about Soviet life, and the over-certain favour or hostility many felt towards the Soviet Union, she turned to the imaginative capacity expressed via literature, her work exploring and later embodying concerns with truth-telling in a different way to that of many of her contemporaries.⁴

The Discourse of Travel

Travel to the Soviet Union was conducted in an atmosphere of apparent certainties and undermining doubts about the nature of the Soviet Union, and of gaining trustworthy information about that world.⁵ The Soviet state was also concerned with questions of truth and sincerity. Soviet agencies, such as the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) and Intourist, corralled foreigners in an infrastructure of cultural diplomacy: tours, guides, and translators.⁶ Along with (in)famous Western claims of Soviet progress and terror, this infrastructure sharpened awareness of certain questions: who told the truth of the Soviet world, and how it could be found and communicated sincerely.

³ Angela Kershaw, ‘French and British Female Intellectuals and the Soviet Union: The Journey to the USSR, 1929–42’, *E-REA*, 4.2 (2006), Article 7 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.250>> [accessed 15 August 2023]

⁴ Patrick Wright, *Iron Curtain*, pp. 235–37.

⁵ Bernard Pares, ‘English Books on Soviet Russia’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 10.30 (April 1932), 525–46; Nicholas Hall, ‘Seeking the ‘unofficial Russian’ in the ‘Real Russia’: sincerity in Soviet-British encounters in the Soviet Union, 1928–1939’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, 2022), <<http://hdl.handle.net/10871/131540>> (accessed 14 August 2023).

⁶ See e.g. Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy And Western Visitors To The Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

The mass of contradictory information about the Soviet Union was well-observed. Harold Bellman wrote in 1934:

[S]o many observers have produced their reams on 'What I Saw in Russia' [...] [Does] the ordinary interested individual, [...] step clear of controversial uncertainties once he sets foot into the Socialist Republic? Not a bit of it.⁷

Arguments about verisimilitude and trustworthiness erupted. To sample but a few: the American journalist Louis Fischer wrote damningly of 'Lies About Russia' in the *New Republic*, responding to claims by a Frank Eason Woodhead of a riot in Moscow.⁸ Gareth Jones gave a speech criticising George Bernard Shaw and others in Spring 1933, for signing a letter 'of such a crass ignorance about the situation [in the Soviet Union] that its signatories should be ashamed'.⁹ Jones's own reports — 'today [...] famine is everywhere' — were targeted by the *New York Times* writer Walter Duranty, who sophisticatedly determined them a 'rather inadequate cross-section', and argued that statistics, not experience, showed the truth: that 'Russians' were 'hungry, but not starving'.¹⁰ The dichotomy of the invented/the real was significant in a discourse where accusations of lies and exaggerations were prominent.

A traveller's methodology became important as questions of sincerity and truth dogged each of them.¹¹ Broadly, we can group approaches into three overlapping types: empirical, thematic (often relating to different types of expertise) and immersive. Rare were those who followed James Agee's view that the fundamental problem facing *reportage* was the inadequacy of language itself.¹² Most travellers implicitly followed Robert Byron:

[the traveller] is a slave to his senses; his grasp of a fact can only be complete when reinforced by sensory evidence; he can know the world, in fact, only when he sees, hears, and smells it.¹³

Delafield also followed Byron, but her approach differed from the broad groups above: she offered no such explicit methodological definition to her readers, other than the work being 'about myself' in the Soviet Union, more than about the Soviet Union.¹⁴

⁷ Harold Bellman, *Baltic Backgrounds* (privately published, 1934), pp. 84–85.

⁸ Louis Fischer, 'Lies About Russia', *New Republic*, 10 June 1931, pp. 94–96; Anonymous, 'Briton Says He Saw Troops Revolt in Moscow, Tells of OGPU "Butchery" and Arrest of Rykoff', *New York Times*, 28 November 1930, p. 1; Anonymous, 'Mutinies in the Red Army', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 November 1930, p. 11.

⁹ Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Gareth Jones Papers, C1–1; Letter, George Bernard Shaw *et al*, *Manchester Guardian*, 2 March 1933, p. 18.

¹⁰ Gareth Jones, 'Famine Rules Russia', *Evening Standard*, 31 March 1933, p. 7; Walter Duranty, 'Russians hungry but not starving', *The New York Times*, 31 March 1933, p. 13.

¹¹ Patrick Wright, *Iron Curtain*, p. 228.

¹² Keith Williams, 'Post/Modern Documentary: Orwell, Agee and the New Reportage', in Keith Williams & Steven Matthews (eds.) *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 163–81 (p. 174).

¹³ Robert Byron, *First Russia, then Tibet* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 10.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Delafield, *Straw without Bricks: I Visit Soviet Russia* (London: Macmillan, 1937), p. vii;

Delafield, Empiricism and Expertise

Delafield went to the Soviet Union at the suggestion of her American publisher. Delafield related her incredulity at the idea of writing a “funny book about it”. She protested: she knew no Russian, they would not let her in. The publisher countered: ‘You’d be able to make out quite a lot. And I guess what you didn’t understand, you could make up’.¹⁵ The idea of knowingly inventing in an atmosphere concerned with truth and sincerity was provocative, particularly when the author was most famous as a novelist who drew from her own life. Delafield inhabited a curious position: tasked with finding truth but feeling ill-equipped to do so; and being given fiction as a ‘way out’ yet refusing it. Delafield offered an accommodation to the reader: the very title of the book, she explained, indicated a lack of ‘solid information’ (the ‘bricks’), and she would offer only the chaff of experience: ‘straws, in their frail, irresponsible fashion, are sometimes thought to show which way the wind blows’.¹⁶ I suggest the ‘frail, irresponsible’ straws were more important than initially presented, as we shall see.

Throughout the book, Delafield reflected on ideas of empiricism and expertise. Other travellers foregrounded these: Walter Citrine wrote in his *I Search for Truth* of 1936: ‘the extraordinary divergences in descriptions of actual conditions made me resolve that such impressions as I formed would be securely founded upon accurately recorded facts’.¹⁷ He related that one of his notebooks was ‘always in my pocket’, and ‘on the evening of each day I devoted a considerable time to writing down [...] an extensive description of the proceedings of that day’.¹⁸ Delafield’s own sometime companion Peter Stucley ‘collects information much more assiduously than I do — asks intelligent questions, and enters the answers into a little book’.¹⁹ Delafield decided she had ‘better not’ follow Peter, or Sidney and Beatrice Webb in their well-known studies of Soviet development — she repeated that, in effect, she did not know how to.²⁰

Such concern with retrievable facts could be taken too far in Delafield’s eyes. On a tour to a collective farm Delafield met a man she called only the ‘Savoyard’. This fellow tourist’s approach to the Soviet world was a scepticism bordering on cynicism. He told her “*On nous cache sûrement quelque chose*”.²¹ His relentless attitude pushed Delafield to reflect: ‘How dramatic it all is. I

Hammill, pp. 186–90.

¹⁵ Delafield, p. 2. The publisher was possibly Augustus Cass Canfield (1897–1986), chairman of Harper & Brothers, Delafield’s US publisher.

¹⁶ Delafield, p. vii.

¹⁷ Walter Citrine, *I Search for Truth in Russia* (London: Routledge, 1936), p. 16.

¹⁸ Citrine, p. ix. See also Charles Maitland-Makgill Crichton, *Russian Closeup* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), 3; Henry Devenish Harben, *Diary* (privately published, 1930), 9.

¹⁹ Delafield, p. 132. Stucley, also a novelist, published *Russian Spring* (London: Selwyn & Blount, 1937) — a much more conventional travel account than Delafield’s.

²⁰ Delafield, p. 132

²¹ ‘They are surely hiding something from us’ (my translation). Delafield, p. 175.

wish I knew where he got all this [...] information [...] I wish I didn't know him to be quite so violently prejudiced'.²² The Savoyard was focused on capturing conditions precisely, even asking her if she was sure that she had seen rats, rather than mice.²³ If the Savoyard doubted the capacity of the Soviets to tell the truth, Delafield doubted his methods would help find it. Elsewhere, she was accompanied by a 'German professor' to a Rostov-on-Don kindergarten. The professor told Delafield in 'guttural French, that he would like to interrogate each child individually and in private'. Delafield observed that a lack of time, and the young age of the children, meant he would 'get little of value from them'.²⁴ The implication from Delafield was that the professor, like the Savoyard, was more focused on unearthing supposed secrets that lay behind Soviet faces — even the children — rather than understanding Soviet people in their context.

As Delafield considered her own position, she asked herself quite what role she played: 'All along, I have said, weakly, that I am a journalist'.²⁵ On a tour of a factory she was asked if she had a question about the works: 'What [...] can I ask that will sound reasonably intelligent?'

At last I enquire *exactly* what the proportion of women workers is — implying that only the most absolute accuracy on this point will satisfy me.²⁶

Delafield playing the empirical tourist was significant in its anticipated futility: she had a different, contrasting method, and the 'reasonably intelligent question' was only meaningful for its intended failure. She emphasised the contrast between methods by adopting an expertise: she would investigate whether Soviet people kept pets, and thus she could 'trail meekly in the wake of people who have been sent to Russia by Associations, Organisations, Societies and so on'.²⁷ This focus on particular areas of Soviet life was common: professional bodies indeed sent experts to the Soviet Union to examine progress (and, the Soviets hoped, to burgeon the reputation of Soviet development therein). Delafield spotted few animals, let alone pets, and noted living space shortages might be to blame. She readily admitted defeat.²⁸ Yet there is a confidence to Delafield's work. From 1933 she wrote for *Punch*, a 'bastion of male humour': Delafield wrote comedy with acid in her pen.²⁹ The empirical, and areas of professional expertise were out of reach. Delafield reported on such approaches to indicate their importance for travellers, and more significantly, to build a contrast with her own approach.

²² Delafield, p. 199.

²³ Delafield, p. 190.

²⁴ Delafield, p. 166.

²⁵ Delafield, p. 204.

²⁶ Delafield, pp. 216–17.

²⁷ Delafield, p. 204.

²⁸ Delafield, p. 209.

²⁹ McCullen, p. 49.

Literature and History

It was the imaginative capacity inherent to Delafield's position as a writer of fiction that was significant for her work. First, via her appreciation of fiction as a way of understanding the world; and second via the role of the imagination in the lives of people she met, and her interest in them as individuals in their context. This contrasts her to other non-expert travellers she met, notably a Mrs Pansy Baker, an American who was fiercely pro-Soviet. Baker's behaviour, her attitude of certainty, was not founded on empiricism or expertise, but on an understanding of 'Russia as a kind of Mecca' — the locus of spiritual truth.³⁰ Baker laughed at Delafield for reading Dickens on the trip, and later asked despairingly whether 'Englishwomen' ever 'take any interest in the great political and sociological questions of the day'.³¹ Baker was, in short, Delafield's *bête noire*.

Delafield's approach also contrasted her, however, to more critical travellers, who took a more immersive approach to travel, such as Violet Conolly, Gareth Jones, and Herbert Marchant. All, to some degree, sought what Conolly called the 'stress and current of Russian life', although *how* they did this varied significantly.³² Gareth Jones valorised the peasant experience, because in the countryside he witnessed famine. Violet Conolly was a proto-Sovietologist, so her experiences were necessarily informed by her understanding of Soviet politics and history; thus her experiences were framed by this comprehension — her expertise *required* immersion. Marchant was less political: a schoolmaster, he was pleased with his 'worm's eye view' of the Soviet Union, borne of a series of visits with different Soviet people, chosen not because of who/where they were, but largely by chance.³³ The complexities of experience, expectation and the Soviet environment affected them all — the discourse of travel had them — but only Delafield used literature as her chief tool for understanding the Soviet Union.

Delafield represented herself as 'the new Mrs Trollope'. Frances Trollope wrote *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), which observed the discrepancies between American rhetoric about liberty and equality and the realities of American life. Thus, in her writing about Russia, Delafield embraced the figure of a writer overcoming adversity, and with no great knowledge of the country she was visiting, but who managed to espy some truths about that place — that is, she understood her role in observing the Soviet Union via an example from literature.³⁴ It is instructive that Delafield saw herself embodying a (different) writer: Delafield herself could not offer insight, but Mrs Trollope did, so Delafield became the new Mrs Trollope.

³⁰ Delafield, p. 65.

³¹ Delafield, pp. 64, 66–70.

³² Violet Conolly, *Soviet Tempo* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1937), p. 28. 'Russian' and 'Soviet' were almost always interchangeable for these writers.

³³ Herbert Marchant, *Scratch a Russian* (London: Lindsay Drummond, 1937), pp. 205–06.

³⁴ Delafield, p. 70.

Allusion to novels and/or authors was key for Delafield: when nervously considering her trip, she thought of herself as the body-swapped Mr. Bultitude from Thomas Anstey Guthrie's *Vice Versa: A Lesson to Fathers*; living for a time on a commune and contemplating the terrible weather, she was the isolated Mrs. Gummidge from *David Copperfield*; she 'thought of Meg's wedding in *Little Women* and Aunt March prancing with old Mr. Lawrence' when watching peasants dance.³⁵ When she considered her trip, the 'things I don't want to do', she thought of Mark Tapley from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, 'in the swamps at Eden'; upon returning from the commune she felt like Rip van Winkle, reawakening to the world.³⁶ Even when appraising the 'balance sheet' of the Soviet world, like so many of her contemporaries, Delafield referred to *Our Mutual Friend* — 'Russian Communism, taking it by and large, is probably an improvement [...] and we must, like Mr. Tremlow, hold on to that'.³⁷

Furthermore, she related how literature was a relief. *David Copperfield* was a salve when stuck at a hotel during heavy rain — 'how well Dickens stands by one!'.³⁸ Delafield lent Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* to a fellow traveller, and it was agreed that the book was preferable as a diversion to Soviet cinema.³⁹ Delafield 'thought well' of a 'Mrs. D', also on the tour, due to her reading of *Jane Eyre*, but also for her being even more out of place than Delafield herself.⁴⁰ Delafield imagined Mrs. D to be in 'a state of collapse in hospital, with myself as a ministering angel coming to visit her and lending her *Bleak House* and *David Copperfield*'.⁴¹ This sense of a divide, of being out of place, and of literature's protective capacity developed when, whilst in Moscow, Delafield spotted a copy of Mary Martha Sherwood's *Fairchild Family* in a bookshop: 'It gives me a kind of shock, of mingled astonishment, home-sickness, pleasure and amusement'.⁴² Delafield wondered at the work being in a Moscow bookshop. She decided that Russia — Soviet or otherwise — was no place for the Fairchilds.⁴³ She saw the world of the Fairchilds — of *England* — as fundamentally different to the Russian/Soviet. The physical fact of the works, in a context like Moscow, was important for the reflections they provoked: they became a way of framing her experience.

Her approach was rooted in appreciating (Anglophone) literature's capacity for providing respite from and a positive contrast to, the Soviet. Yet literature's broader power, in terms of both reading and writing, and its significance in the Soviet world (though Delafield did not explore any Soviet literature), was most sharply seen when Delafield conversed with Eva, a peasant on the

³⁵ Delafield, pp. 3, 45, 55.

³⁶ Delafield, pp. 146, 154.

³⁷ Delafield, p. 226.

³⁸ Delafield, p. 157.

³⁹ Delafield, p. 163.

⁴⁰ Delafield. 212.

⁴¹ Delafield, pp. 212–16.

⁴² Delafield, p. 149.

⁴³ Delafield, p. 153.

commune. Delafield stayed there for around a month, and it formed the first and longest chapter of *Straw without Bricks* — it was the experience she wished to foreground. Eva was the closest person to a friend Delafield had in the Soviet Union. Originally from Estonia, Eva had lived in the United States before joining the commune. This meant she could talk to Delafield in English and that her experiences were likely more familiar to Delafield than that of an untravelled peasant.

Delafield ‘never saw books or papers in Comrades’ homes, except Eva’s’.⁴⁴ Eva and Delafield discussed the Soviet state and Communism’s prospects. What was more important for Delafield was how Eva displayed a ‘sense of humour’ and a ‘sense of satire’.⁴⁵ However, Delafield noted that ‘it was not easy to make Eva talk about herself, and I never learnt her story, as I should have liked to do so’. In fact, all Delafield could catch were glimpses:

The most revealing thing she ever said was one day when I took out my fountain pen in order to write down her full address. ‘You gotta pen, have you? I thought I’d a gone crazy for mine, to start with — but I don’t never think about it now. You get used to anything, with time.’⁴⁶

It is telling that the lack of a pen was the ‘most revealing’ thing to Delafield. The pen — symbolic of, at minimum, the personal capacity to express thoughts, and at its apex the capacity to produce literature — simultaneously captured Delafield’s attitude to the Soviet Union, and her attitude to what she was doing there herself. In the former case, repression was a poor price to pay for possible progress, and in the latter, the pen and its capacity for channelling and challenging the imagination, was how Delafield was to try and understand.

Through conversation with individuals such as Eva, Delafield was able to grasp not ‘what the Soviet was doing’, but some of the tapestry of life that was being woven. Her account features varied conversations with Soviet people: Eva reminded Delafield of ‘Kipling’s Mrs Hauksbee’ — ‘she was oddly hard and cynical on the surface, and fundamentally she was very kind. She had a weak heart, and had no children’.⁴⁷ Delafield also engaged with numerous other peasants at the commune, and also a ‘Venus’ on the beach at Odessa; she debated Soviet matters with a doctor; she was delighted at how much she talked to a ‘monumental Russian’ in a hotel.⁴⁸ A key episode came when Delafield and Stucley visited the home of a ‘man who writes books’ in Moscow, late at night. Apparently in a *kommunalka* (‘five other families’ shared the kitchen), they discussed ‘Abortion [...], the new Metro, a poet who has annoyed the Government [...] and sent as a punishment to work at the construction of a new bridge [...] and the state of literature in England’. She also arranged the sale of

⁴⁴ Delafield, p. 32.

⁴⁵ Delafield, p. 47.

⁴⁶ Delafield, p. 46.

⁴⁷ Delafield, p. 25.

⁴⁸ Delafield, pp. 188–89.

stockings, lipstick and other items to a fellow guest.⁴⁹ Such an experience is at once ostensibly unrelated to the literary — beyond the topics of discussion — yet despite Delafield's doubts, it is a very revealing episode of foreigner-Soviet engagement, born of the same preoccupations of her novels: individuals and families in their context. Here Delafield's route to a kind of understanding came to a similar destination to that of Conolly or Marchant, but that route was hers alone. Literature for Delafield was a conduit, a comfort, and a correction: it was how she related to others and framed her experience; she welcomed its familiarity and sense of home — and she saw the imaginative, the creative, to be at risk in the Soviet Union. Faye Hammil noted that 'The Provincial Lady's personality and perspective are fundamentally defined by her relationship with literature'.⁵⁰ Here the persona was close to reality: it was the elements of fiction that sustained her in a discourse fixated on facts.

The Provincial Lady in Russia

The form and structure of *Straw without Bricks* also exemplifies the significance of the relationship between the literary and the external world. Its structure is only loosely chronological, rather than the A to B of many travel accounts, and episodic: it is centred around the people she met, rather than locations, concepts or themes. Individuals dominate its pages. Furthermore, the material history of the text is instructive: first, she had to smuggle the manuscript out in her clothes, for fear of confiscation at Odessa — again, literature and repression were strongly connected in her mind. Second, it came to *embody* the problems of the invented/real dichotomy. In the United States in 1937 the book was released as *The Provincial Lady in Russia*. Delafield's travel account, a non-fiction work, was slotted into the series of fictional works. As McCullen notes, 'the "I" in both magazine [serialisation] and book is clearly identified as E M Delafield; but the lure of her famous persona was too strong'.⁵¹ Yet the question her work provokes is not one of fiction *versus* non-fiction. The issue is more *which kinds* of experience would — or could — be accepted in the discourse of travel as 'real', as 'proper' *vis a vis* developing an understanding of Soviet life. What Delafield offered was subtle. Peter Fleming wrote of his time in the Soviet Union:

You would have thought [...] that there ought to be some compensation, that life should offer to one who reports it with such pious and boring fidelity an occasional good conduct prize in the shape of an authentically Strong Situation, a ready-to-wear adventure off the peg. But life apparently thinks otherwise. Colourless experience continues to be delivered in plain vans.⁵²

⁴⁹ Delafield, pp. 137–39.

⁵⁰ Hammil, p. 181.

⁵¹ McCullen, p. 57.

⁵² Peter Fleming, *One's Company: A Journey to China* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), pp. 121–22.

Delafield's work shows how the 'colourless experience' was not, in fact, without interest. She problematised her ability to see, and in so doing problematises readings of this history that valorise the political, the ideological; the work undermines the idea of 'generic variety'. Many travellers, even those with strong views about the Soviet world, betrayed their doubt as to what they had achieved in 'investigating' it — Delafield closed her work saying 'it occurs to me to wonder whether I am absolutely certain of what my mind really is, concerning the new Russia' — but few did so with as much skill working in the subtext as Delafield.⁵³ Literature was her way of articulating and framing her activity, and a text built on explanation via metaphor, a focus on individuals in context, the indeterminacy of experience, was the product.

Indeed, Delafield's title inverted the proverb about the futility of making bricks without straw, and so valorised her approach. The straw was essential to the bricks: one could not construct an understanding without it — empirical facts and expertise could only take one so far. She had no need to 'make up' what she did not understand, but resorted to fiction as a means of gaining an understanding. Certainly, her focus was often *herself*, her conceptual framework shaped by *Anglophone* literature, yet she related part of the 'extraordinary everydayness' of the USSR — a far from 'colourless' phenomenon.⁵⁴ Life there was dominated by the state and ideology, and so this was the focus of many travellers' attention. Yet this life was also home to a huge range of human complexity besides. Delafield's work is revealing of the complexity of this life, and by turns the discourse of travel precisely because of her approach. The 'provincial' lady was anything but parochial, unsophisticated, ignorant: Delafield's *metier* was to combine a real anxiety about her position as an observer of the Soviet world with an understated confidence in her skills as an observer of people.

⁵³ Delafield, p. 262.

⁵⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 2–3.

Women and (Im)possible Journeys in Igiaba Scego's *La linea del colore*

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Abstract. Travel is a recursive theme in postcolonial literature, for many postcolonial writers address their migrant experience or that of their families, and frequently speak to the diasporic communities in European countries. In her novel *La linea del colore* (The Color Line), Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego explores, among other topics, the idea of travel through the lives of three Black female characters, namely Lafanu Brown, Leila, and Binti. Moving between the past and the present, the Black Atlantic and the Black Mediterranean, Scego creates a significant connection between slavery, colonialism, and today's migrations through the central Mediterranean route. Lafanu Brown, who represents the past, is an American artist who manages to change her life by travelling to Italy. Leila, who symbolises the present, is an Italian art curator who is free to travel thanks to her 'strong' Italian passport. Binti, who embodies future generations, is a young Somali woman who wants to leave her country and move to Europe. Thinking about the Black Mediterranean, in the first part of this article I examine the concept of 'the color line' and the way Scego deploys it in this novel. Then, I focus on (im)possible travels and analyse how Scego intervenes in the current debate about migrations in the Mediterranean.

Introduction

At the end of the nineteenth century Italy participated in the 'scramble for Africa', occupying, at different times, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Libya.¹ While often defined in the Italian narrative as 'colonialismo dal volto umano' (colonialism with a human face), Italian colonial experience was no less cruel than that of other European countries; yet, this part of Italian history is downplayed in public debate. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller note, 'although Italian colonialism was more restricted in geographical scope and duration than the French and British empires, it had no less an impact on the development of metropolitan conceptions of race, national identity, and geopolitical imaginaries'.² In *La linea del colore* (The Color Line, 2020),

¹ On Italian colonialism, see Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds., *Italian Colonialism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

² Ruth Ben-Ghiat, 'Introduction', in *Italian Colonialism*, ed. by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller

Igiaba Scego addresses the connections between the colonial past and the postcolonial present intertwining fictional and non-fictional characters against the backdrop of historical events.³ This speaks to the author's wish to foster debate about Italy's colonial past through literature, as the empathy readers feel towards literary characters is certainly different from what can be achieved with history books. It is, at the same time, a way to decolonize history, which positions Scego as an *engagé* writer whose works, apart from an unquestionable literary value, show the urgency to engage in issues hotly debated in Italy and in Europe.

La linea del colore tackles the intersection of gender, race, class, and many other topics. In this article, two main themes will be addressed: 'the color line', its relations to racism, and how Scego uses it, and the way the writer participates in today's debate about migration across the Mediterranean. To this end, the last part of the article will focus on Binti's journey along the Central Mediterranean route. As I will show in the next paragraphs, *La linea del colore* falls among the 'practices'⁴ of the Black Mediterranean, which 'has emerged as a powerful framework through which scholars have critically engaged with issues about refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean into southern Europe.'⁵ The Black Mediterranean as a framework offers the possibility to investigate postcolonial cultural production in light of what it reveals about the colonial relationship between Italy and Africa and its correlation with today's migrations from Africa. At the end of the article, I will show how Scego goes even beyond the right to migrate to draw attention to another fundamental right: the right to stay in one's own country.

The Color Line

The title of the novel is a reference to W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*.⁶ For Du Bois, '[t]he problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line'.⁷ The expression 'the color line' was initially used by Frederick Douglass in 1881 to address racial segregation in the United States,⁸ and was then deployed in 1903 by Du Bois to discuss the separation between Black and white people and racial discrimination in a broader sense, including outside

(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 1.

³ Igiaba Scego, *La linea del colore* (Milan: Bompiani, 2020). The English translations are taken from Igiaba Scego, *The Color Line: A Novel*, trans. by John Cullen and Gregory Conti (New York: Other Press, 2022).

⁴ Gabriele Proglgio and others, 'Introduction', in *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders and Citizenship*, ed. by Gabriele Proglgio and others, (Cham: Springer Nature, 2021), pp. 9–27 (p. 14).

⁵ Camilla Hawthorne, 'L'Italia Meticcia? The Black Mediterranean and the Racial Cartographies of Citizenship', in *The Black Mediterranean*, pp. 169–98 (p. 170).

⁶ Scego, p. 362. See also, W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Gorham: Myers Education Press, LLC, 2018).

⁷ Du Bois, p. 5.

⁸ Frederick Douglass, 'The Color Line', *The North American Review*, 132.295, (1881), pp. 567–77, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25100970>> [accessed 10 March 2023].

the United States.⁹ This section explores the way Scego deploys ‘the color line’ in *La linea del colore*, which seems to some extent connected to the possibility to travel freely.

The last novel of the ‘colonial violence trilogy’, which includes *Oltre Babilonia* (Beyond Babylon, 2008) and *Adua* (2015), *La linea del colore* travels between the past and the present and intertwines the stories of three Black women, Lafanu, Leila, and Binti. The subheading of the novel, *Il gran tour di Lafanu Brown* (Lafanu Brown’s Grand Tour), immediately informs the reader that travelling to Italy is one of the main themes of the book. Besides the prologue and the epilogue, the novel is divided into ‘Capitoli’ (Chapters) and ‘Incroci’ (Crossings). The ‘Chapters’ are set in the nineteenth century and recount the story of Lafanu, while the ‘Crossings’ focus on the present and link the stories of Leila and Binti to Lafanu. The chapters dedicated to Lafanu include letters about her life in the United States and her journey to Italy. Leila, like Lafanu in her letters, is the first-person narrator in the ‘Crossings’ sections. The subjective narration generates empathy in the reader and suggests that such travels also represent introspective experiences that characters undertake because of their journey. Even if the main character is an American woman, Scego underlines that this is ‘una storia [...] afroitaliana’.¹⁰ Indeed, Scego puts Leila and Binti together in the ‘Crossings’ chapters, suggesting that their stories and the history of their respective countries are related and influence(d) one another. Through these three characters, the writer nuances ‘the color line’ in different ways.

For Lafanu ‘the color line’ is ‘la linea della sua arte, quella della sua emancipazione’.¹¹ She relies on her talent when she is harassed in college and loses the ability to see colour. Black, like her skin, and mother-of-pearl, like her eyes, are the only colours that Lafanu sees for a long time: ‘Le rimasero una vaga traccia di madreperla negli occhi spaventati e il nero della sua pelle d’ebano’.¹² The cause of the harassment, as well as the reason for her lack of freedom in the United States, the colour Black never leaves her, regardless of the violence she endures. Although she has ‘lost’ the colours, when her art teacher grabs the paint brush and draws a colour line on the canvas, Lafanu understands that art is her ‘luogo per resistere’.¹³ ‘The color line’ thus represents for her a way to escape a destiny of poverty and possible slavery, and her decision to become an artist and find colour again translates into her desire to travel to Rome.

⁹ The expression ‘the color line’ has been used in many fields. Sylvia Wynter develops this concept to show that racial subjugation lies in the binarism ‘rational/irrational’ (p. 306). Wynter analyses the shift from the subjugation of Black and colonized people from religious to scientific reasons: as they were not Christians, they were ‘outside God’s Grace’ (p. 279); or they were considered ‘non-evolved’ (p. 266). See Sylvia Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation — An Argument’, *The New Centennial Review*, 3.3 (2003), 257–337.

¹⁰ Scego, p. 366. ‘[A]n African Italian story’ (p. 521).

¹¹ Scego, p. 362. ‘[T]he line of her art, the line of her emancipation’ (p. 515).

¹² Scego, p. 41. ‘There remained to her a vague trace of mother-of-pearl in her terrified eyes and the black hue of her ebony skin’ (p. 49).

¹³ Scego, p. 44. ‘[P]lace where she could resist’ (p. 54).

Scego explains in an interview that for Lafanu Italy represents ‘a shelter from violence’, but goes on to specify that ‘[s]oon, however, because of colonialism, this image begins to shatter’.¹⁴ The fact that the prologue is set in Rome in 1887 is pivotal. That year, Italy’s plans to expand its influence in East Africa are brutally disrupted by the Ethiopian troops, who defeated the Italian army during the Battle of Dogali and killed more than four hundred Italians. Lafanu herself becomes a victim of this defeat: when the news spread back in Rome, all Black people came to be seen as rivals, regardless of their nationality. Lafanu’s presence in Rome that year becomes the means to connect slavery and colonialism, as she is harrassed in Rome just like she was in college in the United States: once again, the reason is her Blackness.

Scego here uses ‘the color line’ to talk about racism between Italy and Africa, alongside racism in Italy itself. Lafanu not only learns about the Italian campaign in Africa, but also about internal colonialism. Before bringing their weapons and their racism to East Africa, the Italians took them to Southern Italy, so ‘the color line’ that divided Italy before the Unification was exported to its colonies. The prologue establishes a premise: like Lafanu, the reader needs to learn about Italian colonialism and the Southern Question, as it is only by familiarising oneself with this facet of history, that it will be possible to understand her story.

Through Lafanu’s voyage, Scego situates ‘the color line’ in Italy, yet when it is applied to the character of Leila there are significant differences. Leila is a Black Italian Muslim woman who lives in Rome, and whose travels range from international journeys to conduct research or to visit her cousin in Somalia, to urban and regional explorations of the places Lafanu visited in the past. Leila lives in a city that is different from the one that Lafanu knew, but that in some respects it nonetheless has not changed. Italian institutions and white Italians still do not consider Black people as Black Italians, as Italian citizens, and this extends to the children of migrants: ‘Nella società c’eravamo, e non da poco tempo, pure noi migranti e figli di migranti, ma la maggior parte del popolo ci ignorava’.¹⁵ As SA Smythe highlights, Italy considers people of African descent as ‘perpetual “newcomers”, a false belief still present at the nation’s core’.¹⁶ This perception of Black people as non-Italians is perpetuated by the *ius sanguinis* law:¹⁷ various bills concerning an amendment of *ius sanguinis* have been discussed, yet neither left- nor right-wing parties have come to any

¹⁴ Rosa Amatulli, ‘The Color Line — from Lafanu to Leila, Igiaba Scego’s Women’, *Journal of Somali Studies*, 7.1 (2020), pp. 133–39 (p. 136) <<https://doi.org/10.31920/2056-5682/2020/7n1a7>> [accessed 7 March 2023].

¹⁵ Scego, p. 48. ‘We were there in the society, we immigrants and children of immigrants, and it wasn’t though we had just arrived, but the majority of the population knew little or nothing about us’ (p. 61).

¹⁶ SA Smythe, ‘Black Italianità: Citizenship and Belonging in the Black Mediterranean’, *California Italian Studies*, 9.1 (2019), 1–19 (p. 11) <<https://doi.org/10.5070/C391042328>> [accessed 8 March 2023].

¹⁷ According to the *ius sanguinis* principle, children born in Italy to migrant parents do not receive Italian citizenship at birth. They can apply for Italian citizenship when they are eighteen years old.

agreement.¹⁸ Lidia Curti argues that '[t]he failure to extend the law to include *ius soli*, the right to stay on the basis of birth, marked the end of the centre-left governments'.¹⁹ Scego shows that the boundary of Italianness and citizenship also goes through skin colour and symbolises another demarcation of 'the color line'. Leila is aware of being otherized in her own country: she is the only one to feel struck by the statue of four Black prisoners where the crowd gathers in Marino. Like Lafanu, it is thanks to art that she decides to pursue a different path by becoming an art curator, for she wants to 'salvare quelle quattro persone' and urges other people to look at reality differently:²⁰ 'Io avrei dato al prossimo degli occhi nuovi per guardare il mondo che attraversano ogni giorno. Lenti per capire il passato e per acchiappare il futuro'.²¹ Leila's desire to provide people with new eyes to see the world represents a postcolonial stance to re-educate the gaze of those who do not know how to read the past through monuments and urban spaces. 'The color line', therefore, does not influence Leila's movements internationally, but rather the ideological movements within her country. Leila recognizes the implications of the colour line in Italy, but refuses to be sidelined, therefore she tries to render it visible through the exhibition of Lafanu's art. In this way, she also acts as the glue between the past and the future, hence between Lafanu and Binti.

Binti, a young Somali woman, embodies the future generations that simply want to travel in the hope of a better future, and is crucial to understanding Scego's perspective on travel. Through her journey, Scego traces 'the color line' across the Mediterranean Sea. Binti's first appearance takes place when she texts Leila to tell her she is travelling illegally to Europe. Her motivations are stated clearly in her message:

Mi dispiace aver dato a mamma questo dolore. Ma sai già come sarebbe finita. Mi avrebbe fatta sposare a un vecchio, di quelli della diaspora, che vengono qui a prendersi noi ragazze e ci incatenano alla loro vecchiaia. E nemmeno vivono con noi. [...] Ci scopano, ci ingravidano e poi se ne vanno dalle loro prime mogli che se ne stanno beate nei paesi del Nord [...].²²

Binti leaves to escape terrorism, poverty, and refuses to be raped and ensnared by one of the these men, who marry young women and then go back to Europe:

¹⁸ For example, the introduction of the *ius culturae*, the right to become citizens after completing a five-year school cycle. On citizenship see Camilla Hawthorne, *Contesting Race and Citizenship: Youth Politics in the Black Mediterranean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

¹⁹ Lidia Curti, 'Beyond the Canon. Women's Italian Writings of Migration', in *Contemporary Italian Diversity in Critical and Fictional Narratives*, ed. by Marie Orton and others (Cranbury: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2021), pp. 223–36 (p. 230).

²⁰ Scego, p. 61. '[T]o save those four suffering people' (p. 80).

²¹ Scego, p. 62. 'I would give others new eyes for seeing the world they made their way through every day. Lenses for understanding the past and laying hold to the future' (p. 81).

²² Scego, p. 113. 'I'm sorry to cause Mama so much pain. But you know how it would have ended. They would have made me marry an old man, one of those who go back home from the diaspora to take girls away and chain us to their old age. And they don't even live with us. [...] They screw us, they knock us up, and then they go away, back to their first wives, who stay pampered and happy in one northern country or another' (p.152).

Se ne tornano nella loro Svezia, Norvegia, Finlandia, Inghilterra con i loro comfort e i loro passaporti forti. E noi rimaniamo qui con dei marmocchi mocolosi e un passaporto che non ci serve a niente perché è carta igienica.²³

Binti remarks that her passport is ‘toilet paper’. Here, Scego mentions ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ passports to point out that while European passports allow citizens to travel freely almost all over the world, the Somali passport only allows its citizens to travel to a few countries.²⁴ Currently, Somalia is one of the most dangerous nations in the world, but since it is almost impossible to receive a visa to get to Europe legally, many Somalis travel illegally.²⁵ This journey is called *tahrib*, an Arabic word that means ‘fugitive’ but that designates specifically the illegal journey to reach Europe in this context. Many Somalis undertake the Central Mediterranean route: they must traverse the desert to reach Libya, where they would likely be forced to stay for a while before crossing the Mediterranean, and finally, perhaps, reaching Italy. However, Binti’s explanation for her journey is the device used by Scego to address the reasons behind the *tahrib*, rather than the journey itself. The writer aims to highlight that there are multiple reasons behind migrations from Somalia, but European laws leave people in the hands of traffickers. With Binti’s journey, again, ‘the color line’ represents racial subjugation.

Binti’s message resonates with a letter written by Lafanu about her journey to Europe: ‘Niente mi ha reso davvero libera come viaggiare. [...] Solcando quel mare dove la mia gente, la gente nera, ha sofferto l’inferno. Ed è superando l’inferno che sono rinata.’²⁶ Both Lafanu and Binti are trapped in an awful life and undertake a journey to change their destiny. The journeys that Scego recounts in *La linea del colore*, however, are profoundly different from one another. The next section explores these differences.

The (Im)possible Journeys

Scego connects Lafanu, Leila, and Binti through travel, but their experiences are not the same. Even if Lafanu undertakes the Grand Tour, she must travel through the Black Atlantic and feel the pain that slaves endured during the Middle Passage: ‘L’Atlantico è stato una tomba per la mia gente. [...] Fare quella traversata per me è stato un vero e proprio supplizio.’²⁷ Despite this painful

²³ Scego, p. 113. ‘The old men go back to their new countries — Sweden, Norway, Finland, Britain — with their comforts and their strong passports. And we stay here with some snotnosed brats and passports that’s no good for anything because it’s toilet paper’ (p.152).

²⁴ See ‘Global Passport Power Rank 2023.’ [n.d.]. *Passport Index — Global Mobility Intelligence* <<https://www.passportindex.org/byRank.php>> [accessed 10 March 2023].

²⁵ See ‘Global Peace Index’ 2023. *Unesco.org* <<https://www.unesco.org/en/world-media-trends/global-peace-index>> [accessed 7 March 2023].

²⁶ Scego, pp. 114–15. ‘Nothing has set me free as traveling. [...] Sailing the ocean where my people, black people, had endured hell. After I’d gone through hell, I was reborn’ (p. 155).

²⁷ Scego, p. 200. ‘For my people, the Atlantic Ocean was a mass grave. [...] Making that crossing was nothing short of torture for me’ (p. 276).

journey, it does change her life and allow her to eventually find the colours she had lost, become an artist, and live in the city of her dreams, whereas Binti's journey from modern-day Africa has a completely different outcome.

Binti's point of view is introduced through a text which is a request for financial and psychological support. Her urgent need for help engulfs the reader into Leila's anguish, which mirrors the agony that families feel when their daughters and sons decide to leave: 'immagini orribili si susseguivano nella mia testa. Avvoltoi che si cibavano del suo cadavere, lei morta di stenti nel deserto [...] immagini di stupro [...]'.²⁸ Unlike Lafanu, Binti does not arrive in Italy, and after she is raped by traffickers in Sudan, she is traumatized. Scego, therefore, also denounces the traumas that the *tahrib* causes migrants. The trauma and anxiety of the families that stay behind are barely addressed in the Italian narrative about immigration. Just as Binti's presence in the novel is largely conveyed through messages and phone calls, issues surrounding the *tahrib* are discussed through various media, yet they are often overlooked by Italians. Binti's digital voice exemplifies what African migrants represent in Italy, a presence in the media that most Italians never confront. Indeed, the only way for Binti to participate in the exhibition in Venice is to send a video to present the painting she created with other victims of the *tahrib*, by saying: 'Il nostro sogno è prendere un aereo e non dover perdere noi stessi nel deserto dei trafficanti'.²⁹ Binti uses art, then, to illustrate her dream to travel to Italy safely. Thus, aside from travel, art is the other device that connects the three women.

Through the stories of Lafanu and Binti, Scego connects the Black Atlantic and the Black Mediterranean, and creates a link between slavery, colonialism, journeys across the Mediterranean, and the forced mobility or immobility that Black people suffered in the past, and that often must endure today. Taking its cue from Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*,³⁰ the Mediterranean often stands as a 'critical space' that allows us to analyse the relationship between the north and the south shores of the sea.³¹ Although the histories of the Black Atlantic and the Black Mediterranean are different, Scego shows that they are connected by the 'anti-Blackness' to which Black people have been subjected across time and space: from slavery to present-day migrations, from the United States to Europe.³² The group of scholars known as the Black Mediterranean Collective, however, points out that the Black Mediterranean is more than a geographical or a critical space, it is a practice:

²⁸ Scego, p. 127. 'Horrible images pursued one another in my head. Vultures feeding on her corpse, her death in the desert from privations [...] images of rape' (p. 173).

²⁹ Scego, p. 326. 'Our dream is taking a plane and not having to get lost in the desert with the traffickers' (p. 462).

³⁰ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso Books, 1993).

³¹ Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings. The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (New York: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 34.

³² Proglione and others, p. 14.

The Black Mediterranean [...] is a practice of decentralization of the gaze and the production of knowledge from representation to resistance in opposition to a canonized and uniformized geography of power; it is a practice of investigation through which the chronological continuity of history is interrupted by unwritten and unsaid personal and collective stories about struggles against colonial, national, European, patriarchal and white powers; it is a practice of scrutinizing archives beyond their organization and modes of operation, starting from the historical source in order to pay attention to supposed silence or what is yet unsaid.³³

By shifting the gaze, choosing a narration that moves between two different eras, and referring to historical sources to share previously untold stories, Scego's novel, and especially Binti's story, is part of such practices. Although Scego is a writer located in the Global North, through the character of Binti she introduces the point of view of women migrants. Binti, a fictional character from the Global South, only has a virtual mobility, not a geographical one. Through Binti, Scego demonstrates that by denying visas, Europe removes Black migrants' right to travel and decides who has the right to look for a better future outside their country of birth. Indeed, despite being othered by Italian society, the only woman who can travel between Europe, the United States, and Africa is Leila, precisely because she has a strong Italian passport. Travelling is, today like in the past, a privilege. Scego, however, closes the novel by going beyond the right to travel. Binti's email to Leila at the end offers another drastic change of perspective:

[...] vorrei un mondo dove noi africani avessimo la possibilità di spostarci. C'è chi vuole studiare, vedere il mondo, cambiare vita. E poi sì, insieme a questo vorrei che nessuno qui in Africa [...] dovesse essere costretto a partire perché non ha lavoro e prospettive. C'è anche da rivendicare il diritto di restare.³⁴

Therefore, there is also the right to stay in one's own country, which Europe ignores. By reappropriating the narrative of right-wing politicians whose slogans are 'Prima gli italiani' (Italians first), 'Aiutiamoli a casa loro' (Help them [the migrants] in their country), and 'No alla sostituzione etnica' (No ethnic substitution), Scego stresses that while Europe sees an invasion of migrants from Africa, many of them long for a country they do not need to leave and in which they could simply claim the right to stay.³⁵

³³ Proglione and others, p. 13.

³⁴ Scego, p. 344. "[...] I'd like to have a world where we Africans have the chance to move around. Some of us want to study, see the world, change the way we live. Then, along with that, I wish that none here in Africa [...] should be forced to leave because there's no work or opportunities for the future. They should also defend their right to stay' (p. 486).

³⁵ These slogans have been used by different parties and politicians at different times. See: "Pontida al via, Salvini: 'Governeremo 30 anni. In Ue una Lega delle Leghe'", *Ansa*, 2 July 2018 <https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2018/07/01/pontida-tutto-pronto-per-raduno-lega.-salvini-debutta-nel-ruolo-di-segretario-ministro-e-vicepremier_819625f4-85d6-4840-ao42-239f1f28f67d.html>; "E poi, cosa vuol dire "aiutiamoli a casa loro"?", *Il Post*, 8 July 2017 <<https://www.ilpost.it/2017/07/08/>>

Scego's 'color line' traced in the Mediterranean Sea underlines that Europe's migration policies once again create racial segregation and obstruct safe travel. Dealing with The Grand Tour, The Middle Passage, the *tahrib*, and the freedom of mobility of European citizens, Scego explores different types of voyages and highlights their differences and their connections. By moving across different journeys, eras and stories, Scego repositions 'the color line' in time and space, showing that it still divides the world between what Stuart Hall defines as 'the West and the Rest'.³⁶ Through its aesthetic and the topics it addresses, *La linea del colore* participates in those practices that interrupt the 'epistemic violence' which dominates Italian and European culture.³⁷ While exploring different journeys through letters, memories, and emails, using clear and straightforward language, it also advocates for a different narrative about migration, a new language to recount such journeys, as well as new practices to understand the reality behind them and imagine the Mediterranean beyond 'the color line'.

aiutiamoli-a-casa-loro/>; Andrea Colombo, "Il cuore nero dell'esecutivo: "No alla sostituzione etnica"", *Il Manifesto*, 19 April 2023 [accessed 9 September 2023].

³⁶ Stuart Hall, 'The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power' [1992], in *Essential Essays*, 2 vols (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), II, 141–84.

³⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

From ‘novel’ to ‘nouvelle’: The Journey of Charles Lloyd’s *Edmund Oliver* into French

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Abstract. Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis’s 1803 ‘nouvelle’ *La femme philosophe* is often approached by scholars as a stand-alone text, considered only in relation to its French author and its circulation in early nineteenth-century France. Yet, on reading the text’s ‘Avertissement’, we discover that Genlis’s ‘nouvelle’ finds its origins in Charles Lloyd’s 1798 novel *Edmund Oliver*. In claiming that her text ‘n’est qu’une imitation’ of Lloyd’s, Genlis positions *La femme philosophe* as a step in the journey of the source text, not only across the English-French border, but also across the threshold between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through close readings of the source and target texts, this paper proposes that Genlis’s *La femme philosophe* ultimately represents a ‘hijacking’ of Lloyd’s *Edmund Oliver*. By displacing the male protagonist and introducing references to the French writer Germaine de Staël, Genlis seizes the English novel and leads its characters and its plot towards a new destination, one which is designed to serve the imitator’s purpose of engaging with contemporary French discourse on morality, religion, and female agency. As such, the text itself embodies a transfer of power and ownership from the English author to the French translator: Lloyd’s ‘novel’ becomes Genlis’s ‘nouvelle’.

When a text is translated from one language into another, it is transplanted into a new linguistic and cultural context; the translator, or ‘re-writer’, inevitably adapts and manipulates the source text to a certain degree, ‘usually to make [it] fit in with the dominant, or one of the dominant ideological and poetological currents of their time’.¹ This forms the basis of André Lefevere’s theory of rewriting, which treats translation as a dynamic process that takes place within a system of literary and sociological constraints, namely those of language, poetic discourse, regulatory forces, and patronage. The resulting translation is therefore only ever a partial representation of the source text and its author; an *image* of the text created by the translator and the constraints within which they were working.² Translation scholars have since emphasised the importance

¹ André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 2016), p. 6.

² Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. Also see Dimitris

of considering translation as a process, rather than examining the translated product in isolation. For Susan Bassnett, this approach allows for translation to be seen as a site of contest, involving a complex engagement of both reader and writer in the confrontation between known and alien, Self and Other.³ The idea of translation as an ideological and political process is of particular significance within the field of feminist translation studies, which explores the ways in which translation is a gendered practice. Feminist translators in the 1980s began to play on the gendered nature of language by intervening in their source texts through the deliberate use of footnotes, prefaces, additions and omissions. In a strategy termed by Luise von Flotow as 'hijacking', the translator would mark her presence in the text and create meaning by disrupting patriarchal language and making the feminine seen and heard.⁴

Written over 150 years prior to the development of feminist translation theories, Genlis's translation of the English novel *Edmund Oliver* offers an example of a translator taking hold of a source text and moulding it to fit a different cultural context and fulfil a different purpose. Genlis shapes the eighteenth-century English novel into a text for nineteenth-century French readers, with the aim of engaging with contemporary literary themes of femininity, passion, and marriage. Manipulating a source text in this way is reflective of the dominance of 'la traduction libre'⁵ in France at the turn of the nineteenth century, a practice modelled by women translators such as Isabelle de Montolieu, whereby the form, style and content of the source text would be shifted to match the reading habits of the target culture.⁶ However, by displacing male voices and foregrounding female agents, Genlis's approach also anticipates the movement of intervening feminist translators that would arrive over a century later. An examination of *Edmund Oliver's* transition into French at the hands of Genlis can therefore allow us to explore the far-reaching potential of translation as a process by which a text is uprooted, re-directed, and re-settled elsewhere.

Asimakoulas, 'Rewriting', in *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies*, ed. by Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 494–99.

³ Susan Bassnett, 'Translation, Gender and Otherness', *Perspectives*, 13, 2 (2005), 83–90.

⁴ Luise von Flotow, 'Feminist Translation: Contexts, Practices and Theories', *TTR*, 4 (1991), 69–84. The term 'hijacking' was taken from a critic who used it as an attack on Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's translation of *Lettres d'une autre* by Lise Gauvin, which he saw as 'intrusive'. Flotow argues that the interventions of the translator were in fact deliberate and political, with the aim of reclaiming patriarchal language and making women visible in the text. This was an approach popular amongst the Canadian school of feminist translators in the 1980s and 1990s, and the theory has since been re-examined and adapted to incorporate an understanding of intersectionality (see Flotow, 'Feminist Translation Strategies', in *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies*, pp. 181–85).

⁵ 'free translation'.

⁶ Frédéric Weinmann, 'Théories', in *Histoire des traductions en langue française: XIXe siècle (1815–1914)*, ed. by Yves Chevrel, Lieven D'hulst and Christine Lombez (Paris: Verdier, 2012), pp. 51–148 (p. 63).

Edmund Oliver's English Origins

Edmund Oliver is an epistolary novel written in the late eighteenth century by the English poet Charles Lloyd. Although Lloyd's works are not well-known today, in his time he operated within exclusive Romantic literary circles and had strong links with more prominent writers, such as Charles Lamb, Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It is within this context, and arguably as a result of these literary relationships, that Lloyd's only surviving novel was born. In fact, upon the novel's publication, many of his acquaintances were upset by its content, as they saw themselves in the characters Lloyd had portrayed. In his biography of Coleridge, Richard Holmes, whilst describing the novel as 'mischievous and not unreadable', infers that it was written by Lloyd as a means of recording 'his adventures among the *literati* [and] drawing lightly disguised portraits of William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Coleridge himself'.⁷ In regard to the 'portrait' of Coleridge, this was taken to be indicative of a certain animosity between the two friends, as the character of Edmund Oliver appears to parody Coleridge's personal history of sexual debauchery, drunkenness, and opium consumption.⁸ In this way, Lloyd's novel finds its origins in the author's personal relationships and experiences both as a writer and as an individual.

The novel is also intimately linked to the wider context of late eighteenth-century England. In one of the few pieces of scholarship exploring Lloyd's work in depth, Hilary Newman describes *Edmund Oliver* as 'a novel of ideas and explored concepts that were topical at the end of the eighteenth century'.⁹ Lloyd introduces us to these 'ideas' and 'concepts' in his 'Advertisement' preceding the novel, in which he openly states his objection to the principles of 'modern philosophers', namely 'the introduction of concubinage', the 'rejection of cohabitation', and 'the character of that indefinite benevolence, which would respect the mass of existence without addressing its operations patiently to parts of that mass'.¹⁰ This is an explicit reference to William Godwin's exhortation of the dangers of marriage in his 1797 essay 'Of Cohabitation'. Within this essay Godwin uses the term 'cohabitation' to refer to the state of living in family units, arguing that this kind of union endangers social harmony by leading to an 'excess of familiarity', whereby both children and adults are subject to contempt and ill humour.¹¹ In contrast, Lloyd views familial love as crucial to the development of a rational society because 'the human mind never will be led

⁷ Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (New York: Viking, 1990), p. 142.

⁸ Richard C. Allen, 'Charles Lloyd, Coleridge, and "Edmund Oliver"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 35 (1996), 245–94 (p. 245).

⁹ Hilary Newman, 'Charles Lloyd's *Edmund Oliver*: A Riposte to William Godwin', *The Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 159 (2014), 33–45 (p. 33).

¹⁰ Charles Lloyd, *Edmund Oliver*, I (London: Joseph Cottle, 1798), pp. vii–viii.

¹¹ This essay was later renamed 'Of Domestic or Family Life' due to the perceived ambiguity of the term 'cohabitation'. See William Godwin, *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature* (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1797), part 1, essay X.

to interest with regard to a *whole*, except it have been first excited by *palpable parts of that whole*.¹² In other words, Lloyd's novel emphasises that long-standing intimate relationships enable human beings to develop benevolence towards society as a whole.

This view regarding the importance of the family unit is expressed at numerous points throughout *Edmund Oliver* by the character of Charles Maurice, who not coincidentally shares his first name with the author of the novel. As Lloyd's apparent mouthpiece, Maurice takes on the role of wise friend and trusted adviser to the often-wayward Edmund Oliver. It is in one of his letters to Oliver that Maurice offers the antithetical view to Godwin's rejection of familiarity: 'In fact *frequent or vivid association* may stand for a definition of affection. We love him most by a necessity of our condition, with whom our souls have most often, or more intensely, come in contact'.¹³ We see this ideal of closeness and proximity between individuals put into practice at the end of the novel, when Maurice and Oliver move to adjoining properties to bring up their families in community. This peaceful ending concludes a long, tumultuous journey taken by the protagonist Oliver, during which he transforms from a reckless young man intoxicated by his passion for Gertrude, into a subdued gentleman longing only for a quiet life with a 'companion for my solitary moments, a second self, when I would seclude me from the rest of mankind'.¹⁴ It is thus that 'domestic relations' are demonstrated to provide the most noble and desirable expression of human love and passion. This continuous thread of themes of marriage and desire throughout the novel situates the work within a contemporary dialogue, pointing towards Lefevre and Bassnett's position that writing and re-writing is a dynamic process that takes place within a specific social and cultural context; the text is speaking from, with, to, and about the literary and political networks within which the author is confined.

Edmund Oliver and La femme philosophe

In 1803, five years following its publication in England, Lloyd's novel is taken from its English birthplace and transported across the Channel in the form of an 'imitation' by the prolific author Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis. In Genlis's 'Avertissement', she immediately informs the reader that 'la nouvelle qu'on va lire n'est qu'une imitation d'un roman anglais'.¹⁵ By opening the text in this way, Genlis makes it clear that the origins of the 'nouvelle' are found elsewhere, implying that its content belongs not to her, but to Lloyd. This is typical of the

¹² Lloyd, I, pp. viii — ix.

¹³ Lloyd, I, p. 129. Original emphasis.

¹⁴ Lloyd, II, p. 256.

¹⁵ 'The novella you are about to read is but an imitation of an English novel', Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis, *La femme philosophe*, in *L'épouse impertinente par air, suivie du mari corrupteur et de la femme philosophe: nouvelles tirées du Mercure de France et de la Nouvelle Bibliothèque des Romans* (Paris: Chez Maradan, 1804), p. 89. All translations are my own.

self-effacing prefaces of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French translators, which draw out the qualities of the source text, rather than the translation itself.¹⁶ However, despite this opening statement, the preface quickly reveals that Genlis's interventions in the text go further than initially suggested. Detailing her approach towards adapting the English novel, Genlis states that, 'j'ai traduit presque littéralement les premières pages, j'ai changé tous les incidents, toutes les scènes du reste, et j'ai fait un dénouement tout-à-fait différent'.¹⁷ The repetition of the first-person pronoun ('je') places the translator firmly in the driver's seat, and the admission of creating a completely different ending informs us that she has taken the text in a new direction. This foreshadows the strategies of feminist translators in the 1980s, who used prefaces as a means of flaunting their presence and actively participating in the creation of meaning. Take for instance, Barbara Godard's preface to Nicole Brossard's *These Our Mothers*, in which she positions herself as the author's accomplice by detailing the ways in which she has manipulated language to foreground feminist concepts, or Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's preface to Lise Gauvin's *Letters from Another*, which emphasises the discrete identity of the translator in relation to the source text and its author, once again through the use of the first person pronoun: 'Lise Gauvin is a feminist, and so am I. But I am not her.'¹⁸

Genlis's marking of her presence in the translated text reaches a climax through subsequent paratextual material, namely her *Mémoires* in 1825, in which she lays claim to authorship by referring to the text as '*ma nouvelle*'.¹⁹ The steps towards the novel becoming Genlis's '*nouvelle*' begin with substantial alterations to features of Lloyd's plot and narrative. One of the most significant shifts is made obvious in the change of title from *Edmund Oliver* to *La femme philosophe*. The latter refers to the character of Gertrude, which is reflective of the re-positioning of Gertrude as the protagonist in the French text. In *Edmund Oliver*, the narrative unsurprisingly tracks the progression of Edmund. We read detailed accounts of his attachment to Gertrude, his disappearance and army subscription, his return to his aunt's house, and his ultimate redemption and marriage to Edith Alwynne. Meanwhile, *La femme philosophe* fills in the gaps of *Edmund Oliver*'s narrative by offering an account of Gertrude's journey. This difference is most clearly seen in the shift in the narrative surrounding her suicide. Whilst the character of Gertrude in Lloyd's text succeeds in ending her

¹⁶ For an analysis of translator prefaces in France between 1721 and 1828, see Annie Cointre and Annie Rivera, *Recueil de Préfaces de traducteurs de romans anglais, 1721-1828* (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2006).

¹⁷ 'I translated the first pages almost literally, I changed all the events, all the scenes of the rest, and I wrote a completely different ending; but I kept the general plot line, the moral thought, and all the characters.' Genlis, *La femme philosophe*, p. 89.

¹⁸ Barbara Godard, *These Our Mothers* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1983), p. 7 and Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, *Letters from Another* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1990), p. 9.

¹⁹ Genlis, *Mémoires inédits de Madame la comtesse de Genlis, sur le dix-huitième siècle et la Révolution française, depuis 1756 jusqu'à nos jours*, 10 vols (Paris: Chez Ladvocat, 1825), V, p. 349. Emphasis is my own.

own life and is thus removed from the plot, the Gertrude in Genlis's text fails in her attempt. Genlis therefore offers her a chance at redemption, and the work ends with Gertrude living out the rest of her life in peace.²⁰ Even in the lead-up to the suicide attempt, the shift in Gertrude's role in the narrative begins to take shape. In the English novel, we read the scene of her death from the point of view of Edmund's sister Ellen, who is recounting the events to her cousin Edith. It is only after Gertrude has poisoned herself and fallen ill that we receive a brief explanation of her actions, as interpreted by those around her:

[...] the vehemence of her feelings, and her various struggles, had preyed upon her mind, and a violent fever ensued, of which she was confined when we arrived. She had long meditated the deed; the constant presence of some person had prevented her putting it into execution [...]. Mrs Maurice had quitted her, and she had at this moment discovered that the unfortunate Gertrude had availed herself of the opportunity to swallow a bottle of laudanum.²¹

This description minimises Gertrude's agency by consistently placing her as the object of verbs: her mind is 'preyed upon', she is 'confined' by a fever, her actions are 'prevented' by the presence of another, and she is 'quitted' and 'discovered' by Mrs Maurice. In *Edmund Oliver*, then, Gertrude's suicide is an 'unfortunate' event that happens *to* Gertrude and is re-told by other characters who keep the storyline in motion.

In contrast to this brief description of the moments leading up to Gertrude's death, the French text dedicates several pages to detailing the thought processes behind Gertrude's suicide attempt before it takes place. Through a discussion with Madame Melrose, we hear directly from Gertrude that she believes suicide is 'un acte sublime' that will 'fixer sur elle tous les yeux' and 'rendre son nom à jamais célèbre'.²² This dialogue indicates that Gertrude's suicidal thoughts were not simply brought on by 'various struggles' and 'a violent fever', but were motivated by the philosophical notion that to kill oneself is an honourable act. Therefore, her attempt is not the undertaking of an innocent victim, but of a pensive individual seeking fame and renown. We also witness Gertrude's mission to procure the drugs for her overdose, which involves a visit to the local apothecary. The verbs used in this encounter position Gertrude as the primary agent: 'Gertrude entre, s'assied, et demande à parler au maître, il vint: elle lui dit qu'elle était l'amie de madame Melrose, qu'elle logeait chez elle'.²³ In this way, Gertrude has been relocated from the position of passive side character in *Edmund Oliver*, to director of the plot in *La femme philosophe*.

²⁰ Genlis, *La femme philosophe*, p. 195.

²¹ Lloyd, II, pp. 171–72.

²² 'a sublime act', that will 'fix all eyes on her' and 'give her name lasting fame'. Genlis, *La femme philosophe*, pp. 147 — 154.

²³ 'Gertrude enters, takes a seat, and asks to speak to the person in charge. He comes, she tells him that she is the friend of Madame Melrose and that she has been living with her.' Genlis, *La femme philosophe*, p. 182.

The passivity of Gertrude is not just a feature of her death in *Edmund Oliver*, but also of the novel as a whole. The majority of the letters featured in the novel are between Edmund and his friend Maurice, or from Maurice to his wife, meaning the narrative is largely shaped by their (male) perspectives. For example, we often hear Gertrude's words through the medium of Charles' letters, in which he recounts his meetings with Gertrude.²⁴ We know from his letters to Edmund and Mrs Maurice that he is not fond of Gertrude due to the pain she has caused his friend and the philosophical ideas she lives by, so we cannot take Charles' accounts as neutral. The image we receive of Gertrude is, therefore, heavily influenced by the biased perspectives of male characters.

It is in Genlis's adaptation of these instances of male interaction in *Edmund Oliver* that we see her promotion of female agency. For example, whilst in Lloyd's text Edmund learns of Gertrude's intentions to marry through another male character, *La femme philosophe* presents a scene in which Gertrude tells Edmund of her situation and her feelings directly.²⁵ This offering of agency is also extended to other female characters in the French text, most notably that of Fanny Miller. In the 'Avertissement', Genlis highlights this change, stating that she has added the character of Fanny in the place of 'une fille publique, qui, dans l'original, ne paraît que dans une taverne.'²⁶ The equivalent character in *Edmund Oliver* appears only in one scene, wherein she brings Edmund the news that his father's will had been forged and that he is, in fact, the rightful heir to his fortune. Fanny Miller shares the same function in *La femme philosophe*, but she is a constant feature throughout the narrative, and we follow her from being found by Edmund in the street, being nursed back to health, to choosing to live the rest of her life in a convent. What is more, whilst her back story shares many similarities with that of her counterpart Meg in *Edmund Oliver*, Fanny Miller is given more of an active role in uncovering the secret of the forged will and bringing the men involved to justice. In the English novel, Meg is 'seduced to be a partner in the action' and relates helplessly that 'every paper that might lead to a discovery was destroyed'.²⁷ Meanwhile, Fanny Miller is similarly seduced by the perpetrators of the crime, but she takes to spying on them and manages to recover the original copy of the will.²⁸ She is therefore instrumental in enabling Edmund to recover his fortune. By foregrounding previously hidden female characters in this way, Genlis interrupts the passage of Lloyd's text across the Channel and marks the work with her own imprint as a woman author writing for and about women.²⁹ The shift in power between Gertrude and Edmund thus also echoes a shift in power between translator and author.

²⁴ See letters XXXIII and XXXIV.

²⁵ Genlis, *La femme philosophe*, p. 117.

²⁶ 'a prostitute, who, in the original, only appears in a tavern.' Genlis, *La femme philosophe*, p. 89.

²⁷ Lloyd, I, p. 237.

²⁸ Genlis, *La femme philosophe*, pp. 169–77.

²⁹ Writing for and about women is a signature of Genlis's body of work, especially the works she produced at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For example, *L'épouse impertinente par air*, in *L'épouse impertinente par air, suivie du mari corrompueur et de la femme philosophe* and *La femme auteur*, ed. by Titou Lecoq, rev. edn (Paris: Talents Hauts, 2021).

In taking control of the arrival of Lloyd's text in France, Genlis leads the text to a destination that is embedded in French philosophical and moral thought. If *Edmund Oliver* is said to have been written as an exploration of ideas that were topical at the end of the eighteenth century in England, and as an attack on the author's fellow writers and thinkers, *La femme philosophe* can be said to be written as an exploration of ideas that were topical at the beginning of the nineteenth century in France, and as an attack on the translator's fellow writers and thinkers. In Lefevere's terms, then, Genlis chooses to 'rewrite' Lloyd's text in a way that moulds it to correspond with the ideological currents of the target culture. For example, rather than maintaining Lloyd's references to the work of Godwin and his thoughts on marriage and cohabitation, Genlis's text introduces new references to her contemporary Germaine de Staël and her writings on love, passion, and femininity. Genlis inserts these references by using excerpts from Staël's *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations* (1798) and *Delphine* (1802) as the basis of much of Gertrude's dialogue. In Florence Lotterie's analysis of *La femme philosophe*, she brands these citations as 'des déformations parodiques', manipulated by Genlis in an attempt to ridicule the incoherent style of Staël's writing.³⁰ We can see this in the way Genlis isolates certain phrases from Staël's work and places them in a context in which they appear exaggerated and theatrical. For example, towards the end of *La femme philosophe*, during a conversation between Gertrude and her custodian Madame Melrose, we hear of Gertrude's desire to write '*l'histoire des mœurs, de l'administration de la littérature, de l'art militaire de tous les peuples...*'³¹ This passage is a direct quotation from the introduction to *De l'influence des passions*, in which Staël outlines her motivations for publishing the work. According to Madame Melrose, who is consistently the voice of reason within *La femme philosophe*, it is ridiculous that a woman should have such aspirations to enter the masculine world of literary fame.³² Madame Melrose's mocking of Gertrude's desires to become a published author thus also signals an attack on Staël's literary ambitions and her advocacy of the publication of women writers. It is notable that this interchange comes at a point in the 'nouvelle' where Gertrude is in a state of anguish and despair. The dialogue therefore takes the form of confused ramblings, with multiple interruptions and disconnected sentences, which has the effect of presenting Staël's ideas as incomprehensible gibberish. Through the translation process, then, the text is engrained with new cultural meaning that can only be fully understood within the context of French literary and philosophical discourse.

³⁰ 'parodying deformations', Florence Lotterie, 'Un aspect de la réception de *Delphine*: La figure polémique de la femme philosophe', *Cahiers staëliens: organe de la Société des études staëliennes*, 57 (2006), 119–38 (p. 134).

³¹ 'the history of morals, of the administration of literature, of the military tactics of all peoples...' Genlis, *La femme philosophe*, p. 142. The italicisation has been reproduced as per Genlis's text.

³² Genlis, *La femme philosophe*, p. 142.

The outcome of Genlis's translation strategy is a new text that serves a new purpose in a new location. What was once a novel following the development of a male protagonist as he grapples with questions of love, passion, friendship, and marriage, has now become a work tracking the downfall of a young woman, who succumbs to the lethal calls of fame and intellectualism. Prefiguring the feminist translation strategies with which we have since become familiar, Genlis rewrites Lloyd's text so that it is framed within both a feminist and a French perspective, and in doing so, leads the English novel across linguistic and cultural borders, into new territory. This passage is by no means a peaceful one, as the English text is seized, torn apart, and reassembled to fulfil the purpose of warning the French woman reader of the dangers of contemporary philosophical writings. The resulting text is one that is no longer recognisable as a work belonging to English Romanticism, but rather one that has been designed to communicate with nineteenth-century French philosophical and political discourses. The English novel disappears behind the French text, and the English author behind the French imitator; it is no longer Lloyd's 'novel', but Genlis's 'nouvelle'. The words of Luise von Flotow in her analysis of Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's feminist translation strategy can thus be transferred to this case with surprising ease: Genlis 'has in fact "hijacked" the text, appropriated it, and made it her own to reflect her political intentions [...] Here the translator is writing in her own right.'³³

³³ Flotow, 'Feminist Translation: Contexts, Practices and Theories', pp. 79–80.

Losing the Self: Identity, Gender and Migration in Ekaterina Bakunina's Last Novel

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Abstract. This paper delves into the depiction of national and gendered identities in Bakunina's last novel, *Liubov' k shesterym*, with the aim of introducing Ekaterina Bakunina, an overlooked figure of the first-wave Russian emigration to Paris. As a woman writer with a background in law and science, Bakunina stands out from her female contemporaries with her focus on the authentic physicality and sexuality of the woman, and her emphasis on the loss of identity, particularly gender identity, makes her an important voice in the interwar diaspora. By analysing Bakunina's work, the article uncovers an evolution in her writing style from a portrayal of the experiences of Russian emigration to a more universal depiction of the position of women in society. The article focuses primarily on the two tiers of identity: national and gender and reveals a surprising similarity in their structures as well as an interesting interplay between the two.

Introduction

In Bakunina's final novel, *Liubov' k shesterym* (Love for Six, 1935), the protagonist's, Mavra's, struggles transpire on two distinct levels of identity. On one hand, she desperately tries to create a sense of national belonging by consistently evoking memories of her homeland. On the other hand, she attempts to reconcile her inner self with the societal expectations of her as a wife, mother, lover, and homemaker. Despite the protagonist's national identity aiding in her self-affirmation while her gender identity impedes her true expression, the two identities share a parallel structure. In the following pages, I will analyse and compare these two main aspects of identity in Bakunina's last novel — nationality and gender.

Who Was Bakunina?

As one of the minor figures of the diaspora, little is known about Bakunina's life.¹ She was born in 1889 in Tsarskoe Selo, near St. Petersburg. She published

¹ The details of Bakunina's life included here are informed by the following: Ekaterina Bakunina, *Sodruzhestvo*, ed. by Tatyana Fesenko (Washington: Victor Kamlin, Inc., 1966); Ekaterina Bakunina,

her first piece of prose in her pre-teen years. She relocated to the US briefly² which later inspired her first published work as an adult — the short story ‘Koni-Ailand’ (Coney Island, 1912).³ Upon returning to Russia, Bakunina graduated with a law degree and worked as an editor and attorney’s assistant. In 1923, Bakunina escaped together with her husband and her son to Paris. During her time in France, she published a poetry collection, entitled *Stikhi* (Poems, 1931) and two novels — *Telo* (Body, 1933) and *Liubov’ k shesterym* (Love for Six, 1935). She also engaged with the cultural life in Paris: she was the secretary of the progressive journal *Chisla*⁴ and attended the Green Lamp meetings, which were organized by the first couple of the émigré circles — Zinaida Gippius and Dmitry Merezhkovsky; furthermore, she published in a number of periodicals and corresponded with several of the established authors of the diaspora — Nikolai Evreinov, Vladislav Khodasevich and Aleksei Remizov.⁵

Bakunina is a challenging author to categorize. Research on the diaspora has for a long time divided the émigrés into two groups — the older and the younger generations.⁶ The former was characterized by an established pre-revolutionary literary career and a conservative stance towards literature. Bakunina was closer in age to the older generation and had developed as an author before her emigration, as demonstrated by the similarities between ‘Koni-Ailand’ and her later prose. Still, she willingly joined the ranks of the younger generation, attracted by their affinity for a truthful, almost documentarian style of writing (‘human document’) and their willingness to engage with international

Kaliforniiskii al'manakh, ed. by N. L. Lavrova and others (San Francisco: Kruzhok, 1934); *Rossiiskoe zarubezh'e vo Frantsii. 1919–2000. Biograficheskii slovar'*, ed. by L. A. Mnukhina, Mari Avril', and Veronique Lossky (Moscow: Nauka, Museum of Marina Tsvetaeva, 2008). Further information has been discovered in the following archives: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, GEN MSS 182, Nina Berberova papers, 1933, Box 57, Folder 1279 and Amherst College, Records of The Union of Russian Writers and Journalists Abroad, Series 1, Bakunina-Novoselova, Ekaterina, 30 Jun 1930 — 15 Jan 1934, Box 1, Folder 10.

² The dates of her emigration to the US and her return to Russia are unknown.

³ Ekaterina Bakunina, ‘Koni-Ailand’, *Russkoe Bogatstvo*, 1 (1912).

⁴ She worked as a secretary for *Chisla* for only half of its runtime — between 1932 and 1934.

⁵ For more on Bakunina’s correspondence, see the archival materials of Amherst College and the Beinecke Library, as well as Youlia Maritchik-Sioli, ‘Pis'ma E.V. Bakuninoi k N.N. Evreinovu (1931–1934). Istoriiia «malen'koi» pisatel'nitsy’, *Literaturnyi Fakt*, 3.25 (2022), 8–24 and Leonid Livak, *How It Was Done in Paris: Russian Emigre Literature and French Modernism* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

⁶ See among others Gleb Struve, Mark Raeff, Maria Rubins, Greta Slobin and Leonid Livak. Gleb Struve, *Russkaia Literatura v Iznanii: Opyt Istoricheskogo Obzora Zarubezhnoi Literatury* (Moscow: Russkii put', 1996); Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1990); Maria Rubins, ‘The Diasporic Canon of Russian Poetry: The Case of the Paris Note’, in *Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry: Reinventing the Canon*, ed. by Katharine Hodgson, Joanne Shelton, and Alexandra Smith (Cambridge: Open Book, 2017), pp. 289–328; Maria Rubins, *Russian Montparnasse: Transnational Writing in Interwar Paris* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Greta N. Slobin, *Russians Abroad: Literary and Cultural Politics of Diaspora (1919–1939)*, ed. by Katerina Clark and others (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013); Livak, *How It Was Done in Paris: Russian Emigre Literature and French Modernism*; Leonid Livak, ‘Russian Émigré Literature in the Context of French Modernism: The Case of Iurii Fel'zen’, *The Modern Language Review*, 95.3 (2000), 779–89.

literature.⁷ It is, however, also difficult to unequivocally assign Bakunina to the Paris Note, the most popular youthful literary movement.⁹ Despite many similarities between her writing and that of the Paris Note, there is no conclusive proof of any intense involvement with or influence by the group. The Paris Note is widely accepted to be a poetic movement, whereas Bakunina's focus was shifting from poetry towards prose and criticism, as is evident by her publishing history in *Chisla* — in 1932, she published 4 poems, whereas in the following two years, she only published one poem. Furthermore, her 1912 short story 'Koni Ailand' demonstrates the same writing style and themes that are found in her later prose, meaning that Bakunina was already an experienced writer before emigrating, and the influence of her Paris years on her prose was minimal, unlike many of the young authors whose artistic careers began under the influence of Georgii Adamovich.

Bakunina's two novels *Telo* and *Liubov' k shesterym* follow a similar structure — the protagonist, a middle-aged woman, reflects on her life and whether the sacrifices she has made for her family have been worthwhile. In *Liubov' k shesterym*, the protagonist Mavra begins an affair that leads her to the realization that she is more than just a housewife. Throughout the novel, she is torn between her feelings for the titular six — her husband, her three children, her lover, and her platonic love interest — and the responsibilities which all of these relationships entail. However, with time, the reader realizes that the question is not whom she loves more but whether she can pursue her own comfort and happiness at the expense of these relationships. Throughout the novel, Mavra toys with the idea of leaving her family for her lover or abandoning everyone, however, in the end, her sense of duty outweighs her desire for freedom, leading her to choose to stay with her family.

Bakunina and the Idea of the Self

By focusing on identity for the main part of her writing career, Bakunina was able to create an intriguing definition of what the term meant for her. In her universe, the person is born with 'новорожденная душа' (newborn soul) which is '[т]акая же голая, как тело' (as naked as the body).¹⁰ With the passage of time, the individual is forced to take on responsibilities assigned by

⁷ More on the *human document* genre can be found in Nataliya Yakovleva, *Chelovecheskii Dokument: Istoriiā Odnogo Poniatiīā* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2012); Rubins, *Russian Montparnasse*.

⁸ As demonstrated by her reviews of non-Russophone literary works on the pages of *Chisla*. See Bakunina, Ekaterina, 'Sigrid Undset', *Chisla*, 6 (1932), 264–65; Bakunina, Ekaterina, 'Vladimir Zenzinov: Le Chemin de L'Oubli', *Chisla* 7–8 (1933), 270–72; Bakunina, Ekaterina, 'Marc Chagal: Ma Vie', *Chisla* 9 (1933), 221–22.

⁹ The Paris Note was a group of younger poets which revolved around Geōrgii Adamovich and whose works focused on feelings of isolation and an authentic rendering of life in literature.

¹⁰ As Bakunina's novels have not been translated into English, all translations are my own. Ekaterina Bakunina, *Telo; Liubov' k shesterym* (Moscow: Geleos, 2001), p. 67.

society and the family, which obstruct the innate identity.¹¹ The protagonists of Bakunina's two novels are torn between the desire to rediscover who they really are and their roles as mothers, wives, homemakers, and lovers. In *Liubov' k shesterym*, Bakunina clarifies the hierarchy between the self and the identities one requires in life:

Но тем более я распиная себя бесчисленными насилиями над естественными позывами. Теперь у меня душевный запор, перемежающийся с бунтовщическими поносами. Но мне хочется вместо опутывающей меня рутины (стальная паутина) предоставить дневному обходу идти 'через пень колоду', как придется. Однако этого я не могу! Навязанная мне стечением обстоятельств роль сильнее моей задавленной личности.¹²

This statement perfectly summarizes Bakunina's attitude towards the self and the claustrophobic roles which gradually destroy it. The 'natural instincts' represent the innate identity which is stifled by the pressure to fit into the concept of mother, wife, and homemaker. The novel is a rebellion against this process of pigeonholing and represents a quest to rediscover the self. However, as is foreshadowed in the last sentence of this citation, the search for her innate identity is ultimately unsuccessful as the roles Mavra is required to play have a stronger influence on her than her striving to reconnect with her inner self.

National Self

With the fall of the Russian Empire and the rise of the Soviet Union, what it meant to be Russian was quickly changing. For the émigrés, this shift in national belonging was even greater as they found themselves to be 'a national entity without a nation'.¹³ By becoming outsiders to both their homeland and their host land,¹⁴ the émigrés occupied what Homi Bhabha dubs a 'third space'.¹⁵ This places them at the margins of both the host and the home societies, belonging to neither, yet having a perspective on both and from this process of marginalisation a new cultural identity emerges. According to Greta Slobin, there is a third pillar of identity orientation — namely pre-revolutionary identity. When attempting to build a collective identity, this pre-1917 idea of what Russianness meant was fundamental and the émigrés saw themselves as

¹¹ Bakunina calls this entity a 'soul'. Yet, over her two novels it becomes clear that this naked soul is in fact what gets overshadowed by the newly acquired identities of wife, mother, lover and homemaker. Therefore, her meaning seems to be closer to 'self' than to the idea of the traditional idea of a 'soul'.

¹² 'But even more so, I restrain myself with countless acts of violence against my natural instincts. Now I have a mental blockage, alternating with rebellious outbursts. But instead of the entangling routine (steel web) that surrounds me, I want to allow my day to pass 'willy-nilly', as it pleases. However, I cannot do this! The role imposed on me by circumstances is stronger than my suppressed self'. Bakunina, *Liubov'*, pp. 41–42.

¹³ Slobin, p. 23.

¹⁴ Despite the attempts of Franco-Russian cooperation depicted by Leonid Livak, few émigrés were truly successful in the literary fields of their host countries. See Livak, *How It Was Done in Paris*.

¹⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture, The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

the continuation of the pre-revolutionary culture in opposition to the West and the Soviets.¹⁶ The Russia they knew in their younger years remained, therefore, central in the lives of the émigrés, evident from their tendency to gravitate towards Russophone cultural networks such as publishing houses, schools, periodicals, and their continued use of a Russian cultural backdrop in their works even while living abroad.¹⁷

Bakunina is no exception and also depicts the struggles of losing one's homeland in her poetry, as well as in her two novels. In the latter, the act of expatriation divides the life of the protagonist into two halves — a carefree Russian childhood and a difficult adult life in Paris. The tight bond between the homeland and childhood was common for the diaspora, especially for the younger generation, whose departure from their motherland coincided with their coming of age.¹⁸ The double nostalgia — for the lost homeland and the 'golden childhood'¹⁹ — was conducive to the creation of an idealized version of Russia — a mixture of memories, stories, and myth. This merging of the concepts of homeland and childhood leads Bakunina's characters to associate the freedom and lack of inhibitions of youth with their time spent in Russia. Therefore, Russia is presented in the two novels as a space where the characters were free — either in terms of material needs or in terms of lack of duties and routine.

In the latter novel, the protagonist's Russian origin is often employed as a means of identification. There are three main ways in which she uses her background to re-assert her identity— as a sign of belonging, of exceptionality or of difference. Firstly, Mavra uses belonging in order to build camaraderie between herself and the Russian people. For example, when describing the Russian bath house, she expresses a sense of — '[я] от этого народа, ядерная'.²⁰ Bakunina frequently employs the pronoun 'us' to recount the protagonist's past, indicating that her memories are not just personal recollections but rather a shared experience. When describing Mavra's village, she states: 'А как же у нас в деревнях — из жаркой бани, напарившись чуть не до крови, да в снег!'.²¹ According to Anthony Smith, this collective representation of shared memories and similar destinies is crucial in constructing a national identity.²²

¹⁶ This is especially evident in the speech on the mission of the Russian diaspora held by Bunin in February 1924 and later published in *Rul'*. Ivan Bunin, 'Missiia Eusskoï Emigratsii', *Rul'*, 1013, 5–6.

¹⁷ This tendency is demonstrated by the number of publishing houses and journals which sprung up each year in the 20s and 30s. See Struve, pp. 31–35.

¹⁸ As evident in the works of other younger members of the diaspora, e.g. Vladimir Nabokov, Nina Berberova, Irina Odoevtseva, Boris Poplavskii, etc.

¹⁹ Not only was the émigrés' childhood lost to the passage of time, but also the country in which this phase of their life transpired had faded into the realm of memory. For more on the myth of the 'golden childhood', see Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990).

²⁰ 'I am from these people, vigorous'. Bakunina, *Liubov'*, p. 71.

²¹ 'But how about how we go about things in the villages — going from the hot sauna, flushed almost to the very bone, straight into the snow'. Bakunina, *Liubov'*, p. 71.

²² Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Penguin, 1992), p. 29.

Secondly, national belonging is used to enhance the sense of self by distancing oneself from the banality of everyday life and instead adopting a mystical persona. When describing her face to her imaginary lover, Mavra refers to her heritage as ‘всей смеси диких орд и племен, века зачинавших, умиравших и снова зачинавших на самой большой равнине’.²³ She uses these Russian common traits to define not only her appearance but also herself, stating: ‘[В] о мне же должен быть след и от дикости и от могучей зимней русской спячки’.²⁴ The ‘should be’ here expresses a necessity (even desperation) from the protagonist to identify with the free people of the steppes as they represent the opposite of her life as a repressed housewife.

Lastly, Bakunina juxtaposes Russia with France as another way of reclaiming the self. In many instances throughout the novel, Bakunina compares the two countries with an obvious bias towards the homeland. By ‘othering’ the host country, Mavra can create an identity for herself based on difference rather than belonging. In her critique of France, she states: ‘[и] какая это страна, которую можно проехать в один день, а моя без конца и края, сынуля ненаглядная, под белым покрывалом разметавшаяся на двух’.²⁵ What is common in most depictions of Russia is its mystical status as a land of fairy tales and olden-day traditions in opposition to France’s industrialised disillusionment. This portrayal represents a reflection of the diaspora’s outlook, particularly of the younger generation whose understanding of Russia was shaped more by stories and memories than their own personal experiences.

Gendered Self

The gendered self parallels the two-phase model of the national self — in the earlier period of the protagonist’s life, she is in touch with her true identity, whereas in her later life, she loses this connection. The distinction is that for the national self, the point that demarcates the two states is emigration, whereas, for gender, it is puberty and the arrival of womanhood. In *Liubov’ k shesterym*, the transition from a wild carefree child into an obedient woman begins as Mavra describes when ‘у меня стали вырастать груди и удлиняться косы, и вместе с плавностью движений появилось мучительное свойство краснеть, робеть и влюбляться’, making the bodily display of gender signs the beginning of Mavra’s life of submission.²⁶

²³ ‘All the mixture of wild hordes and tribes that conceived centuries, died and conceived again on the largest plain’. Bakunina, *Liubov’*, p. 237.

²⁴ ‘In me, there should be a trace of both the savagery and the mighty Russian winter hibernation’. Bakunina, *Liubov’*, p. 55.

²⁵ ‘And what sort of country is it that you can cross it in one day, and mine is borderless, my beloved son, scattered under a white veil on two continents’. Bakunina, *Liubov’*, p. 101.

²⁶ ‘As my breasts began to develop and my braids grew longer, and along with my movements becoming more graceful, I also developed an unfortunate tendency to blush, cry, and fall in love’. Bakunina, *Liubov’*, p. 87.

Through the use of flashbacks in her novel, Bakunina guides the reader through the protagonist's life. The freedom of her childhood is followed by an awkward adolescence, filled with unrequited sexual desire, and a decision to get married, influenced by inexperience and the attraction of a future life in France. Once in Paris, Mavra is met with the reality of her marriage — she moves in with her husband and mother-in-law and completely loses touch with her inner self in order to conform to their idea of what a bride should be. This is especially evident in her recollection of the first days in her new home. Prior to her arrival, Mavra loved to sing but:

[...] вскоре по приезде я умолкла. Все, что естественно делала, казалось неудобным и неловким под снисходительными взглядами свекрови и мужа. И у меня явилась потребность поскорей натянуть на свою молодость маску деловитой, зрелой серьезности.²⁷

This passage demonstrates the unnatural way in which Mavra was forced to transform into the ideal of a wife (and later mother). The motivation to adopt a new behaviour does not stem from within but is instead enforced by her familial circle. Mavra's failure to internalise what the roles entail as wife and mother is also demonstrated by her need to change her habits in order to give a good example to her children²⁸. With time, she recalls: '[o]ни сжились с моими заботами, а я привыкла о них заботиться. И я уже неотделима от привычек, выросла в свой быт [...]', proving that caring for her family did not come naturally to her. Instead, she needed to fundamentally change herself in order to slip into the role of mother and wife.²⁹

Out of all the roles Mavra performs — the mother, the wife, the daughter-in-law, the lover and the homemaker — the first one is without question the strongest. Immediately after giving birth to her first child, Mavra confesses that she neglected her relationship with her husband as '[она] больше не принадлежала себе и не могла себя отдавать мужу'.³⁰ She experienced a change so deep that she felt as if '[ee] словно подменили. Материнство заслонило или приглушило всякий не связанный с ним интерес, развило смежные'.³¹ Finally, when contemplating the possibility of leaving her family for her lover or for the sake of pursuing her own aspirations, she ultimately decides against it as she cannot abandon her children. She states: '[к]онечно, я

²⁷ 'Soon after I arrived, I fell silent. Everything I did naturally seemed awkward and uncomfortable under the condescending gaze of my mother-in-law and husband. I felt the need to quickly put on a mask of business-like maturity over my youthfulness'. Bakunina, *Liubov'*, p. 182.

²⁸ Bakunina, *Liubov'*, p. 15.

²⁹ 'They [referring to the family] got absorbed in my cares, and I grew accustomed to caring for them. And now, I cannot be separated from these habits, having become fully emerged in my everyday life'. Bakunina, *Liubov'*, p. 8.

³⁰ '[she] no longer belonged to [herself] and could not yield [herself] to [her] husband'. Bakunina, *Telo; Liubov' k shesterym*, p. 108.

³¹ 'It was as if someone had replaced me. Motherhood overshadowed or dulled any interest not related to it, and developed adjacent ones'. Bakunina, *Liubov'*, p. 111.

не могу оставить детей, особенно Таню'.³² Thus, motherhood plays the most significant role in keeping her obedient and destroying the self, as the needs of the child outweigh the mother's desires.

The Intersection of Identities

Even though Bakunina mostly focuses on the national and the gender identities individually in order to underline their shortcomings, there is an intriguing way in which they intersect. Her Russian heritage is on the one hand fundamental to Mavra's sense of freedom, yet it is entangled with a legacy which is passed on from generation to generation of women. 'Наследственная покорность',³³ as referred to by Bakunina, is a moral code inherited from her female ancestors which guides Mavra's actions on multiple occasions despite her realisation that it is futile and even harmful. Mavra sees herself as a mixture from 'первоначальное я, помноженное на все последующие поколения, плюс наследственность, за которую я не отвечаю' assigning an equal role to the inherited and involuntary morals as she does to her self.³⁴ During her first sexual encounter with her lover, she feels 'прабабкиных чувств: отвращение, испуг, оскорбленность, презрение к себе и к вам, и к совершавшемуся, его недопустимость, свой срам, поношение, бесчестье', which then results in a 'взрыв наследственных и впитанных мною за всю мою жизнь нравственных понятий, устоев, запретов, оглядки'.³⁵ The freedom of her forebearers (presumably men) is juxtaposed to the limiting moral convictions of her grandmothers and mothers.³⁶ And thus, the Russian identity seems to be

³² 'Of course, I cannot leave the children, especially Tanya'. Bakunina, *Liubov'*, p. 154.

³³ 'Inherited submission'. Bakunina, *Liubov'*, p. 100.

³⁴ 'The initial me, multiplied by all subsequent generations, plus heredity for which I am not responsible'. Bakunina, *Liubov'*, p. 4.

³⁵ 'The feelings of great-great-grandmothers: disgust, fear, offense, contempt towards oneself, towards you, and towards what was happening, its inadmissibility, one's own shame, humiliation, disgrace,' which then led to an 'explosion of inherited and imbibed moral concepts, norms, prohibitions, reservations that I've carried throughout my entire life'. Bakunina, *Liubov'*, p. 149.

³⁶ When describing her forefathers and the beginning of her life, Mavra states: 'Я была крепка, в меру умна, в меру образована и вышла из класса шкурников, которые черствы, толстокожи, смекалисты в наживе и тупы в остальном, но которые здоровенны и упорны. Соплей революционной утопии их не перешибешь все пережив, вывезут на хребте исконное скопидомство. И я вышла кряжистой и вся налита была жизненными соками и силами, требовавшими приложения', yet this legacy proves to be inapplicable in her everyday life, as 'вместо того, чтобы развить эти мои наследственные качества, требующиеся в беспощадном соревновании, меня натаскивали на расслабляющие этические догмы, развивали во мне жалость, привязанности, сострадание и искусственную слепоту [...]' (I was strong, reasonably intelligent, reasonably educated, and I emerged from the class of furriers who are rough, thick-skinned, shrewd in acquiring wealth, and dull otherwise, but who are robust and tenacious. The mucus of revolutionary utopia cannot bring them down, they've weathered it all; on their shoulders, the ancient penny-pinching thrives. And I came out stocky, filled with life's juices and energies, demanding application; However, instead of nurturing these hereditary qualities of mine that are essential in ruthless competition, I was trained in relaxing ethical dogmas, cultivating in me pity, attachment, compassion, and an artificial blindness [...]). Bakunina, *Liubov'*, pp. 174-75. The initial description,

freeing only in relation to men and children, whereas Russian women remain under a yoke of morality and subordination.

Conclusion

The analysis of identity's role in Bakunina's *Liubov' k shesterym* gives rise to several intriguing conclusions. Firstly, the author employs a similar approach to both gender and national identity, portraying them as being demarcated into two distinct periods by significant life events — maturing and emigrating. These experiences then cause a rift between one's true self and the societal roles to which one must conform. Secondly, we see that for Bakunina the role of the mother is what subordinates the woman in her familial roles. The maternal duty is stronger than all other identities the woman adopts throughout life, and it is more important to her than her desire for freedom or happiness. And thirdly, a captivating interplay emerges between gender and Russian identities. Here, the former significantly impacts the latter, forging a positive image of the Russian male ancestors that in turn strengthens the protagonist's sense of belonging. Conversely, a less favourable image arises of the subordinate Russian woman whose legacy prevents Mavra from breaking free from her roles and re-discovering the self.

emphasizing physicality, strenuous labour, and astuteness, unmistakably directs attention to the fact that the ancestors in question were men. In contrast, the second section aligns with the overarching theme of inherited female morality that permeates the entire novel.

Against Closure and Identification: Textual-Visual Trajectories in *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001)

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Abstract. This article examines *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001), a collection of letters written by one of Delhi's famous *hijra* personalities — Mona Ahmed, interspersed with photographs of Mona taken over a decade by renowned photographer Dayanita Singh. I first locate the text within C  el M. Keegan's conceptualization of good and bad trans objects. Keegan critiques how contemporary liberal representations of trans experiences actually operate within the normative visibility of binary arrangements of gender and sex, idealizing linear movement from one gender into another as the penultimate aspiration of all gender variant individuals. As opposed to this, Singh and Mona refuse aspects of linearity and closure in their autobiographical journeys and present a conception of text-subject that constantly exceeds frameworks of the gender binary. This enables them to rework conventional understandings of autobiography as progressive narratives of an individual self, by employing an aesthetic of literary-visual intermediality. This operates at three levels of relationality in the narrative: between the textual and visual elements, between Mona and Singh as shifting subjects in the narrative, and between the text and the reader. In constantly pushing against closure, Singh and Mona defy the reader's expectations of having 'known' the autobiographical subject through the act of reading. Through that, the narrative becomes an active site of protest in an ethos where gender-variant bodies are being increasingly bureaucratized and assimilated within essentialist discourses of nationhood and identity.

Myself Mona Ahmed (2001) is a collection of letters written by one of Delhi's famous *hijra* (eunuch) personalities, Mona Ahmed, interspersed with photographs of her taken over a decade by Dayanita Singh, in which Mona records the memory of her castration with noticeable uncertainty and grief. After remembering the physical pain of having gone through the procedure, she writes: 'But after the day of my castration, I started to have regrets and wondered what I would do...'¹ This moment is followed by memories of a range of complications she must confront. These include recovery from the surgery, estrangement within the *hijra* groups in Delhi, the enforced separation from

¹ Dayanita Singh, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (New York: Scalo, 2001), p. 51.

her adopted daughter Ayesha and the eventual shift to her family's ancestral graveyard atop which she builds a home for herself. Within the text, Mona evokes memories of her transition very briefly, and only in the first letter. The rest of the letters seem to be an effort to record as well as process the grief experienced after her separation from Ayesha. This is coupled with ruminations about the state of gender-variant individuals in a regulatory ethos determined to assimilate them within a normative economy of welfare and citizenship. In doing so, Mona rejects the centrality of surgical transition, or a straightforward movement from one gender embodiment to another, as the penultimate signifier of closure and freedom in life-narratives and representations of transgender and transsexual individuals.

It is worth noting that Mona operates in a distinctive South Asian setting and identifies as *hijra*, a locally specific register of gender variance. As Ahmad Ibrahim explains, *hijras* are feminine embodied individuals who are assigned male at birth, who may or may not have undergone castration; they are scripturally given roles such as providing blessings during marriages or childbirth and live in kinship structures with other *hijra* individuals.² These varied aspects of the community's lived experiences and socio-cultural positioning get overlooked within discourses of gender variance under the ambit of 'transgender' and 'transsexual' as identity signifiers.³

However, Mona's narrative's refusal is echoed within Cael M. Keegan's idea of 'good' and 'bad' trans objects.⁴ Keegan critiques the dominant discourse of increasing media visibility of trans characters in shows such as *Pose* (2019) and *Orange is the New Black* (2013–19), as a direct correlative of freedom, equality and positive legislation. As he explains, this proliferating representation often frames transness within linear tropes of movement and transition, and therefore continues to uphold the binary arrangement of sex and desire within legal and cultural spaces.⁵ This further connotes with Juliet Jacques's analysis of autobiographical narratives such as Hedy Jo Star's *I Changed My Sex* (1963) and Jan Morris' *Conundrum* (1974).⁶ Jacques explains how these narratives embody the linear journey of their autobiographical subjects, who perceive their marginality in opposition to a life lived in accordance with normative conceptions of gender and sex.⁷ Within the ambit of this linearity, the moment of surgical transition becomes the closing point of the text. This closure marks the subject's arrival at a state of wholeness within which their corporeal gendered self is finally congruent with an internal essence. To narrativize such

² Ahmad Ibrahim, 'Under Empire and the Modern State: Unravelling "Queer Precarities" inside Global Assemblages', in *Queer Asia*, ed. by J. Daniel Luther and Jennifer Ung Loh (London: Zed Books, 2019), pp. 29–44 (p. 32).

³ Ibrahim, p. 32.

⁴ Cael M. Keegan, 'On the Necessity of Bad Trans Objects', *Film Quarterly*, 75 (2022), 26–37.

⁵ Keegan, p. 27.

⁶ Juliet Jacques, 'Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory and Fiction in Trans Life Writing', *Life Writing*, 14 (2017), 357–70.

⁷ Jacques, p. 359.

an experience, the text also operates within a framework where its ending signifies a fixed point of closure, foreclosing any alternative possibilities of expression and interpretation.

Mona's iteration of gender variance situates itself neither in-between nor outside binary arrangements but seems to unsettle them from within. Therefore, in Keegan's framework, she operates as the 'bad' trans object, one that needs to be constantly pushed out of accepted zones of representability.⁸ This question of representation is further complicated when one understands the reception of the book as an autobiographical narrative. Her letters are specifically addressed to the publisher to reveal different aspects of her lived reality, both about and beyond her status as a marginalised subject. As mentioned before, it is not the element of castration and surgery that holds centrality in the narrative. In fact, the last letter in the book reiterates her hope of reuniting with Ayesha, leaving the narrative open-ended. The letters, the photographs and the personal foreword by Singh constantly take the reader back and forth across spatio-temporal settings. As a result, there is a noticeable spectre of fictionality that looms large over the narrative. Furthermore, Mona's autobiographical subject occupies a fraught gendered position throughout the text. This signifies the subject's refusal to arrive at a coherent gendered subjecthood, which is formally mapped onto the narrative's non-linear and open-ended trajectory.

Within the scope of such ambivalence, Mona's text also counters some definitional tenets articulated by foundational theorists of autobiography studies such as Philippe Lejeune and James Olney. Lejeune necessitates a pact of verifiable 'identicalness' between the author on the autobiography's cover and the narrator and protagonist inside the text.⁹ Olney states that the autobiographical self needs to be reflective of an essential humanist essence within which the reader can clearly recognise themselves.¹⁰ At the very outset, the fact that both Singh and Mona operate as autobiographical subjects effectively refutes considerations of such impermeable boundaries.

The book's reworking of the foundational tenets of autobiography signals towards an integral relationship between an incoherently gendered subject and a formal universalism that must be de-mythologised to narrativize the former's life. Interestingly enough, because of life-writings' undecidable location between fiction and non-fiction, Paul De Man, in his 1979 essay, discredits autobiography as a genre.¹¹ However, *Myself Mona Ahmed* highlights the possibility of using this contestation as a point of departure, rather than a moment of definitional crisis. In this framework, the autobiographical text, much like its fraught subject, initiates a trajectory of plural readings and multiple positionalities that

⁸ Keegan, p. 29.

⁹ Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact', in *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin, trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 3–30 (p. 14).

¹⁰ Candace Lang, 'Autobiography in the Aftermath of Romanticism', *Diacritics*, 12 (1982), 2–16 (p. 4).

¹¹ Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as Defacement', in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 67–81 (p. 68).

operate beyond moments of being conceived, written and received as a finished narrative. It is within the purview of this reworking that I analyse Singh and Mona's text, specifically how the extensive use of textual-visual intermediality becomes a conduit of formal autobiographical disruption. I explore three levels of inter-relationality through which this disruption operates: that between the visual and textual elements of the book, between Mona and Singh as separate yet interconnected writing subjects in the narrative, and finally between Mona's written subject and the reader/viewer interpreting the text. I argue that it is within the scope of these relationalities that Singh and Mona defy expectations of textual closure and fixity, and through that, present a fierce critique of enforced gender norms. Finally, I will also explore the narrative as a counter-discourse to the 2019 Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act. By refusing assessments of autobiography as evidentiary of an essential reality, the book protests this bureaucratic effort by the Indian state to assimilate gender variant dissidence within fixed discourses of nationalism and citizenship.

In *Myself Mona Ahmed*, the majority of the photographs are taken during the phases of Mona's adoption and separation from Ayesha, and the relocation to the graveyard after being ostracised from the *hijra* group she was a part of. However, they do not follow any discernible linear order. In fact, the first photograph shows Mona sitting in the jungle near the graveyard, surrounded by bulkheads and shrubs, with a distant melancholic expression on her face. Taken in 1999, almost a decade after Singh met Mona, it is captioned: 'Sitting in the jungle, I am complaining to Allah that the little joy I got in my life from Ayesha was also snatched away from me'.¹² Followed by a letter thanking Keller for his interest in her story, the next photograph shifts back to 1991, in which Mona holds Ayesha as an infant, both gazing into the camera. These temporal shifts signify a subject that is continually processing her past. Although a marker of a changing and evolving self, this processing is mapped onto the narrative without the promise of a bildungsroman resolution or arrival into an actualised self. In fact, an intense melancholy pervades the letters and photographs that follow. However, in the absence of a clear resolution, this emotion seems to seep out of the text and become a token for the reader/viewer. This is one of the significant ways in which the text attempts to chart a course beyond closure. I will analyse how this reconfigures the reader's position vis-à-vis autobiography and gives the text an afterlife, after commenting upon the relationship between the textual and visual construction of melancholy.

Singh's photographic gaze seems insistent on capturing Mona in shifting settings and contexts. As with the letters, this enables a focus on the everyday, the immediate and the momentary aspects of her negotiation with her surroundings. A few photographs from 1999 show her at a mosque, seeking blessings to relieve her of her depression. With sections of the mosque in the background, Mona is being stared at by a flurry of visitors. She gazes directly

¹² Singh, p. 4.

into the camera with half a smile on her face. The photo is captioned: 'People always stare at me, but it does not bother me'.¹³ This insistence on the daily and the momentary allows Singh and Mona to reproduce a self that is configured relationally and materially rather than individually. Her life after relocating back to the graveyard is reflective of the ways in which she instrumentalises her grief to create networks of solidarity with people surrounding her. For instance, there is a photograph of her counselling the women in her neighbourhood who are trapped in troubled marriages. Another series in the middle of the book shows Mona surrounded by the numerous animals she has adopted. The last of this set is particularly arresting; a closeup shot of Mona's face as her pet rabbit Moti rests its head on it.¹⁴ This gesture symbolises how the photographs rewrite the letters' repeatedly invoked melancholia into a site of forging connections and relationships beyond communal, gendered identities. However, this reworking does not imply a potential move away from emotional turbulence, for the book's last photograph returns Mona to the same jungle with which the subjects' journey began. Captured from a distance, Mona stands in front of a construction site, potentially her own home, and looks directly into the camera. Taken in 2000, just a year after the first picture, she captions it: 'There's peace in the jungle, but I still cannot find it in myself'.¹⁵

Furthermore, one also notices how the text and image do not always complement each other in terms of the situations they represent. For instance, in the letter that follows the photograph with her rabbit, Mona expresses a strong concern for the state of democracy in contemporary India.¹⁶ This lack of coherence between the visual and textual documentation of Mona's concerns and emotional state allows the narrative's subject to occupy multiple positions simultaneously. However, these positions do not coalesce into a subject that is healed or has processed her past. In fact, the relocation back to the ancestral graveyard, a significantly material site of intergenerational memory, is symbolic of an insistence to keep returning to the familial. Although, the familial does not signify a point of origin for Mona. It rather enables a disruption within the linearity of the trope of 'coming out', which insists on an active forgetting of the past to reproduce the identity of a liberated queer subject. Mona and Singh's subject operates beyond the scope of identification within normative ideas of liberation. In reworking 'identity' from a sovereign psychic category to a site of disruptive practice, the subject performs what José Muñoz articulates as 'disidentification', a strategy by which marginal subjects neither operate for nor against normative exclusionary systems but actively rework them from within.¹⁷ This is signified by the networks of support Mona is able to engender

¹³ Singh, p. 127.

¹⁴ Singh, pp. 115–18.

¹⁵ Singh, p. 158.

¹⁶ Singh, p. 119.

¹⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 4.

with different groups of people around the graveyard. For instance, Mona provides shelter to a Muslim priest in her house even though the caretakers of the graveyard kill her pet monkey Shabnam, for they associate it with Hindu religious mythology and therefore inappropriate to be sheltered within a Muslim graveyard.¹⁸ This gesture on Mona's part exhibits a call to engender networks of solidarity within which identities are materialised as relational and concomitant, rather than individual and separated. It is precisely this conception of relationality that informs not only Singh's photographic gaze, but also her relationship with Mona in the narrative.

As previously mentioned, both Singh and Mona operate as autobiographical entities in the narrative. In her foreword, Singh explains how in the process of establishing trust with Mona, they both become an integral part of each other's life. As their photographer-subject relationship progresses into an intimate friendship, Mona becomes a point of access into a world by which Singh admits having been formerly intimidated. Her entry into Mona's world, also reflective of her ethical practices as a photographer, contrasts with Susan Sontag's assessment of Diane Arbus's 1972 retrospective in *On Photography*. In the latter's oeuvre, Sontag locates a continuous focus on subjects located at socio-cultural margins, who were always sought for their permission before Arbus photographed them. However, this contract between her and her subject does not mark Arbus's entry into the spaces they inhabit. As Sontag writes: 'The whole point of photographing people is that you are not intervening in their lives, only visiting them.'¹⁹ In that framework, Arbus's subjects remain entrenched in their position as the objects of her photographic gaze. Fixed in their setting and separate from each other, they are located outside of history, with no possibilities of interaction between their disparate contexts.²⁰ However, something entirely different seems to be happening in the case of Singh and Mona.

The nature of their interaction is most exemplified when Singh writes that 'as the years went by, and we got older, the equation shifted. More and more I felt like I had to take care of Mona...'²¹ This implies a framework of empathy and care within which Mona and Singh occupy different positions at different junctures. In other words, even as her photographic gaze reads Mona in her context, she is also allowing herself to be read by Mona as a subject that is changing, evolving in relation to her. As Singh admits, 'in a class-ridden society of ours, there would be no meeting point for Mona and me, were it not for photography. Photography led me to her, but it was not photography that sustained our relationship for 12 years.'²² In the narrative, both Singh and Mona straddle the lines between seeing and being seen, writing and being

¹⁸ Singh, p. 117.

¹⁹ Sontag, p. 44.

²⁰ Sontag, pp. 33-34.

²¹ Singh, p. 12.

²² Singh, p. 16.

written. This disrupts all notions of the autobiographical subject's supposed sovereignty, a represented mimetic entity with interiorised self-awareness. Instead of mimesis, the narrative makes space for the recreational possibilities of autobiographical writing and opening up space for those renditions of self that are constantly in the process of reproduction. The lines between self and other, inside and outside are intentionally blurred, and they remain so, as the recreated subject(s) constantly push(es) against closure. In such a framework, both the positionalities, that of being seen and being written, are not passive, othered positionalities. The book locates a certain degree of agency in the reception of a gaze that is empathetic, politicised and makes space both for context and relationality. In doing so, it reconfigures Lejeune's autobiographical pact and highlights the possibilities of a relational self or selves claiming and sharing autobiographical space. However, where and how do we locate the reader in such a pluralistic textual practice? Or what kind of interpretive and receptive practices does Singh and Mona's rendition of subjecthood encourage?

This analysis has so far shown that the text's autobiographical subject(s) constantly exceed all framings of totality. Multiple iterations of subjecthood operate in multiple settings simultaneously, without culminating into a whole that connotes with the writing subject outside the text, and within which the reading subject can recognise themselves. This refusal opposes the Barthesian classification of 'readable' and 'writeable' elements of a text, as interpreted by Candace Lang.²³ The readable signals those parts of a text within which the reader can recognise themselves, those which are comprehensible and reflective of the text's totality. In contrast to this, the writeable elements are those that go beyond comprehension, which are pluralist, appear disjointed and must be rewritten by the reader for them to become comprehensible.²⁴ In this sense, the act of reading signifies an attempt to bring together the disparate elements of the text and coalesce them into a legible, interpretable whole. As Lang writes: 'To read, in the Barthesian sense, is to function within the romantic mode, characterised by the desire for unity and totality, and a belief in the autonomous self.'²⁵

However, within the purview of Singh and Mona's narrative, the notion of a reading subject who can discern the various positionings into a unified set of meanings does not hold. Both the visual and textual constructions of subjecthood actively refuse receptions of the text as a linear and fixed narrative. The absence of distinctive closure takes this even farther as the reader must contend with a certain degree of 'un-knowability' on part of the autobiographical subject's representation of themselves. For instance, in the last letter that is directly addressed to Ayesha, Mona signs herself as *Abboo* (father), while also saying to Ayesha: 'But I hope you will never have to face

²³ Lang, p. 12.

²⁴ Lang, p. 12.

²⁵ Lang, p. 12.

the pain that I have gone through as a mother losing her child'.²⁶ In doing so, Mona constantly defies the expectations of being read within binary framings of gender. This un-knowability, rather than being a reductive category, allows the text to traverse multiple spatio-temporal positions. It prevents the text's model of dis-identificatory self-making from becoming an exacting reproducible template of liberatory politics. Additionally, the intermediality of the narrative, specifically the intentionally disparate interspersal of images with the letters, further challenges the evidentiary and representative expectations of photographs in the text. Instead of offering a fully realised subject who can be 'known' either visually or textually, Mona and Singh attempt at a different kind of coalition with the reader.

Coupled with melancholy, Mona's letters also express a lot of rage in the narrative. But in the absence of conclusive telos, where that rage is expected to be channelled towards a resolution, Mona and Singh offer this emotion as a token to be reproduced outside the text's limits. In other words, they implicate the reader within the text to generate introspective effects, for the reader empathises with the written subject without having epistemic authority over it. In this process, the text acquires an afterlife or initiates a journey beyond closure for its effects refuse to cease simply via narrative resolution. This generates a space for contextual yet multiple readings, which works against the logic of linear and reproductive iconographies. Instead of the autobiographical space being claimed for an individual's lived reality, it is utilised as an avenue for cultural critique. I believe it is precisely the relational conception of self that Mona initiated with people around the graveyard as well as with Singh, an engendering of solidarity beyond politics of identity, that the book attempts to reproduce with the reader. It is worth referencing the series of photographs of Mona with her pets. The love and care with which she tends to her rabbit Moti, as well as Sunehri, her dog, and many other animals cannot simply be reduced to a sense of psychic displacement of her love for Ayesha. It signals an attempt for what Muñoz explains as 'thinking outside the regime of the human'.²⁷ He writes, 'Thinking outside the regime of the human is simultaneously exhilarating and exhausting. It is a ceaseless endeavor, a continuous straining to make sense of something else that is never fully knowable'.²⁸ It is precisely this framework of 'un-knowability' within which Mona's coalition with the reader is established. The objective for the narrative's subject is not to be known and recognised by the reader. It is rather to establish an inter-relational, inter-subjective framework of solidarity despite epistemic and ontological gaps.

As Keegan explains, normative visual economies of trans representation conform state enforced efforts to fixate transness within already existing

²⁶ Singh, p. 151.

²⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, 'Theorizing Queer Inhumanisms: The Sense of Brownness', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21 (2015), 209–10 (p. 209).

²⁸ Muñoz, pp. 209–10.

regulatory systems around gender and sex. In the Indian context, this is exemplified by the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act that was passed by the government in 2019 despite countrywide protests from gender non-conforming and *hijra* communities.²⁹ The act mandated the appointment of a governmental council to oversee, validate and sanction a transgender person's claims to the rights and welfare it promised. This promissory narrative of rights rests on a fixed template of gender variance that complements the assimilation of queer discourses within the current government's Hindu nationalist project. Leaders, popular media, and supporters continue to cite mentions of gender variance within Hindu mythology to present a liberal façade of the religion's supposed tolerance of queerness. Only those iterations of gender variance which can claim referentiality and origins within a 'known' discourse of religious mythology are sanctioned. In such a framework, lived experiences narrativized into writing must be represented in a manner that refuses plurality. Their ending must signify closure, and the unknown afterwards, is a threat to the master narrative they are supposed to reproduce.

This act directly violates the right to self-determination of gender, among various other contentions, that the 2014 NALSA (The National Legal Service Authority) judgment granted the community (Mohan). The letter that follows the photographs with Mona's adopted animals expresses concern about the contemporary state of Indian democracy, a letter potentially written in the advent of the Babri Mosque demolition in 1992 organised by Hindu nationalist groups claiming it as a site of an ancient Hindu temple.³⁰ Mona writes: 'They break a mosque and want to build a temple. If Christians talk of their religion, we burn them alive. Indira Gandhi died, and thousands of Sikhs are dead'.³¹

More than three decades later, Mona's words read eerily relevant. In such a framework of 'knowability', where one must constantly reproduce dominant iconographies of citizenship, where a neo-liberal rights framework necessitates a fully formed corporeal and psychic subjecthood both before and after moments of violation, Singh and Mona's epistemic refusal becomes a highly charged site of protest. In her foreword, Singh constantly reiterates the uniqueness of Mona's worldview, in that it is exceptional to such an extent that Mona would stand out wherever she is.³² Throughout the narrative, the shifting subject positions that Mona occupies share a degree of liminality with each other. In other words, the uniqueness arises from being neither here nor there, neither male nor female, neither with biological ties nor accepted into the *hijra* community in Delhi. A focus on this liminality runs the risk of reading Mona out of her very material context. And yet, by constantly contextualizing the written subject

²⁹ G. Ram Mohan, 'Halt Implementation of Trans Act 2019: Activists', *The Wire*, (2020), <<https://thewire.in/lgbtqia/trans-act-2019-rules-feedback-activists>> [Accessed 12 August 2023]

³⁰ The Wire Staff, 'Babri Masjid: The Timeline of a Demolition', *The Wire*, (2020), <<https://thewire.in/communalism/babri-masjid-the-timeline-of-a-demolition>> [Accessed 12 August 2023]

³¹ Singh, p. 119.

³² Singh, p. 15.

within the everyday, the non-monumental and the immediate, Singh and Mona reconfigure grand narratives of self-making and citizenship. The graveyard is transformed from a site of familial trauma to a site of forging new relationalities and networks of care. In that process, the autobiographical subject registers itself, makes itself known without being assimilated within discourses of national identity and belonging. By refusing closure, it is perhaps this agency that Mona and Singh urge the reader to reproduce outside the text, which itself embodies the fraught, non-static positions that its subjects occupy. In doing so, the text travels across multiple spatio-temporal settings in a way in which it can be reproduced, re-read, and re-written indefinitely. Sayan Bhattacharya, while talking about his experience of visiting Mona's grave, mentions how her house continues to provide shelter to the dwellers in the graveyard.³³ Conceivably, it is this openness that is not only mapped in her life's narrative but also extended to the reader. And by extension, the afterlife the text acquires is also reflective of the different ways in which Singh and Mona's reconfiguration of identity and textuality survives their practice of it.

³³ Sayan Bhattacharya, 'Minoritarian Affects: Feeling Generosity as a Life Ethic in a Graveyard', *QED*, 8 (2021), 85–106 (p. 102).