



Neo-Victorian trans-corporeality: Narrations of Julia Pastrana's body¹

Transcorporalidad neovictoriana: Narrando el cuerpo de Julia Pastrana

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RESUMEN: La fascinación por Julia Pastrana (1834-1860) dentro del neo-victorianismo se debe en gran parte a su trágica historia y explotación extrema, sobre todo por parte de su *mánager*/marido Theodore Lent. Su carrera como *freak* excedió su muerte cuando su cuerpo fue embalsamado y llevado de gira por Europa – un espectáculo macabro que duraría hasta finales del siglo XX. A pesar de ser repatriada y enterrada en 2013, la historia de Pastrana sigue cautivándonos en el siglo XXI. Este ensayo examina como el cuerpo de Pastrana sigue siendo imaginado en la bioficción neo-victoriana analizando las dos novelas *Julia Pastrana* (2007) de Sandy Olson y Julian Fenech, y *The Orphans of the Carnival* (2016) de Carol Birch a través de la perspectiva de *trans-corporeality* (Alaimo, 2010). Pretendemos ofrecer una lectura actualizada de como las representaciones interdisciplinarias de Pastrana atraviesan tres siglos, convirtiendo su cuerpo en un texto narrado a través de múltiples discursos científicos y culturales. Para ese fin, el eje teórico que sustenta el análisis se basa en teoría feminista sobre el cuerpo que se centra en sus características fluidas, dinámicas y móviles, y que analiza las orientaciones e intersecciones multi- e interdisciplinarias del cuerpo.

Palabras clave: Transcorporalidad, Neo-victorianismo, Julia Pastrana, Bioficción, *freak show*.

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ABSTRACT: Julia Pastrana (1834-1860) features prominently in neo-Victorian biofiction, which is probably indebted to her tragic life and posthumous exploitation in the hands of her husband-manager Theodore Lent. Pastrana's career surpassed her death when Lent continued touring her embalmed body – an exhibition that would outlive him into the late twentieth century. Although Pastrana was repatriated and buried in 2013, she did not reach the final rest as her story continues to fascinate twentieth-first century audiences. This essay focuses on the ways in which Pastrana's body has been constructed and produced narratively building on multiple discourses that straddle different disciplines and cultural settings that span three centuries. The two biofictional novels *Julia Pastrana* (2007) by Sandy Olson and Julian Fenech, and *The Orphans of the Carnival* (2016) by Carol Birch will be analysed through the lens of trans-corporeality (Alaimo, 2010). By drawing on twenty-first century feminist theory on the body that has placed emphasis on the body as a dynamic and travelling concept through its orientations and intersectionality, my principal aim is to provide new insights into the ways in which contemporary novelists have rendered Pastrana's body.

Key words: Trans-corporeality, neo-Victorian biofiction, freakery, Julia Pastrana.

1. INTRODUCTION

In February 2013, the mummified body of Julia Pastrana (1834-1860) was retrieved from the basement of the Forensic Institute of Oslo to be repatriated to Mexico. Her body had been removed from the public eye in the late 1970s when the freak show changed from being perceived as spectacular to distasteful. After having been displayed across the world for over 150 years as a freak of nature, a human marvel, and posthumously as an embalmed wonder, she was yet to remain in a glass cage hidden, but not forgotten, for another four decades. The journalists covering Pastrana's repatriation highlighted the general consensus of bringing Pastrana's tragic story to a closure in a humane and respectful manner.² Statements as “the burial marks an end to a cycle of exploitation” and “now it has an appropriate ending” were published under the headline “An Artist Finds a Dignified Ending for an Ugly Story” in the *New York Times* (Wilson, 2013: n.p.). Moreover, the head of the Institute of Basic Medical Sciences at the University of Oslo, Jan G Bjålie, expressed his satisfaction over “grant[ing] a worthy end to her life” (“Mexican Ape Woman”, 2013: n.p.). Thus, people and authorities felt both the desire and the urge to end the exploitation of Pastrana and to finish her story in an appropriate and dignified manner by taking her body to its final rest. Nevertheless, Pastrana's life story did not come to an end with her burial, and her many afterlives are continuing into the twenty-first century.

Pastrana's life, fate and body still haunt the cultural imagination and her image persists in neo-Victorian fiction. To date, three neo-Victorian novels have been inspired by Pastrana's story partially or entirely: Sandy Olson and Julian Fenech's co-authored novel *Julia Pastrana* (2007), Rosie Garland's *The Palace of Curiosities* (2013) and Carol

² Henceforth, the name “Pastrana” refers to the real Julia Pastrana, and “Julia” to the fictional character based on her in *Julia Pastrana* and *Orphans of the Carnival*.

Birch's *Orphans of the Carnival* (2016). While authors feel compelled to reimagine the life of Pastrana, Victorian freakery has gained critical attention among scholars who address the complicated revisionary project of narrating the lives of human exhibits (Davies, 2015a; Pettersson, 2016; Tomaiuolo, 2018). Helen Davies stresses the importance of “the ethical considerations in treating historical subjects as ‘fictional characters’” in neo-Victorian freak biofiction since “‘characters’ were vulnerable to misinterpretation, silencing, ‘othering’ and exploitation in their own lifetime” (2015a: 16). In contrast, Saverio Tomaiuolo suggests that the fictionalisation of Pastrana is a “memorial project” (2018: 88), and insists that “Julia’s life cannot be forgotten, and should not be forgotten, and the alluring, disturbing and tragic show of her cultural memory must go on” (Ibid: 97). Independently of their revisionary aims, neo-Victorian freak narratives are inevitably ambiguous as they continue to display human exhibits.

As long as Pastrana’s body continues to be rewritten, reimaged and imprinted with new meanings, it remains inconclusive, fluid and open-ended. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben aptly define neo-Victorian biofiction “as an historical-biographical fictional text, which could not have been conceived without the prior extradiegetic existence of the real-life nineteenth-century subjects it incorporates, and which self-consciously engages with and reinterprets pre-formed images of those same subjects already circulating in the cultural imagery” (2020: 18). Both novels portray Pastrana’s career as a freak performer, first in America and later on tour across Europe and Russia with her husband-manager Lent, followed by her death in childbirth and ending with the macabre posthumous spectacle of her and their son’s embalmed bodies. Reading and writing Pastrana’s body implies interpreting it as a multi-discursive text where different discourses intersect to produce new and multiple meanings. Gail Weiss argues that

[i]f bodies indeed “indicate a world beyond themselves,” then to understand the body as a text, or as I will be calling it here, a narrative horizon, means that one cannot restrict oneself to the body proper, but one must look at the ways in which the body is always already engaged with (and formed by) other bodies, social and political institutions, language and gesture.

(2006b: 62–63)

Taking this as a starting point, this essay explores how Pastrana’s body is written, read and reimaged by situating her body within a neo-Victorian biofictional narrative horizon. The constant and shifting practices of framing Pastrana’s body and identity, both in real life and in literature, affirm the fluid nature of the body. The ensued analysis adds to previous work by reading through Pastrana’s body in its process of becoming and paying special attention to the multiple and fluctuating presentations of her body, and its miscellaneous meanings across time –both in real life and literature. To this end, my analysis bears on feminist conceptualisations of the body that attend to its fluid and dynamic nature.

2. THE BODY WITHIN A FEMINIST NARRATIVE HORIZON

Margrit Shildrick and Robyn Longhurst, have argued for the fluidity and leakiness of the body highlighting its unstable, leaky and shifting nature. As Shildrick sustains: “the body as we know it is a fabrication, organised not according to a historically progressive discovery of the real, but as an always insecure and inconsistent artefact, which merely mimics material fixity” (1997: 13). In a similar vein, Longhurst holds that spatial borders and disciplinary boundaries are designed to contain and control bodies, and emphasises the fluid nature of both knowledge and the body. Taking into consideration “the shape,

depth, biology, insides, outsides and boundaries of bodies placed in particular temporal and spatial contexts”, Longhurst stresses the importance of analysing “the leaky, messy, awkward zones of the inside/outside of bodies and their resulting spatial relationships” (2000: 1). If these boundaries have been shaped by a “particular politics of masculinist knowledge production”, as Longhurst argues (2000: 2), nineteenth-century medical, scientific and gendered discourses on Pastrana’s body call for a re-assessment from a feminist perspective.

Scholars such as Ahmed (2001), Grosz (2005) and Alaimo (2010) share a common focus on the dynamic, shifting and entangled aspects of the body. Their work has been informed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s notion of the body as a process of becoming and serves as a critical framework to explore Pastrana’s unfinished body in a constant process of becoming. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the body is a dynamic process that never ceases to become rather than a static incarnation: “Becoming is a verb with a consistency all [of] its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, ‘appearing,’ ‘being,’ ‘equaling,’ or ‘producing’” (1999: 239). Hence, the body involves both a state and an act of embodying something. The oriented body (Ahmed, 2001) invites us to think through rather than about the body, which implies reading the body as an interface where different discourses intersect and merge. Grosz notices how, for Deleuze, “concepts are points of multiplicity, connections of components, which share ‘zones of proximity,’ borders, with other concepts, marked by irregular contours, an improper or imperfect fit” (2005: 159) –a view that reminds us of Alaimo’s notion of ‘trans-corporeality’, which denotes “the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures” (2010: 2). In lines with these twenty-first century models of corporeality, contemporary fictionalisations of Pastrana, invite us to look through, rather than at, her body.

In the introduction to *Thinking Through the Skin* (2001), Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey add a dermatological dimension to feminist theory on the body inviting us to re-orient our focus from the body to the skin by suggesting “a politics that takes as its orientation not the body as such, but the fleshy interface between bodies and worlds” (2001: 1). While we may understand the body as an en fleshed material entity contained by the skin, the body, as such, is built by a network of connective tissues that gives inner cohesion to the body, and supports organic systems and their interconnections. The skin is a flexible and multi-layered surface that simultaneously protects us from, and connects us to, the exterior world through its openings, as well as the sense of touch. Focusing on the ways in which the skin connects the internal body with the external world, Ahmed and Stacey’s volume explores different bodily orientations through a process of becoming rather than being. They sustain: “[t]hinking through the skin is a thinking that reflects not on the body as the lost object of thought, but on inter-embodiment, on the mode of being-with and being-for, where one touches and is touched by others. *Thinking Through the Skin* poses the question of how the skin becomes, rather than simply is, meaningful” (Ibid). This approach attends to the intersectionality of the body in ways that render a dynamic perspective of embodiment.

Ahmed elaborates further on the concept of orientation in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), exploring orientation as a critical concept. The critic explains how bodies become oriented in relation to other bodies, objects and the space they inhabit. Ahmed understands the oriented body as dynamic and transferable arguing that “[b]odies as well as objects take shape through being oriented toward each other, as an orientation that may be experienced as the cohabitation or sharing of space” (552). Accordingly, the oriented body is not only a matter of intersectionality, but also invites us to conceive the body as a travelling concept in terms of embodiment. The body

is simultaneously material and discursive, and making meaning of the body as a travelling concept involves a process of thinking through, rather than about, the body. In these lines, 'trans-corporeality' highlights the body's intersectionality:

[t]rans-corporeality, as a theoretical site, is where corporeal theories and science studies meet and mingle in productive ways. Furthermore, the movement across human corporeality necessitates rich, complex modes of analysis that travel through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and the textual.

(Alaimo, 2010: 4)

3. JULIA PASTRANA'S BODY WITHIN A NEO-VICTORIAN NARRATIVE HORIZON

Neo-Victorian biofiction provides a hybrid literary space where Pastrana's body is deeply enmeshed in past/present, historical/fictional, biological/cultural and scientific/gendered discourses and can be revalued both productively and positively to produce new meanings through the lens of trans-corporeality. Alaimo affirms that thinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions. By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures (2010: 2).

The critic explains how trans-corporeality can be linked to Grosz's view on the body and need for "reconceptualizing the relations between the natural and the social, between the biological and the cultural, outside the dichotomous structure in which these terms are currently enmeshed" (qtd. in Alaimo 2010: 10). Thus, the concept of trans-corporeality allows for a richer and deeper understanding of the body than a social constructivist approach that rests upon binary oppositions as nature/culture, body/soul, material/social has previously permitted. The spectacle of Pastrana's body was not only shaped by multiple – and sometimes competing – medical, scientific and cultural discourses during her lifetime, but it underwent several material transformations posthumously. As her body continues to be produced and reimagined in neo-Victorian literature, the body becomes a fictional contact zone where past and present discourses and theories intersect in productive ways. Rather than separating Pastrana's neo-Victorian body into different categories and theoretical concepts, her body is to be understood as a travelling concept that is enmeshed in a network of multiple discourses. Therefore, to better understand, critique and engage productively with textual and cultural representations of Pastrana's body, the ensued analysis approaches Julia Pastrana's body as a trans-corporeal space that is entangled in a network of interconnections and interchanges.

3.1. THE FEMALE FREAK AND BLURRED BOUNDARIES OF BODILY CONSENT

Olson and Fenech's biofictional novel aims at validating Pastrana's humanity and subjectivity and the third-person omniscient narrator frequently evokes the reader's pity. The narrative representation of Pastrana's body builds on critical discourses on consent and volition (Gerber 1992) and recurs to a sentimental rhetoric of pity which was employed as a freak-show strategy in the nineteenth century (Garland-Thomson 2003). This narrative strategy is employed to appeal to the reader's compassion while coercive acts echo critical debates in Freak Studies. A trans-corporeal lens removes the body from binary oppositions to instead pay heed to the ways in which Pastrana's body is entangled

in multiple discourses to the end of criticising bodily exploitation, validating Pastrana's humanity and evoking the reader's empathy.

Pastrana's exhibition used sentimentality as a strategy to appeal to the tastes of a more refined audience, and pity became a tool to confirm their superiority in comparison to the less cultivated masses. Garland-Thomson argues that

sentimentality was one element in the nineteenth century-discourse that increasingly differentiated the bourgeoisie from the working classes. The sentimental was part of upward social mobility registering the refined sensibility, genteel manners, and sense of stewardship. [...] Public exhibitions such as Pastrana's were effective vehicles for sentimentality, which rescued what solidifying middle class took as vulgar and offensive practice of exhibiting monsters.

(2003: 140)

The character Julia is framed by a sentimental discourse of pity evoking feelings of compassion among readers and to denounce dehumanisation and acts of gender violence. The chronological development of the plot follows Julia's career as a human exhibit from being staged as the 'Bear Woman' until being displayed as the 'Embalmed Non-Descript' posthumously by her husband-manager Lent. As a neo-Victorian act of rewriting Pastrana's life story, her body becomes a text where historical and fictional narratives meet in productive ways.

Although Pastrana's body was buried in 2013, it remains unfinished as her story continues to haunt the contemporary cultural imagination. Therefore, rather than analysing Pastrana's body as a finished text, her body needs to be addressed as a trans-corporeal space and read as a "multi-discursive text" (Weiss, 2006b: 62) where "medical, scientific and aesthetic discourses intersect" (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001: 2). Yet, the idea that neo-Victorian textual reimaginings of the freakish body are productive is not without controversy. Pettersson pinpoints that neo-Victorian freakery reiterates the very same discourse it aims to alter (2016: 191). Similarly, Davies has drawn attention to the neo-Victorian objectification and exploitation of nineteenth-century freak performers arguing that "[p]osthumous display is extremely difficult to justify in terms of granting performers any sense of agency or dignity, for they clearly have no opportunity to control the terms of their exhibition and are irrevocably confined to the role of object rather than subject" (2015a: 17). Although Julia lacks agency in Olson and Fenech's novel, the authors attempt to restore her dignity by appealing to the reader's pity. Pastrana's body is a multi-discursive text in neo-Victorian literature, and as a theoretical and cultural crossroad, it becomes a trans-corporeal space where "[b]odily natures emerge across different domains" (Alaimo, 2010: 4).

Julia's career is shaped by a contradistinction between coercion and consent, and as the plot unfolds the lack of occasions for choice seems conspicuous. David A. Gerber has questioned the idea that disabled people wished to pursue a career in the freak show and submit to public humiliation. Drawing on consent theory, he highlights "[a]t the heart of the problem must be our effort to understand both the nature of choice and the ways in which choice ultimately may or may not be said to inform acts of uncoerced consent" (1992: 54). The opening chapter brims with violence and dehumanisation as Julia is sold and forced to join a freak show. This transaction is a violent process of dehumanisation and the narrator appeals to the reader's abhorrence by comparing Julia to a wounded creature: "*The beast lay naked on the concrete slab, trembling, trying to catch its breath. [...] The men lifted the creature into the air by the noose*" (Olson and Fenech, 2012: ch

1; emphasis added)³. Julia's repeated attempts to resist a change of master and being forced into the freak show pinpoint her unwillingness to become an exhibit. She is undoubtedly coerced into a career as a freak-show exhibit, and the inhumane treatment of Julia provokes more repugnance than her deviant body does.

In the novel, Julia's victimisation as a female freak is two-fold, and her body is placed under the control of her husband-manager who exploits her body for financial profit, and abuses her physically and psychologically. The authors depict the moment of conception as marital rape, and the scene is a clear example of gender violence:

Lent lunged from behind and stopped her from going anywhere. With no patience now for buttons and laces, he tore her dress open and continued his forceful advance. [...] He swung her around and kissed her forcefully on the mouth. She turned her head and tried pushing him away but he was too powerful. He flung her onto the sofa and forced himself on top.

(Olson and Fenech, 2012: ch 27)

In this fragment, Lent forces himself upon his wife after preventing her from leaving the room. The scene is charged with violence and Julia's body language clearly tells Lent to stop while she is raped. This raises the issue of whether non-consensual sex within marriage could be classified as rape. Fact is, marital rape was not criminalised in most Western countries until the second half of the twentieth century, and is still not considered a crime in many countries. The question of consent echoes the consent debate in the context of the Victorian freak show; agreeing to form part of one institution –the institution of marriage or the freak show– implies surrendering one's body to the full control of a husband or manager. On the one hand, a woman grants the husband the right to her body through marriage, and sexual intercourse is regarded to be consensual. On the other hand, by joining the freak show, performers place their bodies under the control of managers and their participation in the spectacle implies their willingness to participate in theatrical acts of humiliation. In Julia's case, as a female freak and Lent's wife, she is a double victim of gender violence and her husband-manager appropriates himself over her body through rape, violence and for economic profit.

The marital rape results in pregnancy and several acts of violation are committed from the moment of labour until Julia's death. Theo does not miss the opportunity to make a profit from Julia's body by turning his birthing and dying wife into a spectacle. Christopher Gylseth and Lars Toverud write in Pastrana's biography that "rumours claim that she died with a large group of curious observers standing around her bed" (2003: 68; 71). In the novel's epilogue, the authors refer to a deal that Lent supposedly made with the doctor attending Julia during birth: "the medical team would have complete access to the patient during her labor for medical purposes. She was then exposed to a number of unnecessary exams and experiments for the next several hours that had little, if anything, to do with the birth" (Olson and Fenech, 2012: epilogue). If the doctor's intervention and postpartum examinations were based on medical curiosity rather than treatment, the situation is comparable with instrumental rape. Thus, Julia's birthing body falls victim to medical curiosity and male authority as the doctors penetrate her body visually and instrumentally.

Julia's dying body is turned into a spectacle as Olson and Fenech recreate the private viewings of Pastrana on her deathbed. During her last hours, Julia's body, heart and spirits are broken as she lies suffering from postpartum complications and grief. As visitors are invited to observe the scene, both her private parts and privacy are violated.

³ This edition is an ebook and page numbers vary according to the digital device used, screen size and zooming options. For this reason, only the chapter has been indicated.

The cruelty towards his wife, the lack of empathy of the viewers and the vulgarity of the situation are emphasised through their contrast to Julia's vulnerability, humanity and grief. Physically and emotionally exhausted, Julia is left in a state of apathetic shock:

By the third viewing, Julia was lying as still as death itself. She had run out of tears and was staring into oblivion, her large black eyes rarely blinking. Emotions such as anger towards her husband or grief over her son's death were now nonexistent. Completely absent were feelings of rage, regret, and resentment. Gone was the sorrow and isolation she felt earlier. The only feeling that passed through her now empty heart was that of utter disbelief.

(Olson and Fenech, 2012: ch 31)

As mentioned before, Olson and Fenech aim at validating Pastrana's humanity and subjectivity through a sentimental discourse, and this is achieved through the third-person omniscient narrator's appeal to the reader's pity.

Given the evidence that Lent took advantage of his wife and exploited her ruthlessly, there are several details from Pastrana's biography that are questionable. According to the rumours, her dying words were: "I die happy, because I know I have been loved for my own sake!", yet, as Gylseth and Toverud remark, "That sounds nice, but too good to be true" (2003: 71). In this vein, Olson and Fenech replicate this moment emphasising Lent's shameless and immoral manipulation of the situation:

He had created the most unbelievable show in the world. No one could top this. As her chest rattled, he leaned his ear close to her mouth, pretending she was whispering him a secret. [...] He then stood up and made an announcement intended to move his captive audience. "Her dying words have now been spoken to me." The group leaned forward in anticipation. With as much emotion as he could muster, he continued. "She said to me, 'I die happy. I know I have been loved for myself'." The women sighed and the men nodded, thinking it a romantic ending to the Ape Woman's life. Those words, he thought, will go down in history.

(Olsson and Fenech, 2012: ch 31)

The authors recreate both the scene and the rhetoric frame of sentimentalism as the audience and the reader interpret Julia's dying body. Garland-Thomson highlights how "[s]entimentality was the production and demonstration of a certain affect that structured a social relation between the person who could show fine feeling and the one who could induce it" (2003: 141). While the viewers show bourgeois decorum and self-control, the reader detects their lack of compassion and empathy for Julia. Lent appeals to the audience's emotions by turning her deathbed into a moment of idealised romance, the authors evoke the reader's feeling of pity as they represent her last moment as a morbid spectacle for paying visitors. Whereas the Victorian middle-class audience elevated themselves from the less sophisticated and vulgar working classes, contemporary readers uphold a morally superior position to Victorian audiences. In either case, Julia's body – in real life and in fiction – becomes a text that bears on a discourse of pity and whose "rhetorical purpose is to verify the viewer's vision of himself" (Garland-Thomson, 2003: 140). Julia's body becomes what Davies calls "a convenient vehicle for exemplifying the difference between the prejudices of the Victorian era and our own more progressive emphatic understandings of physical difference" (2020b: 175). Thus, the narrated body becomes a site of potential, conflicting stances where Victorian refined feeling clashes with neo-Victorian self-reflexivity in which paradoxically the Victorian audience and contemporary reader position themselves in a superior moral position.

The posthumous exploitation of Julia shifts the focus from the body to the skin, and medical, scientific, and aesthetic discourses intersect during the embalming process. Ahmed and Stacey refer to these as "technologies of the skin" and invite us to think

through, rather than about, the skin as “discourses intersect to produce the intelligible skin, even when the skin cannot be held in place by such knowledge” (2001: 2). Professor Sokolov claims Julia’s body in order to dissect it, which is described as a material process of dehumanisation. While she is hung, skinned and embalmed the anatomical procedure is comparable with the process of skinning an animal before slaughter with explicit references like: “Just as a deer would be prepared, Julia was ready to be skinned”, or “Julia hung like a half-skinned moose, with her hide hanging down over most of her upper body” (Olson and Fenech, 2012: ch 32). Sokolov follows the pattern of a taxidermist who prepares and mounts the skin of an animal for display as Julia’s skin is esthetically arranged like a stuffed animal: “Julia’s hide was fitted over a wooden skeleton. All parts of her body were stuffed with cotton and rags until the correct fullness was achieved” (Olson and Fenech, 2012: ch 32). The human-animal polarity used to promote her human-animal hybridity as the Bear Woman or Ape Woman during her career as a human exhibit materialises as Sokolov turns her body into the embalmed nondescript. Ironically, while the embalming process is intended “to treat (a dead body) so as to protect from decay” (EMBALM, n.d.), Julia’s body is not protected from posthumous exploitation. Rather, she falls victim to yet another act of invasive abuse as her body is ravaged by Sokolov, which together with her posthumous career pinpoints the lack of consent of human exhibits.

3.2. SUMMONING JULIA PASTRANA’S BODY

The main plot of Carol Birch’s *Orphans of the Carnival* (2016) focuses on Julia Pastrana and is combined with the story of Rose, who is struggling with mental health issues. The two narrative strands are set 130 years apart, criss-crossing the Victorian era and the 1980s. Their stories are linked by the embalmed and deteriorated body of Julia’s baby, which Rose picks up from the litter after mistaking it for a tattered doll. The novel is divided into the three parts “New World”, “Old World” and “Next World” corresponding to the different stages in Pastrana’s life: her early life and initial career as a human exhibit in America, Julia’s life and career together with her husband/manager Theo on tour in Europe and Russia, and her post-mortem fate as an embalmed exhibit. The constant speculations into Pastrana’s body and human identity, historically and fictionally, attest to “the inherent leakage and instabilities of categories” (Shildrick, 1997: 60). Pastrana was exhibited under different titles throughout her life, from “the Marvellous Hybrid Bear Woman” and “the Baboon Lady” to “the Non-Descript” (Bondeson, 1997: 217; 21), and the flow of continuous scientific inquiry and medical speculation into Pastrana’s body and cultural construction of her identity on stage run through Birch’s novel. Taking cue from Weiss who suggests the term “narrative horizon” (Weiss 2006b: 62–63) to denote the body as “a multi-discursive text” (Ibid), I will navigate the three parts of *Orphans of the Carnival* examining the ways in which Pastrana’s body was, and still is, narratively constructed.

Part One, “New World”, describes Julia’s initial career as a freak-show exhibit in Mexico and the United States. Birch uses an imagery of entrapment rather than victimisation, and like Olson and Fenech’s novel, it echoes the consent debate within freak studies. As the novel opens, Julia lives secluded in Culiacán (Mexico) under the care and protection of Solana. However, there are several references that imply Julia’s exploitation through drawing-room performances and forced medical examinations: “She’d seen a few medical men as a child. They’d studied her teeth, peered down her throat and down her ears, made her lie back and close her eyes and sing a little song to try and make her forget where they were poking their fingers” (Birch, 2016: 72). While

Julia may not mind singing and dancing, there is no sign of consent to the medical examination. The procedure is referred to as an invasive and uncomfortable episode, and the probability of a young girl's willingness to submit to a medical examination of her intimate parts is questionable. Another hint at entrapment is that Julia experiences Solana's death as a liberation: "[he] died six months later, and then she was free" (Birch, 2016: 24). Later she leaves in the middle of the night like an escaped convict, which further enhances the notion of being confined under the mask of protection. Although Solana's home may have been the only option for Julia, it does not necessarily involve her choice and consent as she is exposed to similar practices of exploitation through performance in a domestic setting as well as forced medical examinations.

Birch draws on nineteenth-century scientific and medical discourses on Pastrana's body as Julia becomes "the Marvellous Hybrid Bear Woman. The only one whose humanity was in doubt" (Birch, 2016: 40) after joining the freak show. During her lifetime, Pastrana was examined by doctors, scientists and taxidermists who measured her according to different criteria to decide on her proportions of humanity, race and femininity.⁴ Several medical reports reveal that Pastrana was submitted to genital examinations; One doctor "declared in an affidavit that she certainly was entirely human and 'a perfect woman, performing all the functions of her sex'" (Bondeson, 1997: 220), and an article published in *The Lancet* described her female body as "remarkably well-developed" with regular menses (qtd. in Bondeson, 1997: 223). In the Victorian era, the freakish body was discursively produced by scientific testimonies and medical reports that confirmed the freak's oddity and authenticity. In the novel, Julia is examined by doctors in the name of science and Birch echoes nineteenth-century scientific, medical and cultural narratives that enhanced Pastrana's hybridity. Julia's body is classified as hybrid or semi-human as it does not fit the medical model of the body. For example, Dr Mott categorises her as a missing link: "she is a Semi-Human Indian, a perfect woman, a rational creature endowed with speech which no monster has ever possessed, yet she is Hybrid, wherein the nature of woman predominates over the brute—the Ourang Outang" (Birch, 2016: 75). Rachel Adams has noticed the use of "ethnographic and medical discourses to grant legitimacy to the fantastic narratives they wove around the bodies on display", and argues that exotic freaks were "framed in a pseudoethnographic language by showmen" (2001: 28). Interestingly, Birch replicates this pseudoethnographic language to represent Julia's humanity, at the same time as opposing binaries as male/female, human/animal are brought into the equation of measurement. This intersectional fascination with ethnicity, gender and humanity is later repeated:

In Cleveland she saw another doctor, who asked about her monthlies. Since she'd been on the road she'd met three very distinguished men [...] one said she was an ourang-outang, one said she was neither negro nor human, another that she was her own species, a species of one. She was HYBRID. SEMI-HUMAN, MUJER OSA, TROGLODYTE OF ANCIENT DAYS, UGLIEST WOMAN IN THE WORLD'

(Birch, 2016: 93; original emphasis).

In terms of trans-corporeality, Alaimo sustains that "the multitude of nature/culture 'hybrids' [...] cannot be understood in such segregated terms" (2010: 9). The multiple diagnoses presented are based on precarious traces that testify to how "the boundaries which organise us into definable categories are in any case discursively unstable" (Shildrick, 1997: 60). Thus, Julia's body is fluid and unfinished as different discourses intersect in a constant process of becoming. Shildrick has drawn attention to

⁴ Bondeson (1997: 219) and Garland-Thomson (2003: 136) provide detailed descriptions of the changing perceptions of Pastrana's body and the multiple readings of her pathologies.

the leakiness of the body arguing that the body is constantly subjected to attempts of inserting it within normative systems (1997: 50). She sustains that

in performing our bodies in transgressive ways, we may subvert the apparent fixity of both raw biological data and of our embodied selves [...] the boundaries which organise us into definable categories are in any case discursively unstable, and it not so much that resistance is required to override them as constant reiteration is needed to secure them.

(Shildrick, 1997: 60)

The freak-show discourse testifies to the interconnectedness and fluidity of categories by transforming the uncategorisable body into a spectacular body. Granted that this involves a destabilisation of categories, I suggest that freak-show discourses not only epitomise the views put forward by Shildrick but disclose how the body emerges in a process of becoming. In this regard, Julia's body is a trans-corporeal space which "reconceptualize[es] the relations between the natural and the social, between the biological and the cultural, outside the dichotomous structure in which these terms are currently enmeshed" (Grosz, 2005: 30).

The second part, "Old World", is set in Europe and Russia and focuses on Julia's time with Lent until her death. The spatial, social and cultural situatedness of Julia's body is an example of what Stern refers to as "the mobile effects of spectacle" (2008: 202), and Julia's body is inscribed with hybrid cultural meanings. This testifies to the body as a travelling concept where difference discourses intersect and merge. Rather than understanding hybridity within binary paradigms, hybridity fits Alaimo's notion of transcorporeality which advocates interconnections between multiple bodily natures. What is more, according to Alaimo, as "trans indicates movement across different sites, transcorporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted" (2010: 3). While on tour across Europe and Russia, the exhibition of Julia's body is moved from the freak show to cultural institutions, such as museums and theatres, in an attempt to make the spectacle respectable. With this aim in mind, Theo spins the narrative of Julia's body around scientific knowledge and medical discourse that vouch for her hybridity:

Inside, Theo had quoted in full from her certificates: "pronounced by the most eminent Naturalists and Physicians to be a true hybrid wherein the nature of woman presides over that of the brute." He had added: "*She is a perfect woman - a rational creature, endowed with speech which no monster has ever possessed.*"

(Birch, 2016: 146–147; original emphasis)

Theo recurs to previous discursive resources and weaves the scientific accounts and doctors' testimonies into the promotion of her hybridity, which he expands with a note that affirms her femininity and humanity. In doing so, he intentionally establishes a contrast that attests to her hybridity. The moment Julia's spectacle is moved into the theatre, vulgarity and respectability is juxtaposed as the body becomes both a source of laughter in the play and a potential danger to sensitive viewers due to the risk of maternal impression – the belief that shocking visual impressions and emotions would affect the baby in the womb and lead to abnormal births. Maternal impression is mentioned as a potential danger, although the main stress is placed on the dangers against respectability as the police officer explains: "This show is accused of obscenity and immorality and has been deemed dangerous" (Birch, 2016: 183). The spectacle of Julia's body challenges the class hierarchy that distinguishes sensitive and refined viewers from the vulgar working classes. This is something that Birch emphasises through the newspaper report on the incident in the German press reading "the problem arises when the sideshow is brought into a respectable theatre" (Birch, 2016: 193). Thus, spatial, social and cultural parameters

intersect in the framing of Julia's body as a danger to sensitive viewers and a threat to respectability.

Ironically, it later turns out that obstetricians, doctors and scientists represent the real threat against Julia's body when they create an immoral and obscene spectacle of her body. Price and Shildrick hold that "the very fact that women are able to menstruate, to develop another body unseen within their own, to give birth, and to lactate is enough to suggest potentially dangerous volatility that marks the female body as out of control, beyond, set against the force of reason" (1999: 3). The moment Julia goes into labour, her body becomes a target of male intents to bring the birthing body under material and categorical control. The labouring body becomes an object of obstetrician interest, and Julia is submitted to a series of invasive medical interventions reaching a climax during childbirth as the baby is delivered with forceps. The baby does not survive, and Julia dies slowly from postpartum complications under the gaze of paying visitors who deprive Julia of the right to bodily privacy at an utmost vulnerable moment. Julia's body is exposed to medical mistreatment, physical scrutiny and commercialisation through different invasive practices during her last hours while she is suffering physically and emotionally from the loss of her newborn baby. This demonstrates how the labouring body is exposed to multiple male regulatory practices that seek to categorise, contain and control the female body, which is entangled in "the interplay of text and physicality which posits a body in process never fixed or solid, but always multiple and fluid" (Price and Shildrick, 1999: 6).

Part III, "Next World" narrates Julia's posthumous career as the embalmed nondescript after Professor Sokolov has completed the preservation process of the bodies. Julia's body is turned into a material object that is manipulated and shaped into a static image which causes mixed feelings of repugnance, pity and wonder. The audience describes the exhibition of "the Embalmed Non-Descript" as "gruesome" and "scary", yet "strangely beautiful" (Birch, 2016: 319–320). When a reporter asks Theo about his dead wife and son, he answers coldly that "they're mummies. Just as I said –that is not Julia. That is not the boy. That is mere *matter* and it doesn't *matter*. There is no significance" (Birch, 2016: 320; original emphasis). Sokolov has removed the skin from her body and ceased the disintegration process through an embalming method, and, accordingly, the body is no longer perceived as an en fleshed and embodied subject but as a material object or static image. In Theo's words: "*That is not Julia. That is an image of Julia*" (Birch, 2016: 323; original emphasis). Accordingly, Julia's identity is reduced to a static and containable image imprinted on the skin. Yet, contrary to Theo's claim, Julia's body still has significance. As mentioned previously, the skin connects us to, rather than separates us from, our environment, or as Weiss puts it: "[t]he body image informs us from moment to moment and in a largely unthematized way, how our body is positioned in space relative to the people, objects, and environment around us" (1999a: 9). Thus, Julia's embalmed body is more than a static image, which testifies to the fluid nature of the body and how it is entangled to the environment through the skin.

Julia's posthumous career across time and space is summarised in two chapters describing how she becomes the embalmed non-descript, and subsequently is used as a stage prop to display Theo's second hirsute wife and exhibit: Zenora Pastrana. The spectacle of Julia's body outlives both Theo and Zenora Pastrana, and her embalmed skin provokes feelings of pity and wonder until it is distasteful and removed from the public eye in the late twentieth century after a tour crossing geographical boundaries (Europe, America and Scandinavia), covering different cultural sites (museums, amusement parks) and spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The multiple ways in which Julia's skin is produced, altered and continuously re-imagined in a process of becoming in

Birch's novel "account for the processes of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction that are constitutive of human corporeality" (Weiss, 1999a: 67). Thus, Pastrana's body continues to be invested with new meanings posthumously and the narrative that constructs her body image is entangled in past and present discourses, theories and interpretations.

4. CONCLUSION

Nearly a decade after Pastrana's repatriation and the burial of her embalmed remains, her body continues to be read, narrated, produced and remembered in neo-Victorian biofiction. Whether this can be understood as an act of "exploitation" (Davies, 2015a) or "remembrance" (Tomaïoulo, 2018), novels that reimagine Pastrana's tragic fate and deviant body bespeak Pastrana's trans-corporeality as multiple discourses and perspectives intersect in the re-imagination of her body. Her body is a travelling concept which is enmeshed in discourses, which situate her body within the mobile effects of Victorian freak-show spectacle. In Alaimo's words: "the fact that [Pastrana's] bodily natures' are emerging across different domains suggests that the concept has the potential to perform potent cultural work" (2010: 3–4).

The act of reading through the body within the narrative horizon of neo-Victorian freak biofiction presents contemporary readers the opportunity to trace the nineteenth-century scientific, medical and cultural discourses embedded in Pastrana's body historically and fictionally. A trans-corporeal lens allows us to grasp the myriad of discourses, theories and instruments that have placed Pastrana's body within a process of becoming throughout her life as well as her many afterlives – both in fact and in fiction. *Julia Pastrana* and *Orphans of the Carnival* engage with Victorian scientific, medical and gendered discourses as Pastrana's body is summoned to reimagine her tragic life and fate from a contemporary perspective that is expected to be morally superior. The authors employ freak show strategies of display to raise awareness of their exploitative and dehumanising effects and echo the sentimental discourse of pity to appeal to the readers' compassion. While Olson and Fenech's co-authored novel places the main stress on "volition and valorization" (Gerber, 1992) to question the dehumanisation of Pastrana, Birch is more concerned with distancing the reader from exploitative practices and appeal to our emotions through a Victorian sentimental rhetoric (Garland-Thomson, 2003). In either case, the authors engage critically with contemporary freak studies and twentieth-century biographies on Pastrana that reject medical, scientific, and cultural abuse of her body as well as gender violence insisting on the blurry boundaries of consent.

I have addressed the neo-Victorian fictionalisations of Pastrana through the critical lens of feminist theory on the body that vouches for its fluidity and trans-corporeality. As Alaimo puts it: "by emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interconnections between various bodily natures" (2010: 2). Pastrana's multiple representations and bodily states remain unfinished in the twentieth-first century, and her body continues to be constructed and narrated across time. As Gatens remarks "[t]he human body is always a signified body and as such it cannot be understood as a 'neutral object' upon which science may construct 'true' discourses. The human body and its history presuppose each other" (1999: 230). In this sense, neo-Victorian interpretations of Pastrana's body are dynamic texts where past/present and history/fiction meet and mingle in productive ways in a trans-corporeal encounter that spans three centuries. As such, these narratives invite us to read through, rather than about, Pastrana's body in its continuous process of becoming.

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