

The background is a dark blue gradient. On the left side, there is a vertical stack of white-outlined books of various sizes, some open and some closed. Several white birds are shown in flight, scattered across the upper half of the image. At the bottom, there is a stylized landscape with green rolling hills, a blue body of water, and three dark blue mountains with white snow-capped peaks.

# Moving Beyond the Pandemic: English and American Studies in Spain

Francisco Gallardo-del-Puerto,  
M<sup>a</sup> del Carmen Camus-Camus &  
Jesús Ángel González-López (Eds.)



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# **MOVING BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: ENGLISH AND AMERICAN STUDIES IN SPAIN**

**Francisco Gallardo-del-Puerto, M<sup>a</sup> del Carmen Camus-Camus and  
Jesús Ángel González-López  
(editors)**



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## CONTENTS

Preface .....	10
PART I: PLENARY SPEAKERS .....	12
“AN INVENTORY OF ECHOES”: WORLDING THE WESTERN IN TRUMP ERA FICTION .....	13
<i>Neil Campbell</i>	
TRANSNATIONAL STARS AND THE IDEA OF EUROPE: MARION COTILLARD, DIANE KRUGER .....	20
<i>Celestino Deleyto</i>	
PART II: LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS .....	30
SCRIBAL PRACTICES IN THE PROLOGUE OF <i>PRICK OF CONSCIENCE</i> : A LOOK INTO MS D.5 .....	31
<i>Sara Albán Barcia</i>	
ADDRESSING GENDER IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM .....	41
<i>Óscar Alonso Álvarez</i>	
<i>LONG, LUST AND THIRST</i> : THE DEVELOPMENT OF IMPERSONAL VERBS OF DESIRE IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR .....	48
<i>Noelia Castro Chao</i>	
AN ANALYSIS OF FRAGMENTS IN PRESENT-DAY WRITTEN AND SPOKEN ENGLISH .....	56
<i>Yolanda Fernández-Pena</i>	
UNERGATIVE COGNATE STRUCTURES ACROSS ENGLISH AND ROMANCE .....	65
<i>Celia Fullana, Georgina Alvarez-Morera &amp; Isabel Oltra-Massuet</i>	
THE EVOLUTION OF AGENT PREPOSITIONS: A CROSS-REGISTER APPROACH .....	78
<i>David Hernández Coalla</i>	
“RULES TO BE OBSERVED”: A LOOK INTO THOMAS SHERIDAN’S AND JOHN WALKER’S ATTITUDES IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY .....	85
<i>Mar Nieves Fernández</i>	
HOW DO L2 LEARNERS PERCEIVE THEIR OWN SPEECH? INVESTIGATING PERCEPTIONS OF SPEAKING TASK PERFORMANCE .....	92
<i>Mireia Ortega, Joan Carles Mora, Cristina Aliaga-García, Ingrid Mora-Plaza</i>	
COLLOCATION AS A MEASURE OF SEMANTIC (DIS)SIMILARITY: REVISITING THE CONCEPT <i>PLEASANT SMELLING</i> .....	100
<i>Daniela Pettersson-Traba</i>	
ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF MIRATIVE READINGS: A CONTRASTIVE STUDY ON ENGLISH AND SPANISH .....	109
<i>Mario Serrano Losada</i>	
LEXICAL SPECIFICITY AND ALLOSTRUCTURAL VARIATION: SUBJECT PRONOUN OMISSION IN WORLD ENGLISHES ...	118
<i>Iván Tamaredo Meira</i>	

PART III: LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES . . . . .	125
ROOT IDENTITY–RELATION IDENTITY IN INGA SIMPSON’S <i>UNDERSTORY: A LIFE WITH TREES</i> . . . . .	126
<i>Bárbara Arizti Martín</i>	
WILDERNESS, GARDEN OR EXERCISE OF POWER? IMAGES OF NATURE AND HUMAN-NATURAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE USA . . . . .	132
<i>Gorka Braceras Martínez</i>	
TRANSCULTURALISM AND THE 2021 REPORT OF THE UK GOVERNMENT’S COMMISSION ON RACE AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES . . . . .	137
<i>Eduardo de Gregorio-Godeo</i>	
(N)EVERMORE: THE MUSICAL AFTERLIVES OF EDGAR ALLAN POE’S <i>THE RAVEN</i> . . . . .	143
<i>Ester Díaz Morillo</i>	
UNDER THE SIGN OF TRAUMA: AN ANALYSIS OF WILLIAM FAULKNER’S 1929-1936 NOVELS . . . . .	148
<i>Elena Dobre</i>	
<i>THE SHORT STORY</i> (1948) REVISITED: SEAN O’FAOLAIN’S BLUEPRINT FOR IRISH WRITING . . . . .	154
<i>José Francisco Fernández</i>	
THE FIGURE OF THE SUBALTERN IN WICOMB’S SHORT STORY <i>BOWL LIKE HOLE</i> . . . . .	159
<i>Laura Gutiérrez González</i>	
EMOTIONAL SCARS AND EMBATTLED RELATIONSHIPS IN LIANE MORIARTY’S <i>BIG LITTLE LIES</i> (2014) . . . . .	165
<i>Rosa Haro Fernández</i>	
ADAPTING JANE AUSTEN’S <i>MANSFIELD PARK</i> FOR A NEW DIGITAL GENERATION . . . . .	170
<i>María Heredia-Torres</i>	
AIMING FOR THE STARS, GETTING THE EARTH: OUTER SPACE, BORDERS, AND THE ASTRONAUT AS AN AGENT FOR COSMOPOLITAN ASPIRATIONS IN JAMES GRAY’S <i>AD ASTRA</i> . . . . .	176
<i>Ismael Ibáñez Rosales</i>	
HUMANIZING THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN ANGIE CRUZ’S <i>DOMINICANA</i> . . . . .	182
<i>Aitor Ibarrola Armendáriz</i>	
TOWARDS THE ARCHETYPE OF A WORKING-CLASS WOMAN IN THE 1960s: NELL DUNN’S <i>THE MUSE</i> (2020) AND HER EARLY WRITINGS . . . . .	189
<i>Ángeles Jordán Soriano</i>	
NEW SUSTAINABLE BODIES IN TRANSIT: TRANSNATIONAL AFFECTS IN SOME (SOUTH-EAST ASIAN) CANADIAN WOMEN WRITERS . . . . .	195
<i>María Jesús Llarena Ascanio</i>	
SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE DARK ROOM: READING WHISPER NETWORKS AS COLLECTIVE NARRATIVES . . . . .	201
<i>María Isabel Marqués López</i>	
‘IT IS OFTEN MORE FUN TO WANT SOMETHING THAN TO HAVE IT’: DYSTOPIAN (UN)HAPPINESS IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE’S <i>INFINITE JEST</i> . . . . .	207
<i>Alejandro Peraza Díaz</i>	
‘BEAUTY IS AS WE SEE IT’: FEMALE PERCEPTION OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN MARY W. SHELLEY’S <i>THE MOURNER</i> (1829) . . . . .	212
<i>Irene Repiso Rodríguez</i>	

EXEMPLARY ELITE: THE REVOLUTION OF 1688 AND THE RHETORIC OF DRAMATIC DEDICATIONS .....	218
<i>Nora Rodríguez-Loro</i>	
ALLEGORISING SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM: <i>WESTWORLD</i> 'S SCIENCE-FICTIONAL AND METAFICTIONAL PASTICHE .....	224
<i>Miguel Sebastián-Martín</i>	
TENSIONS BETWEEN INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN JULISSA ARCE'S <i>MY UNDERGROUND AMERICAN DREAM</i> .....	231
<i>Amaia Soroa Bacaicoa</i>	
PART IV: ROUND TABLES .....	237
WOMEN'S FLUID SPACES AND GENDERED SPATIAL ORIENTATIONS IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE .....	238
<i>Rosario Arias, Laura Monrós-Gaspar, Miriam Borham-Puyal &amp; Lin Pettersson</i>	
COVID-19 AND POPULAR CULTURE: EMERGING SOUNDS FROM THE AMERICAN WEST .....	242
<i>Amaia Ibarra Bigalondo, Ángel Chaparro Sainz &amp; Amaia Soroa Bacaicoa</i>	
POSTCARDS FROM THE INTERREGNUM: NORTH-AMERICAN CINEMAS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE GREAT RECESSION .....	246
<i>Fabián Orán Llarena, Eva Darias Beautell &amp; Isabel González Díaz</i>	
CULTURES OF RISK, CULTURES OF POWER .....	249
<i>David Walton, Alberto Lázaro Lafuente, Luz Mar González-Arias &amp; Laura Martínez-García</i>	

## Women's Fluid Spaces and Gendered Spatial Orientations in Victorian Literature and Culture

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### Abstract

In this roundtable we focused on the spatial significance of 'orientation', implying movement, and process, for Victorian women, engaging with the mobility turn, or "the mobility paradigm" in the study of women's liminal spaces in the Victorian period. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), and other critics, we explored Victorian fluid spaces where the private and the public divide is negotiated, which, coupled with the break-up of temporal boundaries in some instances, underlines how embodied subjectivities benefit from being oriented towards other bodies and spaces. Finally, this roundtable considered the interaction of temporal and spatial dimensions in the analysis of women's fluid positions in Victorian times, and in relation to the dynamic interstitial spaces inhabited by women in the nineteenth century. This led us to examine the meanings generated in re-positioning ourselves in relation to the past as regards women and mobility in the Victorian period.

**Keywords:** London, Entertainment, Women's clubs, Spiritualism, New Woman, Nineteenth century, Liminality, Space.

This roundtable discussed the research undertaken by the members of a current Research Project (Ref. FFI2017-86417-P-FEDER). Rosario Arias introduced the main theoretical tenets of the Project, which revolves around the notion of 'orientation' in contemporary critical theory and literature. Laura Monrós-Gaspar dealt with the topic: "women's clubland: politics, debates and entertainment". Considered sites for 'man-haters' by their detractors (Doughan and Gordon 2006, 43), and 'central havens of refuge' (Doughan and Gordon 2006, 47) by their advocates, late nineteenth-century clubs offered women a forum where they could publicly air their views on topical issues of the time. As heirs to the debating societies of the eighteenth century (Thale 1995), clubs provided women with alternative intellectual networks, which served as a counterpoint to the mainstream cultural circles, usually exclusive to men. Among the topics discussed at women's clubs there were, for example, issues related to marriage, fashion and gardening, but also to women's suffrage, politics, literary criticism and entertainment. Sources for the activities held at late nineteenth-century women's clubs are highly dispersed; there only exist few annual reports and club journals and this is not the case with every club. Notwithstanding the scarcity of sources, there is ample evidence of how the performing arts were a recurring topic in Late-Victorian women's clubs as a form of entertainment and a forum



for discussion. In addition, an influential network of theatrical New Women found in the liminality of feminine clubland an institutional hub where to test, contest and, more notably, to spread their own cultural products and ideas, which has remained unnoticed by feminist criticism and theatre historians alike (Farkas 2019). The aim of Monrós-Gaspar's contribution to this roundtable, therefore, was to scrutinize late-nineteenth-century women's clubs as fluid spaces of social, cultural and political intersections with the common link of entertainment.

In turn, Rosario Arias focused on the significant changes undergone by the Victorian drawing room as it became a locus of negotiation and transgression for women in the context of Spiritualism. The parlour/drawing room was the setting for the Spiritualist medium to hold her séances, usually in the dark. In her *The Darkened Room* (1989), Alex Owen broke new ground for the study of the dark room in connection with Victorian gender roles, and she argued that "the Victorian séance room became a battle ground across which the tensions implicit in the acquisition of gendered subjectivity and the assumption of female spiritual power were played out" (1989, 11). Granted that the medium's experience was often transmitted or recorded by male sitters and believers, it is also true that there is another point of entry into the medium's experience: the séance. Recent studies on Victorian spatial dynamics focus on the porosity of boundaries between public and private spaces in the private sphere *par excellence*: the domestic environment itself. In this sense, Anna Despotopoulou discusses the Victorian drawing room as a space of semi-public visibility for women in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* where the drawing room is paralleled to a theatrical spectacle (2008, 87). Interestingly, the Victorian drawing room, where the séance takes place, is described as "an increasingly permeable space that allowed for the introduction of social gathering and play into the private and familial sphere" (Natale 2016, 61). Seen in this light, the Victorian parlour, a dynamic locus of in/visibility for women and spirits, becomes a place for entertainment that puts semi-public events on stage, with music, objects, a cast, an audience, and its own dramaturgy. Her aim was to explore the séance as a fluid space where the domestic setting is reformulated to hold social gathering and supernatural spectacles, offering a dynamic understanding of the Victorian household. In addition, Arias re-oriented the meanings of the séance, this locus of in/visibility, towards the materiality of the room, and towards the interaction of the medium/performer, as an embodied subjectivity, with her object world through the space of the Victorian drawing room.

Lin Pettersson undertook a study of Victorian travelling shows as liminal spaces of bodily natures. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), Sara Ahmed argues that bodies are oriented towards objects and others "through different sites, spaces, and temporalities". With this phenomenological approach the critic "offer[s] a new way of thinking about the spatiality of sexuality, gender, and race" (Ahmed 2006a, 2). She argues that, on the one hand, "bodies take shape through tending towards objects that are reachable, that are available within the bodily horizon", and, on the other hand, "consciousness is always directed 'toward' an object, and given its emphasis on the lived experience of inhabiting a body" (Ahmed 2006a, 2). This twofold view invites us to analyse the body as a material and enfolded entity that changes as it tends towards objects and others, as well as interpreting the lived embodied experience of spatialised subjectivities across time. Ahmed's theory advocates for the body as a travelling concept; a notion that aptly fits Stacy Alaimo's term "trans-corporeality" (2010, 2). Alaimo stresses how bodies are spatialised and through connections and interactions with the environment that surrounds it arguing that "thinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a source of human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions. By emphasising the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality, reveals the interchanges and

interconnections between various bodily natures” (2010, 2). Thus, both Ahmed’s “spatiality of sexuality, gender and race” (2), and Alaimo’s “trans-corporeality” are produced and shaped by intersections and interconnections of space, objects and others “that travel through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual” (Alaimo 2010, 2-3). Victorian travelling shows provide a space where bodies are differently presented and stylised according to different environments. One example is the quintessential performative mode of the Victorian freak show, which is underpinned by medical, scientific and ideological discourses on gender, sexuality and race, and this enactment of bodily difference and otherness interconnects the material with the immaterial. If “trans-corporeality as a theoretical site, is where corporeal theories, environmental theories, and science studies meet and mingle in productive ways” (Alaimo 2010, 3), then, the travelling show in neo-Victorian literature provides a liminal space where corporality is enacted as a travelling concept across time and space. Pettersson’s research places freak narratives in a new critical spotlight, by analysing neo-Victorian representations of touring performers through the lens of “trans-corporeality” (Alaimo 2010, 2). Pettersson’s principal aim was twofold: on the one hand, she analysed how contemporary authors re-imagine the space of nineteenth-century travelling shows and re-embodies Victorian performers through the lens of orientation; and on the other hand, Pettersson examined the (im)material intersections and interconnections of embodiment in neo-Victorian fiction on touring performers.

Lastly, Miriam Borham-Puyal discussed women in transit, liminal spaces and the New Woman in Egerton’s *Discords*. Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright (1859-1945), better known as George Egerton, was a relevant literary figure at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Innovative in form as well as in content, she claims to explore in her short stories the *terra incognita* that is woman. In this exploration, Dunne’s female characters are defined by fluidity, rather than fixity (O’Toole 2014), both spatially and personally. They prove in constant transit, exploring their position in the world with regard to others, men but also women, re-defining forms of effective sorority, together with their own inner worlds. Bjørhovde qualifies them with the term “transient restlessness” (1987, 5), while O’Toole describes how they move in the social world branded by their rootlessness, a trait she sees as characteristic of Dunne’s modernism (2014, 830). Borham-Puyal addressed how the New Woman in Egerton’s fiction is presented as a woman on the threshold, in such a time of transition as was the turn of the century. It claimed that, in fact, these women are liminal, in the traditional sense of Victor Turner’s ‘transition toward’ or ‘in-betweenness’: they have separated from societal conventions, they are transgressive and their re-incorporation in the post-liminal phase would also transform the society to which they return. Therefore, they inhabit a liminal position in time, in that “generative caesura” that the present is, as conceptualized by Sara Ahmed and Victoria Browne (2014, 40). The ‘now’ in these narratives provides a hopeful orientation forward because “moving toward” maintains available the “possibility of changing directions, of finding other paths” (Ahmed 2006, 570), which is especially relevant in the context of women’s fight for equality in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, it highlighted the use of spaces of transit in Egerton’s second collection of short stories *Discords* (1894), from stations, ships and city streets to actual thresholds (windowsills, doors). These physical spaces, and the place women occupy in them or in relation to them, can be interpreted as symbols of the fin-de-siècle women’s need to negotiate the conquest of private and public spaces, and of these New Women’s stance in-between past and future, constraint and freedom.

All in all, we discussed several instances of Victorian in-between spaces occupied by women, where the private vs public divide was negotiated, and challenged, thus stressing women’s mobility, linked up with corporality, in the nineteenth century. Also, in looking back

to the Victorian past, we re-position ourselves, and generate new meanings about women's embodied subjectivities and their orientation towards other bodies and spaces, then and now.

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