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LANGUAGE AND PERFORMATIVITY: AN EXPLORATION OF GENDER AND RACIAL IDENTITIES IN T. KINGFISHER'S *SWORDHEART*

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Under her pseudonym T. Kingfisher, fantasy writer Ursula Vernon has published several novels and short story collections in which notions of belonging, identity and hegemonic power are both explored and openly challenged. In fact, her Hugo and Nebula award winning works have been praised not only for their ability to examine such topics through a lighthearted tone, but also because of their portrayal of marginalized social identities.

In particular, this research paper focuses on one of her later novels, *Swordheart* (2018), and its discursive exploration of gender and race; arguing that the narrative treatment of the two main characters, Halla and Sarkis, allows for an interpretation of language as a form of resistance against vertical systems of violence—particularly, the patriarchy and white supremacy.

Specifically, this paper relies on Butler's (1990, 2004) ideas of gender performativity and Meyerhoff's (2014) notions of discursive stereotyping to examine how Halla's linguistic performance of a working class and domestic-bound femininity can be understood as a deliberate weaponization of stereotypical and essentialist womanhood. Moreover, Kingfisher's treatment of

racialized identities is also seen as an element of academic interest. Drawing from Coates's (2015) writings of violence and the Black body, this article will explore the ways in which the narrative description of Sarkis' body as a site of struggle is used to both highlight and denounce the historical commodification and subjugation of non-white communities.

Keywords: gender; race; performativity; CDA; Swordheart

1. Introduction

In recent years, science fiction and fantastical narratives have risen in popularity, partially due to the creation of specialized editorial houses, and the proliferation of new forms of consuming and sharing speculative narratives through technology. However, speculative stories have not only gained economic and commercial popularity, but they have also become an object of academic attention. In particular, science fiction and speculative fiction scholars have closely examined the ways in which these stories serve to question and (re)imagine our current realities (Kennon 2011, Le Guin 2020), as well as alternative futures.

While science fiction, fantasy and speculative narratives have been analyzed and studied from slightly different lenses—here we might be reminded of Darko Suvin's emphasis on the 'cognitive estrangement' of science fiction (1979), for instance, or Robles' (2021, 22) concern with the integration of supernatural elements in fantasy narratives—this paper will be discussing the three genres and their narrative possibilities together. This paper does not wish to portray all forms of speculative storytelling as monolithic or interchangeable, but rather, it stems from a desire to highlight how their shared ability to offer new possibilities of being, belonging, and narrating makes the claims in this article applicable to the three genres—thus why it draws from fantasy, speculative fiction and science fiction scholars.

In particular, this research paper is interested in exploring the narrative affordances offered by speculative storytelling in regards to othered communities, arguing that the destabilization of the

normal that takes place in these forms of fiction allows for a discursive reimagination of marginalized identities. In the last decades, science fiction authors and scholars have been concerned with the ways in which gender (Russ 1995, Robles 2021), sexuality (Gay 2008) and class (Bould and Miéville 2009), among other social variables, can be challenged and questioned through these narratives—as well as how issues of identity and power seem to lay at the very core of fantasy, speculative and science fiction stories.

Drawing from this ecology of knowledge, we will be paying particular attention to the work of an author that has been neglected by academia, despite exploring issues of power and belonging through fantasy narratives— that is, Ursula Vernon. Under her pseudonym T. Kingfisher, fantasy writer Ursula Vernon has published several novels and short story collections in which belonging, identity and the limits of the possible are both explored and openly challenged. In fact, her Hugo and Nebula award winning works have been praised not only for their ability to examine such topics through a dark yet lighthearted tone, but also because of their portrayal of marginalized social identities. This research paper focuses on one of her later novels, *Swordheart* (2018), and its discursive exploration of gendered and racial identities. Specifically, it argues that the narrative treatment of the two main characters, Halla and Sarkis, depicts language as a survival strategy and a form of resistance against hegemonic violence—as well as against vertical and violent notions of economic class.

The 2018 novel is centered around Halla, a housekeeper who inherits both a small fortune and a magical sword from an old relative. This medieval inspired fantasy story also follows the character of Sarkis—the immortal guardian of the sword—and their companions in their quest to both claim Halla's inheritance and to avoid the deadly danger of the fantasy creatures they encounter—as well as the threat posed by Halla's ill-intended relatives.

Since the intersection of gender, identity and power is central to this article, we will be drawing from Butler's (1990, 2004) ideas of gender performativity and Meyerhoff's (2014) notions of discursive stereotyping. Again, we will pay special attention to how Halla's linguistic performance of a working class and domestic-

bound femininity can be seen as a deliberate weaponization of the conceptions of womanhood that harm her and position her as a subaltern other—all while taking into account that this discursive practice is one of the few ways Halla is able to exercise active agency. Moreover, Kingfisher's treatment of racialized identities is also an element of academic interest. Drawing from Coates's (2015) writings of violence and the Black body, this article will argue that that the narrative description of Sarkis' body as a site of struggle is used to both highlight and denounce the historical commodification and subjugation of non-white communities—which in turn illustrates the transformative and political potential of language.

This article is divided in five sections, first of all the introduction at hand, then a theoretical background in which the academic theories and authors this paper draws from are expanded upon. Thirdly, there is a methodology section in which the corpus is contextualized, and the methodological approach and tools are described in detail. Then, we may find an analysis and discussion section, consisting of an examination of both Halla's and Sarkis' discursive representations in the novel, and the specific ways in which they illustrate the transformative potential of science fiction in regards to subaltern and othered identities. Lastly, we have a conclusion that includes an overview of the paper and its main claims, the issues discussed during the analysis and the limitations and possibilities of expansion of this research.

2. Theoretical Background

This section explores the different academic fields this article draws upon, as well as the ways in which they interact with one another in their understandings of identity, power and discourse.

2.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

This research paper relies on Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) as its main theoretical and methodological tool, since this discipline is mainly concerned with the relationship between language, ideology and social power. While there is not a

fully unified or shared definition of CDA, there are some core ideas shared by all of its branches. For instance, we might mention the understanding of discourse as social practice—that is, the notion that all linguistic productions cannot be divorced from their social dimension, role and meaning, including the cultural and economic context they are (re)produced in—and the notion of discourse as having the potential for challenging and shaping systems of power and oppression (see Van Dijk 2009). In other words, this research paper works under the assumption that "discourse has effects upon social structures, as well as being determined by them, and so contributes to social continuity and social change" (Fairclough 2001, 27), and thus sees the linguistic and the social as irremediably linked.

This perception of language being inherently connected to power and society is also accompanied by a political stance against hegemonic and systemic violence. CDA, as a discipline, tends to reject the pretense of academic objectivity, and instead demands a certain critical positionality that is in alignment with radical liberatory movements. Again, the position of this article regarding patriarchal and racial violence does not necessarily mean that it is irremediably biased, but rather that, as every piece of research is, it comes from a certain subjectivity that is ideologically and culturally situated—here I want to allude to Donna Haraway's' situated knowledge (2004) and Sandra Harding's 'strong objectivity' (1993). These notions are essential for understanding CDA as a useful approach for analyzing the narratives that surround marginalized communities, specially since issues lay at the core of CDA's view of discourse itself.

Even though I have mentioned Van Dijk before, this research paper will be mainly following Reisigl and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach, as it is directly concerned with how "text are often sites of social struggle in that they manifest traces of differing ideological fights for dominance and hegemony" (2009). Moreover, it will also follow Fairclough's Dialectical-Relational Approach, as

it prioritizes the exploration of resistance and identity (Fairclough 2010)[1].

In addition, this research paper also draws from Michelle Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth FCDA), which is interested in highlighting the prevalent role of cisnormative and patriarchal violence in relation to hegemonic violence and the status quo. Not only that, but FCDA also wishes to pose the question of how gender-based stereotypes, violence and dominance are "discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and contested in specific communities and discourse contexts" (Lazar 2014, 182) — which requires centering gender, sexuality and the body in our interrogations of hegemonic violence.

2.2. Gender Studies

This research paper also relies on feminist studies that favor social constructionist and poststructuralist approaches to gender—as opposed to gender essentialist theories. That is, this article understands gender as a socially constructed notion that is not situated in nor can be reduced to a male-female binary, but is, instead, a spectrum that includes multiple identities that are culture specific (Butler, 1990, 2004; Serano 2020). We are also particularly concerned with the performative and linguistic elements of gender, always bearing in mind that "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act," but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler 2016). Thus, by viewing gender performativity not as a mere discursive repetition, but as a form of realizing and

[1]While I am drawing from these two particular branches of CDA, I am not necessarily of the opinion that there is a clear cut and unmovable distinction between CDA's methodological approaches. Instead, this article believes that each author offers a different set of theoretical tools to examine the relationship between the social, the political and the linguistic, and that there is an inevitable (and probably necessary) overlap between branches.

rendering visible one's gender and gendered identity, we further and strengthen the connection between language and gender.

This is essential to understand the relationship between discourse and identity, and how the former can be used to "consider and clarify the force of the socially ascribed nature of gender: the assumptions and expectations of (often binary) ascribed social roles against which any performance of gender is constructed, accommodated or resisted" (Bergvall 1999, 282)—as well how essentialist and binary understandings of gender are (re)produced through hegemonic narratives.

Similarly to (F)CDA, feminist and gender studies require a certain political compromise against cisheteropatriarchal ideals that not only position (white, non-disabled and middle class) cisheterosexual male lives at the center of society, but also present cisnormativity, misogyny and compulsory heterosexuality (see Rich 1980) as seemly normal and natural states of the world—instead of being seen as vertical systems of oppression that have been actively constructed to relegate women, queer and non-binary people to the margins. Similarly, this article understands gender-based violence as inherently connected with other vertical systems of dominance, such capitalism, ableism and white supremacy—thus seeing gender as undivorceable from notions of class or race, among others

Here it is quite necessary to note that, while this research paper is analyzing gender and race in two separate subsections, it still advocates for an intersectional approach and rejects the possibility of understanding or even conceptualizing gender and raceless or race as genderless, reinforcing the idea of the two notions coexisting together in the previously mentioned forms of social, economic and political dominance (see Crenshaw 1989, Carruthers 2019).

Again, this article is particularly interested in the ways in which gender is performed and realized discursively, as language is seen as offering possibilities of constructing identities that are temporally, geographically and culturally specific (see Cameron 1995). Another key point of interest here is that of language stereotyping in relation to gender—that is, how specific gendered groups (in the case of this article, women and people who are

socially read as such) are expected to talk and to perform gender through language, as well as how the linguistic traits that have been historically associated with these groups are devalued precisely due to their connection with womanhood and femininity. To do so, we will be drawing form Meyerhoff's work on linguistic stereotyping (2014) and third wave sociolinguistics (Eckert 2012), rather than focusing on earlier sociolinguistic works that dealt with semi-rigid ideas of 'women's talk'.

2.3. Race and Language

As it has already been anticipated in the introduction, one of the main aims of this research paper is to explore the discursive representation of race in the context of Sarkis' character. To do so, this article will be exploring the role of discourse in the production of racial identities (see Solórzano and Yosso 2002), instead of assuming that race can be seen as a biological absolute. This approach draws from critical race theory (Davis 1983, Delgado and Stefancic 2001) and postcolonial studies (Harrison 2003, Langer 2011), and requires paying particular attention to (neo)colonial and imperial efforts to construct certain bodies as racialized—which then serves to position certain racial and ethnic identities as uncivilized while elevating the idea of whiteness itself (see Balibar 1994). In addition, we are also working with an understanding of whiteness that sees it as dependent on this epistemological distinction, as well as rooted in a colonial past that sees racialized bodies as commodities.

As it has been already mentioned, the intersection of race, power and discourse lays at the very core of CDA, since a significant number of CDA's foundational texts deal with these notions—such as Van Dijk's work on the linguistic realization of the idea of race and how racist and hegemonic discourses are (re)produced, distributed and reinforced through language and the press (1991).

Finally, we may also comment on how science fiction, fantasy and speculative narratives have historically been concerned with destabilizing and questioning the idea of the alien other, the racial other and that of race itself—bringing at the forefront of these stories

what it means to belong and how race and ethnicity are linked to ideas of normality. Not only that, but science fiction and speculative scholars have also examined the role of literature and storytelling in reinforcing and naturalizing said false normality (see Haslam 2015). Thus, speculative stories, and *Swordheart* in particular, become a narrative space that allows for questioning and challenging how the racialized body is discursively constructed, and the role of imperial and neocolonial violence and logic in this very construction.

3. Methodology

This article is a case study of the fantasy novel *Swordheart* (2018), written by T. Kingfisher and published by Argyll Productions, a small American editorial house that focuses on 'science fiction from the margins' (2021). The story is set in a medieval not-descriptive town and follows Halla, a housekeeper that has unexpectedly inherited a small fortune—as well as an enchanted sword in which a mercenary has been imprisoned for centuries, forced to serve the yielder of the sword. The pair, accompanied by the characters of Brindle, a gnole[2], and Zale, a non-binary priest, attempts to survive the dangers they find in their quest to help Halla legitimize her inheritance and gain economic freedom—all while the narrative seems to criticize how the economic and legal system of their world condemns women, non-binary people and working-class communities to a life of isolation and domestic servitude.

While the novel maintains a lighthearted tone all throughout, it focuses on how class, gender and race intersect and interact with one another, as well focusing on the possibilities offered by language in resisting vertical and multiaxial structures of power and rendering them visible. Thus, the methodological choice of conducting a case study instead of relying on a quantitative approach is rooted not only in the belief that issues of discourse and identity can be found at the core of the novel, but also due to the text being

[2]A type of fantastical creature that exists in the world of *Swordheart*.

seen as exemplifying the emancipatory and subversive potential of fantasy narratives.

In addition, and as already anticipated, this research paper will be relying upon (F)CDA as a methodological approach. We are going to be looking at issues of lexical choice, nomination and predicational strategies and (self) representation (Wodak and Meyer 2015), and we will be focusing on specific segments of the novel where the use of these discursive strategies to negotiate a certain gendered or racialized identity is more obvious—rather than focusing on specific and isolated linguistic constructions.

However, before moving onto the analysis, we must note that CDA has traditionally been used to dissect what is normally referred to as 'naturally occurring examples of language', which is code for non-literary language. Yet, if we rely on Critical Stylistics, which applies a more radical and social approach to traditional stylistics—if it is possible to even talk about 'traditional' stylistics—we can justify using CDA methodology on fictional texts since it generally views literature as discourse (Fowler 1981, 1996) and therefore as a legitimate object of study in regards to CDA.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Halla: Gender, Language and Performativity

As it can be inferred from the plot described in the previous section, a substantial part of the novel is concerned with highlighting the systems of dominance that position Halla as a subaltern other with limited autonomy and influence. From the beginning of the story, she is presented as a vulnerable, middle-aged woman; someone whose gender identity, economic dependency and working-class status render her as an object unable to enact active agency.

While this stereotyping of Halla as a powerless woman is related to her living in a rural area, her being a house-keeper and to

her main occupation being reproductive and domestic work[3], part of her initial characterization as 'ignorant' and 'incapable' is her bubbly way of speaking and her constant asking questions—that is, her idiolect. These linguistic characteristics are seen as intrinsically connected with her gender identity in the yes of other characters, such as Sarkis. To him, these discursive practices seem to infer a certain 'life' inexperience, lack of knowledge and even, vapidness—which, again, brings back the notion of gendered knowledge and the question of whose experiences and occupations are seen as valuable.

Yet again, we must remember that the character of Halla has very limited resources and possibilities of resisting a cisheteropatriarchal system that positions her at the margins; a system is built, reproduced and maintained on the grounds of that same differentiation. One of the elements she can take cover in and use to gain a certain level of freedom is her being a widow, which provides her with some level of 'respectability' and allows for her to postpone the prospect of a new marriage on grounds of religious morality—here we have the policing of women' sexuality, desire and autonomy, as well as a reminder of the impossibility of a sexual liberation in a context that commodifies subaltern lives, bodies and desires. Thus, even if Halla's position as a widow provides her with a certain social leverage and allows for her not to remarry immediately, she is still trapped in the institution of the family due to the economic and patriarchal system.

The other way Halla is able to protect herself is by linguistically enacting a hyperfeminine and easily dismissible persona—which is directly connected with her initial presentation and the discursive patterns and behaviors that are generally attributed to women in mainstream discourse. This would include the notion of women dominating conversations, 'overspeaking' or

[3]The novel makes a point of denouncing that reproductive labor and care work are so devalued because of their association with femininity and womanhood in a patriarchal system, and portrays Halla's 'domestic' skills and knowledge as essential to the group's survival.

over explaining themselves, and focusing on domestic and private interests in terms of topic choice (Meyerhoofer 2014).

Again, we are working with the understanding of gender being a fluid social construct, and that gendered and sexual identities can be and are enacted, negotiated and (re)defined through linguistic practices (Queen 2014)—which implies the rejection of the essentialist and outdated notion of women inherently talking and producing language a certain way. Rather, what this research article is concerned with is the linguistic expectations those that are read as women face, and how those preconceived notions limit and impact one's self-presentation and ability to perform gender altogether.

Nevertheless, while the discursive enacting of social identities tends to be viewed as a generally subconscious (or rather, non-deliberate) use of language, it is also worth mentioning that marginalized communities and individuals learn to perform a more palatable and less 'threatening' version of their own identities in order to survive and to navigate hostile spaces. Therefore, the linguistic strategies of self-definition that are available or feasible in a given space are directly influenced by the cultural and social context, especially in situations in which the open portrayal of one's non-normative identity can be dangerous.

This research paper argues that Halla is deliberately drawing from the sociolinguistic stereotypes that code her as inherently ignorant in order to perform a hegemonic and domestic femininity. By relying on the "repetition of hegemonic forms which fail to repeat loyally" (Butler 2016, 124), Halla is able to weaponize linguistic stereotypes of 'female ignorance' and protect herself from patriarchal violence. These linguistic choices—what she calls "her protective shell of foolishness" (354)—are not understood as a caricature of working class and rural women, but as a resistance strategy against hegemonic ideas and power structures that draws from the potential of discourse to shape social identities and the status quo itself—an idea that is, again, central to (F)CDA and reinforces the connections between the corpus and the methodology.

In the quotation below we can see how other characters are aware of the fact that Halla's linguistic choices are used as a survival strategy, connecting them with Halla's inability to obtain any formal

education or cultural capital in a patriarchal society. Moreover, we can see once again how her performance of gender is directly linked with the issue of language and power—as well as being directly determined by the fantastic allowances of the novel.

> Which is not to say that Halla does not sometimes ask questions to throw people off. But she is, I think, like many children born in poverty. Intelligent…curious…but never given beyond the most basic education. In boys, that sort of thing is valued, in girls…" Zale shook their head. "Had she come to the attention of the Rat, we might have made a scholar of her. As it is, *she has learned to be quiet and agreeable and to appear quite stupid when it is convenient*. But the curiosity still comes through. (166, my emphasis)

Here we can see how the stereotyping of women as dominating conversations and 'overspeaking' is brought up again, yet it is now linked with Halla's working class status, connecting her lack of cultural and economic capital with her being a working class woman that lives in an isolated rural community—communities that have been traditionally characterized as and assumed to be ignorant. Not only that, but the line "to appear quite stupid when it is convenient" appears to reinforce the fact that Halla is aware of the social and linguistic stereotypes she is subjected to, and thus decides to deliberately weaponize them in an act of discursive agency.

The second extract this paper wishes to examine is that of Halla herself commenting on how her linguistic production and her idiolect are directly determined by her social status and her lack of perceived authority. Specifically, she establishes that she wishes she was able to adopt a more direct and perhaps even hostile linguistic persona, instead of needing to recur to linguistic stereotyping—in this case, she mentions over explaining and using lexical items from the domestic realm. Specifically, she compares herself to the character of Zale, who is able to use their positioning as a respectable priest to reject hostile linguistic environments.

> Halla rather admired the priest's flat refusal to answer the question. S*he'd be burying the man in information, herself, with every relative she had in every town along the way, including some made up on the spot*. Still, Zale had a certain authority and c*ould get away with defiance* (165, my emphasis)

Albeit the character of Zale is not an element of study in this research paper, their identity as a non-binary priest in an environment that elevates and respects religious scholars serves to reinforce the importance of intersectionality (in this case that of class and gender) when discussing linguistic agency. Opposite to Halla, for whom class reinforces the social disdain she experiences as a woman, Zale's identity is somewhat protected, overlooked or left unquestioned by their social affordances as a member of a powerful group, allowing them to refuse a tamer or safer discursive presentation. Again, other characters are aware of this difference and openly comment on Halla's idiolect and the fact that "[s]he's found a way to weaponize ignorance" (348).

Our third example is that of an exchange between Halla and a group of priests that attempt to detain and capture the main characters on grounds of immorality and religious corruption. Outnumbered and with no opportunity to resist by physical force, Halla resorts to portraying a certain hegemonic femininity to appear unthreatening—once again weaponizing the discursive expectations that have been placed upon her.

> "Can you believe it?" Halla demanded. "If they'd just asked for biscuits, I would have given them some! It's not like they stay fluffy past the second day! You have to eat them up, or they get hard as rocks. Well, you know."
>
> Judging by the look on the Motherhood captain's face, he did not know.
>
> "I don't—" he started to say, but Halla had the bit between her teeth now.
>
> "And it was my grandmother's recipe! My grandmother's! They stole my grandmother's biscuits, can you imagine? What kind of depraved mind steals a woman's extra biscuits?
>
> Truly shocking," murmured Zale, casting a long-suffering look at the Motherhood priests.
>
> "No, no," said Halla, waving her hand. "No, I know. You've got bigger things to worry about than bandits stealing a respectable widow's baked goods. It's all terrible, the way the rule of law has gone, that's all. I hope you find your missing men. If you do, bring them by, and I'll make you all biscuits."

> There was a long, teetering moment when Halla thought it might work. She'd stonewalled better men than the Motherhood captain. Such men hated to look foolish, and if you could appear so absurd that bothering you made them look equally absurd… (333)

When looking at the lexical choice of this extract, we may comment on how Halla seems to deliberately thematize the private sphere with references to family members (line 6) and domestic work ('biscuits'), alluding to a certain traditional and non-threatening femininity that aligns with expectations of women being complacent and non-dangerous. This notion, which is again deemed a deliberate linguistic choice with that of "but Halla already had the bits between her teeth" (line 5), is also accompanied by certain nomination and self-definition strategies in which Halla focuses on gender as a bases for group categorization and identity, putting womanhood at the forefront of the discourse with the repetition of terms such as 'woman' in line 7 and 'a respectable widow' in line 10.

This discursive weaponizing of traditional femininity being associated with ignorance is also furthered by certain thematizations and predicational strategies by which Halla hedges and diminishes her own importance, describing herself as an inconvenience (line 9)—a characterization that is enhanced and reinforced by Zale's gestures (line 8)—and her pretending to respect authority figures and police forces. Finally, these strategies also rely on the aforementioned forms of linguistic stereotyping women and femme presenting people face, such as that of 'overexplaining' and dominating conversations and constant use of rhetorical questions.

Finally, it is also crucial to note that Halla's performance also relies on the relatively unconscious complicity of hegemonic masculinity; that is, she assumes the priests will not engage in conversation with her for fear of being associated with her hyperfeminine discourse ("such men hated to look foolish" in line 14). This is, again, a way of construing a certain gendered, in this case masculine, identity, one that reacts to and positions itself as opposite to and distant from Halla's womanhood.

However, before moving onto the next subsection, I want to very briefly comment on the role of race in Halla's linguistic

performance and how her whiteness furthers her being perceived as pure, unassuming and non-threatening. While this research paper has explored and focused upon how Halla uses language to protect herself due to her limited social and economical capital, there is a historical tradition of white femininity and politics of respectability being deliberately weaponized to hurt queer and racialized communities, as exemplified in Hamad's 2020 and Jones-Rogers 2019 work. Therefore, even if this article believes Halla's discourse to be an act of linguistic agency and self-determination, it is necessary to note that it is rooted in racial violence and the hypervigilance of non-white communities.

4.2. Sarkis, Violence and the Black Body

This second part of the analysis and discussion section is concerned with the linguistic representations of non-white bodies and the subversive potentiality of discourse in the particular fantastical context of T. Kingfisher's *Swordheart* (2018). Again, we are working with the idea of race being a social constructed identity that is deeply intertwined with systems of hegemonic violence and white supremacy that are prevalent in the West.

Specifically, we will be examining the portrayal of the character of Sarkis, the love interest of Halla that has been imprisoned in a magical sword. Coded as racialized —he can be read as a Black man—, Sarkis' journey follows his inability to free himself from his servitude duty to the sword in the present day, and goes back in time to contextualize the numerous forms of violence and mistreat that he has endured over decades as an enslaved man. However, we must note that, since Halla's narrative is prioritized in the novel as she is the main protagonist, this subsection will be slightly shorter than the previous one.

What is most salient about the linguistic portrayal of Sarkis is his lack of linguistic agency—particularly when compared to that of Halla. Rather than having his past discussed by dialogue, with his own words, Sarkis' story and experiences of violence are told through references to his body and the marks of pain, scars and wounds that have been inflicted upon him. His body is presented as

a site of historical struggle, a visible reminder of the effects (neo)colonial and imperial have upon racialized communities.

To explore the ways in which Sarkis' experiences of violence are discussed, we will examine several passages in the novel in which the notion of Sarkis' body as a site of historical trauma (see Bakare-Yusuf 1999 and Moore 2009) is thematized through the use of lexical choice and predication strategies:

1) There were scars there, too, cutting starkly across the lines of ink. A stag with curling horns ran across his left bicep, its throat sliced open with silver. (57)
2) "I fear I will go on and on and on, until there is nothing left of me but silver scars and I have forgotten what it is like to be a man instead of a blade." (93)
3) "A spear like that, in the proper hands, could be far more lethal than a sword, as Sarkis happened to know. One of the lower scars in the mass scribbled on his chest had been from the point of a spear like that" (209)
4) "[…] you had nothing but secrets and failure and a body wracked with silver scars." (231)

One of the patterns we may comment on is the repetition of the term 'scars', and the allusions and explicit discussions of physical violence, somethings enacted by Sarkis but more often experienced by him ("cutting starkly across the lines of ink" in example 1 and "one of the lower scars in the mass scribbled on his chest had been from the point of a spear like that" in example 3"). This article am also particularly interested in the implications of the line "I have forgotten what it is like to be a man instead of a blade" in the second extract, as it seems to position discussions of the instrumentalization and weaponization of Black bodies at the forefront of the narrative (see hooks 1984), as well as hinting at the potentiality of discourse in denouncing the dehumanization of non-white communities.

I also want to briefly mention how the aforementioned examples have taken place in the span of many centuries, as Sarkis was cursed with immortality the moment he was imprisoned into the sword. The constant and repeated nature of this violence seems then to allude to the legacy of white supremacy, as well as white supremacy itself, being still present — as well the fact that vertical

forms of violence that are drawn upon and maintained by racialized bodies and labor.

There is a final extract from the novel this paper wishes to comment on, which is that of "one of my wielders liked to cut out my tongue" (168). It is perhaps one of the most explicit examples of cruelty in the book, both because of the implied repetition of the mutilation (Sarkis previously established that his wounds heal naturally due to the curse) and because of the casual tone in which it is said, drawing attention to the normalization of racial cruelty. This specific act of mutilation, which is directly connected with language and speech control, is also reminiscent of slavery practices of the Global North, as well as being reminiscent of Coates' idea of the "ability to break the [Black]bodies" as a "mark of civilization" (2015, 104), and the use of violence to elevating racist ideas of white civility.

Again, there is an abundance of violent lexicon that results in Sarkis being defined through his body, and the notion of the body as a site of struggle is used to both highlight and denounce the historical commodification and subjugation of non-white communities. Not only that, but when looking at lexical choice and predication strategies that his self-definition comes from the proofs of his survival, rather than from an opportunity to exercise discursive agency. Moreover, this portrayal does not challenge structural forms of violence like Halla's does, but rather, relies on language to expose them. Again, we come back not only to the subversive potential of fantasy narratives in offering textual spaces where the intersections of language, violence and identity can be explored, but also to the role of racial identity in allowing for linguistic agency.

5. Conclusion

In short, this research paper has been concerned with the transformative potential of fantastical narratives and their ability to challenge and render visible hegemonic forms of violence. We have paid attention to the ways in which speculative fiction offers narrative spaces to discuss subaltern identities, working with the

idea that these genres are inherently connected to the margins. To do so, we have followed (F)CDA understandings of discourse as a social practice that is embedded in social forms of domination, and we have explored the potential of (F)CDA in studying the connections between power, language and identity, focusing specifically on gendered and racial identities.

Following a social constructionist approach to gender and race, we have examined Halla's use of discourse and her weaponization of femininity as well as Sarkis' denouncement of racial violence as examples of subversive uses of language—while still exploring how the existence of vertical structures of power conditions the possibilities of linguistic agency. We have paid close attention to the ways in which class and rurality influences the perception of gender, and have analyzed the nomination, predication and self-definition strategies used by Halla to enact a traditionally feminine persona and protect herself in hostile environments. Moreover, we also examined issues of lexical choices and nomination strategies in order to understand how the racial body is presented as a site of struggle—a testimony of violence, almost—in Kingfisher's novel.

All in all, this research paper is limited in its scope and its corpora, as it only focuses on the linguistic realization of two social variables—gender and race — in a specific novel. Hopefully, this research can be expanded by either focusing on the role of class, ability… in the specific context of *Swordheart,* or perhaps it can be used as a starting point to explore commonalities in reference to language and identity in Kingfisher's work. I can only hope that, despite these limitations, this article has enriched the critical explorations of language and identity, and has furthered, if only slightly, the realm of speculative and fantastical studies.

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