



“Being then nothing”: Physicality, abjection and creation in Janice Galloway’s short fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the prominence of the body in Janice Galloway’s short fiction. Drawing mainly on Kristeva’s notions of the semiotic and the abject, the argument initially establishes the central place of physicality in Galloway’s poetics. Her creative project is inspired by a desire to transmit in writing the experience of being alive, of how being is intrinsically fragile, inexorably bound to extinction. In a particularly sharp manner that engages the reader more actively than her novels, her short stories exhibit both formally and thematically an interaction of the symbolic and the semiotic. As being attentive to life entails an awareness of death if one is to write realistically, the ensuing discussion of stories from her three collections –*Blood* (1991), *Where you find it* (1996) and *Jellyfish* (2015)– reveals that abjection, the extreme version of the semiotic that threatens to cancel out the symbolic, is paramount in her creative universe.

KEYWORDS: Janice Galloway, short fiction, the body, abjection, being, death, Kristeva, Blanchot.

1. THE LETTER KILLETH AND GIVETH LIFE: GALLOWAY’S BODY POETICS

According to Alexander Kojève, the word was for Hegel the murder of the thing.¹ Thus, for instance, “the word ‘dog’”, Kojève explains, “does not run, drink, and eat; in it the Meaning (Essence) ceases to live –that is, it dies” (1969: 140). Strongly influenced –like Jacques Lacan and other French intellectuals of the time– by Kojève’s seminal

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reading of Hegel, Maurice Blanchot states that “the word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness” (1995: 322). For Blanchot literature is precisely the attempt to bring back to life *through language* that which language itself had murdered:

In speech what dies is what gives life to speech; [...] something was there and is no longer there. Something has disappeared. How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look at what exists *before*, if all my power consists of making it into what exists *after*? The language of literature is a search for this moment which precedes literature. Literature usually calls it existence; it wants the cat as it exists, the pebble *taking the side of things*, not man but the pebble [...] *I say a flower!* But in the absence where I mention it, [...] I passionately summon the darkness of this flower, I summon this perfume that passes through me though I do not breathe it, this dust that impregnates me though I do not see it, this color which is a trace and not light. (1995: 327)

The conviction that the task of literature is to rescue things (cats, flowers, pebbles...) from the deadly net of conceptual abstractions through the sensual evocation of their physicality is very strong in the case of the Scottish writer Janice Galloway. To Georgina Brown, who famously described Galloway as “a literary endoscopist” and defined her writing as “visceral”, she declared on occasion of the publication of her second collection of stories (*Where you find it*) that she was engaged in the “very complex and very ambiguous” task “to write realistically about what it feels to be alive” (1996). In so doing, the most important of all the “essentials” (as she called them) of her writing was “to make the reader feel” (Brown, 1996). For Galloway, corporeality, physicality, sensuality, in sum, *the body* is to be rescued from extinction through writing and shared with the reader in what constitutes a truly universal experience: “I want people to know[,] to remember that I am a body, not some kind of great brain schlumping about being an abstract truth. I hate the kind of writing that inflates the intellect into the only thing that matters –there is a horrible elitist game going on there– a ‘let’s escape from the body’. We are our bodies and no matter what your background [...] We all feel the same when we touch things, that’s the real universal” (Galloway in Brown, 1996).

Three years later, in an interview with Cristie Leigh March for the *Edinburgh review*, Galloway admitted that she was “obviously fascinated by physicality –sometimes repulsed, sometimes wildly attracted. [...] Physicality is *always* a focus” (1999: 97, emphasis added). Both Galloway’s fascination with physicality and its thematic recurrence in her work have directly to do with, she states, “my own obsession with [...] death. Death is the most bizarre idea. Being then nothing” (March, 1999: 97). Moreover, it is this fascination with being and with its inevitable annihilation that makes her a writer, that should make anyone a writer: “If

you're not fascinated with the simple fact of being", Galloway states, "you've not got a lot to write about" (March, 1999: 97).

Galloway's impulse towards literary creativity derives, therefore, from her effort to convey to the reader in writing the sense of being's fragile physicality which (as Julia Kristeva calls it following Jacques Lacan "*the symbolic*", as one modality of significance) has emptied out of substance in its abstract, discrete organisation of reality (1984: 24). It is in literary, poetic language that, according to Kristeva, the dialectic of "the symbolic" and the other modality at work in the signifying process, "*the semiotic*", becomes particularly intense. In ways akin to Blanchot's idea that "[t]he language of literature is a search for [...] what exists *before*" the word murders the thing, Kristeva points out that (what she calls) "*the semiotic chora*" is "a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign *is not yet articulated as the absence of the object* and as the distinction between the real and the symbolic" (1984: 26, emphasis added). The semiotic disrupts the stability and coherence of the symbolic, blurs its presumably mimetic transparency (hence its transformative, *revolutionary* creative power)² and evokes in the subject the moment in which he/she was not yet separated from the object, primordially, from the mother (Kristeva, 1984: 27), from the mother as the other that must be repressed, expelled, "ab-jected" in order for us to constitute our identity as subjects (1982: 13).

In speaking and writing the corporeal, the semiotic and its extreme manifestation, the abject³ are linked by Kristeva to Lacan's notions of the "real", "*jouissance*", and "drive", three terms that are interrelated in their destabilising effects on the symbolic order as that instituted by the paternal law (for Lacan the real is the unsymbolisable), regulated by the normalising pleasure principle (for Lacan *jouissance* is beyond the pleasure principle and has orgasmic connotations) and as the place where the subject's desire is articulated (in stark contrast with the drive, which is "what a biological instinct becomes once it is subject to the signifier [... and so is connected] to the real of the foreclosed biological body" [Kay, 2003: 162]). Hence Kristeva's affirmation in *Powers of horror* that "it [the Other, the symbolic order] jettisons the object into the abominable real, inaccessible except through *jouissance*. It follows that *jouissance* alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion" (Kristeva, 1982: 9).

Kristeva's dialectic interweaving of the semiotic and the symbolic, like Blanchot's literary search for what precedes literature, is in line with Galloway's attempt to make the reader feel and with her "hope [that] what is picked up is transmitted in more entirety –by suggestion, perhaps– than the words alone can do. I deal a lot in bodily sensation too" (Sacido-Romero, 2018). Indeed, depictions of the physical, material, scatological, carnal, sensual, fleshy, visceral, bodily run like a thread in Galloway's fiction, yet, because of their condensation, limited frame, elisions, and concentration, those depictions impact the reader

more vividly and affect him/her more intensely than is the case with longer narratives.⁴ The fact that short fiction engages readers more actively has been frequently singled out as a defining feature of the genre (Korte, 2003: 5; Brosch, 2015: 93). Galloway herself states that she “like[s] the intensity and airy space they [short narratives] offer for the head to roam” (Sacido-Romero, 2018). Short stories, hence, become apt vehicles to achieve another of the major aims (or “essentials”) of her writing: namely, “hauling the reader in [...] to make them [readers] do part of the work and bring the experiences that they have” (Brown, 1996). If this works for longer narratives like her second novel *Foreign parts* (1994), where (in her own words) “[t]he are rhapsodies about Rona’s [one of the two main characters’] face, plum membrane on her lips, the body’s resistance to exercise” (March, 1999: 97), such details would leave a more sharp, focused, unified impression on readers of short stories where there is little space to bury them under a heap of narrative detail.

Galloway’s short fiction abounds in examples of the semiotic and the abject as a way to link writing to the body and the material, to resuscitate the being that language in its symbolic modality has murdered, imposing the view that words as bearers of ideal concepts are actually transparent representations of the world, of things, of being. In Galloway’s stories, the semiotic is conveyed through both formal strategies –like an unconventional use of typography, fragmented syntactical periods and ungrammatical language (which confer on her narratives a poetic quality)⁵– and recurrent motifs that underline the sensual, frequently abject dimension that her work explores. Norquay (2000) reads Galloway’s typographical experimentation in her first two novels (*The trick is to keep breathing* and *Foreign parts*) as an instance of Hélène Cixous’ *écriture féminine*, particularly her use of the upper-case as a vector or conductor of intense energy currents (135). McGlynn (2008) interprets the particular layout design, typesetting and visuality of *The trick is to keep breathing* (1989) as the book’s way to “assert the physicality of the text” so that it “demand[s] the reader to approach it as object” (229). Precisely, for Blanchot, the hope of the retrieval of being through/in language lay on “the fact that words are things, too, are a kind of nature” (1995: 327). Words, from this new perspective, become solid, concrete, material, while before they were seen as ephemeral, abstract, ideal. Somewhat prefiguring Kristeva’s cogitations on the semiotic obfuscation of meaningful symbolic transparency, Blanchot concludes by highlighting the materiality of the literary work: “language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be, tries [not fully achieves] to become senseless. Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and the paper on which one writes, the trace of ink, the book. Yes, happily language is a thing: it is *a written thing*” (1995: 327, emphasis added). Without neglecting this formal, material dimension of literary language when deemed most relevant, I will concentrate in what follows on the conspicuous thematic presence of the physical, the sensual and the abject in a bunch of short stories by Janice Galloway that illustrate her poetics of the body.

2. GOING TO THE BUTCHER'S

Galloway's one-page story "The meat" (*Blood* 1991) opens with a striking image of rotting meat hanging from a hook in a state of abject isolation which is typographically reinforced by the double space that separates this one-sentence paragraph off from the following one as if cut out from the rest of the text in which life goes on: "The carcass hung in the shop for nine days till the edges congested and turned brown in the air" (2009: 108). This piece of unsaleable meat, we are told, had something in it that "was infecting" and "[b]y the tenth day, the fat on its surface turned leathery and translucent like the rind of an old cheese" (Galloway, 2009: 108). Tactile and olfactive stimuli follow ("The ribs were sticky and the smell had begun to repulse him [the butcher]" [Galloway, 2009: 109]) so much so that the shop owner ends up throwing "it into the back close parallel to the street" to immediately "hear the scuffling of small animals and strays" presumably gnawing on it (Galloway, 2009: 109). Recalling the sharp, epigrammatic turning point of an English sonnet's closing couplet, readers find out only at the very end that the carcass on sale was the corpse of the butcher's wife, a climatic conclusion reached after a narrative progression permeated by a sensual *in crescendo*: "In the morning, all that remained was the hair and a strip of tartan ribbon. These he salvaged and sealed in a plain wooden box beneath the marital bed. A wee minding" (Galloway, 2009: 109).

Based on a classroom experiment she conducted, Martín Alegre reads her students' reactions of uncomfortable surprise at the story's conclusion as Galloway's "incisive criticism of a patriarchy so dominant that we don't see women's ill-treated bodies, not even when their sad remains are fully displayed" (2009: 462). To Martín Alegre's sagacious conclusion it could be added that Galloway's indictment of patriarchal murderous violence in "The meat" is even more incisive and cruder if one takes into account not just the readers' but also the customers' reaction to the carcass whose identity they *do not* ignore, but, on the contrary, may know all too well: "no one wanted the meat. It dropped overhead from a claw hook, flayed and split down the spinal column: *familiar enough* in its way" (2009: 108, emphasis added). Even if the carcass were in a state that made it difficult to identify it as the wife's body, customers could not have missed "the hair and the strip of tartan ribbon" as the butcher keeps a sort of macabre trophy. The community of unnamed/ungendered shoppers, thus, tolerate homicidal domestic violence and at once react with utter disgust in the presence of what is really a corpse. The corpse was precisely for Kristeva the epitome of the abject, the remainder and reminder of the body's fragility before death: "The corpse, seen without God and outside science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part" (1982: 4). Flesh, unsuccessfully commodified woman's flesh (that is, "meat"), in a state of decomposition, becomes refuse for living fellow human beings and food for animals and parasites who (like Keats' nightingale) have no conscience of death.

Galloway's opposite reactions of attraction and repulsion towards physicality show in the relatively recurrent reference to butchers, butchers' shops and meat in her short stories.⁶ Because, indeed, the tension between physicality's appeal and disgust in Galloway is intensely manifested in eating, more precisely, in responses to food.⁷ Thus, at the climatic point in the novel in which she became or decided to become an anorexic ("I didn't need to eat"), Galloway's central character in *The trick is to keep breathing*, Joy Stone, looks at the contents of a can of vegetable soup and says that the stuff "was sickening but pleasantly so" (1999: 38, last emphases added). Yet, among the different types of food, meat is the one that provokes the most ambiguous reactions in humans. As Holm points out in her Kristevan reading of Claude Chabrol's film *Le boucher* (*The butcher*, 1969), "meat is perhaps the ultimate abject object as it necessitates the death of a body to feed another body, bringing together life and death in the most direct of manners" (2017: 160). The butcher is likewise an ambiguous social figure as meat dealer, as a merchant of the abject. Holm expands her analysis of Chabrol's central character, a serial killer of beautiful women, to propose a general description of the abject status of the butcher and of meat that is relevant for my discussion of the recurrence of these related motifs in Galloway's stories. "Even butchers who do not turn their knives on fellow humans", Holm writes, "straddle the divide between life and death, rendering them liminal figures intimately involved in the sourcing of one of the most anxiety-ridden foods. It is this quotidian crossing of the boundary between living and death that render both the butcher and meat as conflicted symbols and highly ambivalent. [... The butcher's] position [is that of] an intermediary between society and the abject" (2017: 159). By choosing to title her story "The meat" instead of "The carcass" or "The butcher", Galloway puts the accent on the abject status of this type of food while, of course, misleading the reader and adding to his/her final surprise when the truth of a horrid parricidal act is revealed.

"after the rains" (*Where you find it*) is a more openly urban Gothic fantasy than "The meat". The story is located in Glasgow and is punctuated with broken sentences in italics inserted as variable unpunctuated and uncapitalised poetic refrains that add to the sense of utter disruption of the normal order of things that the text provokes in readers. This is the story of how nine months of unremitting rainfall and an ensuing heatwave breed monsters. Like loose refrain-like fragments scattered in the text, subjects and objects lose their demarcations, boundaries are erased in the most bizarre ways, miraculous transformations occur (sprouts and leaves grow in a florist's body till she becomes a garden, for instance) till external reality is invaded by an amorphous worm-like being ("An enormous white grub spread the length of the pavement, bulbous tips waving in what looked horribly like *appeal*" [Galloway, 2009: 236, emphasis added]) and by a featureless ghost whose physicality is nevertheless highlighted: "Beyond this nerveless thing, a three-headed phantom groped forward on its hands and knees. Where features should have been was only tight, smooth

skin, blanket-grey and eyeless” (Galloway, 2009: 236). The I-narrator escapes from the touch of another such phantom (“I drew back, *repulsed*, fearing the thing it might touch would be me” [Galloway, 2009: 236. My emphasis]) and finds him/herself “facing the butchers”, where bloody sacrificial rituals appear to be taking place as the shop seems to mutate into a church: “a pitiful screeching forced me to turn. I was facing the butchers’. The howling and the bloody trail at their doorway. The awful death stench and low weeping of children, childish voices seeping under the door of the church” (Galloway, 2009: 236). This nightmarish blurring of boundaries that is at once *appealing* and *repulsive* is a fictional example of the abject as defined by Kristeva in the very first paragraph of her book-length study on the topic: “a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (1982: 1). The I-narrator cannot but look back while she/he runs faster and faster seemingly across the line that separates life from death as he/she finally finds him/herself mutating into a corpse. Typographical fragmentation reinforces the protagonist’s feeling of being beside him/herself in the story’s concluding passage:

My hands were very pale and whitening still. Thinning.
They were stark white.

I kept on running. (Galloway, 2009: 236)

In presence of the abject, whose epitome is the corpse, Kristeva argues, “I am at the border of my condition as a living being” (1982: 3). The bizarre transformations people undergo in “after the rains” have rightly been interpreted as the citizens’ transmutation into their social functions which undermines human closeness and the sense of community (March, 2002: 127). But this is not the whole message of the story as, from another perspective, it is not only that these marvellous metamorphoses actually upset rather than maintain the abstract order of symbolic positions and functions rendering it ineffective, but also that, as the final transformation of the I-narrator epitomises, human life is pushed onto and, apparently, across the threshold that separates it from death at the story’s inconclusive conclusion. As readers reach the end of the story the protagonist seems to reach the end of his/her life. However, this final moment is rendered as an uncompleted, transitional process by means of material, textual disarray, of images of growing paleness and the reference to an ongoing action in the very last word of the story, “running”. In sum, to the character’s *being, then nothing (death)*, there corresponds the reader’s *reading, then blank space beneath on the final page of the story*.

A striking scene of abjection affecting the I-narrator’s own body closes thus the narrative in “after the rains”, putting the accent on the inescapable fact of the precariousness of life, of being. Galloway’s recurrent explorations of abject physicality, I maintain, are in tune with her attempt “to write realistically about what it feels to be alive” (Brown, 1996), to

show the fragility of our lives, of our efforts to stay alive, to keep breathing (March, 1999: 96), opposing therefore the abstract rendition of human existence found in the intellectualist kind of writing that obviates the body. Kristeva writes: “A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death –a flat encephalograph, for instance– I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (1982: 3). In the realistic and less experimental long short story “A week with Uncle Felix” (*Blood*), eleven-year-old Scottish girl Senga, on a visit to his dead father’s brother in England, is exposed to the abject several times in a traumatic context of unpleasant family secrets and growing sexual awareness. It begins with her visit to the butcher’s in her aunt’s company. They buy some meat there and when they reach home, we are told, “she saw the blood oozing down her arm in a twisted line and shouted. The meat was dripping on the lino as well. Senga went upstairs without waiting for the tea” (Galloway, 2009: 139). This disgusting experience of (literal) carnality as manifested in her refusal to eat (the meat) gives way to Senga’s more traumatic confrontation with the abject in otherwise harmless natural objects which the text elaborates on: namely, plums fallen from a plum tree whose imposing, full vitality she admires and wants to take a closer look at. Firstly, the abject is experienced by her as an indefinable tactile impression (“She staggered backwards as her foot slipped on something soft” [Galloway, 2009: 145]), then as a strong olfactory impression (“Windfalls: that thick sweet smell like metal” [Galloway, 2009: 146]) and finally as visual *cum* tactile confrontation with the fully-formed fruit in the process of losing its definable contours and rotting into a growingly shapeless mass of stuff on which ants feed:

She opened her hand and picked up the whole fruit; thumb and first fingertip, end to end, lifting it nearer. Then it became something else. Grey blue fungus furred one side of a gash underneath, a running sore oozing brown pulp and something else. Something moving. Thin black feelers twitching towards her hand. Dropping it was immediate. Even then it wasn’t far enough away and she drew back from under the shade of trees, staring, wiping her hands against the jean seams to get rid of the feel from her fingers. Black movements flickered at the corners of her eyes, everywhere now she looked. Ants. (Galloway, 2009: 146)

The story’s length, its less experimental nature and the greater amount of details and themes it contains make instances of abjection less unified and striking in the reader’s mind. However, in terms of the reader’s response, the formal and technical features that the long passage just quoted exhibits make it a sharply effective instance of impressionist “delayed decoding” (Watt, 1981: 175). In it, a bunch of raw sense impressions perceived by a character are rendered directly by the narrator so that the whole event acquires full meaning later on, when some interpretative key is provided by the text (“Ants”, in this case). This is a

way of making the reader's perception and awareness of what happens to and around the character simultaneous with that of the character himself, drawing the reader in to make him/her feel what the character felt.

In the passage above, reality loses its consistency and threatens the subject's safe inscription in it, blurring the boundaries across which bodies die to give life to other bodies in an incessant process of generation, decay and annihilation from which no one is saved. "A sudden and massive emergence of uncanniness", Kristeva writes, "which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome." (1982: 2). This (as Kristeva calls it at one point) "abominable real" (1982: 9) is a manifestation of the Lacanian Real. The Real undermines both symbolically constructed reality and the subject's egoic imaginary fullness, as when Freud reached a limit in his relation of the dream of Irma's injection. As Lacan says in *Seminar II* (March 9, 1955), Freud got his patient to open her mouth so as to see her throat: "There's a horrendous discovery here, that of the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things [...] something which provokes anxiety" (1991: 154). When Senga leaves for her home in Scotland in her uncle's car with a box of plums nobody had wanted to eat (Galloway, 2009: 150), the abject, though hidden from view, makes itself present through a stench that impregnates everything. This is how the story closes: "the stink of plums began rising from the boot, thickening behind sealed windows. It went on rising all the way North" (Galloway, 2009: 179).

3. GENDER TISSUES

In another story from *Blood*, "Love in a changing environment", the smells and sounds coming from a butcher's shop ruin the love life of a couple that lives in the flat above. Their imagination is assailed by abject images of "dead tissue congested with blood" and "raw muscle flenching from the blade" (Galloway, 2009: 19). These images along with the smell of "putrefaction" and "the soft sound of the scalpel" destroyed their mutual appeal as solid, fully-formed love objects: "We lost sleep and seldom touched, suspicious of the scent of each other's skin" (Galloway, 2009: 19). They eventually split up: "The day they unloaded the bone grinder, I packed my bags" (Galloway, 2009: 19). However, in another story from the same collection, "things he said", it is not the abject but language (polite conversation, small talk, empty words) that works as an obstacle to the sexual intercourse of a man and a woman in a what seems to be a blind date. The story closes with a sharp "The things he did" (Galloway, 2009: 129). The wordy deferral of an action is put to an end and, with it, the narrative too, triggering the readers' erotic imagination to fill in the blank page, another instance of how typographical space and textual structure elicits a sensual response from the reader.

In her interview with Cristie March, Galloway stated that, along with the life/death interrelation, her strong interest in physicality had “to do with my fascination with gender, the differences between men and women which are more pervasive, even at the physical level, than they seem” (1999: 97). Precisely, the kernel of the unnamed man’s unstoppable chatter in “things he said” was gender differences, particularly the impossibility of bridging the gap that separates men and women, even by means of *that* which seemingly holds the greatest potential for success: namely, sex, especially, kissing. For him, “kisses were a threat, not able to be direct. [...] Kisses were a threat, a resonance at the back of his throat before he looked me in the eye. If you get the men and women thing right, everything else follows” (Galloway, 2009: 129). The title piece of Galloway’s second collection of stories, *Where you find it*, is a rendition of what comes close to what the unnamed man in “things he said” considered impossible and, hence, threatening: namely, “direct” kissing, *where it*, the object of love and desire, is *found* by the unnamed female narrator. The “things he [Derek] can do with his mouth” (Galloway, 2009: 194) –things like having “his tongue buried and moving around in there, foraging into all the available recesses” (Galloway, 2009: 192)– move the woman narrator into a state of dizzying sensuality and joyful surrender which is, at once, a recognition of her individuality, of her status as the object of love and desire (“There’s no woman wouldn’t love that” [Galloway, 2009: 193]) and of getting to know the other fully (“I love that, love it, love knowing all his secrets, even those bits of him, bits he doesn’t see” [Galloway, 2009: 193]). In “where you find it”, what is otherwise -counted as refuse, as abject (“the flesh one never sees”, in Lacan’s words above), is reintegrated and experienced as part of bodily totality in which knowledge (otherwise too abstract) and sensation fuse: “You can feel the wee cord that keeps his tongue on stretching, pulling up from the soft veiny mass on the floor of his mouth, tightening to its limit like it might uproot. That cord is in there all the time, folded up like a fin or stray slice of tissue left on a butcher’s tray, like something loveless left over from ritual surgery and on most people that’s how it stays. You’d never suspect. When Derek kisses, though, you get a share of everything, you get it all” (Galloway, 2009: 192).

Yet, “things he said” is not only the counterpart (the negative, to use a photographic analogy) of “where you find it”, which revolves around “the things he can do with his mouth”, as the closing sentence reads (Galloway, 2009: 194). In the latter story we come across a passing reference to butchers (“a butcher’s tray”), which has been singled out as a privileged site/space of the abject in the previous section. The accompanying reference to “surgery” in the long passage just quoted, however, begs further discussion. Before the long passage quoted above, the narrator had said that Derek “prises you apart like you’re in the dentist’s chair and you *know* you are being kissed” (Galloway, 2009: 192). This simile reminds us, of course, of the distressed protagonist in what is perhaps Galloway’s best-known story, “Blood” –another title-piece, in this case of Galloway’s first collection.

“Blood” begins with a girl lying on the dentist’s chair and going through the ordeal of having a bad tooth pulled. This literal act of *ab-jection*, of ex-traction of a rotting, infected and infecting bodily part, is performed with humorous yet professional detachment by the dentist while the girl lies not so much in pain as in disgust at the close-up sight of the man’s abject bodily areas described in detail at the story’s beginning: “She couldn’t see his face. The pores on the backs of his fingers sprouted hairs, single black wires curling onto the bleached skin of the wrist, the veins showing through. She saw an artery move under the surface as he slackened the grip momentarily, catching his breath; his cheeks a kind of mauve colour” (Galloway, 2009: 1). The way to counteract the effects of abject, palpitating and fragmented fleshliness that she sees in front of her and imagines inside her mouth is to construct a meaningful pattern out of the cracks in the ceiling above their heads: “Better to keep her eyes open, trying to focus past the blur of knuckles to the cracked ceiling. She was trying to see a pattern, make the lines into something she could recognise” (Galloway, 2009: 1). But “what is *abject*”, Kristeva writes, “is radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses” (1982: 2). After the dentist’s, her mouth goes on bleeding and she soon finds out she is also menstruating, two manifestations of the abject that must be hidden from view and discarded (Kristeva, 1982: 71; Hock-Soon Ng, 2004: 183).⁸ She avoids flirting workmen, an inquisitive mother, an unsympathetic female janitor and school mates who write chauvinist graffiti she could not obviate, though she tried, just like the reader who cannot help but fix his/her gaze upon its transcription in capital letters that stand out in the midst of a very long paragraph.

She tries, then, to find refuge in music, in “something fresh and clean, Mozart” (Galloway, 2009: 6). Art, music in this case, like the pattern she constructed imaginarily in the ceiling at the dentist’s, would provide her with a pacifying sense of meaningfulness, clarity and aesthetic unity with which to identify: “She leaned towards the keyboard, trying to be something else: a piece of music. Mozart, the recent practice. Feeling for the clear, clean lines. Listening” (Galloway, 2009: 8). Attracted by the music, a silent and solitary student who taught cello and was extremely shy with girls comes into the room, praises the beauty of the piece, and asks if it is Haydn. When she corrects him saying it is Mozart, blood comes out of her mouth profusely so that he escapes in horror at the sight of the abject: “She saw his face change, the glance flick to the claw roots in the tissue [the tooth she had placed on the piano] before he shut the door hard, not knowing what else to do” (Galloway, 2009: 8). The mouth, the site of mutual knowledge and sensual fusion in “where you find it”, has become the source of abjection spilling over uncontained blood in the title-story of Galloway’s first collection.

4. MOTHER NATURE

In Galloway's third and last collection of stories, *Jellyfish* (2015), images of raw physicality (like open wounds, blood, tissue, and so on) are less recurrent than in the previous collections and elicit care rather than abjection in the overall context of the author's growing ecological sensibility.⁹ Likewise, formal disruption is less frequent, and that includes Galloway's experiments with typography which are mostly displaced to and condensed in what she calls the "interstitial pages" (Galloway, 2015: 170) which contain phrases in large, thick block letters submerged in water, the fluid, dissolving and fertile medium *par excellence*. In the title-piece that opens the collection, some jellyfish lie dying on the beach because a quick turn of the tide got them stranded in the sand. Monica and her four-year-old son, Calum, inspect their transparent bodies till they see one, "[t]he biggest [,which] had a rock in the middle and was bust to bits, its body turning cloudy. This close it looked like a blood-clot under slow-frying albumen, an eye in need of surgery" (Galloway, 2015: 24–25). In the closing story, "distance", Martha, the protagonist, hits a deer with her car in the remote recesses of the island of Jura. The deer's wounded body is described in detail but the story (and the collection) closes with Martha embracing the animal while Mozart's *Queen of the night* sounds on the radio. In "fittest", the weather runs wild somewhat like in "after the rains", but instead of amorphous monsters and ritual murders of the innocents in butchers' shops-turned-into-churches, the weather brings a marvellous specimen of a presumably extinct butterfly whose route the protagonist follows. There are also stories, like "greek", portraying a man who sucks strongly when he kisses, and stories (like "that was then, this is now (1)") in which the narrative voice's desire to know what is happening in a room upstairs is attuned to the female character's desire to reach an orgasm rendered in broken syntax and use of italics.

There is, however, one story, titled "turned", featuring a girl or a woman suffering a recurrent psychotic breakdown related to the traumatising figure of what Kristeva called the "death-bearing" mother ("woman", "She-Gehenna", "bloodthirsty Fury", or simply "She" (1989 [1987]: 27–19).¹⁰ "turned" certainly deserves a thorough reading as it condenses much of what I have been arguing up to this point in relation to physicality, the body, abjection and creation in Galloway's short fiction. "turned" is a sharp rendition of the disruptive pressure that the maternal semiotic and the maternal abject exert on normative, oedipal subjectivity and on language as the symbolic, formal, neutral, coherent system that organises reality. Everything in the story leans towards the blurring of boundaries and the collapse of identity. To begin with, the narrative voice oscillates continuously between first person (the main character of the daughter), second person (sometimes used by father and daughter to address each other, sometimes used by daughter to refer to herself) and third person (sometimes referring to the daughter, other times to the persecutory figure of the mother). Surrounding this ambiguity of the narrative voice is the failure of language to name and define reality, as

announced already at the beginning of the story: "Mornings were pink and the afternoons were green and brown. Evening colours were harder to define. Evening colours were bruised and shifting. They were a colour all right, *but no colour with a name. Nothing I could define*" (Galloway, 2015: 97, emphasis added). Moreover, the protagonist's symbolic identity, her own name, is tantalisingly withheld, cut off from truncated and scattered sentences which are analogous to the scattered green twigs and plant heads her mother feverishly snipes in a garden while the daughter looks out from her bedroom window: "Your name. Your name is" (Galloway, 2015: 100), or,

Your.

Name. Your

name. (Galloway, 2015: 103–104)

The very nature of the main character's experience is also radically ambiguous as she wakes up from a dream into a recurrent nightmare (an index of trauma) in a way that the reader is not sure whether the latter is an oneiric or a waking experience: "The same, same dream, same detail, same accident. Accidents. And it starts with waking. This is the final act" (Galloway, 2015: 97). Perhaps to signal the mortifying circular dynamics in which the unnamed protagonist is caught, the nightmare or hallucination seems to begin at the story's very end, with more intensity this time as manifested in the greater verbal and typographical disarray in rendering the daughter's desperate attempt to reach out to her father as the mediating, pacifying, oedipal third party that can protect her from the deathly fusion with her mother and so secure her identity. The second passage below, which is the one that "closes" the story, echoes the first one, which is located right after the opening paragraph:

It's the reaching out.

It's always the reaching out that does it.

The same dream, same dream, same detail, same accident. Accidents. And it starts with waking. This is the final act. It starts

now.

The room is full of moonlight. He isn't there. (Galloway, 2015: 97)

[...]

The sides heave. Reach up. Turn and prepare. He is waiting out there, knowing nothing. Reach. Reach and turn. And the reaching
the reaching

the room is full of

it is full

full (Galloway, 2015: 105)

Fullness, previously related to the feminine imagery of the moon (moonlight) and of water (“This is a deep-sea tank. You are at the bottom” [Galloway, 2015: 98]), becomes unqualified maternal fullness that leaves no gap, no place for a quota of difference necessary to produce meaning and acquire a sense of identity, but just the hole through which the daughter is swallowed back into nature’s womb that mutates into the mother’s womb at the climax of this seemingly unstoppable nightmare. This engulfing experience is rendered through an (for the reader) overwhelming array of visual, acoustic, tactile and olfactory images of abject physicality and palpitating, pulsating life in typographically packed paragraphs that contrast with the more fragmented passages in which she attempts to know her name and speaks with her father. I quote selectively:

a tumulus of restless earth struggling upward through the soil, inching closer. Watch it come, pause as though catching its breath, begin again. Six feet away, the movement is close enough to see in detail, a seethe and a slump like something buried but not dead yet, struggling beneath the layer of grass. [...] Gently, a tiny O appears. The O widens to the size of a green cat’s yawn. Listen. You can hear the sound of roots parting, tearing like animal sinew. [...] A scent of burning carries on a drift of night-stock, catching the back of the throat but there is no sign of mother, none. Not yet. [...] Beneath your naked feet, the leaves of decades gust a thick, aromatic scent, and unseen things, little pulses of life, shift out of range of your vision. [...] In the split second before falling, you recall mother’s neat cotton collar, the lilac cast of her skin. And falling, tearing the edge of the hollow you think you hear someone call your name. A woman’s voice. Whatever you do don’t answer. [...] Open your eyes slowly and there is merely half-light, a mist curled on flat, red-packed earth. [...] And this is your true beginning. Home. Stroke the sticky sides of the pit with soft-nailed fingers, hear loose pockets of its substance slither and drop. Slick fibres touch your back, tickle your neck like antennae. [...] The sides of the pit stretch high and steep, a snail coils at your knees. The floor is beating. The whole pit glows pink like a gullet. Home (Galloway, 2015: 102–104)

When Kristeva argues in *Black sun* that “[m]atricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation” (1989: 27–28), she is referring precisely to this overpowering figure of the abject mother that cancels out the (paternal) symbolic and knows no limit. The maternal abject is the semiotic pushed to the limit so that the latter’s tension with the symbolic terminates in horrible sensual engulfment.

5. CONCLUSION

Janice Galloway's body poetics aims at rescuing physicality from oblivion. Words, the stuff her art is made of, are put at the service of being, whose inescapable fate in time is extinction: "being, then nothing" (March, 1999: 97). Her creative effort is oriented to placing words on the side of being so as to express in a more effective way our shared experience of being alive. How to open up the space for being, for the body, inside the mortifying net of signifiers is her main task –the predicament of any literary artist according to Maurice Blanchot. In a particularly sharp manner, her short fiction, as this article has shown, resorts to formal devices such as typography and weaves threads of recurrent motifs in order to place the accent on the corporeal, sensual, physical, and bodily, those dimensions in which, along with language, our experience of sexuality, gender relations, family bonds, individual identity and, even, shared humanity is played out. But if she distances herself from an intellectualist, abstract, sanitised writing practice it is not only because it obviates life, but also because it oversees that to which life is inextricably linked: death. Hence the salience of abjection in Galloway's depiction of the bodily, for the abject is precisely that which makes human life aware of death. In most of the stories analysed above, the characters come *vis-à-vis* the abject to inhabit a border zone in which life and death interact. The dialectic life/death, being/nothing is what inspires her writing.

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NOTES

1. "In Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology [of Spirit]*, Hegel claimed that all *conceptual* understanding (*Begreifen*) is equivalent to a *murder*" (Kojève, 1969: 140). This idea is a central one in the work of Jacques Lacan and, more recently, of Slavoj Žižek. "Thus the symbol", Lacan writes, "first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject's desire" (Lacan, 2006: 262). The phrase "the word is the murder of the thing" is repeated many times in Žižek's work: see, for instance, Žižek (1989: 131).
2. "[T]he semiotic, which also precedes it, constantly tears it open, and this transgression brings about all the various transformations of the signifying practice that are called 'creation.' Whether in the realm of metalanguage (mathematics, for example) or literature, what remodels the symbolic order is always the influx of the semiotic" (Kristeva, 1984: 62).

3. For an elaboration of how the abject (mother) is a radicalised version of the semiotic (mother) see D. C. Covino (2004: 21).
4. Burgess (1996) defines Galloway's short fiction as "very physical writing". See also Tym (2013).
5. Two approaches to Galloway's short fiction highlight their poetic quality, Paccaud-Huguet (2004), who concludes that it "deserves to be called poetic prose" (78), and Jackson (2004), for whom Galloway's short stories are akin to "a poetry of place, where ideas and emotions can only be apprehended through the environment in which they are mediated" (7). Paccaud-Huguet also highlights the element of linguistic and bodily excess in Galloway's writing: "The excess of meaning in human bodies and in language is no longer covered but on the contrary exposed" (2004: 69).
6. I have found no references to butchers in her novels: *Trick*, *Foreign parts* and *Clara* (2002).
7. "Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (Kristeva, 1982: 2).
8. Andrew Hock-Soon Ng (2004) reads Galloway's "Blood" as an example of a monstrous text in its "inability to represent the body" (182). Furthermore, though referring to Kristeva's idea of menstruation as one of the manifestations of the abject, Hock-Soon Ng suggests that "Blood" could be read as a parody of feminist essentialisms such as Kristeva's notions of prelinguistic *chora* and the semiotic (2004: 185, 207n30).
9. "My concern for animal welfare and ecology has always been there, I guess it's finding its way into the work more now because things are getting uglier with regard to lack of human compassion and care for their fellow creatures" (Sacido-Romero, 2018).
10. Galloway's "he dreams of pleasing his mother" (*Where you yind it*) can be also read as a nightmarish fantasy of (pre-)Oedipal attachment in which the mother figures as a "beast" (Galloway, 2009: 309 and 310).

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