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Of American dreams and other unhomely nightmares: Abjection, disgust, and the nation's waste matters in Emer Martin's *Baby zero*

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on feminist scholars Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, and Sara Ahmed, this article explores zones of abjection in relation to socio-geographic "waste-lands" in the US –"waste-lands" understood as territories populated by subjects rendered disposable in the nation's purging of its "waste matters". Employing Emer Martin's novel *Baby zero* (2007) as a map orienting us across these terrains, the article examines how such spaces "become", how they are constituted in and through abjection and, relatedly, disgust as affective reaction. I argue that in its depiction of Leila, a child migrant in the US, and her precarious dwelling in the House with No Anus as a radical zone of abjection, *Baby zero* offers a trenchant reflection on the necropolitics that characterize the ethos of neoliberal states and societies such as that of the US, ultimately mounting a sustained critique of its gendered and racialized nature and violent consequences.

KEYWORDS: abjection, disgust, affect, waste, nation, migration, refugees, borders, American dream

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1. INTRODUCTION

In *Waste matters: Urban margins in contemporary literature*, Sara K. Harrison (2016) critically examines the imprint of waste in a wide range of literature, framing it as a "socio-material formation" (p. 4), while emphasizing that its "literal dimensions are inseparable from its figurative import" (p. 4). The figurative import Harrison refers to denotes "the troubling conflation of marginal humans with physical waste" (p. 5), captured in Zygmunt Bauman's well-known concepts of human waste and wasted lives. Such conflation beats at the heart of *Baby zero* (2007), the third novel of Irish-born, US-based author Emer Martin, a narrative that poignantly attests to the socio-geographic marginalization of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, and to the processes that configure them as "the waste products of globalization" (Bauman, 2004, p. 66). While the novel spans diverse national contexts, this study specifically examines its depiction of US "waste-lands", emphasizing how female and racialized bodies become key sites for the nation's purging of its "waste matters" within a Western neoliberal ethos. In this article, I focus on one central space in the novel, the House with no Anus, a house that opens its doors "typically to all the flotsam that is washed in with the desert wind" (Martin, 2007, p. 117). This house is significantly located in a deprived area of the Sonoran Desert in Arizona, a liminal space delimiting the geographic and political frontiers of the nation. As a microcosm of this site, and of all such spaces where migrants, refugees, and all those rendered disposable in neoliberal societies are banished and abandoned to their luck (or lack thereof), the House With no Anus is shown as a quintessential, "'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable'" (Butler, 1993, p. 3) place, containing everything and everyone society rejects. Thus, the House with no Anus operates in the novel as a literal and symbolic "waste" disposal site or, more accurately, a "waste" container, waste understood here in its socio-material sense and as regards its figurative imprint (following Harrison and Bauman). Drawing principally on the work of feminist scholars Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, and Sara Ahmed, I contend here that, in its depiction of this space as a zone of cumulative and radical abjection, *Baby zero* articulates a powerful reflection on the necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) that characterize the ethos of neoliberal states and societies such as that of the US, ultimately mounting a sustained critique of its gendered and racialized nature and violent consequences.

2. ABJECTION, DISGUST, AND THE NATION'S WASTE MATTERS

This article starts from the idea that the constructed "disposability" of certain individuals and communities rests on processes of inclusion and exclusion comparable to those involved, following Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory, in the subjects' construction of self in and through abjection. What Judith Butler has termed "'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life" (1993, p. 3) are designated precisely by the abject, which Butler explicitly links to "a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality" (1993, p. 243n2). Making use of Kristeva's theories of the abject as "that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered 'Other'" (1984, p. 5), Butler theorizes zones of abjection as those spaces symbolically (but often also literally) occupied by subjects who are similarly expulsed from the social body. The lives of these Others are made unlivable or, in Butler's later work (2009; 2004), radically precarious in their (social) vulnerability: they matter less, or not at all; they are subjected to violence and exposed to death.

Like Butler, Sara Ahmed has engaged with Kristeva's theory of abjection, in this case to examine how affect and, concretely, "the affectivity of disgust" (2005, p. 102), "is involved in the very making of boundaries" (2005, p. 101). Also, similarly to Butler, Ahmed reframes Kristeva's work, extending its applicability from the domain of the individual to a broader

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social context that includes the nation and transnational dislocation. Her exploration of boundaries and how they are un/made casts them as frontiers that divide Self and Other and, correspondingly, specific imagined communities from their (also imagined) Others. Yet, these are also contact zones where Self and Other inevitably meet. If, as Ahmed argues, "it is how bodies come into contact with other bodies that allows the nation as a collective body to emerge" (2005, p. 95), then what she dubs the "skin of the community" does not exist as a stable, fixed object, but "is an effect of the alignment of the subject with some others and against other others" (2005, p. 104).[1] And these alignments do not occur because of certain characteristics that are inherent to certain bodies (2005, p. 104). It is how bodies orient themselves *towards* or *away from* other bodies (or objects) that re/produces these alignments, giving way to the border/frontier –to the body's surface, the skin– and with it, to a construction and perception of specific subjects and objects as "possessing" certain features. Both the female body, quintessential abject body in our socio-cultural imaginary (Kristeva, 1984; Irigaray, 1985; Shildrick, 2002), and the body of the "stranger" (Ahmed, 2000; Puwar, 2004) –as a non-white body "out of place" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 2)– have been consistently read as "disgusting" (2004, p. 82). And this occurs, as Ahmed insists, not because these bodies *are* "dirty" but because, prior to the actual encounter, they are already associated with "dirt" within dominant patriarchal and racist/colonial discourses.[2] By contrast, what is imagined as a coherent, "clean" community emerges through this act of projection: by designating certain bodies as impure or threatening, it secures its own sense of integrity and order. Disgust thus also functions as the emotion that "shapes the bodies of a community of the disgusted" (2004, p. 15), which constitutes itself as "clean", untainted by the "dirt" of the Other it rejects and abjects.

In this way, for Ahmed, affect and emotions constitute the demarcation lines of what Butler terms the "'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life" (1993, p. 3), as they identify "those that can be loved, [and] those that can be grieved" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 191), crucially affirming "a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate lives" (2004, p. 191). Even though these alignments are not completely fixed and stable, Ahmed stresses that "[i]t is not simply any body that becomes the border: particular histories are reopened in each encounter, such that some bodies are already read as more hateful and disgusting than other bodies" (2005, p. 106). And these are the bodies that most often become the target of violence, in full operation of what Achille Mbembe has termed necropolitics: a form of power that enables the capacity to decide "who must live and … who must die" (2003, p. 17), "who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (2003, p. 27).

Following this idea of a socio-geographic territory precariously populated by subjects rendered disposable in neoliberal societies' purging of their "waste matters", I will employ Martin's novel *Baby zero* and its narrative construction of the House with no Anus as a sort of map orienting us across this territory and the complex modes in which it "becomes" –that is, how it is constituted in and through abjection and also affect. In *Baby zero*, it is predominantly the female body and the bodies of racialized migrant subjects that are shown as primary inhabitants of the marginal space of the abject(ed) Other, consistently read as "dirt/y" and "disgusting" and feared as a potential source of pollution of the individual and the communal/national self. In particular, the narrative poses one of its female protagonists, a Middle Eastern girl named Leila, and her life itineraries and untimely death in the US, as an exemplary inhabitant of the nation's waste-lands, and the House with No Anus as the epitome of these.

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3. US WASTE-LANDS IN EMER MARTIN'S *BABY ZERO*

Baby zero traces the transnational trajectories of a Middle Eastern family fractured by an Islamic revolution and ensuing war in their home country, a fictional Middle Eastern state named Orap, whose story bears resonances to the recent history of both Afghanistan and Iran. Farah and her husband Ishmael flee with their children, Zolo and Leila, ending up in a UN refugee camp on the border of a neighboring country. Trapped in bureaucratic limbo, they are unable to secure asylum elsewhere, leading to their heartbreaking decision to legally renounce their children and send them to their uncle in the US. As noted earlier, I will focus on the journey of their first daughter, Leila, and her life and death in the US, which proves most significant for the purposes of this article. After arriving, Leila forcefully moves from one house (or room) to another in search of a place where she can feel "at home", even if often surrounded by an inhospitable environment where she feels either invisible or rejected, ultimately becoming part of the nation's "waste matters", living (through) the nightmare of its exclusionary politics and uncaring practices. To fully grasp the implications of the narrative construction of Leila's "wasted life" (Bauman, 2004), it becomes imperative to pay close attention to the actual places and figurative spaces –the waste-lands– she is "dumped" into, who shares these with her (or not), and how she inhabits these dwellings, particularly the House with No Anus.

3.1. Of American dreams and other unhomely nightmares

Once in the US, Leila and her older brother Zolo spend their first days and nights in their Uncle Mo's house in Malibu, feeling uncomfortably out of place in a (literally and symbolically) cold climate. Not feeling entitled to Mo's bed, they choose to sleep outside on a deck over the sea, which seems to symbolize their abrupt loss of solid ground: "As darkness pulled over them, the tide came right in under the deck. They rolled over on their stomachs and pressed their noses between the wooden planks. The bottom of their world was fluid running back and forth in a silky rhythm" (2007, p. 73). Though instinctively feeling as unwanted guests in their uncle's house and, by extension, in the host country, the children are not yet fully aware of their situation *vis-à-vis* the adoptive nation. When Mo finds them sleeping outside, he is enraged, afraid of the image they will project of his house: "You can't lie there like peasants. Like *refugees*. I have a reputation in the neighbourhood" (2007, p. 74) [emphasis added]. Mo's Malibu house –purchased with the fortune he amassed in Orap– is foregrounded as a class status indicator; thus, the pejorative reference to peasants, which explicitly raises the issue of this family's privileged background in pre-revolutionary Orap, and the ingrained class prejudices of that highly Westernized capitalist society, which the novel links to Iranian society and the "class culture of a modernized local elite" (Moallem, 2012, p. 107) before the revolution that dethroned the Shah in 1979. Besides, as the house is not only Mo's domicile but also the place where he sets up his business –a plastic surgery clinic– it symbolically becomes the pillar of Mo's American dream. In this sense, the house becomes Mo's most cherished proof of potential assimilation into US society, which he perceives as intrinsically linked to economic success and participation in consumer culture –both axes, as Inderpal Grewal (2005) argues, of mainstream articulations of American national identity in the 21st century (p. 206). By the late 20th century, Grewal explains, the ubiquitous American dream had "linked itself to American discourses of multiculturalism and diversity through proliferating target markets and diverse lifestyles" (p. 7), thus allowing for, and even promoting, the idea of "belonging through consumer practices" (p. 2). Even without taking into consideration the dubious desirability of a belonging built in these terms, the American dream reveals itself as accessible only to a select group of people whose class status can buy it. And

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as Mo, and later Zolo and Leila, gradually learn, that group is increasingly narrowed by enduring structures of racism and sexism in US society. As part of Mo's intended assimilation within the neighborhood and, ostensibly, the nation, the people living in his house and their behaviors are closely scrutinized as a test of their adjustment to unwritten laws of propriety, which will define them as insiders or outsiders. Zolo and Leila's presence in the house behaving "like refugees" disrupts Mo's "American way of life", marking them all as abject Others "within the terms of [normative] sociality" (Butler, 1993, p. 243n2). Martin herself has described refugees as "the ultimate twenty-first century exemplar of what it is to be cast out" (Terrazas Gallego, 2021), an observation that directly aligns with the novel's figurations of "waste" and national "waste-lands".[3] Mo urges the children to come inside the house, but they continue feeling awkwardly out of place: "Mo came into the room. The children were sleeping on the floor" (Martin, 2007, p. 75). Soon he feels menaced by the children's "maladjustment" and decides to dispose of them: "He stuck his nephew and niece in a budget motel by the freeway. The window was facing the first-floor walkway, and they didn't want strangers looking in and discovering that they were alone, so they kept the curtains closed" (2007, p. 78). At this point, Leila and Zolo practically become unaccompanied minors –though legally under Mo's guardianship, they are left alone without guidance or supervision. They are pushed by their uncle to live in the margins of his life as well as in the margins of society, its waste-lands, condemned to invisibility behind the curtains of their room by their extremely vulnerable position.

Zolo's and Leila's feeling of abandonment and not knowing where to go next in life is visually represented in the children's spending the days standing "in the parking lot. The motel was on a freeway. They looked up and down but could see nothing but the road on either side" (Martin, 2007, p. 79). Once again, the description of the material reality that surrounds Zolo and Leila, and particularly the idea of transition that permeates either the image of the seawater or the road for which they can see no destination, underscores the sense of instability and disorientation brought about by the children's forced displacement. Later in the novel, the narrator describes an earthquake that surprised the children when standing outside the motel, once again evoking their unstable and precarious condition as exiles: "They had stood outside and felt an earthquake. Where they understood that not only can a country be pulled out from beneath your feet, but the ground you stand on is in no way solid. Where Zolo left Leila alone, to get on with his life and chase his genius into all the blank walls of disappointment" (p. 287).

As suggested in the quotation above, Zolo soon finds the road he wants to follow: he manages to get forged documents, enrolls in school and ultimately moves to the dorms. Like his uncle, Zolo finds Leila a burden to scale the ladder of American society and, like him as well, he abandons her and leaves her alone in the motel. Leila is cast out of their lives in their struggle to find their own place within the individualistic neoliberal society of the US. However, as the narrator's words in that quotation also suggest, even though Mo's position as a male wealthy individual or Zolo's intellectual brilliance seem to suggest high possibilities of success, they will find that their non-national status and their racialization are insurmountable obstacles for their full integration and participation in this society. As Mo reminds his nephew near the novel's end: "You are not a native. You're a refugee. We all are until we get the citizenship, and even then we are. Things have to be different for us" (2007, p. 265). And indeed, things are different for them, and harsher still for Leila, who, uncared for by either her relatives or the institutions of the state, will be paradoxically both sheltered and gobbled down by the House with No Anus.

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3.2. "Welcome to the house with no anus"

Mo and Zolo rapidly buy into the neoliberal discourses of individualism and self-achievement that are so constitutive of the myth of the American dream. Yet this orientation, to use Ahmed's terminology, does not emerge ex nihilo: it is rooted in their upbringing in pre-revolutionary Orap, shaped by the values of a Westernized local elite and the classed logics of colonial modernity. What they encounter in the US is not an entirely new ideology, but an intensification of that same logic, now recast as the price of belonging. In aligning themselves with the promise of American integration, they cast Leila out from their lives –a gesture that not only reflects neoliberal logics of disposability but also reproduces deeply ingrained patriarchal assumptions.[4] Leila is for them "Orap … Small, conflicted, overlooked … *Dangerous*" (Martin, 2007, p. 260; emphasis added). In this way, following Ahmed (2005, 2004), we can claim that both uncle and nephew orient themselves *towards* and align *with* the US, turning *away from* and *against* Leila, whom they repudiate and relegate to the abject space of the House with no Anus. How Leila ends up dwelling in the House with no Anus is thus significant: Mo, Zolo, and Leila are all trying to find their place in the US, but Mo and Zolo do so by decisively cutting ties with Orap and their family –as exemplified by their discarding of Leila and by the letters from the children's parents that pile up unread in Mo's house– whereas Leila remains emotionally attached to the past they disavow. Her inability and unwillingness to renounce those affective bonds, particularly her conflicted attachment to her parents and her deep connection to her childhood friend Mehrdad, render her misaligned with the assimilatory logic they pursue.

When Zolo drives Leila to the house of the Clancy family, home to his new friends Jack and Desiree, they are received by the latter with the words: "Welcome to the House with No Anus … Everything goes in and nothing comes out" (2007, p. 93). Beyond a sad premonition that this is the last house Leila will live in and the place where she will soon die, this statement reflects the real life of the house. The Clancys are depicted as a dysfunctional family *vis-à-vis* the patriarchal and capitalist ideal, due both to their unstructured and disordered family dynamics and to the fact that most of its members are shown to be somewhat dysfunctional members of normative society. Jack has been diagnosed with Asperger syndrome; Desiree is, in her own words, "a proud bulimic" (2007, p. 105); and the eldest son, Ernie, might have bipolar disorder. All the Clancys, but especially Mrs. Clancy, have a strong tendency towards hoarding that symbolically relates to the American culture of materialist accumulation and compulsive consumerism, but also signals the family's dysfunctional participation in it. The Clancys' compulsion results simultaneously in the perfectly organized collections of watches, skulls, and old cameras Jack keeps in his extraordinarily tidy room and, on the other hand, in the bizarre mess the interior of the house is:

> A forest of empty shampoo bottles in the bathroom. Forty toothbrushes with smushed yellow bristles, overgrown hedges of newspapers in the corridor. War rations, cans and packages avalanching from the cupboards. Jars with strange green liquids in the fridge door, Uncle Peter's gallstones, every closet spilling out into trails in the floor. Paths beaten through each room constantly in danger of overgrowing with shoes, one-handed clothes, rock-hard bagels, pots, pizza cartons. (Martin, 2007, pp. 93–94)

The novel's depictions of the house's interior heavily rely on images of rancid and rotting food and greenish liquids, which define its abject nature. For Kristeva, "[f]ood loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (1984, p. 2). Yet, as she explains, "[f]ood becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories … The virtual impurity of … food comes close to excremental abjection, which is the most striking example of the interference of the organic within the social" (1984, p. 75). The rotten

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food and mouldy liquids, leftovers spread and mixed with all the other objects accumulated in the house, evidence precisely this polluting presence, of the organic betwixt the non-organic and amidst the social life of the family. And thus, in Kristevan fashion: "It is … not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order" (1984, p. 4).

It is in this light that I read the House with No Anus as an abject zone, the epitome of the nation's waste-lands, which simultaneously sustains the (outside) social norms from which it is excluded and calls them into question. Functioning as a containment site for those expelled from the symbolic order, the house mirrors what Mbembe (2003) identifies as necropolitical governance: the exercise of sovereign power over the threshold of life and death, whereby certain populations –racialized, gendered, and displaced– are rendered not only killable but socially dead. Yet it is precisely through this extreme marginalization that the house acquires its destabilizing force: by accumulating that which society seeks to eliminate, it exposes the fragility of the borders –the precarious "skin of the community" (Ahmed, 2005)– that define and uphold the normative order. As Kristeva contends: "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity … it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it –on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (1984, p. 9). In Butler's rendering of the notion of abjection as it relates to zones of sociality, this danger is felt by normative subjects as a threat of "dissolution", which may be kept at a distance (though "never banished altogether", as Kristeva indicates) if "what is foreclosed or repudiated" is prevented from re-entering the field of the social (Butler, 1993, p. 243n2). In the Clancys' house, what is taken in is then retained inside –the house has "no anus"– and is left there to slowly putrefy. The putrefaction of the food emerges as a potential source of corruption equitable to excremental pollution: these food remains are (at) a border between nourishment and defilement, a border that signifies the house itself.

This border is graphically exploded in the characterization of Mrs. Clancy's daughter, Desiree, a bulimic teenager who performs complex rituals of food deprivation, eating and vomiting that resemble a sort of bodily "purging". Desiree's body is the abject in excess, the grotesque body at its limit. In the novel's depictions of her moments of bulimic spewing out, the horrors Kristeva identifies in her theory materialize, or, more aptly, fluidify:[5]

> Desiree ripped some sheets of toilet paper off the roll and laid them on the surface of the toilet water and on the seat. 'This is to prevent back-splashing.' …
> Desiree choked and gagged on her fingers. She roared, 'Uuughhhghhhtuh.' Whoosh, a stream strung out from her mouth and hit the side of the bowl. Desiree stood and clapped her hands. 'You should start with ice cream. As good on the way up as it is on the way down.' (2007, p. 105)

Fluids spill out of the body in a manner that, while attempting to maintain bodily integrity against contamination, precisely reveals the body's permeability –in the same way the nation-state's biopolitics of immigration control, together with its social mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion, aim to preserve the alleged "integrity" of the nation while revealing the unavoidable permeability of its borders. In the scene above, all borders between the inside and the outside are diffused while being crossed in every direction. In a more grotesque moment, when the family and guests gather for Christmas dinner, Desiree feigns horror but shows herself amused by the discovery of a worm "on the cat's ass" (2007, p. 117): "I saw that and had a sudden urge to scoop up the worm with my fingernail and pop it into my mouth … Fuck Weight Watchers! Here's to a worm off a cat's ass" (p. 117). Once again, the border collapses: food and excrement are not always differentiated, entering and leaving the body

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indiscriminately, nearly fusing the different body orifices of supposed entrance and exit to the body.

In contrast to both Mrs. Clancy and Desiree, the youngest member of the family, Jack, attempts to shield himself from the house's "chaotic horror" (Martin, 2007, p. 94) by creating a "clean" zone within: his room. Jack is described as a "nineteenth century dude" (p. 99), diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome at six and obsessed with order and cleanliness: "Jack's room was an oasis of neatness" (p. 94). Jack embodies the nineteenth-century modern mindset that obsesses over a relentless quest for order founded on the exclusion of the Other and its presumed doom of chaos. Although he initially offers Leila his room, he later retracts: "your brother tells me you are a bit of a slob and, while that is nothing new in this household, my own domain is a tranquil place of scientific study, so here's a key to my brother's room" (p. 96). Leila's "dirtying" body and his mother's disorder are relegated to the margins, to the outside. In this gesture, paralleling the exclusionary "gestures" of the normative society Jack aspires to belong to, a border is generated that simultaneously affirms and threatens the stability of the individual, that is, of Jack's clean and proper self: the process of exclusion "produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is after all, "inside" the subject as its own founding repudiation" (Butler, 1993, p. 3). Or, as Kristeva puts it, "[t]he impure is never banished nor cut off, it is thrust away but within—right there, working, constitutive" (1984, p. 106). Jack's sealing of his identitarian space plainly follows psychoanalytic patterns in his impossible aspiration to the normative bounded, solid body of the idealized independent and autonomous (male) subject. And, in this process, Jack is no exception to the simultaneity of horror and fascination that characterizes abjection.

One of Jack's collector obsessions concerns everything that has to do with so-called "freaks", a fascination inherited from his great-great-grandfather: "The pictures on the wall … photos in identical brown frames of various tribes and freaks. One such frame contained a photo of an entire African tribe with elephantiasis of the scrotum" (Martin, 2007, p. 94). Jack's fixation with these Others which have traditionally epitomized "monstrosity", together with the way he fixes them in frames as objects of scrutiny, and the overt reference to issues of excessive male sexuality embodied by the men in the African tribe, all point to these subjects as the abject Other that reaffirms Jack's normative self: the "abnormal" body that reassures the normativity of his, the object that confirms him as subject, the sexual excessiveness held against his desired boundedness and bodily control. And yet,

> [a]lthough the very word "monster" is a common term of abuse, implying a denial of any likeness between self and other such that a barrier is put in place between the two, the very force of rejection of such otherness cannot but suggest a level of disturbing familiarity, even similarity. The monster is not just abhorrent, it is also enticing, a figure that calls to us, that invites recognition. Simultaneously threat and promise, the monster, as with the feminine, comes to embody those things which an ordered and limited life must try, and finally fail, to abject. (Shildrick, 2002, p. 5)

Although commonly regarded as an absolute Other or outsider, the monster is nonetheless our constitutive Other. Thus, Jack's collection of photographs of racialized, monsterized Others within his room stands for the inevitability of the abject within ourselves, no matter how hard we try to fix it behind frames, fragile transparent walls that remind us the Other is yet already within us.

The presence of the abject in the house is also represented by those people to whom the Clancys open their doors. Jack explains to Leila that her presence will be barely noticed, as their parents are "always adopting people" (Martin, 2007, p. 94). One of the house's adoptees is Patterson, a man without history or place, whom we never get to know anything about apart

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from one character's affirmation that "he's full blood" (p. 129). By identifying Patterson as a Native American, the novel makes his presence in the house essential as the embodiment of the nation's "founding repudiation" (Butler, 1993, p. 3). Patterson is probably as houseless as his ancestors were left homeless in the American conquest of the West, which appropriated America for the whites and literally as well as symbolically wiped out Indigenous populations in a genocidal campaign that "turned the year back to Zero" (Martin, 2007, p. 258). Ejected from their territories, Native Americans were gradually confined to reservations (many located, like the House with No Anus, in the Arizona desert), which function as foundational constitutive abject zones with regards to the nation, simultaneously inside its territory and outside its symbolic identitarian frontiers.

Leila's "adoption by default" (Martin, 2007, p. 94), as Desiree calls it, is significant in a similar sense, emphasizing a continuity of violence that she herself is tracing in a series of scrapbooks she begins to put together in the House with No Anus to better understand her place in the world: "She was beginning to have the outline of something. The same Cowboy and Indian story over and over again in different costumes, in different locations" (p. 208). She is a child immigrant forced to leave her home because of a war with roots in Western imperialism, with a broken family and no resources (either material or emotional) to confront the harshness of life in this foreign land, an unaccompanied minor nobody seems to really "see", and therefore somehow wiped off the map.

However, Leila finds shelter in The House with No Anus, even displacing one of its legitimate members: the Clancys' eldest son, whose room Leila occupies. Insisting on the house's inhabitants as abject subjects, Ernie is described as a young man the novel situates in the margins of in/sanity, his own and his environment's: "a delicate child who hovered mutely on the unhinged periphery" (Martin, 2007, p. 99). Ernie is also slightly physically disabled, which further isolates him socially: "He was like a lone fish in a bowl. Staring out on to the world without connections. Circling and circling alone" (p. 102). Even before Leila's occupation of his room, Ernie used to sleep in his car, so he was not fully dwelling in the house:

> "I live in your bedroom."
> "That's not my bedroom."
> "…Whose is it then?"
> "Ernie's."
> "You're Ernie."
> "That Ernie is dead." (p. 101)

Though this conversation may suggest the possibility of bipolar disorder, it is also possible to read in these words Ernie's decision to become an/other from the person he had been in the past. Some of the objects Leila finds in his room –newspaper clippings on the history of white supremacy, a picture of Ronald Reagan, or the American flag nailed over the window– may suggest a former allegiance to a particular idea of America, a neoliberal-conservative nationalism that Ernie may have come to reject to the extent of "killing" it in himself. The picture of Ronald Reagan is especially relevant here because of the intense way in which the New Right he represented, and he himself as US president (1981–1989), mobilized "the rhetoric of home, protection, and threatening others" (Mohanty & Martin, 2003, p. 99).

Ernie's relationship with Leila may be proof of the reborn Ernie's new politics, a politics of affect toward the Other that his body reveals: "[I]n Ernie she found a friend … Small, strange smiles landed on Ernie's face like alien ships when the two crossed paths in the gloom of the corridor" (Martin, 2007, p. 100). In line with Ahmed's understanding of affective economies, *Baby zero* suggests here that "feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation" (2004, p. 8), it is the social exchange between individuals which

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generates affective emotions as well as affective knowledge. The fact that the scrapbooks Leila "adopts", works on, and transforms into her own written legacy were initiated precisely by Ernie, whom unproblematically accepts this transition, seems to insist on this intersubjective transmission of knowledge as a profoundly affective experience.

Leila finds in The House with No Anus a place of affection and esteem: "[E]veryone in the house liked and respected her … She had found a place where no one judged her, where all the world's discarded things had equal value and were cherished" (Martin, 2007, p. 100). In this collage of discarded, "disposable" peoples and objects, "hidden away amid the collecting mania of the Clancy family" (p. 111), Leila finds comfort. Thus, when forced to temporarily leave the house while Mr. and Mrs. Clancy are on holiday, Leila tries to resist: "I'm happy here. *This is my home*" (2007, p. 213) [emphasis added].

However, the scene when the family decides that Leila must leave serves as a reminder of her position in broader society. As Avtar Brah argues, there is a difference between "'feeling at home' and staking claim to a place as one's own" (1996, p. 190) because "[i]t is quite possible to feel at home in a place and yet the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home" (p. 190). The novel's imagery leaves no doubt about this disjunction. The father, a character linked to the abject only through his acceptance of the family dynamics, asks Desiree to "throw out as much *junk* as she could" (Martin, 2007, p. 209) [emphasis added], in an attempt to "normalize" his home. At that moment, he realizes: "[w]e can't just leave the child here" (p. 210). Mrs. Clancy draws attention to Leila's vulnerability and precarious situation in the US: "Does she have anywhere to go? … She is a real, live refugee, you know" (p. 210). In this way, the novel avoids eschewing the reality that, by being accepted into this house in the first place, Leila is at the same time recognized as one of society's abjected (non-)members.

In this way, the politics of inclusion and exclusion operating in the US and in The House with No Anus are revealed in the novel, exposed as parallel in their ultimate rejection of "alien" bodies, neglecting even those most in need. Although apparently sustaining a discourse of hospitality, The House with No Anus, like the nation, establishes clear-cut boundaries regarding Others. From the beginning of her stay, Leila and her body fully participate in the configuration of the house as a zone of abjection, materially and figuratively epitomizing the nation's waste matters.

Apart from being associated with the racialized Other and their "dirtying", "disgusting" (Ahmed, 2004) presence, Leila's connection to the abject is also strongly gendered and sexualized. In the House with No Anus, Leila has her first period, and the narrative's description of her initial confusion and fear is beautifully tender while utterly abject:

> Leila awoke in the soft bed feeling soggy. There was moist hot between her legs. She moved slowly and felt herself leak. She put her hand down and felt about. Everything was thick and wet. She took her hand out from under the covers and saw blood—smelling it instinctively. There was a dark red clot on her finger. This was a short life, she thought. I am twelve, almost thirteen. Gone.
> In the bathroom, she hung her head down and saw that blood smeared all over her thighs. She sat on the toilet seat, streaking it with blood. The stained sheets were in the bath on top of the thousand empty shampoo bottles. A string of dark red goo came out when she pissed. It came out behind the streel [sic] of piss. From somewhere else. She couldn't imagine where. She couldn't go to Dr Clancy because of where it was coming from. She raced down the desert road in horror. (Martin, 2007, p. 126)

In this passage, the depiction of Leila's menstruating body accumulates most of the features that, according to Kristeva, give rise to abjection: the leaking body, its orifices exposed; the horror at this leaking, and the puzzlement before the newly discovered existence

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of a new (gendered) orifice; the fear of death; the stained sheets atop other waste already accumulated in the house; the blood that mixes with the urine. Thus, Leila's menstrual blood simultaneously signifies "dirt" and evidences the exposure and transgression of the (bodily) borders thought to contain or keep this dirt afar. But, following Kristeva, this blood is socially rendered as polluting in a slightly different way than excrement is, precisely because it signifies sexual difference (1984, p. 71).

In the end, Leila accumulates in her body both types of danger to the normative identity of the self-same. As the narrative warns: "Going into the house from the outside was plunging to bottomless depths" (Martin, 2007, p. 100). When the Clancys go on holiday and decide Leila cannot stay, she actually has nowhere to go, so feeling sick and most probably ill with meningitis, she is left again by her brother at the door of the House with no Anus. The narrative retrospectively describes this moment as when Leila "disappeared into the house" (p. 260), as if the house had devoured her. In the room where she had initially found "a tomblike solace" (p. 99), Leila finally dies. With this, the novel closes the circle of abjection delimiting the house, as, in Kristeva's words, "[t]he corpse … is the utmost of abjection" (1984, p. 4): "[C]orpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live … If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (p. 3).

3.3. "[A] day that never was"

Leila's death in the House with No Anus, where her corpse remains for days before her brother and uncle ultimately bury her in an unmarked grave in the mountains, is linked in the narrative to the nation's geopolitical frontiers (the Sonoran Desert at the US–Mexico border, and the mountains as burial site), as well as to its foundational narratives of identity, and its current necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) of immigration control. Much as Zolo is visibly affected by the death of his sister and revolted by her improper burial, his and Mo's concealment of Leila's death and body has less to do with a denial of pain and loss, or the guilt of neglect, than with their own interest *vis-à-vis* their position in US society, and their dreaming the American dream. Mo explains the situation as follows: "This doesn't have to be a disaster or it might be. We could get thrown out of the US for this. My clinic is about to be open … My American passport interview is in a month" (Martin, 2007, p. 264). The narrative suggests here that for Zolo and, especially, Mo, Leila –who embodies Orap for them and, thus, their own reality as refugees– must be buried and forgotten for them to start anew and build a future in the US. By burying Leila's body in an unmarked grave in the mountains, Mo and Zolo symbolically attempt to bury the past and to dispose of "the present's waste matter" (Martin, 2007, p. 27). As Mo says: "This will be a day that never was" (p. 265). This erasure is linked in the narrative to US history and the European settlers' erasure of Native Americans and their histories. Trying to stop Marguerite, Leila's and Zolo's younger sister, from digging into Leila's story after discovering her hidden existence, Mo tells her:

> Americans ignore their past. It's a dirty genocidal history. You should too. Zolo tried to show me Leila's scrapbooks … They were full of sentimental nonsense about indigenous peoples. They had to kill the Indians to enjoy this place fully. To make it their own, to start from zero … To be comfortable as an American you have to forget. The world has never been empty but we can pretend it was. And who wants to know about these things? That this rather banal place we live in was founded on genocide not too long ago. Forget, Marguerite. That's my advice to you. (Martin, 2007, pp. 276–277)

Yet Marguerite is fully committed to remembering. As Leila had done in creating her scrapbooks, her younger sister also rummages through the nation's waste matters in search of

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Leila's body and story. And in their parallel unearthing of the unhomely nightmares they find underground, they ultimately bring to light the forgotten legacies of the past that inevitably shape our present and thus offer hope for a future when these legacies can be investigated and, more importantly, accounted for.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In its depiction of Leila's wandering journey in the US and its portrayal of the House with No Anus as a zone of cumulative and radical abjection, *Baby zero* pieces together a compelling critique of socio-geographical exclusions in the US framed herein in relation to Judith Butler's and Sara Ahmed's reworkings of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. By connecting Kristeva's psychoanalytic study to Butler's ideas on the abject as regards zones of sociality, and Ahmed's reflections on disgust as an affective reaction that simultaneously makes and unmakes (community) borders, this article has put forward the ways in which Martin's novel exposes the –gendered and racialized– thanatic ethos of neoliberal states and societies such as that of the US, materialized in the nation's "waste-lands". As the epitome of these, the House with no Anus becomes in the narrative an all-encompassing border relentlessly un/made in and through the nation's abjection of its "waste matters": the "dirt/ying", "disgusting" bodies that are disposed of in this purging, but which are nonetheless inevitably constitutive of its identitarian definitions.

Far from the land of opportunities that the idea of the American dream in its multicultural version seems to promise, the US is presented in *Baby zero* as an unhomely context where the lives of migrants, and especially women migrants, are severely neglected. Even when Leila manages to build affective allegiances with other characters who, like herself, are regarded as socially undesirable, her death and secret burial underscore the extreme vulnerability of these subjects in such a context. In the novel, their attempts at building "livable lives" are in vain, as exemplified by Leila's fate, ultimately marred by the excruciating violence of a society that deems its (presumed) Others disposable to confirm their non-existence within its fiercely defended limits. Yet these limits are, as Kristeva tells us, "in perpetual danger" (1984, p. 9) of dissolution; or, as Ahmed argues, these limits are the result of specific affective encounters that can be re-oriented, for instance, by determinedly aligning ourselves against indifference; activating ethical practices of care and solidarity; committing ourselves to accountability; and thus, ultimately cultivating, in Ahmed's words, "hope for another kind of world, another kind of way of inhabiting the world with others" (2004, p. 189). This hope emanates in the novel from Leila's and Marguerite's unyielding determination to remember those "wasted" lives and bodies shattered and forgotten, buried under a mountain of oblivion.

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NOTES

1. Ahmed refers here to the nation, but she similarly appraises whiteness, constructed as a familial bond, a form of social kinship that identifies non-white Others as "strangers", or "bodies out of place" (2004, p. 2).

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2. Ahmed draws on Mary Douglas' theorization of "dirt" as never simply dirt but rather a question of "matter out of place" (1984, p. 36), representing "all the rejected elements of ordered systems" (p. 37).

3. See also Altuna García de Salazar (2016), and Rosende-Pérez (2015, 2021).

4. The novel articulates a critique of patriarchy in multiple forms and across different contexts. It shows how patriarchal logics operate in pre-revolutionary Orap, post-revolutionary religious authoritarianism, and within the normative structures of white, middle-class, American and Irish society –while also foregrounding how these logics shift according to class, race, and national belonging. Religious and capitalist fundamentalisms share patriarchal ideologies that they may implement differently as, in Grewal and Kaplan's words, "each fundamentalism uses and disciplines women in different ways" (1994, p. 24). Nonetheless, as Hardt and Negri (2004) point out, the fixation of all strands of fundamentalist ideologies with bodies, especially women's bodies, ultimately unites them.

5. In "The mechanics of fluids", Luce Irigaray exposes precisely how female corporeality has been conceptualized as abjectly fluid in opposition to the "solidity" of the male rational body of Cartesian philosophy.

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