

“HEALING IS LIKE FALLING IN LOVE, BUT DEEPER”: ROMANCE AND
INTERTEXTUALITY IN JUNAUDA PETRUS’S *THE STARS AND THE
BLACKNESS BETWEEN THEM*

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Junauda Petrus’s *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them* (2020) – a literary debut telling the story of two black girls from different backgrounds falling in love with each other – in light of John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012). After briefly introducing the subgenre of YA queer romance fiction, the article adopts a popular romance studies perspective to observe how the presence of the protagonist’s terminal illness affects the narrative construction of adolescent love. In its first part, the article specifically aims at shedding light on a discursive aspect – shared by Petrus’s and Green’s narratives – centring on a notion of existential infinitude within finitude brought about by recognition. The second part of the article discusses intertextuality as a substantial formal aspect that reveals Green’s and Petrus’s different approaches to the genre they engage with – articulated in terms of the Symbolic and the Semiotic respectively – and the way they narrate and resolve the destinies of their fictional characters.

KEYWORDS: contemporary cancer narratives, *The Fault in our Stars*, *The Stars and the Blackness between Them*, intertextuality, YA Romance, popular romance studies

“HEALING IS LIKE FALLING IN LOVE, BUT DEEPER”: ROMANCE E
INTERTEXTUALIDAD EN *THE STARS AND THE BLACKNESS BETWEEN THEM*
DE JUNAUDA PETRUS

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them* (2020) de Junauda Petrus –su debut literario sobre la historia de amor de dos chicas negras de orígenes distintos– a la luz de *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) de John Green. Tras introducir brevemente el subgénero de la novela *queer* para jóvenes lectores, el artículo explora desde la perspectiva de los estudios sobre la novela romántica popular cómo la presencia de la enfermedad terminal de la protagonista afecta a la construcción del amor adolescente. En la primera parte, el artículo se centra en arrojar luz sobre las cuestiones discursivas que comparten las novelas de Petrus y Green, centrándose en la noción de lo infinito dentro de lo finito que se deriva del momento de reconocimiento. La segunda parte del artículo explora la intertextualidad, un aspecto formal clave en ambas novelas y mediante el cual Green y Petrus se acercan al género de manera distinta –en términos de lo simbólico y lo semiótico respectivamente– para resolver los destinos de sus personajes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: narrativas contemporáneas sobre cáncer, *The Fault in our Stars*, *The Stars and the Blackness between Them*, intertextualidad, romance adolescente, estudios sobre novela romántica

INTRODUCTION

The current and *substantial* diversification of sexual orientations in YA romantic fiction, as Amanda K. Allen (2021) argues in her comprehensive outline of the history of the genre,¹ is a recent development which nevertheless has its roots in the past. Michael Cart and Joan Kaywell explain that

The field of young adult (YA) literature with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer, intersex, asexual, and so on, standing for all of the other sexualities, sexes, and genders not included in LGBTQIA+ content, began with the publication of a single book, John Donovan’s (1969) *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (2022: 1).

Cart and Kaywell add that Donovan’s novel «introduce[s] an unfortunate leitmotif that haunted early queer YA literature: death – often in an automobile accident – and the seeming punishment of the presumably gay or lesbian character for his or her actions» (2022: 1). This trend continues to characterize the – still scarce – publication of queer YA romances throughout the 1970s. The novels published in this decade, Cart and Kaywell observe, «established the situations and attitudes that would become stereotypical in the years to come: it is dangerous to be queer, one is punished for being queer, queer relationships are bound to end badly, being queer is just a phase, and so forth» (2).

The pace of publication of YA queer literature increases in the 1980s, a decade that sees the publication of Nancy Garden’s *Annie on my Mind* (1982), the first lesbian romance with a happy ending. Whereas novels of the 1990s are strongly characterized as «coming out narratives», at the turn of the century YA romance literature sees a significant increase in thematic diversification which reflects the one taking place in the romance genre at large: «a growing number of queer books described life after coming out and featured characters who ‘just happened’ to be gay and whose homosexuality was only one aspect of their character» (Cart and Kaywell, 2022: 5). The years 2010-2016 saw the publication of a little less than 600 novels, «a veritable tsunami of titles» (5), presenting a growing number of not only gay, but also bisexual, asexual, and transgender protagonists. Cart and Kaywell observe that «the belated appearance of characters of color; Black, Latino/a, and Asian characters are becoming fixtures of the literature [...] have moved [the genre] beyond the tokenism of earlier years to a demonstration of embracing community». (6)

In light of this essential summary of the history of the genre, Junauda Petrus’s *The Stars and The Blackness Between Them* (2019) appears as an apt representative of recent YA romance fiction and its increasing diversification while resorting to the trope of death introduced by Donovan’s novel. Petrus’s protagonists, Audre and Mabel, two adolescent black girls from different geographic and cultural backgrounds – Audre is from Trinidad and Mabel from the US – are free to develop – after initial vicissitudes – their relationship within an “embracing community” (Cart and Kaywell 2022: 6), warm and accepting. While growing up in Trinidad, Audre is in an intimate friendship with Neri, a girl of her

¹ Allen discusses three historical periods corresponding to three different approaches in scholarship. In the 1940s and 1950s, critics would mostly formulate “good/bad judgements of junior novels, focusing on their use in girls’ socialization or as ‘steppingstones’ to mature texts, or deriding them for their lack of realism” (Allen, 2021: 184). The period of the 1980s and 1990s is characterized by an equally critical attitude towards YA romance novels, seen as “damaging portrayals of patriarchal power and gender norms” (184). In contrast, current scholarship of the genre “represents a global flowering of analysis into wide-ranging new territories (including supernatural, dystopian, and queer YA romance) and formats (including fanfiction and manga), as well as an active historicizing of the field itself” (184).

same age. When Audre's mother, religious and severe, catches the two girls together, she decides to send Audre to live in Minneapolis with her father. Once there, Audre rekindles her relationship with her father as well as a childhood friendship with Mabel, a sweet-tempered girl growing up amongst loving, open-minded parents, and a supportive cluster of – mostly queer – friends. The two girls meet during a challenging time for both: Audre is trying to make sense of the pain and trauma of having been sent away from home for having become “too” close to another girl; Mabel is putting together the pieces of her sexual identity with the help and inspiration of Whitney Houston's music. Audre has left behind her hometown and all her closest relationships, her grandmother especially, perceptive and warm, a woman profoundly knowledgeable about the island's medical traditions and healing practices; but she brings to Mabel's life a universe of spirituality and references (concerning healing practices, food, astrology...) that enriches Mabel. In return, Mabel gives Audre the gift of unjudging friendship.

Unfortunately, shortly after the two girls meet again, Mabel is diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. When Mabel discovers her terminal disease, Audre will have to find ways to sustain and assist her. While confronting her illness, Mabel will be able to rely on her own community of family and friends, Audre's sincere commitment to her, and a memoir written by an incarcerated man, Afua Mahmoud, a text Mabel incorporates into the fabric of her fading but intense existence. Afua got wrongly accused, many years before, of having killed a man during a demonstration against the police. Condemned to spend the rest of his life in prison, he uses the time at his disposal to write an honest and thoughtful account of his experience. Afua, just like Mabel, was very young when his life was cut short abruptly and unfairly. Mabel's struggle against cancer relegates her coming out to the story's margins and completely disconnects her death from her sexual orientation. As a recent representative of queer YA cancer romance novels, a sub-genre with its own conventions, standards, as well as classic texts, the novel conforms to the required resolution, with a magic twist.²

This article analyses Petrus's novel in conjunction with another example of the YA cancer romance genre, *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) by John Green, a narrative telling the story of two adolescents, Hazel and Augustus, who fall for each other at the same time as they fight against cancer. Their relationship is based on a profound understanding of what living with cancer entails, as well as a shared passion for books and a self-reflexive approach to life. *The Fault in Our Stars*, a decade after its publication, may be considered a classic of YA literature in which the sub-genres of YA romance, cancer romance, and coming-of-age romance are blended together. Although the novel was not the first narrative to boldly interlock young (heterosexual) love with cancer, its astonishing popularity generated much attention and some controversy.³

² Eric Segal's *Love Story* (1970) is commonly recognized as an archetypal text of cancer romances. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag mentions Segal's novel in connection to the form of cancer usually «chosen» by authors for protagonists of commercial fiction. Sontag maintains that leukaemia, the disease that kills Jenny, the protagonist of Segal's novel, is a «white» form of cancer for which «no mutilating surgery can be proposed» (1989: 18). A fictional character afflicted by leukaemia may be gravely ill without having to lose parts of his/her body. Several of McDaniel's heroines (see footnote 3), as well as Mabel, suffer from leukaemia.

³ See, for instance, Lurlene McDaniel's *Dawn Rochelle Book Series*, a quintet: *Six Months to Live* (1985), *So Much to Live For* (1991), *No Time to Cry* (1993), *I Want to Live* (1995), and *To Live Again* (2001). The first four titles were re-published in an omni titled *Dawn Rochelle, Four Novels* in the year 2000. For a critical reading of McDaniel's novels, see Nathalie op de Beeck's article «'Sixteen and Dying': Lurlene McDaniel's Fantasies of Mortal Endangerment» (2004). Op de Beeck sees McDaniel's novels as transitional, positioned between an era in which YA fiction used to heavily rely on religion to find solutions
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Green’s novel has been critiqued for not offering «an accurate and realistic portrayal of cancer, particularly in the lived experience of adolescent readers» (Lounsbury et al., 2019: 38).⁴ This observation, which should be read in light of a long-standing concern, in YA scholarship, with what may be «helpful» or «unhelpful» to a young readership (Allen, 2021: 182), appears to be based on a misunderstanding of the very nature of fictional work, which does not respond to the task of depicting reality as is, but of representing it. Naturally, when treating a subject matter such as terminal illness in adolescents, substantial doses of accuracy and sensitivity are desirable, but such criteria are not directly proportional to the narrative’s degree of realism.

Eight years later, almost to prove that mimesis, as Julia Kristeva puts it «is the construction of an object, not according to truth, but to *verisimilitude*» (1984: 57) – Junauda Petrus’s re-writes the tale of young (homosexual) love and terminal illness using the interpretive key of magical realism. A comparison between Petrus’s and Green’s novels helps to foreground, and consequently analyse, Petrus’s distinctive choices vis-à-vis the expressive register in which her story is told. The two novels put forward a remarkably similar message concerning the importance of becoming aware of the infinitude of human existence, a realization occurring through reciprocated love, but they articulate it, as we will shortly see, in opposed and complementary fashion.

The present article makes a conscious effort not to adopt a didactic/moralistic perspective on Petrus’s and Green’s narratives, evaluating them as more or less «helpful» to a posited homogeneous «adolescent readership».⁵ Instead, it takes a more strictly literary criticism approach to analyse the narratives’ complementary discursive contents and formal characteristics. It will be argued that in spite of a fundamental homogeneity of themes and narrative patterns, each novel conforms to one of the expressive registers legible in terms of the long-established dichotomy of the Symbolic (Green) and the Semiotic/Imaginary (Petrus). The symbolic realm, in a wide sense, refers to the rule-governed aspect of language, associated with the law and the masculine; the semiotic aspect of language, associated with the feminine, is pre-structured and bodily.⁶

Green’s narration is logical and orderly, in the sense that is it both realistic and linear. The novel’s images and metaphors are consistently taken from the world of science and mathematics. On the other hand, Petrus’s narration is plural, not linear, fragmented, much less reliant on a «punctual ego» (Kristeva, 1984: 41). Her characters speak

to moral issues, and the contemporary period, in which the characters of YA fiction are made to deal with themes once considered inappropriate to a young readership: sex, illness, death, divorce, and adultery.

⁴ In spite of having been accused of scarce realism, *The Fault in Our Stars* does not shy away from describing sex with an amputated leg, the progressive loss of one’s mental inhibitions, as well as the loss of control over bodily functions. Petrus’s novel, in this regard, is much more abstract. Without tackling the grit of terminal disease, takes a magical approach to cancer that has not been the object of analogous criticism. Mabel progressively loses strength and weight, but she is, until her last days, an attractive and desiring young woman, strong enough to enjoy sex with Audre.

⁵ The didactic aims of YA fiction have never altogether disappeared, only changed in time. Lois Keith argues that «By the end of the twentieth century, writers still aimed to teach young readers important lessons, but what they wanted them to learn was different. Books became less religious, less sentimental, less about being ‘good’ in the sense of refined and unselfish and more about a social and psychological exploration of the situations young people might face» (2001: 195).

⁶ In his *Beginning Theory* (1995), Peter Barry introduces the opposition as follows: «In terms of the literary polarisation between the realist and the anti-realist text, the Symbolic realm would have to be seen as the one found in realist literature, a world of patriarchal order and logic. By contrast, the anti-realist text represents the realm of the Imaginary, a world in which language gestures beyond itself, beyond logic and grammar, rather in the way that poetic language often does» (1995: 80).

geographically and culturally specific languages, as well as parlances, which are in part accurate to specific geographic areas, but also poetically (creatively) re-invented to make them intelligible to a wide Anglophone readership. Moreover, in Petrus's narration, there are consistent "outbreaks" of the Imaginary into the Symbolic, most evidently exemplified by dreams in which a character sees the past of other characters. The novel's ending is also an instance of magical realism, in which the narrative most explicitly undercuts the rules of realistic narration.

The next section of the article highlights discursive similarities between Petrus's and Green's novels vis-à-vis barrier and recognition, two narrative tropes – characteristic of romance fiction – mostly affected by the presence of terminal illness. In both novels, recognition, in particular, encompasses love but also transcends it, transforming itself into a realization of infinitude within finitude, which is perhaps the most prominent discursive feature shared by the narratives. The second part of the article analyses the two opposed expressive registers (the Semiotic and the Semiotic/Imaginary) at play in connection with intertextuality, possibly the most prominent formal trait the two novels share.

NARRATING LOVE AND ILLNESS: BARRIERS AND RECOGNITION

As it is well-known, according to scholar Pamela Regis, the modern romance novel composes its narrative around eight essential elements, which are, at the same time, analytical categories for understanding the genre, as well as events in the storyline which must occur for a romance novel to be defined as such: the initial state of society, the meeting, the barrier, the attraction, the declaration, the point of ritual death, the recognition, the betrothal.⁷ In contemporary cancer romance narratives, the point of ritual death, a notion Regis borrows from Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), imposes itself as the final – not merely ritual – element, thereby pressing all others – including, sometimes, some form of betrothal – to occur within a usually tight and recognizable sequence. In other words, because of the mandatory tragic ending – the necessary absence of a *happily ever after* – some elements assume special importance and/or undergo a significant metamorphosis in the presence of terminal illness.

In Petrus's novel – a YA romance novel – Regis's classic sequence is partially detectable and worth examining. After all, the novel begins with a social milieu (Audre's) in which being queer is perceived as wrong, two girls who used to like each other as kids meet again after some time, they are fascinated by one another, they become close, and there are barriers to their relationship. Petrus's narrative downplays some of the elements – the meeting, the declaration – whereas it decidedly enhances others, such as the barriers, the recognition.

The main barrier between Mable and Audre is Mabel's disease, but there is also a secondary barrier represented by Audre's sense of guilt and inadequacy.⁸ Audre has been

⁷ This schema allows for a virtually endless number of variations: the meeting between heroine and hero (between heroines/heroes/more than two protagonists with diverse romantic and/or sexual orientations) can be recounted in flashbacks, for instance, the "betrothal" is often figurative, and the barrier can be thoroughly internal, that is to say constituted by the «attitudes, temperament, values, and beliefs held by heroine and hero that prevent the union» (Regis, 2003: 32).

⁸ Hazel's self-awareness, and her fear of hurting others, contrasts with her father's approach to her illness, which he finds very difficult to confront. In both novels, the parents of the sick teen-agers are similarly opposed and characterized: mothers take charge of the situation, sometimes becoming over-protective and over-proactive; fathers choose a silent form of pain and a denying attitude. Mothers are combative, in both novels, hands-on, and highly informed of their sick child's condition; fathers appear passive and helpless in the face of tragedy. They often sob quietly while their wives competently discuss the particularities and consequences of their children's disease.

sent away from her hometown because of her emotional and physical closeness to another girl. She knows her mother judged wrongly, but she is too much caught up in her misery and sense of failure to acknowledge the possibility of exploring a side of herself that brought about exile and abuse. Once in Minneapolis, as she experiences acceptance and understanding with her father and friends, she will begin to see she was undeserving of punishment. Just as Hazel in *The Fault in Our Stars*, Audre learns she deserves to be happy and loved. If Hazel’s «minor» barrier is her reluctance to engage in a relationship with Augustus out of fear of hurting him, Audre’s is constituted by her own sense of guilt, by being persuaded that she is not deserving of love.⁹ Both heroines’ coming of age, therefore, is closely connected to the realization of having lived a full life through the experience of reciprocated love.

The recognition in both Green’s and Petrus’ novels encompasses a wider and deeper meaning than the one usually encountered in romantic fiction, becoming an element of major prominence. In *The Fault in Our Stars* love brings about a form of recognition (expressed in mathematical terms to Augustus) that goes beyond the recognition of the “right partner,” that Regis identifies in romance narratives; recognition for Hazel approaches a comprehensive understanding of what human life might mean:

I can’t talk about our love story, so I will talk about math. I am not a mathematician, but I know this: There are infinite numbers between 0 and 1. There’s .1 and .12 and .112 and an infinite collection of others. Of course, there is a bigger infinite set of numbers between 0 and 2, or between 0 and a million. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities [...] There are days, many of them, when I resent the size of my unbounded set. I want more numbers than I am likely to get, and God, I want more numbers for Augustus Waters than he got. But, Gus, my love, I cannot tell you how thankful I am for our little infinity. I wouldn’t trade it for the world. You gave me a forever within the numbered days, and I’m grateful.” (260)

Likewise, in *The Stars and The Blackness Between Them*, Afua, while in prison, reaches an understanding of existential recognition that is not at all distant from Hazel’s: no matter how many days an individual life is granted, a fulfilling existential parable is accomplished if one is given to realize and experience the limitlessness of existence. Afua realises this one day he is allowed, with other inmates, outside the prison walls:

How do you explain the feeling of seeing the night sky after years and years of artificial light and darkness, a life of walls? It felt like I was arriving to this planet for the first time. The sky looked brand-new. There were so many stars and mists of galaxy above us, I heard gasps from some of the other captive cats, and then silence from the awe of it. We were convicts of earth entering a cosmic cathedral [...] The sight filled my eyes with water and my chest with hope. Hope because I realized I was among this limitlessness the whole time, even if caged within a finite box (2020: 162).

The feeling of limitlessness within a finite box experienced by Afua while in prison is strongly reminiscent of a sense of living forever within the numbered days of Hazel and Augustus’s relationship.¹⁰ Audre conceives of and uses love as a healing force that

⁹ Perceiving herself as a “grenade” (2012: 99), Hazel is terrified of hurting those who get too attached to her: «To be with him was to hurt him – inevitably. And that’s what I’d felt as he reached for me: I felt as though I were committing an act of violence against him, because I was» (2012: 101).

¹⁰ Audre, Mabel, and Afua are the novel’s narrators. The plurality of perspectives equalises the three characters and their respective voices. Indeed, the central love relationship is between Mabel and
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eventually liberates Mabel from perishable physicality and consigns her to a supernatural world of boundless existence. Similarly, in Mabel's case, love goes hand in hand with a perception of existential boundlessness (also expressed through poetry), which in turn goes hand in hand with healing: «Healing is like falling in love, but deeper. You unite with someone so that you can work alchemy with their soul. So that they might elevate and revive them and heal not only them but their ancestors» (2020: 140). Love, which survives earthly life, is a healing force capable to intervene in the present as well as in the past. Therefore, if the reader does not get to see Mabel's death, it is not because the novel ends before this occurs, but because Audre, through her love and healing practices, has managed to transfigure it into a sudden vanishing, and a journey.

Towards the end of the novel, Mabel, with the help of Audre, her family and friends, manages to obtain permission to release Afua from prison for one day. On a visit to Coney Island, Mabel and Afua take a ride together on the Cyclone, the amusement park's wooden roller-coaster. The ride becomes the metaphor of a more significant departure: «We both gasp at the sight ahead of us. All we see is the limitless black sky and all we hear is the roar ahead as we descend into an unknown thrill» (2020: 306). After the ride, as the roller-coaster car returns to its starting place, Mabel and Afua are nowhere to be found. Audre explains what happened: «They freed themselves. Mabel and Afua are gone, only the handcuffs remain dangling from the lap bar. No one could explain it, but somehow I understood. The sky reclaimed them somewhere between the ocean and its blackness» (307). Although Audre could not heal Mabel's illness, her healing practices have somehow worked, helping Mabel become a star, an ancestor, a «sweet electricity» (307), capable of returning to the ones she loves and communicate her presence to them.

Green and Petrus construct and articulate death in opposite terms. Green takes a philosophical stance, arguing that present lives are enabled by past ones. Numerous episodes, in his novel, corroborate the notion. For instance, on their flight to Amsterdam, Augustus and Hazel watch the film *Sparta*. In a battle scene, an army of soldiers uses the corpses of the dead ones as a fence to protect themselves from the enemy. As the enemies kill more and more soldiers, the fence grows and the living soldiers, climbing it at the right time, manage to overcome the enemy. Human life, the scene seems to suggest, along with its momentary conquests and successes, is enabled by death, by those who came before. The struggle for life is continuous and holds in no regard individual existences.

Petrus's choices are gentler and more rarefied. In a meaningful conversation taking place at the end of the novel, Mabel and her father promise one another they will try to meet again, after Mabel's death, in the garden they have been cultivating together. Once again, the prevailing language spoken by Petrus's characters is a mystical one of emotional closeness and protection. Petrus creates a context of colourful and chaotic gentleness for a fresh love story which is constructed along partially recognizable trajectories. Following these with the aid of Regis's elements – and An Goris's interpretation of them as a «point of departure and a kind of baseline» (Goris, 2013: 2) for further analysis – reveals Petrus's reliance on and unique interpretation of conventions coming from several literary traditions.

Reading such forms and conventions in light of one another helps to disclose something of the wider context, potentially expanding our understanding of the romance genre *tout court*. For instance, in cancer narratives and YA cancer narratives, we see at

Audre, but Afua's thoughts constitute a commentary that illustrates Mabel's condition and helps the reader understand it.

work a significant reversal in the final segment of Regis’s classic sequence. Whereas the point of ritual death for Regis is a dark time preceding clarification and appeasement, in these novels the point of ritual death might be read as the conceptual specular reflection of what Green calls, in *The Fault in Our Stars*, the «Last Good Day» (253), a short-lived moment of light and happiness prior to a tragic ending. While, *de facto*, respecting the convention – Augustus gets a Last Good Day before dying – Green makes Hazel pronounce a meta-commentary on this trope, and, by extension, the genre it belongs to

One of the less bullshit conventions of the cancer kid genre is the Last Good Day convention, wherein the victim of cancer finds herself with some unexpected hours when it seems like the inexorable decline has suddenly plateaued, when the pain is for a moment bearable. The problem, of course, is that there is no way of knowing that your last good day is your Last Good Day. At the time, it is just another good day. (253)

In Petrus’ novel, Mabel gets her Last Good Day as well, when she goes on a trip to a lake house with her friends in spite of her precarious health conditions. The trip is idyllic: Mabel and Audre get close, they have sex, and declare to one another. It is clear that, in spite of not being able to leave her home, Mabel has become a young woman capable of living as an adult, engaging in life beyond her familial relations.

The Stars and the Blackness Between Them partially reproduces the classic narrative sequence of the popular romance novel. This section set itself the goal of shedding light on the element of the barrier – minor barriers vis-à-vis terminal disease – as well as on recognition as a key moment of understanding of a fundamental existential truth.

INTERTEXTUALITY: A SUPPLEMENT OF MEANING

This section of the article focuses on intertextuality as a formal strategy put in place in both novels to accomplish multiple purposes: construct an alternative voice – a contrary one in Green’s novel; a sympathetic one in Petrus – an authoritative commentary to the narratives, and an opportunity to multiply the meanings of the text. More specifically, the different usages Green and Petrus make of intertextual devices fully reveal the similarities and differences between their respective approaches to storytelling in general, and, specifically, to the fate of their protagonists and the ways they choose to narrate it and resolve it.

Julia Kristeva argues that intertextuality may take the form of a «supplement of meaning» (Kristeva, 2002: 11). In both literary instances under scrutiny, fabricated textual references guide the protagonists – as well as the reader – providing challenges and contrary perspectives, as well as a way to make sense of events. Green’s game of textual references is clever, thought-out, and cerebral. Petrus uses Afua’s *memoir*, horoscope-themed poems, and personal letters, to provoke emotional involvement in Mabel’s destiny and soften it for the reader. Kristeva also argues that intertextuality «can be at once a melancholic moment of crisis, a loss of voice and meaning, a void and displaced origin, and a rebellious conquest of a new polymorphous expression against any unproductive identity or totalitarian linearity» (2002: 9). The act of rebellion against “totalitarian linearity” is doubly detectable in both narratives: authors look for different expressive outlets at the same time as their protagonists look for teachings and challenges that come from sources external to the familial context. In other words, Hazel’s and Mabel’s reliance on a text, in both cases conceived of as a sort of existential point of

reference, can be read as the attempt to find a source of authority beyond parental perspectives.

In *The Fault in Our Stars*, Green experiments with the creation of fictitious texts throughout his narrative: a videogame, its novelization in the form of a sci-fi series, and, more centrally, a novel, *An Imperial Affliction*, a crucial «presence» in the story. It has been observed that *An Imperial Affliction* is often referenced and quoted by Hazel and Augustus, but its contents remain largely unknown to the reader. Over the course of the story, Hazel mentions its protagonists, telling readers that the novel ends with a truncated sentence, probably suggesting the sudden death of its narrator, a teen-age girl named Anna. Hazel knows that the unfinished sentence signifies the abruptness of death, more likely to occur *in medias res* than at the end of an accomplished existential parable.¹¹ The sci-fi series, on the other hand, does not have an ending and, just like all series, implies the possibility of continuing indefinitely. Hazel appreciates both types of resolutions, the crudely honest one, as well as the consolatory: «I know it's a very literary decision and everything and probably part of the reason I love the book [*An Imperial Affliction*] so much, but there is something to recommend a story that ends. And if it can't end, then it should at least continue in perpetuity...» (2012: 49-50).

This observation will reveal itself to be a meta-commentary on the novel's own ending, which does not fully adhere to either of these outcomes. The narrative cuts for itself the possibility of a «third ending» in which tragedy (Augustus's death) and hope (Hazel's survival) will be made to share the same narrative space. Hazel gets an accomplished existential parable, given to her by the recognition of having been the object of Augustus's love, and having loved him in return. By giving her such awareness, Green saves Hazel from a truncated ending. At this point, readers are free to believe that Hazel's disease will soon return, but by not making her die within the limited number of pages of his novel, Green, just like Augustus, gives Hazel another infinite «within the numbered pages». In other words, if Hazel's death does not occur within the novel, it does not happen at all.¹² This is perhaps the only way Green has of keeping Hazel alive without compromising on realistic obligations.

At the opposite spectrum of narrative possibilities, Petrus's novel resolves its own ending by consciously betraying realistic conventions in order to resort to the register of the magical and the supernatural. In place of a realistic death, or a momentarily precarious survival (Green's solutions), Petrus opts for a transcendental outcome immune to further developments. By transfiguring Mabel's death into a sad but harmless and rarefied occurrence, Petrus seals the equation between love and transcendental healing at the same time as she gifts her readers with a «lighter» catharsis.

The two examples reported below are emblematic of the opposite use each author makes of intertextual strategies and the way these intertwine with discursive content. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel and August meet, for the first time, at a support group's session for teen-age cancer survivors. As it is conventional in the romance genre, their

¹¹ This contrary ending, which deeply frustrates and unsettles Hazel, turns out to be revelatory of the personality of its author, Peter van Houten, a sour and apparently unsympathetic character, through which Green voices an adult and cynical perspective on life – and life with cancer – which complements and challenges that of the young protagonists. In this regard too, Petrus's choice is an opposite one: Afua is an understanding friend to Mabel, a spiritual guide, and an inspiration.

¹² Hazel's immaturity reveals itself in her psychological dependence on fictional characters, and on wanting to know, at all costs, what “happens to them” beyond the pages of her favourite novel. By the end of the story, Hazel emancipates herself from this need, understanding that her fictional friends only exist on the page, and nothing happens to them outside the text. Having encountered real love, Hazel can let go of her juvenile fixations. Her recognition of having been in a loving relationship, true and intense, functions as an accelerator of growth and understanding.

first meeting – one of Regis’s elements – makes visible some of the fundamental personality traits and concerns of the protagonists. In this case, the reader is immediately told that Augustus is more resentful than Hazel, who seems to have better come to terms with her condition and the realistic prospect of not having enough time to make a lasting mark upon the world. Augustus expresses his fear of being forgotten soon after his death, and Hazel, quoting from *An Imperial Affliction*, the book which she considers «as close a thing as I had to a Bible» (2012: 13), replies to him:

There will come a time [...] when all of us are dead. All of us. There will come a time when there are no human beings remaining to remember that anyone ever existed or that our species ever did anything. There will be no one left to remember Aristotle or Cleopatra, let alone you. Everything that we did and built and wrote and thought and discovered will be forgotten and all of this [...] will have been for naught. Maybe that time is coming soon and maybe it is a million of years away, but even if we survive the collapse of our sun, we will not survive forever. There was time before organisms experienced consciousness, and there will be time after. And if the inevitability of human oblivion worries you, I encourage you to ignore it. God knows that’s what everyone else does. (2012: 13)

An Imperial Affliction, the title itself an intertextual reference to a poem by Emily Dickinson, brings Augustus and Hazel together and continues to provide them, throughout the narrative, with conversation material. Furthermore, it gives them a mission to accomplish, and an adventure over the course of which they will learn from and fall in love with each other. The text also constitutes a mystery to solve (who is its author, Peter Van Houten?), an existential guide, and an unfinished story to complete (what happens to the secondary characters after the death of the protagonist?). However, the excerpt quoted above is the only one available to the reader. As already observed, this fabricated text is invested with much power to affect the actions and thoughts of Hazel and Augustus, but readers don’t know much of its contents. Precisely for this reason, the text’s voice, when heard, is all the more authoritative.

From this perspective, it is important to note the apparent pessimism of the quote, as it will make the later discovery of the possibility of an «infinity within the numbered days» all the more surprising, as well as touching. Green mobilizes a world of objective facts (time before consciousness, the collapse of our sun) and historical figures (Aristotle and Cleopatra) to state something realistic and ominous about the human condition. Later in the narrative, the poetic discovery of infinity within finitude will come across as unexpectedly soothing precisely because the narrative, throughout most of its development, maintains a tone decidedly sparing of consolatory messages.

In *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them*, the *memoir* Mabel falls in love with constitutes a poignant commentary and explanation to the main themes of Petrus’s novel: what it means to be condemned to an untimely and unjust death, the possibility of finding meaning transcendental to earthly existence, the importance of love as spiritual healing.¹³ An excerpt from the introduction to Afua’s text brings all these topics to the surface:

¹³ In *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them*, Petrus makes a comparison between terminal illness and imprisonment: both Mabel and Afua are unjustly sentenced to die. When Mabel writes to Afua her first letter, she remarks upon this similarity: “it seems that you, like me, had no chance to be anything either” (2020: 154).

Incarceration is a sustained, lifetime lynching, meant to discard your soul and make a shell out of you in plain life. Make you into your monster self, the beast that comes out when you are forced to survive in the absence of love and safety. Never mind that most of us come broken and traumatized, we still are no longer worth of our humanity. We are a criminal. We need punishment and to be rehabilitated. We need shame and exclusion [...] But I was a boy once [...] I write this story for the little Afua in me that needs to know he is okay and worthy of life, even if my whole existence is a reminder that my breath will one day be taken away at a predetermined time by an executioner, whose house I live in. I protect that young boy's soul by reminding him he is infinite, like the stars and the blackness between them. (124)

In this instance, human beings do not discover infinitude «within their numbered days», they are, by nature, limitless and potentially capable of transcending their embodied existences. Afua's memoir imparts lessons on the importance of finding freedom beyond unjust treatment caused by racial as well as sexual prejudice; Audre's healing process contains an encouragement to inclusion and a lesson concerning the transformation of earthly life into a different kind of existence, enduring and purposeful: a soothing thought, for Mabel as well as for the reader. In other words, Petrus combines the themes of race, queerness, illness, spirituality, and healing practices to achieve an all-comprehensive vision of human life as meaningful and potentially endless.

At the beginning of this article it was argued that the two novels could be legible in terms of the opposed but complementary realms of the Symbolic and the Semiotic/Imaginary, a dichotomy first formulated by Jacques Lacan and further elaborated upon by Kristeva. In its concluding segment, the opposition may be briefly returned to in order to draw some conclusion in regard to Petrus's originality vis-à-vis the genre she engages with.

Kristeva, in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), applies the distinction to the realm of language, associating Symbolic language with the language of prose, orderly structures and linear storytelling. The Imaginary/Semiotic, on the other hand, is the language of poetry and the unconscious. Whereas *The Fault in Our Stars*, in spite of its numerous meta-commentaries, mainly conforms to the conventions of literary realism, *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them* repeatedly attempts at breaking the wall of conscious narration, a gesture exemplified, within the story, by the irruption of past lives and memories of Audre's ancestors into Mabel's unconscious.

When Audre starts practicing her healing techniques on Mabel, Mabel begins having visions of Audre's grandmother's past. These dream sequences feed on the notion of a shared «physiological memory» (Kristeva, 1984: 29). They constitute «break[s] in the signifying processes» (43), «irruption[s] of drives within the realm of the signifier» (1984: 49). In other words, Petrus, «in cracking the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself» introduces «jouissance into and through language» (80). Moreover, Petrus's novel is interspersed with astrologically-themed poems that «symbolize underlying themes, tones, and events to foreshadow what is coming» (Adeniji et al., 2022: 144). Petrus seems to use poems as intertextual supplements of meaning as well as counter-texts to her own prose, reminding the reader of the function of poetic language, which is, according to Kristeva: «to introduce through the symbolic that which works on, moves through, and threatens it» (1984: 81). Lastly, Petrus, with her «free play of meanings within the frame of loosened grammatical structures» (Barry 1995: 88), seems to make a conscious attempt at implementing what French critic Hélène Cixous would call an instance of *écriture*

feminine, an «antilogos weapon» (1976: 880), capable of «surpass[ing] the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system» (880). A kind of writing, in other words, «conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate» (883).

CONCLUSION

As outlined in the introduction, the subgenre of YA romance has recently transformed itself from an overwhelmingly heterosexual literary form to one committed to revealing the complexity and diversity of current relationships between two (or more) young protagonists. *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them*, which I have read in relation to the YA romance genre and in light of *The Fault in Our Stars*, a novel that a decade after its publication may be considered a classic of YA (cancer) romance, can be read as part of these transformations.

The first part of the article looked at Petrus’s novel from the perspective of popular romance scholarship. It argued that barrier and recognition are the narrative elements mostly impacted by the presence of terminal illness, and it set out to illustrate such changes and deviations. This section specifically highlighted how the novels transmit a message of potential existential infinitude as their central discursive trait. In its second part, the article specifically focused on intertextuality as a formal characteristic markedly shared by both novels. It was argued that, in spite of their closeness in contents, the two texts mobilize not only different but opposite expressive domains to formulate a life-affirming message that differently but analogously transcends death by doubling the destiny of the protagonists (Green), or exploring its narrative potentialities in a symbolic key (Petrus). Petrus’s novel, in particular, weaves a thick and rich fabric of fresh references as well as a discourse of inclusive acceptance around its heroines, avoiding the pitfalls of moral judgement, a punitive ending, and an excessive focus on coming out which characterises other YA queer romances.

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