

Registering the Self: The Identity of Women Artists in *How to Be Both* and *A Line Made by Walking*

Registrando o Eu: a identidade de mulheres artistas em *How to Be Both* e *A Line Made by Walking*¹

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ABSTRACT: Women artists have only recently been given the spot of artist protagonists in artist narratives. Their identities are constructed in a constant state of tension, influenced by the myth of the romantic genius, and constantly traversed by gender issues. Thus, this paper studies the construction of women artists' identities in contemporary artist narratives written by women through a comparative analysis of the novels *How to Be Both*, by Ali Smith, and *A Line Made by Walking*, by Sara Baume. It contextualizes these novels' literary genre, based on the study of artist narratives and their roots in the *Künstlerroman* tradition, then investigates the identity of women artists and how it is portrayed in the narratives of *How to Be Both* and *A Line Made by Walking*.

KEYWORDS: Women artists. Identity. *How to Be Both*. *A Line Made by Walking*.

RESUMO: Só recentemente mulheres ganharam o lugar de artistas protagonistas em narrativas de artista. Suas identidades são construídas em um estado constante de tensão, influenciadas pelo mito do gênio romântico, e constantemente atravessadas por questões de gênero. Sendo assim, este artigo discute a construção da identidade de mulheres artistas em narrativas de artistas contemporâneas escritas por mulheres por meio de uma análise comparativa dos romances *How to Be Both*, de Ali Smith, e *A Line Made by Walking*, de Sara Baume. Ele contextualiza o gênero literário desses romances, com base no estudo de narrativas de artista e suas raízes na tradição do *Künstlerroman*, e depois dedica-se a investigar a identidade de mulheres artistas e como ela é retratada nas narrativas de *How to Be Both* e *A Line Made by Walking*.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Mulheres artistas. Identidade. *How to Be Both*. *A Line Made by Walking*.

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Women artists are only recently starting to occupy the position of artist protagonists in artist narratives. They used to be restrained to secondary roles such as the muses or the wives of the male painter (Lago, 2017). It is in the tradition of the *Künstlerromane* written by women that they found the space needed to be depicted in the main role. As Rachel B. DuPlessis (1985) claims, in writing the artist heroine the woman author defies the traditional notions of the genre linked to the image of the romantic artist. By inserting a gendered subject as the protagonist, the woman author opens the narratives to the struggles the woman artist faces when she enters the art world, including the difficulty of being acknowledged as an artist or establishing an identity for herself in a traditionally male space.

Following this tradition and Virginia Woolf's (2016, p. 14) advice that one can only attempt to comprehend the woman by looking at her from her own perspective, the literary objects analysed here are both written by women: *How to Be Both* (2015), by Ali Smith and *A Line Made by Walking* (2017), by Sara Baume. *How to Be Both* (2015) narrates the story of George, a teenager who has just lost her mother and is still learning how to come to terms with her grief, and Francescho del Cossa, an Italian Renaissance painter who travels in time to haunt the girl in contemporary times. In search of her mother's presence, George starts stalking Lisa, an intimate friend of Carol's, and photographing her daily life from the same observation spot in front of her house. *A Line Made by Walking* (2017) narrates the story of Frankie, an artist in her mid-twenties who moves to her grandmother's bungalow in the countryside after suffering a nervous breakdown. There, she starts a photographic series on dead animals as a final attempt to succeed as an artist. The protagonists' struggles and process of searching for an identity permeate both novels, as well as their relation with Art and their artistic creation, all of these being traces characteristic of the genre artist narratives that is presented next.

Women Artists in Artist Narratives

Artists are one of the most controversial characters in literature and are usually associated with stereotypical terms such as the heavenly gifted, the bohemian, the genius, and so on. Their lives, struggles and artistic productions are at the core of the *Künstlerroman* tradition, that is, of artist novels. The *Künstlerroman* is defined by Solange R. de Oliveira as "any narrative in which the figure of an

artist or a work of art (real or fictitious) plays an essential structuring role, and, by extension, literary works in which one searches for a stylistic equivalent based on other arts” (1993, p. 5).² Oliveira (1993) bases her definition on the one proposed by Ulrich Weisstein (1981, p. 9), to whom the *Künstlerroman* is a narrative that presents, at its core, technical and aesthetical problems which are characteristic of one form of art, so that by solving the issues related to the artistic creation itself, the artist-protagonists also find a solution to problems in their own lives. Both definitions centre the classification of a *Künstlerroman* on thematic aspects so that the presence of an artist or the work of art structuring the narrative is enough to consider a novel as part of this tradition.

The origins of the term and its definition, however, are rather controversial. Izabela B. Lago (2017) identifies two possibilities: the first one claims that artist novels are born with Wilhelm Heinse’s *Ardinghello und Die Glückseligen Inseln*, published in 1787; the second one places the *Künstlerroman* as a response to the *Bildungsroman*, the so-called novels of formation, which depicts the growth and coming of age of a protagonist. A *Bildungsroman* is classified, according to Karl Morgenstern (2009, p. 654-655) – the philosopher who first defined the term in a lecture in 1819 – “on account of its content, because it represents the development of the hero in its beginning and progress to a certain stage of completion, but also, second, because this depiction promotes the development of the reader to a greater extent than any other kind of novel”. Thus, Morgenstern (2009) insists on the formational character of these narratives, emphasizing that they somehow teach something to both the character and the readers. Following this line, then, the distinction between the *Bildungsroman* and the *Künstlerroman* lies in the fact that, in the former, there is necessarily a strong educational concern that is not the focus of the latter, which, in turn, concentrates on the lives and works of artists.

In an attempt to solve the problems concerning the origins and the multiple conflicting definitions of *Künstlerroman*, Lago (2017) proposes the term artist narratives, a category derivative from the Germanic tradition. The updated term comprises narratives in which the life of an artist-protagonist is necessarily in the foreground, setting the tone and the basis to develop the entire narrative. By opting for this terminology, which is followed in this paper, Lago (2017) removes the former restriction of these narratives to romances, opening it to other literary

2 In the original: “qualquer narrativa onde uma figura de artista ou uma obra de arte (real ou fictícia) desempenhe uma função estruturadora essencial, e, por extensão, obras literárias onde se procure um equivalente estilístico calcado em outras artes” (Oliveira, 1993, p. 5). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

genres, such as short stories, novellas, and representations in other media as examples of these narratives. Her proposal also provides a clear definition of the formal and structural aspects that are characteristic of this kind of narrative, which are valuable to building a consistent analysis and understanding of artist narratives.

Despite the considerable popularity of artist narratives, it is important to notice that the number of publications in which the artist-protagonist is a woman remains low. In the vast majority, according to Lago (2017), the artists depicted are male painters. Usually, in such narratives, the female characters “were relegated to secondary roles, represented as muses-models or partners-wives of these artist-protagonists, passive subjects in the creative activity, when they do not represent a source of conflict, an obstacle to the artist’s work, many times playing a maleficent role, as antagonists” (Lago, 2017, p. 89-90).³

Lago (2017) also indicates a connection between the absence of women in active roles and the moral and social conventions of the 19th century, which restrained women’s access to education and the subversive spaces commonly depicted in artist narratives. In *‘Mon’ Histoire des Femmes* (2006), Michelle Perrot details the extent of the contact women were allowed to have with Art: they “could paint for themselves, draw children’s portraits, sketch bouquets or landscapes. Play Schubert or Mozart on the piano for a friendly or social evening” (2006, p. 129-130).⁴ In other words, they could create their own works or reproduce others as long as they did it in private spheres or for private matters. Perrot (2006) also explains that women could enjoy Art, and even teach drawing or piano, manufacture small objects, or copy the great masters in the museums, if necessary; however, they could not and should not attempt to do it professionally. On the same topic, Woolf (2015) explains that any woman in the sixteenth century who attempted to explore a great gift for poetry, and for other arts as well, “would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at,” since she “would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty” (p. 37).

3 In the original: “foram relegadas a papéis secundários, representadas como as musas-modelos ou companheiras-esposas desses artistas protagonistas, sujeitos passivos na atividade de criação, quando não se apresentam como uma fonte de conflitos, um entrave ao trabalho do artista, muitas vezes desempenhando um papel maléfico, como antagonistas.” (Lago, 2017, p. 89-90)

4 In the original: “...peuvent peindre pour les leurs, crayonner les portraits des enfants, esquisser des bouquets de fleurs ou des paysages. Jouer au piano Schubert ou Mozart pour une soirée amicale ou mondaine.” (Perrot, 2006, p. 129)

As a consequence, formal education or a professional career in the Arts was not accessible to them, especially if they wanted to avoid publicity, as pointed out by Woolf (2015). Their alternative, according to the author, was publishing works unsigned or using male names, which accounts for the often supposed absence of women from these narratives and stories. The desire for anonymity, Woolf (2015, p. 37) claims, “runs in their blood”.

Even so, in *Les Femmes ou Les Silences de l'Histoire* (2012), Perrot explains that, because of this restriction to private spheres, women were given little space in the traditional historical narrative as well. The author states that most of the records about these women and their creations are found in diaries, correspondences, files, and photographic albums, that is, in the files and “the secrets from the attics” (Perrot, 2012, p. 35). Yet, besides the attics, the lives of average Elizabethan women, Woolf (2015) explains, might be found somewhere, spread in “parish registers and account books,” (p. 34) waiting to be registered and transposed into a book. This erasure from historical narratives, along with the exclusion of women writers from the canon, collaborates to the *Künstlerroman* being “characterized as a genre dominated by the masculine” (Campello, 2003, p. 32).⁵

It is relevant to note that the absence of women artists in museums, in comparison to male artists, is the result of a combination of factors, such as the fact that “even in the nineteenth century a woman was not encouraged to be an artist. On the contrary, she was snubbed, slapped, lectured and exhorted” (Woolf, 2015, p. 41), not to mention the fact that “art making traditionally has demanded the learning of specific techniques and skills, in a certain sequence, in an institutional setting outside the home, as well as becoming familiar with a specific vocabulary of iconography and motifs” (Nochlin, 1988, p. 163), an instruction that was highly inaccessible to them. Even nowadays, in the painting collection at London’s National Gallery, the one George – the protagonist in *How to be both* (2015) – frequently visits, only 21 of the 2,300 paintings are signed by women artists, primarily by famous names such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, Rachel Ruysch and Rosa Bonheur.⁶

It is not surprising, then, that when the woman artist figures as the protagonist of an artist narrative, as is the case of the novels analysed here, her learning process follows a different pattern from that of male artists. Eliane T. A. Campello (2003) explains that when the traditional artist narratives focus

5 In the original: “o *Künstlerroman* se caracteriza como um gênero de domínio do masculino” (Campello, 2003, p. 32).

6 For more information about the collection, see www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/women-in-our-collection.

on the development of the artist-heroine from a young age, it usually draws on the limitations of her origins, the social context in which she is inserted, issues related to relationships, self-education, alienation, and on the search for an artistic realization and an independent life. However, when artist narratives written by women attempt to redefine notions of gender, they usually narrate the development of the artist from adulthood, in which the heroine's expectations about the future are related to marriage and motherhood rather than to artistic creation, and "the possibility of integrating herself into the social context as an artist is almost null" (Campello, 2003, p. 69).⁷ It is this impossibility of integration that, according to Campello (2003), frequently sets death, madness, physical or emotional mutilation or alienation as the artist-heroine's fate and gives rise to the figure of an "*artiste manquée*" (p. 69, author's emphasis), whose creative potential is somehow trimmed by society or the social institutions of the Art world.

It is possible to say, at this point, that Sara Baume's *A line made by walking* (2017) fits precisely within what is considered a traditional artist narrative. Frankie, the artist-protagonist, finds herself in the middle of a creative crisis, constantly feeling like she has failed her career. The distance from her artistic creation during the time she was working in an art gallery painting the walls between exhibitions leads her to a life crisis, to the point that she feels like she is slowly disappearing from the world. The conflict between life and art permeates the novel as she reflects upon her life and her creative process while working on a photographic series on animal corpses. In contrast to Baume's novel, Ali Smith's *How to be both* (2015) presents a contemporary approach to these narratives, exploring duality from its title to its core: it is divided into two independent but interconnected chapters, which overlap, describing moments from the past and the present, and it depicts two women artists as protagonists. Their stories are intrinsically interwoven as George and Francescho enter the art world after the loss of their mothers at a young age. Both of them share a romantic interest in their best friends and it is through the eyes of one – the painter – that the entrance of the other – George – into the Art world is narrated. In addition, real and fictitious artworks are the backbone of the narrative, the line that sews their stories, and, at the same time, they assume a didactic function by revealing the trajectory of women artists through history.

While it is true that *How to Be Both* (2015) stands at the intersection between an artist narrative and a *Bildungsroman*, one cannot deny that Art is not present

7 In the original: "esta possibilidade de integrar-se na qualidade de artista ao meio social é quase nula" (Campello, p. 69)

in the novel merely as a motif to teach something to the readers. It represents, instead, the form through which George finds a way to come to terms with the loss of her mother, which approximates the novel to Weisstein's (1981) claim that Art and the search for answers to an artistic problem might help the artist-protagonist of a *Künstlerroman* to find a solution to real-life matters. When George's relation to Art is associated with Lago's (2017) condition that the life of the artist-protagonist must be in the foreground of the narrative, then it becomes undeniable that the novel may be read as an artist narrative. Furthermore, while the entire novel focuses on George's life and journey, even in del Cossa's chapter, it is also permeated by the unfolding of the bond between mother and daughter, pointed out by Campello (2003) and Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1985), in which the daughter dives into artistic creation trying to give voice to the mother, or, in this case, sight. In the narrative, it is clearly stated that George wants to prove her mother's sanity and avenge her, at the same time. She wants to inflict the same invasion of privacy she believes her mother suffered. Carol represents the muse guiding George's steps, even in her absence. After her death, George embraces even the little things such as the daily dance routine to old songs Carol used to do, and she often catches herself thinking about how her mother would know exactly how to behave in certain situations.

Portraying the Woman Artist

The question "Who am I?" has been at the centre of a heated debate for centuries, and, even so, there is still no consensus on the proper way to answer it. That is, probably, because it touches on a rather controversial topic in theory: that of the subject and its identity. The understanding of what a subject is, however, shifts over time, reflecting the socio-political context of the period. A consequence of these changes, Donald E. Hall (2004, p. 17) explains, is "a palpably increasing awareness of the self as something that was not divinely formed and statically placed, but rather changeable and possibly cultivatable through one's own concerted activity". Thus, it might be shaped or even constructed. Along this line of thought, it is relevant to draw attention to Julia Kristeva's attempt to disrupt Sigmund Freud's notion of a unitary subject by considering subjectivity as "a constant making and remaking" (Kristeva, 1998, p. 159), meaning an ongoing process. Her definition resonates with Judith Butler's argument about human subjectivity being always already "variable" (Butler, 1999, p. 181). In turn, both notions dialogue with that of the post-modern subject, defined by Stuart Hall

(1996), to whom identity is never fixed, essential or permanent; it is rather fluid, contradictory, and fragmented, shaped, and influenced by the forms one is represented and interpolated in different cultural systems.

It might be said that when the subject in question is an artist, the matter of identity and its representation becomes even more fluid. Alison Bain (2005, p. 26) attributes such fluidity to the fact that artistic creation is a solitary activity, mostly performed in private spheres, so artists may not experience that much pressure to label themselves as one thing or another. On the figure of the artist, Mary Eagleton explains that, to Pierre Bourdieu, the “true aesthete assumes a position of ‘detachment, disinterestedness, indifference’ far removed from the ‘vulgar surrender to easy seduction and collective enthusiasm’ of the uninitiated” (2005, p. 44). She points out that the artist benefits from assuming this “interest in disinterestedness” (Eagleton, 2005, p. 44), as it represents a lack of interest in taking the artistic production seriously, at the same time that it separates ordinary elements of everyday life from the ones worthy of the aesthetes’ attention. Bain (2005, p. 28-29) also mentions that elements such as the myth of the artistic genius, and the outsider without formal education also influence artists’ identities. According to Lago (2017), other notions currently associated with artists’ identities include the myth of unstable personalities, a current need for isolation, a divine artistic talent, and the existence of internal struggles leading the artist towards art, among others. All these characteristics are intrinsically related to the image of the romantic genius, the eccentric figure that devotes his entire life to art making.

However, it is relevant to emphasize that this generic concept of “artist” most often refers to a male artist. While he is free to experience his art without having his identity questioned, the process of constructing an identity as a woman artist is a gendered one, hence a much more complex one. The woman author, Eagleton affirms, “is embroiled in problems about genre, literary form and language and solving these problems is important in maintaining her independence and her autonomy as an author” (2005, p. 76), a position rather similar to that of the woman artist. Woolf (2015) stresses that in the nineteenth-century women were still battling a discourse that settled them as inferior even to the worst man.

Although being a woman artist represents a herculean task in itself, establishing an identity as a woman artist is even harder, as she has to first find a balance between being a woman and being an artist. In pending towards the woman, she needs to face the extensive set of cultural aspects that dictates her

role in society and the proper way for her to play it. These aspects, however, leave minimal to no space at all for artistic creation. Instead, in pending towards the artist, her subjectivity is bound to be influenced and instigated by all the myths, symbols, and characteristics entailed in the figure of the artist. The artist, then, “is torn not only between life and art but, more specifically between her role as a woman, demanding selfless devotion to others, and her aspirations as an artist, requiring exclusive commitment to work” (Huf, 1985, p. 5). This is probably one of the main reasons why the woman artist needs to “defy the cultural definition of an artist or of woman if she is to remain artist and woman,” (Stewart, 1979, p. 14) otherwise she is destined to be constantly struggling in search for a balance that allows her to be both.

Even though women are no longer openly restrained from entering the art world, their current conflicts still reflect the traces of their search for an identity. About that, Katarzyna Kosmala (2007, p. 38), based on Parker and Pollock, reinforces that the identity of the female artist even now remains haunted by male-inspired myths of the “great maestro” and the romantic genius. It becomes a bigger issue if taken into consideration that insisting “on describing women artists in terms of linkages to the male artists who were their teachers or who influenced them in other ways undermines any vision of the female artist as independent” (Frederickson, 2003, p. 14).

About the conflicts these women artists face, especially in the literature written by women, Linda Huf (1985) identifies three recurrent images used in the way they are represented in artist narratives:

First, images of monsters are common, suggesting that the woman artist sees her refusal to conform to a traditional role as making her a freak, an aberration of her sex. Second, images of entrapment abound – cages, jars, and glass bells – suggesting that the female artist sees herself as caught in a trap, not simply in the trap of the feminine role but also in a more complicated kind of double bind. Finally, images of flight appear, indicating that the woman artist conceives her escape from her prison in Icarian terms. ... But in the woman’s *Künstlerroman* one finds primarily images of failed flight – of birds falling and planes crashing – for until recently it was rare for women writers to permit their artist heroines, in flying from their prisons, to succeed like Daedalus in reaching land rather than fall like Icarus into the devouring sea. (Huf, 1985, p. 12)

Although Huf’s text was published in 1985, and some elements have changed significantly, it is relevant to note that a few of these images remain

closely attached to the woman artist. In contemporary narratives, as explained by Campello, it is more common for these heroines to experience open endings, rather than frustrated flights (2003, p. 16). Even so, images of entrapment, of being cornered between what is socially expected from them and the freedom to be whomever they want, are not strange to contemporary women artists.

Moreover, there is another central point in the process of constructing an identity as a woman artist that needs to be considered: the fact that even the choice of the type of art through which they wish to express and explore their subjectivities has an impact on the way these artists perceive their selves. Whether the material they are working with is words, canvas and brushes, oil paints, drawings, cameras and lenses, or marbles, it carries nuances into the forms they represent the world and themselves. Taking photography for instance, as it is the one chosen by George and Frankie, it can mediate the artist's interaction with the world, by adding a distance between the object photographed and the subject behind the camera, or by revealing aspects of reality that have passed unnoticed. Also, photography, "seems to be directly linked to the subject, to the photographer, and to the spectator's history and experience of the world" (Louvel, 2008, p. 32), as it is related to both past – a registering of the past – and the present, that is, the moment when it is observed and commented upon.

Photography, then, relates to the subject, especially in its ability to shape "ways of seeing and of representing the visual" (Louvel, 2008, p. 34). In addition, it should be considered that "photography is fiction-inventive due to its capacity to generate stories. In its disconnection from the real, it offers to the gaze a concentration of experience asking to be verbalized and fictionalized" (Louvel, 2008, p. 45), so it favours the representation in fiction of women's perspectives on their experiences in dealing with reality, with their pasts and presents and, perhaps most importantly, with the representation of themselves in it.

Returning to the novels, it is clear that George and Frankie have different approaches to artistic creation and different relations to art itself. Thus, the construction of their identities also follows different, yet similar, paths. Before tracing the points where the construction of their subjectivities intersect, it seems fitting to address each of them separately first.

George is a teenager and, as such, she is experiencing a critical phase when everything is scrutinized and provides fuel to comparisons. She is almost the representation of a typical "Gen Z," a person who was born in the digital age, "too young to know the political importance of choosing to be called Ms anything"

(Smith, 2015, p. 18) and “a migrant of [her] own existence” (p. 36), in Carol’s words, when she sees George watching the same programme on the TV and her laptop while searching for photobombs on her smartphone. She could have stayed on this specific sort of automatic track if it were not for the passing of her mother and the turbulence that comes with grieving.

After Carol’s death, George is thrown into a state of apathy in which she loses interest in everything she used to like. Even her obsession with grammar, and the proper ways of saying things, is not relevant enough to make her say something. At the same time, she decides to take on her mother’s hobbies as a way to keep her memory alive, so she includes the morning dance routine into her daily life, even though she cannot find the exact song Carol used to dance to, as well as the fixation with art and New Year’s rituals.

A remarkable point about George is that she grows up surrounded and supported by strong women characters, and this fact exerts a great influence on her behaviour. Carol is described as an “*Economist Journalist Internet Guerrilla Interventionist*,” a “*renaissance woman*” (Smith, 2015, p. 20, author’s emphasis), in addition to the fact that “(her mother did an art history degree once),” “(and a women’s studies degree)” (p. 96). She is described as impetuous enough to take her children on a spread-of-the-moment trip to another country just to visit a museum, free enough in exploring her sexuality, conscious enough in maintaining open dialogues with her children and husband. George, then, is educated to question and talk back at the things she does not agree with – “Savvy, yes, her mother says. Always be savvy please. I’d need that from any daughter of mine” (Smith, 2015, p. 37) – as well as to train her eyes to grasp and understand the subtleties of seeing, to look at artworks first, instead of at the artists behind them. These are only a few examples of the influence Carol had on George when she was alive, whether from direct teaching or from setting an example.

In her absence, George gets closer to Helena, another strong figure, so much that “most people in the school were pretty respectful of Helena Fisker” (Smith, 2015, p. 65). H is the girl who “has a mother who is French” and a father who “is from Karachi and Copenhagen,” and who smashes a classmate’s phone for calling her “an ethnic cow” (Smith, 2015, p. 66). H, who also has an aptitude for art and is as impetuous as Carol, is the one who defies and instigates George until she consciously breaks from the apathy that trapped her after her mother’s death.

Therefore, even if George’s subjectivity is to be seen as merely constructed in relation to or influenced by someone else, it is in relation to other women. The

few male characters – Nathan, her father, and Henry, the little brother – are not expressive enough in the narrative, up to the point that Nathan has no authority at all over the teenager. He does not even notice when George starts skipping school to go to London, and neither is he capable of convincing her to stop watching a porn film portraying the abuse of a young girl. Her attitude towards the film, as appalling as it was to Nathan, might be seen as a reflection of her understanding that seeing is rarely simple, as she explains “to her father that she had formerly watched, and intended again to watch, this film of this girl every day to remind herself not to forget the thing that happened to this person,” so that “she was doing it in witness, by extension, of all the unfair and wrong things that happen to people all the time” (Smith, 2015, p. 33). Nathan misses the main point of her motivation and simply complains about how other people’s children have normal neuroses, “like always having to have the same spoon to eat with or just not eating at all or throwing up, cutting themselves, whatever” (Smith, 2015, p. 35).

At this point, George’s subjectivity begins to be entangled with what is often part of the image of the artist. Her so-called “neuroses” are neither considered the same as other people, common people, nor comprehended by her adjuvants. In addition, in expressing her urge to witness not only the girl’s suffering but also all unfair events that happen to other people, George approximates herself to the observation station occupied by photographers. The desire to witness life’s happenings may be perceived, as well, in George’s photographs of Lisa’s house. She assumes the same position to observe and register the woman’s routine, and when she decides that she is no longer going there, George still leaves something to mark her spot and remind Lisa that someone was there, that someone monitored and witnessed what was going on:

There are 2 girls kneeling on the paving. ... they’re painting, eggs? No, eyes : they’re painting 2 eyes on to a wall : they take an eye each : they begin with the black for the hole through which we see : then they ring the colour round it in segments (blue) : then the white : then the black outline. ... a girl (who is she?) bends down to a pot with white in it, reaches forward, adds a small square of white the size of the end of her fingertip then does the same in the place to the other eye cause an eye with no light is an eye that can’t see... (Smith, 2015, p. 312-313)

In the presence/absence relation implicit in the photographs, George not only fulfils her impetus of honouring her mother’s eyes, but she also assumes the position of the witness of Carol’s daily life doubled on Lisa’s. It is photography

that enables the teenager to register and narrate her point of view of a specific period of her mother's life. And, because of that, she decides to actively interfere with it, as it is her right as an artist – a position granted her by del Cossa's claim that the girl is an artist. The observation spot, then, becomes a literal reminder of her passage there.

The moment the narrative shifts from a third-person narrator to Francescho's point of view, in the "Eyes" chapter, another layer of distance is added between the reader and George's exploration of her subjectivity. The process is mediated by the eyes of another character, who might be seen as a sort of foremother, someone who has already experienced the struggle to establish an identity while also trying to overcome personal loss through art. Even the gender-bending aspect of del Cossa's subjectivity is doubled in George at this point, as the painter mistakes the teenager for a boy when she first arrives at the contemporary age.

While the shift in narrative focus does distance the narrative from George's perspective, the experienced narration of del Cossa adds nuances to the girl's experiences that might have been overlooked if it continued being told by a third-person narrator. Since del Cossa has already been through similar experiences, she can notice George's grieving and tells her that "nothing is finished or unchangeable except death and even death will bend a little if what you tell of it is told right" (Smith, 2015, p. 238), and that "nobody knows us : except our mothers, and they hardly do (and also they tend disappointingly to die before they ought). ... cause nobody's the slightest idea who we are, or who were, not even we ourselves" (Smith, 2015, p. 238-39). From that, it is noticeable that del Cossa perceives and truly understands how the apathy that follows the loss of a beloved might lead to an identity crisis, especially when the deceased is the one who is supposed to know her the best: the mother.

Another relevant aspect specific to George's subjectivity is subtly disclosed by del Cossa when she tells the moments George and Helena are twisting themselves inside the wall of photographs. More precisely, in the moment "at which the paper wall breaks and as it comes apart its brick-shapes fly off like rooftiles and the girls hit the floor together in each other's arms in the mess of the pictures littered round them" (Smith, 2015, p. 310). In this scene, del Cossa adds "I like a good skilful friend. I like a good opened-up wall," (p. 310) before moving on to talking about her friend, whom she loved and who also loved her, although they were never allowed to say it aloud. What is implied in this "opened-up wall" might be seen as the culmination of George's process of questioning her sexuality

and feeling comfortable enough to tell Helena: “*You asked, and te semper volam*”⁸ (Smith, 2015, p. 148, author’s emphasis).

Contrary to *How to Be Both* (2015), in which the narration is either in the third-person or by a ghost, in *A Line Made by Walking* (2017), the struggle to understand and construct an identity is narrated by the artist herself. Hence, it is easier to notice the different stances that interpolate and interfere with Frankie’s subjectivity and her perception of her self.

Even so, what is mostly reflected in Frankie’s identity crisis is the difficulty in conciliating being a normal woman with being an artist. She explicitly mentions the conflict during an appointment with a psychiatrist:

‘There really isn’t much wrong with me,’ I say, ‘it’s just that, well, I’m not like other people; I don’t want the things they want. And this is not right, I mean, in other people’s eyes, and I feel as though they feel they are duty-bound to normalise me, that it isn’t okay just to not want the things they want, you know?’

I realise I’ve been leaning forward. I lean back. ‘So it’s as if,’ I say, ‘I’m okay in my own bones, but I know that my bones aren’t living up to other people’s version of what a life should be, and I feel a little crushed by that, to be honest, a little confused as to how to align the two things: to be an acceptable member of society but to be able to be my own bones both at once.’ (Baume, 2017, p. 133-134)

While she seems to be comfortable being the artist, the one who is different from everyone else, she is disturbed by the fact that she cannot fulfil what is expected from her. The role she is supposed to play in society does not accept everything else that is intrinsic to her. This conflict also permeates her family relations, even though she seems to have more space to be herself with them. Although Frankie is exempted from ordinary family obligations, such as buying them Christmas gifts, she is still haunted by guilt. Thus, even when the woman artist receives the “immunity of the artistically gifted” (Baume, 2017, p. 168), she still needs to prove herself worthy of it. This, however, indicates that being the artist is not as comfortable as she previously said it is.

The same guilt permeates the novel, as she demonstrates her discomfort in not being able to create despite having everything she could possibly need to do so. It appears more clearly when she is reflecting on her own life, as in the following excerpt:

⁸ Latin translation of “I will always want you”.

My happy life was never enough for me. I always considered my time to be more precious than that of other people and almost every routine pursuit – equitable employment, domestic chores, friendship – unworthy of it. Now I see how this rebellion against ordinary happiness is the greatest vanity of them all. I think of my aunt and her ‘self compassion’. But it isn’t fair to forgive myself so easily. (Baume, 2017, p. 239)

Although Frankie embraces throughout her life the immunity given to artistic people, she notices the vanity in perceiving her time as more precious than everyone else’s. These contradictions in her posture – affirming that she feels good in her bones, while still feeling guilty about living as she does – reinforce Frankie’s struggle to conciliate the life of the woman with that of the artist.

In addition, it is necessary to highlight that Frankie does not want to be any kind of artist. She sets being the outsider genius as her life goal, which causes her to be constantly haunted by the myth of the romantic genius. Even her age becomes an issue because of that. While she says “I am twenty-five, still young, I know,” even though she already felt “so improper, so disordered” (Baume, 2017, p. 11), turning “twenty-six is not significant in a good way. It’s the age at which I become irrevocably closer to thirty than twenty. ... now I know, with certainty, that it’s too late to be a genius” (p. 146-147).

Contributing to the construction of this shattered self in search of an identity, it is rather relevant to note that the few images of Frankie built in the narrative are glimpses of her reflection in mirrors. In these moments, there is usually an element that seems new to her or that she does not recognise as part of herself. For instance:

I catch the reflection of a *figure* in the wardrobe mirror, turn my head to face it. *A person too old to be a child but too young to be an adult.* Hair falling limply yet somehow wild, short yet somehow knotted. Baggy eyes, blotchy skin. I notice for the first time all day what *I’m* wearing: a woolly winter cardigan that hangs down to *my* knees, even though it is warm, even though it is spring. (Baume 2017, p. 30-31, emphasis added)

In this case, at first, she sees a figure not too old, not too young, and it takes a while to understand that it is her own reflection, as demonstrated by the use of “a figure,” and “a person” until this Other becomes the I in “I’m wearing” and “my knees,” highlighted in the quotation. Nonetheless, Frankie herself sheds light on the fact that mirrors represent different versions of the person looking at them when she is scrutinizing her hair to check if her hairline had moved: “But mirrors

are treacherous things. Each one revised my reflection according to its position on the wall, my position on the floor, the angle of the light” (Baume, 2017, p. 67). Hence, the image on the mirror is only one of several versions of her, despite the existence of a “true” subject.

Besides the subtleties entailed in searching for an identity at different moments of life, there are common traces connecting the representation of these two artist-protagonists, especially the fact that both of them are facing an identity crisis triggered by loss and that none of them identifies themselves as a photographer, specifically, only as artists. Even so, although George and Frankie are traversed by gender issues while constructing their selves, the way such issues are represented in the narrative is slightly different.

In Smith’s novel, George is led into assuming Carol’s role in the family, so she becomes the one responsible for raising her little brother and taking care of the house. She has not even started to come to terms with her grief when she is pushed into this position, especially considering her father’s sudden alcohol addiction and his constant absence from the house. Although George’s main struggle in the novel is not directly linked to artistic creation, it is in artistic experimentation that she encounters a path to discover an identity for herself, independent from Carol’s, although still influenced by hers. Thus, George’s identity is slowly being constructed on the traces of the women who preceded her, following a matrilineage that leads her into the Art world. She still does not have an established perception of her self by the end of the novel, but she seems much more comfortable in exploring different nuances of her subjectivity.

In Baume’s novel, in turn, gender issues are embedded in the guilt Frankie constantly feels for not succeeding as expected, for having the time and an entire bungalow to herself, and yet not being able to create something, not being worthy of it. At the same time, she is also pressured by social expectations concerning relationships, marriage, and beauty standards, up to the point, for instance, in which she notices her weight and wonders: “I used to try so hard to be this thin and now I find it bittersweet that I am even thinner still without having tried at all. Back then, I would have been triumphant. Now, I am only perplexed. Where did so much of me go, so effortlessly?” (Baume, 2017, p. 247)

At this point, considering how photography impacts one’s subjectivity, it is relevant to recall Susan Sontag’s claim that photographs “depict an individual temperament, discovering itself through the camera’s cropping of reality” (1977, p. 219) and Louvel’s (2008, p. 40) explanation that, in fiction, photography might

serve “as an instrument of revelation, in keeping with the technical developing process and the slow apparition of the image in its acid bath. The “revelation” may be that of a betrayal, of an ugly deed, of identity. It entails a process of recognition”. Even though this process of revelation happens to both George and Frankie, it is not exactly something concrete. Instead, it comes as little reminders. To Frankie, it is the confirmation that she would not meet the same end as her creatures. She would not just disappear, and she is not dying. Thus, it is only in coming to terms with her status as an artist and her incompleteness that she distances herself from the appeal of death, of non-existence. To George, it is a reminder of her mother, a direct one that screams her mother’s absence, and a sign that her life continues, despite her loss.

On the main differences in their representations, it is worth highlighting the fact that George is taught to be free and independent and to develop a strong critical and moral sense concerning her beliefs, even though she is often reprimanded for her attitudes, as in the episode of the porn film. Meanwhile, Frankie enjoys the immunity of the artist given by her family, but she is the one reprimanding herself for not living up to her and others’ expectations. She has a bungalow of her own to recover, explore and dedicate herself to being an artist, but she lacks the energy and the comprehension of those surrounding her. George, on the contrary, has the motivation to become an artist, but she is held back by life’s circumstances. Even so, she manages to move between the two worlds: she takes care of Henry and her father, and she tells Nathan her roof was leaking, but she also takes time for herself to pursue her will after she sends Henry to school and Nathan to work.

Final Thoughts

What has been delineated thus far is the difficulty in establishing an identity and exploring subjectivity while being a woman artist, from the struggles to become and be accepted as one, to the gendered aspects that weigh on the ones who dare to be both woman and artist. Not surprisingly, both of the artist protagonists of the novels analysed are facing an identity crisis, triggered by different reasons but mostly permeated by a similar sense of loss. George and Frankie often seem to be dancing on the limits of what is accepted as a normal person, as they are constructed to be exceptional on their own terms – even if it happens in the embracement of their averageness. It is difficult not to notice, however, that to try to (re)construct their identities both of them turn to what they fear the most:

death and absence. In photographing dead creatures, Frankie registers her own presence/existence in the world, in the same way that, in monitoring Lisa's daily life, George captures the absence of her mother. Because what they need is a form to capture reality and hold testimony of it, photography figures as the ideal art form for their explorations.

It seems relevant to shed light on the fact that these artist-protagonists' journey in search of constructing a sense of identity, by exploring their subjectivities, is crossed by numerous issues beyond their control. They struggle with gender expectations regarding their role in society, as well as the pressure to grow up, succeed in a career, be sociable, manage all areas of their lives, and the list goes on endlessly. At the same time, the artistic path also demands them to create, to understand that nothing is stable, nothing is fixed, and to acknowledge the need to embrace their incompleteness and, thus, learn how to cope with the absence, to turn it into something else.

All things considered, it becomes clear that the subjectivities of the artist protagonists are inevitably marked by these struggles. Although there have been significant changes in the Art world concerning the artist and the recognition of women's artworks, it is rather difficult to question the fact that the woman artist is still battling for a space in which her identity is no longer questioned and evaluated based on male standards. What remains, perhaps, is the reassuring acknowledgement that both Frankie and George seem to have found a balance between the opposition of art and life. The closer they are to Art, the more alive they feel, which forces them to realise that there is a lot more life beyond the chaos they are living. After all, as Frankie would say, art is everywhere and it is every inexplicable thing.

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