

## Beyond the ‘Glasgow Discourse’? Emotions and Affects in Ellie Harrison’s *The Glasgow Effect* and Darren McGarvey’s *Poverty Safari*

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**Abstract.** The present article investigates two recently published essayistic memoirs, Ellie Harrison’s *The Glasgow Effect* (2019) and Darren McGarvey’s *Poverty Safari* (2017), and the debate between the two writers/artists within the wider framework of the *Glasgow discourse*, a manneristic imagination of the city shaped by the *Glasgow novel* in the course of the twentieth century. Focusing on issues of representation of traumatic historical memory, it relies especially on Myriam Jimeno’s idea of *emotional community* and presents the Glasgow novel as an example of such community, originally designed to make the predicament of the working classes visible. The article contends that many contemporary novels posit deviance from the genre’s original function of voicing the subaltern, exploiting instead a popular literary cliché. It also argues that both texts, by representing their authors’ emotions and life stories as embedded in the city’s social and cultural landscape, dis/place the borders of the city’s imagination, simultaneously stumbling upon and pushing back the limits of the Glasgow discourse.

**Keywords.** Glasgow novel; emotional communities; contemporary Scottish literature; cities in literature; Scottish national identity.

[es] ¿Más allá del ‘discurso de Glasgow’? emociones y afectos en *The Glasgow Effect*, de Ellie Harrison, y *Poverty Safari*, de Darren McGarvey

**Resumen.** El presente artículo investiga dos memorias ensayísticas publicadas recientemente, *The Glasgow Effect* (2019), de Ellie Harrison, y *Poverty Safari* (2017), de Darren McGarvey, así como el debate entre los dos artistas/escriitores en el marco más amplio del *discurso de Glasgow*, un modo de imaginación manierista de la ciudad que toma forma a través de la *novela de Glasgow* a lo largo del siglo XX. Se centra en cuestiones relacionadas con la representación de la memoria histórica traumática, especialmente la idea de *comunidad emocional* desarrollada por Myriam Jimeno (2018), y presenta la novela de Glasgow como ejemplo de este tipo de comunidades, originalmente concebidas para denunciar y hacer visibles las dificultades de las clases trabajadoras. El artículo defiende que muchas novelas contemporáneas se desvían de la función original del género, que era dar voz al subalterno, para explotar en cambio un cliché literario popular. También argumenta que ambos textos, al representar las emociones y las historias vitales de sus autores arraigadas en el paisaje social y cultural de la ciudad, desplazan los límites de la imaginación de la ciudad, al mismo tiempo tropezando con los límites del discurso de Glasgow y ampliándolos.

**Palabras clave.** la novela de Glasgow; comunidades emocionales; literatura escocesa contemporánea; ciudades en la literatura; identidad nacional escocesa.

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**How to cite this article:** Sassi, C. (2021) Beyond the ‘Glasgow Discourse’? Emotions and Affects in Ellie Harrison’s *The Glasgow Effect* and Darren McGarvey’s *Poverty Safari*, in *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 29, 7-16.

### 1. Introduction: of Rats and Men

In Theo Anthony’s stunning experimental documentary *Rat Film* (2016), Baltimore’s histories of rat infestation and of racial segregation are conflated and shown as to not only be taking part in the same political discourse, but as indelibly inscribed in the city’s plan and architecture, still replicating a turn-of-the-century project. “It ain’t never been a rat problem in Baltimore; it’s always been a people problem”, wisely explains Mr. Edmond, an Afro-American pest control specialist interviewed in the documentary. A series of colour-coded street maps, shown in close sequence, lends credence to his words by showing how infestation and segregation have indeed afflicted the same underprivileged districts of the city for over a century. The documentary gradually

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discloses the invisible truth of a city trapped in a foreordained design and largely unaware of its inescapable consequences. The sense of individual helplessness in the face of such a design is harrowingly represented in the closing scene, featuring a snake breeder feeding a helpless new-born rat to his captive reptiles. The final, blood curdling image of a snake slowly and silently swallowing a writhing tiny, blind pink body sums up powerfully Anthony's central intuition, that of a city still unwittingly faithful to its original design and function: the segregation and exploitation of a part of its denizens.

The specificity of Baltimore's history belies, in fact, a more universal pattern that can be traced in many post-industrial cities across the Western world, where the more or less earnest attempts at social regeneration in the post-war period have not been able to fully erase the palimpsests of nineteenth-century urban and social segregation. Italo Calvino's Janus-faced "invisible city" of Beersheba provides allegorical insight into the secret structures of such a pattern. Haunted "by two projections of itself, one celestial one infernal", the "universal" town of Beersheba stands as an apt figuration for the horror that dwells within the post/industrial city. Its hellish essence, "designed by the most authoritative architects" and "with every device and mechanism and gear system functioning, decked with tassels and fringes and frills hanging from all the pipes and levers" (Calvino 1974: 89), is shown as inextricably bound with its heavenly side.

Glasgow is indeed one of these dual cities, where heaven and hell still secretly collude. This is a city that, arguably more than any other in the UK, has borne the brunt of the inequities generated by extreme expressions of capitalism over the course of two centuries—the scars of its long, brutal industrial history of exploitation and ghettoisation of the working classes still casting a shadow on its cosmopolitan and 'regenerated' present. The borders that have divided it—social and economic, 'ethnic', religious and linguistic—are manifold and complex, and yet they show a high degree of continuity, often delimiting the same physical spaces of privilege and subalternity. Over two centuries, its East and South End deprived districts have produced an extraordinary history of conflict, fear and oppression, as well as encounter, creativity, and rebellion, becoming at once a source of horror and shame, as well as an object of strange fascination or idealisation. Often seen as holding in themselves the authentic voice of the city and the nation, as well as the key to their social and cultural redemption, they have inspired some of the most remarkably innovative literary voices of twentieth-century Scotland—Alasdair Gray, James Kelman and Tom Leonard, among others. Literature has indeed woven powerful recuperative narratives, giving voice and redeeming from invisibility the suffering humanity of the dispossessed and making them central in the contemporary imagination of the city.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to narrate Glasgow today and not to engage with the legacy of highly emotional memories and images that have sedimented over the course of time, crystallising its experience and 'identity' with an intensity that is directly proportional to the trauma experienced. On the one hand, Glasgow's resilient memory of its working-class history represents a valuable line of resistance against the 'cosmopolitan amnesia' which is progressively erasing communities' history across the world through the spreading/imposition of globalised urban and social models, while on the other, its crystallised *topoi* and narrative practices occlude re-readings of that (complex) history, thus preventing that same memory from yielding a dynamic understanding of the present.

The present article proposes to address the above-mentioned dilemma by exploring two recent essayistic memoirs, Ellie Harrison's *The Glasgow Effect* (2019) and Darren McGarvey's *Poverty Safari* (2017),<sup>2</sup> which both engage with the *Glasgow discourse* (a phrase I will use to refer to consolidated narrative practices, which will be discussed in the next section) by conforming to it and at the same time unsettling it. As we shall see, their authors were at the centre of a lively diatribe, triggered by Harrison's artistic project, launched in 2016 and also titled "The Glasgow Effect". The project, funded by Creative Scotland, stirred much angry popular attention across Scottish social media, even soliciting responses from the cultural establishment, with McGarvey leading the attack against Harrison, the "middle class" artist, identified as a representative of an iniquitous cultural establishment. It is both in their individual (and yet closely related) memoirs, accounting for their own life stories as a gateway to the understanding of the city, and in their fraught dialogue that many of the limitations of the Glasgow discourse, largely defined in the twentieth century, become evident. This article, precisely because it acknowledges and is concerned with the continuing relevance of issues of economic and social inequality in post-industrial Glasgow (indeed denounced by both writers), will contend, among other things, that responding to them through the channels of a superseded (literary) language and thus providing an inadequate representation of the city's complex history can only deflect attention from them and ultimately hinder their solution.

## 2. Defining an *Emotional Community*: The Glasgow Novel in the Twentieth Century

The symbolic bond between animal and human subalterns sharing a common fate in Baltimore's poor districts in Anthony's docu-film also features in *Ratcatcher* (1999), the debut film by Scottish director Lynne Ramsay.

<sup>2</sup> The choice to invert the chronological order of publication in the title of the present essay has been made on the basis of the fact that it was "The Glasgow Effect", as an artistic project, that opened the 'debate' discussed in the present article.

Set in a Glasgow tenement block in the 1970s, and deploying a partly fantastic, partly realistic language, it revolves around a series of more or less connected episodes in the life of a young boy, James, and his small circle of acquaintances. The universe James inhabits is as cruel as it is claustrophobic: the piles of rubbish bags accumulating during a binmen's strike and the murky canal that crosses the housing estate, where one of his little friends drowns at the beginning of the film, and where James himself will choose to end his life, constitute the backdrop of most scenes of the film. The emotional counterpoint to the dirty and cramped space to which James is confined is an equally crippling affective world—his relations with family and the children who live within it are on the whole devoid of love and warmth. It is clear from the very beginning that the 'ghetto' is a deadly trap, and there is no way to escape from it unless in a dream, as Snowball, a white pet rat owned by Kenny, a close friend of James's, does. In a fantastic cameo, the film—after recording the cruelty of a gang of children who taunt Kenny, steal his rat and start throwing it in the air, threatening to kill it—shows Kenny setting his pet free from the world he cannot escape by hanging it to a red balloon and letting it fly to the moon, under the awed gaze of its tormentors. Leaving the Earth behind, the wriggling mouse eventually lands on the porous surface of the moon and joins a colony of fellow white rodents. A safe escape from the ghetto into a happier world can only take place in a dream, while in reality the only way out, as in James's case, is death.

The tale told in *Ratcatcher* is a hauntingly poetic rendering of one of Glasgow's most distinctive and influential contemporary master narratives: the depiction of the horrors of growing up/living in the city's deprived districts through the perspectives of the victims' lived experiences, the account of their (frail, although heroic) rebellion against the social/economic system that entraps them, or their attempts to change or escape it, and, in many cases, their eventual defeat. Glasgow's identification with its subaltern history is indeed a resilient literary *topos*; a 'tradition' in its own right, and one that at times, as Edwin Morgan observed, seems "to be burdened, as far as its novelists are concerned, with certain stereotypes of approach, where image does not necessarily take over from reality but instead distorts reality through crude overcolouring and selective melodrama" (1993: 89).

Fictional or semi-fictional accounts of Glasgow working-class life have been common throughout the twentieth century. Framed in different literary discourses, from sentimental to realistic, from fantastic to autobiographical or historical, the bibliography of memoirs and novels falling in this category is indeed vast, and it stretches well into the present century. It includes a number of twentieth-century classics, such as Alexander McArthur's *No Mean City* (1935), George Blake's *The Shipbuilders* (1935) and Archie Hind's *The Dear Green Place* 1966, as well as recent successes, such as Douglas Stuart's fictional memoir *Shuggie Bain* (2020), awarded the Booker Prize at the time when the present article was first submitted. It is worthwhile to remember here, however, that for all its popularity and pervasiveness, this subgenre has become overarching only since the post-war period. Moira Burgess's *The Glasgow Novel* (1972), a pioneering annotated bibliography of 263 novels engaging with life in the Scottish city and mostly published between the late nineteenth century and the 1980s, identifies a range of different settings and concerns, not all related to working-class themes. It is within this wide and heterogeneous corpus that Edwin Morgan, in the preface to Burgess's volume, recognises the gradual emergence of a specific thematic concern with "steam engines, mobs and upstart mobility" (1972: 6).<sup>3</sup> A focus that appears "in Glasgow novels by fits and starts", Morgan continues, where "one has the sense, as in a Sibelius symphony, of scattered motifs gradually coming together, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after years of spotlighting or specialisation" (1972: 6).

At the time of the publication of the second edition of *The Glasgow Novel*, Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981) had already been published, and its revolutionary impact was perceived and acknowledged by both Burgess and Morgan, even though it was too early for a full evaluation of its role in honing the imagination of Scotland's post/industrial capital. Along with that other hugely influential Glasgow novel of the twentieth century—James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994)—*Lanark* furthered and indeed went beyond the process of specialisation Morgan hints at, initiating "a movement of fictional innovation", in Gavin Wallace's words, with both writers being clearly "indebted to the parameters of working-class urban realism established in the preceding decades, but simultaneously transcending them" (1993: 3). Both novels are complex and have received wide critical attention. With no wish to simplify their interpretation, it is worthwhile focusing here specifically on the features that most contributed to the further specialisation of the Glasgow novel in terms of plot, perspective and emotional framing. The narrative focus of these two novels rests—very much like in *Ratcatcher*—on the (mostly doomed) attempts of a single individual to challenge the rules of the crippling social and political system which has generated the concentrationary universe of Glasgow (slum) life. Both *Lanark* and *How Late It Was, How Late* are highly emotional narratives, which, centred on their 'subaltern' protagonists' suffering, solicit an intense response from their readers. In both novels, the main character's plight is determined by an iniquitous, violent and loveless environment, which affects his mind as well as his body, with hurt and illness taking centre-stage. The image of disease permeates *Lanark*, from Duncan Thaw's asthma to the monstrous transformations of bodies in the narrative's fantastic parts, standing as a metaphor for the pathological state of the social and political order. Along similar lines, Sammy's frail and

<sup>3</sup> Morgan here borrows Lord Cockburn's view on Glasgow.



tormented body in *How Late It Was, How Late* bears the signs of pervasive, state-legitimised and ideologically sanctioned violence. Furthermore, both these characters are denied access to the world of affect—rejected by their respective partners, they remain unable to bond with or win the support of fellow human beings. This rift between body and affect—powerfully symbolised by Sammy’s blindness, the outcome of police violence and a further source of isolation and displacement—has distinct Foucauldian connotations in both novels. The suffering, affect-less bodies are either “subjected bodies”, potentially “productive” (Foucault 1979: 25-26)—literally so, in the fantastic chapters of *Lanark*, where corpses are recycled as food and energy by the Institute, a global, all-powerful capitalist enterprise—or simply helpless and thus controllable, at the mercy of a soul-less social and economic system, as in *How Late It Was, How Late*.

Not only does the Glasgow novel take on a more specialised profile in terms of plot and themes in the second half of the twentieth century, but in doing so, it defines a highly influential *emotional community*. The concept of emotional community deployed here is borrowed and adapted from Colombian anthropologist Myriam Jimeno’s original analysis of a different, more extremely violent and traumatic, and thus only partly comparable, geo-political context.<sup>4</sup> Jimeno studied the response to a series of murderous attacks perpetrated in the first decade of 2000 by far-right paramilitary groups, acting closely with the armed forces of Colombia, against different ethnic groups and especially the indigenous Nasa, and observed how the targeted communities undertook a number of actions—political, social and legal—to redress the wrongs they had suffered. Charting their response, Jimeno, Daniel Varela and Angela Castillo found that “the common thread of these actions was the construction of a narrative about the traumatic events that focused on a particular category: victim with violated rights”. These narratives travelled beyond the groups that had originally experienced the wrongs, fostering identification across regions and ethnicities, as the “victim category” became imbued “with an emotional and affective content that allowed it to transcend beyond a simple and imposed bureaucratic category”. “We came to understand”, the authors explain, “that the social re-composition and political action of these actors required rebuilding their emotional bond with society through the creation of emotional communities”. The notion of emotional community, then, links the subjective experience of grief, to “a publicly shared political feeling” (2018: 24). This is not simply about compassion, as it aims at empowering the victim by creating a (new) political bond that contributes to enhancing “actions that seek justice, punish the guilty, set the record straight about what actually happened, and [allow] victims to be holistically compensated” (interview with Myriam Jimeno. November 2014, qtd. in De Marinis and McLeod 2018: 5). Like all narratives, however, even this type of recuperative and self-assertive narrative can be degraded to mannerism, whereby the depiction of suffering becomes an end in itself—what Jimeno describes as “a pornography of violence, when horror fascinates the listener”. This actually achieves the opposite effect of that implied in the notion of emotional community: it is a disempowering, rather than empowering, practice insofar as it makes the victim revert to a passive status (qtd. in De Marinis and McLeod 2018: 5), an object of observation and commiseration rather than an agent in its own right.

The Glasgow evoked by novels like *Lanark* and *How Late It Was, How Late* in the second half of the twentieth century indeed shapes an emotional community of the type described by Jimeno to the extent that it not only represents and remembers the victims of social/economic violence, but by combining a sense of reparation with a demand for justice it has an unprecedented mobilising power, both creatively and politically. To put it in Aleida Assmann’s terms, these novels are not just about *communicative remembrance* (individual memory that becomes social memory) but also involve an act of *cultural remembrance* (2010: 40-41)—they generate an empowering political and cultural memory whose strength is directly proportional to their success not just at home (a limitation that would in fact apply to the smaller, domestic readership of many of the novels listed by Burgess) but across the world. An achievement that contributes to making the emotional community visible and tangible, more ‘real’.

An extra layer of meaning has, however, been added to these narratives, which have not only become metonymical substitutes for the whole city of Glasgow (and for the different social groups, experiences and perspectives that have made it), but have also merged with other subaltern narratives set elsewhere in Scotland to take centre stage in the contemporary Scottish literary canon. Janice Galloway’s *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* (1989), set in North Ayrshire, Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* (1993), set in Edinburgh, and Alan Warner’s *Morvern Callar* (1995), set in Oban, are just a few of the novels that in the pre-devolutionary years, as Scott Hames has convincingly argued, contributed to “giving voice” to the national community, bringing “literary and political endeavours (...) into rhetorical and strategic alignment” (2020: 2). By soliciting identification across social classes and regions, the localised emotional communities evoked by Gray and Kelman with their request for social justice have thus converged in the common ‘national cause’ and the quest for devolution. Arguably, it is through these literary works that the road to the redress of justice has been widely envisaged as not simply a matter of overturning an iniquitous social/economic system, but as a radical political turn towards a devolved/independent country.

<sup>4</sup> Jimeno developed the concept of *emotional communities* in a number of publications, among these *Crimen pasional: contribución a una antropología de las emociones* (2004), “Cuerpo personal y cuerpo político: violencia, cultura y ciudadanía neoliberal” (2007) and “Emoções e política: A vítima e a construção de comunidades emocionais” (2010).

The accrued complexity of the emotional community conflating the call for Scottish independence with demands for social justice has been problematic, especially in terms of its overexposure in contemporary Scottish fiction. As Robert Alan Jamieson had foreseen, as early as 1992, “Glasgow’s rebirth, and the establishment of a literature of the people of urban Scotland, is unquestionably a vital component in the making of a greater, contemporary, wholly Scottish literature” and yet “there is a danger that the curse of success, imitation, of which there is already much evidence, may lead to an urban kailyard of inverted values”, where life in post-industrial Scotland becomes “a cipher for the state of Scottish society in the 1990s as the fictional perpetuation of the same was a cipher for the Kailyarders a hundred years ago, long after the passing of the world they described into unreality” (qtd. in Hames 2020: 271). There has been no dearth of critical voices raising concerns about the ‘unreal’ fixity of late twentieth-century Scottish literary models, among them Christopher Whyte, who identified the gender bias inscribed in this genre, as well as the rift between “the dysfunctional urban male” (or ‘hard man’) as the distinctive protagonist type that defines it, and the middle- and upper-middle class readership that determined its canonical status. “In other words”, Whyte observes, “the consumers of texts in which the ‘hard man’ plays a significant role are unlikely to be ‘hard men’ themselves” (1998: 275).

The transformation of a militant genre equating ethics with aesthetics by voicing an emotional community into an ‘object of desire’, appropriated for ends different to its primary purpose—the empowering of that community—has the inevitable effect of weakening, or indeed neutralising, that purpose. The ultimate aim of Jimeno’s emotional community is the redress of justice and healing, if this aspiration is sidelined, for reasons that can be very different, what remains is social anger at one end of the spectrum and (literary) mannerism at the other.

### 3. Dis/placing Borders: A Fraught Dialogue

A sense of restlessness with the Glasgow discourse has become more evident since the 2000s, when the Glasgow novel started showing, as recorded by Alan Bisset, “discontinuity with the themes and styles of the ‘Glasgow tradition’, as well as its necessarily contiguous links with it” (2007: 59). The post-devolution era has indeed marked a new age of experimentation, still in close dialogue with forms and practices of the late twentieth century, but also moving forward, in search of new cultural cartographies.

The tense and problematic dialogue between Harrison and McGarvey and its reverberations across the media does, among other things, shed light on this moment of cultural transition by revealing the flaws in the processes of memorialisation and identity construction which are anchored in the Glasgow discourse of the previous century. Both *The Glasgow Effect* and *Poverty Safari* are hybrid narratives—essayistic memoirs that engage with British/Scottish politics and society, environmentalism and globalisation, arts and identity issues, while representing the authors’ life stories as embedded in the city’s social and cultural landscape. Both texts, as we shall see, dis/place the borders of the city’s imagination, simultaneously stumbling upon and pushing back the limits of the Glasgow discourse.

The first encounter between Harrison and McGarvey in fact dates back to before the publication of either book. Their dialogue was unwittingly initiated in 2016 by Harrison, a London-born artist and activist who had just settled in Glasgow and received a £15,000 grant from Creative Scotland to carry out her project, “The Glasgow Effect”, as she eventually decided to name it, after the phrase coined by scientists in the previous decade to describe the city’s notorious record of poor health performance.<sup>5</sup> This was a one-year durational performance which would involve forcing the artist not to go beyond Glasgow’s city limits, and not using any vehicles except her bike, thus reducing her carbon footprint for transport to zero and, more generally, settling into a frugal, sustainable life-style. A GPS-based mobile application would chart and record her movements in space,<sup>6</sup> while the results of her social experiment would be published on the project website and other social media. Inspired by Scottish thinker Patrick Geddes’s famous slogan “Think global – act local”, she projected her concerns onto the city she had chosen to live in, treating it as a case study for the most extreme consequences of a flawed social, economic and cultural order, and situating herself, the performing artist, as the observer and recorder.

The ‘encounter’ between the two artists took place in the first week of 2016, when Harrison launched the website for her project and advertised it through a dedicated Facebook page,<sup>7</sup> immediately finding herself at the centre of a national media storm. Her project was perceived as offensive by many Scottish viewers, a perception no doubt reinforced by the provocative key image selected by the artist, a dish of greasy chips—a somewhat clichéd metonymy, in Britain, for Glasgow’s unhealthy lifestyle. Not only did the attack on Facebook reach epic proportions, reverberating throughout the Scottish media, but it also bore

<sup>5</sup> For an overview, see Joe Cowley et al. (2016).

<sup>6</sup> The timeline of the project, a detailed description of its development and the account of the public and media response to it, is available on Harrison’s website [www.ellieharrison.com/glasgoweffect](http://www.ellieharrison.com/glasgoweffect).

<sup>7</sup> The project’s Facebook page is still active at: [www.facebook.com/events/938052702945194/?active\\_tab=discussion](https://www.facebook.com/events/938052702945194/?active_tab=discussion).

deeply troubling overtones, as it focused not so much on the project as on the artist.<sup>8</sup> Slurs about her were common on the project's Facebook page, ranging from those based on Harrison's 'privileged' middle-class background, to more generic sexist and personal attacks. And while a few voices rose up to temper the debate and defend Harrison's freedom of artistic expression,<sup>9</sup> even constructively critical comments often revolved around her predicament as an outsider—someone who (as both unable and unauthorised to do so) could not engage with the Glasgow narrative.<sup>10</sup>

Darren McGarvey (aka Loki) was among the first commenters on Harrison's project Facebook page: "thousands of artists articulate the 'poverty experience' and are marginalised culturally in favour of this kind of wishy washy shite" (qtd. in Harrison 2019: 159), he complained, being among the first to associate Harrison's project with a disrespectful 'voyeurism' for a harsh reality that she was not in a position to know or understand. A rapper, a hip-hop recording artist, a social commentator and community activist, McGarvey had grown up in Pollok, one of Glasgow's most deprived housing estates, and had first-hand experience of poverty and social exclusion. When Harrison launched "The Glasgow Effect", he was already an established public figure—between 2004 and 2006 he had written and presented eight programmes on social deprivation for BBC Radio Scotland and, among other things, he had been part of the Poverty Truth Commission hosted in Glasgow in 2009. His most acclaimed published work—*Poverty Safari*, awarded the Orwell Prize in 2018, and recounting McGarvey's own traumatic experience of growing up in Pollok and his journey to healing and social and political militancy—is entangled with Harrison's project both in terms of direct inspiration and of generational affinities, as the two authors, as we shall see in the next section, share more ideological ground and perspectives than most commenters were able or willing to reveal while their *querelle* was unfolding. McGarvey indeed devotes one of the closing chapters of *Poverty Safari* to his own response to "The Glasgow Effect"—"in early 2016 I found myself at the head of an angry mob" (McGarvey 2017: 183), he admits, spending several pages accounting for and justifying that anger. "There are thousands of artists who articulate what living in poverty is like. These artists are often marginalised", he argues, quoting from one of his own many 2016 public responses to Harrison's work, "a recent study in *The Guardian* showed the arts is dominated by middle class people. Ellie's project epitomises that. It's horrendously crass to parachute someone in on a poverty safari" (McGarvey 2017: 187). It could be argued that Harrison's project—and Harrison herself—played a central role in coalescing various strains of anger (social, economic, 'national') into a unifying metaphor. It is indeed by leading the revolt against her and the middle-class standpoint she allegedly represents ("it fell to me to try and set them all straight. I decided to do that by going for Ellie directly, vindicated by the many online supporters willing me on to represent the plight of the working class") that McGarvey finds the inspiration to write his own ('authentic') working-class experience of Glasgow. In the same chapter, McGarvey acknowledges retrospectively that he had acted "out of revenge" and that he had "retrofitted Ellie with a middle class identity, despite not knowing anything about her, and then used that as a justification for trying to derail her project" (McGarvey 2017: 190). Much of the chapter in question—as we shall see in the next section—engages with the roots and nature of McGarvey's own anger, and oscillates between affirming the legitimacy of his violent resentment and (contradictorily) admitting its untenability. *Poverty Safari* represents, then, a problematic journey through the collective emotions that constitute the Glasgow discourse—the privileged lens here, very much like in Harrison's project and memoir, is the author's individual experience and 'performance' of the city.

Harrison's 2019 book is an attempt to respond in an articulate manner to the accusations levelled against her by the Scottish media and public, but also to engage with McGarvey in further dialogue—one of 'kinship': "from very different backgrounds, Darren McGarvey and I"—Harrison explains—"have arrived at similar critiques of the city, the society and the economic system within which we live" (2019: 14). *The Glasgow Effect* stems from a desire, comparable to that of *Poverty Safari*, that is, to set the record straight. The book is overambitious, stretching in too many directions and sometimes shading over into self-indulgence, but it earnestly aims at providing a wider picture of the author's individual and artistic undertaking. Very much like McGarvey's, her account of the city is constructed through the lens of her life—her family affects, her studies, her activism, her experience of Glasgow. Unlike McGarvey's, however, her narrative oscillates from a sense of belonging—signalled by her frequent use of a self-inclusive 'we' for the denizens of the city—and one of inescapable foreignness—"even after seven and a half years of living in Glasgow, I didn't really know the city. I didn't really understand Scottish culture" (Harrison 2019: 178).

<sup>8</sup> Harrison reckons that in January 2016 the Glasgow Effect event "appeared in the 'newsfeed' of more than one million people, 248,000 of whom viewed the page with more than 8,800 actively engaging by posting comments and making memes" (2019: 183).

<sup>9</sup> Among these, artist and poet Alec Finlay and art historian Murdo MacDonald (Harrison 2019: 166, 168). See also David Pollock, "[Insert Outraged Headline about The Glasgow Effect Funding Shocker]", *The List*, 5 January 2016: [www.list.co.uk/article/77552-insert-outraged-headline-about-the-glasgow-effect-funding-shocker/?fbclid=IwAR2O6tZC-w7Ax3UKMmMHZYcvHnEasUQhwYIbiAfW\\_xOr2F2DIWq8XFDZrgo](http://www.list.co.uk/article/77552-insert-outraged-headline-about-the-glasgow-effect-funding-shocker/?fbclid=IwAR2O6tZC-w7Ax3UKMmMHZYcvHnEasUQhwYIbiAfW_xOr2F2DIWq8XFDZrgo). Eventually, a public debate was organised to encourage the two artists and the public to exchange their ideas constructively and respectfully ("The Glasgow Effect: A Discussion", The Glad Café, Glasgow, 3 February 2016, chaired by Roanne Dods and Gerry Hassan).

<sup>10</sup> For a chronological selection of the comments posted on Harrison's project Facebook page, see Harrison (2019: 158-69).



#### 4. Shaping Emotions: Anger and (the Quest for) Love

Harrison and McGarvey have more in common than their different life-stories and social backgrounds, and indeed the story of their ‘conflict’, might suggest. Respectively born in 1979 and 1984, they belong to the same UK generation that was able to benefit from generous arts funding schemes throughout the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, especially in Scotland—“a golden age”, as Harrison unhesitatingly describes it (2019: 49). As performing artists they both focus on the body as a political instrument of protest—to represent the silenced social classes in the case of Loki’s rap, and to deconstruct consumerism-shaped body-politics in Harrison’s projects. As artists and writers, they share substantially the same ideological orientation—one of radical opposition to neoliberal policies—and a similar history of social and political militancy through their art. Indeed, both have at heart the healing of the wider body politic, of Britain or the world, of which Glasgow is seen as a microcosmic expression. Even McGarvey’s more ‘local’ approach in fact implies a wider concern, *Poverty Safari* opening with a lengthy and haunting evocation of the Grenfell Tower disaster, rightly upheld as a British (and global) emblem of the invisibility of whole ‘subaltern’ communities—that “sense that you are invisible, despite the fact that your community can be seen for miles around and is one of the most prominent features of the city skyline” (McGarvey 2017: xix). More importantly, however, both narratives share a similar individualistic orientation—even when they engage with global and local communities, it is the individual’s initiative, rather than a collective movement, that is seen as conducive to social change. “I underwent an adaptation that would change the course of my life: I began to embrace the dysfunction and used it as form of creative and social propulsion”, explains McGarvey (2017: 99), in relation to his remarkable story of survival, echoing Harrison’s own project of becoming “ascetic”—that is to embrace alternative or anti-consumerist life choices—“to try to counteract the excesses of living alone” (2019: 108), similarly pinpointed as the turning point in her life. Identifying individual behaviour as the key to changing collective reality may be seen as unwittingly replicating the very neoliberal attitudes and strategies that the two writers propose to critique—a camouflaged expression of neoliberal individualism—and indeed, at least in part, this seems to be the case. And yet, this individualistic approach also entails an extended focus on emotions, and emotions, as Sara Ahmed observes, “are not ‘in’ either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects” (2004: 10). In both *The Glasgow Effect* and in *Poverty Safari*, emotions indeed foreground both a self-referential and an other-referential concern. It is through emotions “that surfaces or boundaries are made”, along the lines of Ahmed’s theorisation, and that “the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others” (2004: 10). The radical social change both writers advocate is thus represented in terms of an affective trajectory through the negative emotions inherited by a toxic social environment, harming them physically as well as psychologically—with anger and lack of (self)love affecting their bodies and their minds—, as well as in terms of their struggles to master and transcend them.

It is an anger/fear-fuelled hatred—uttered softly or loudly—that takes centre stage in both works, one which is pitched against loveless and mean Glasgow, against an iniquitous social and economic system, against the irreconcilable ‘other’ in terms of class and ideology. The blind anger that dominated the violent social media reverberations of the original “Glasgow Effect” diatribe seems to have at least partly infiltrated the two narratives, which originate from and yet complicate that original context. In fact, in Harrison’s and McGarvey’s respective memoirs anger does not function only as a motivational source, but also as a transforming individual and social instrument. Intertwined with it, and in synergy with it, is the haunting absence of love in the two writers’ past or present lives, most poignantly represented in both narratives by the trauma of the absent/lost mother-love. The alcoholic and abusive mother whose dreadful violence shapes McGarvey’s childhood and identity—“the only reason I ever overcame my fear of the bullies was because it was dwarfed by my fear of my mother” (2017: 15)—could not be more distant from the loving and nurturing mother described by Harrison. And yet, the absence/loss of motherly unconditional love is presented by both writers in very similar terms of permanent ‘homelessness’. “For if you are not safe in your own home, under the care of your own mother, then where else could you possibly drop your guard?” asks McGarvey (2017: 13); Harrison, struck by her mother’s sudden and untimely death, declares that “emptiness would be with me always from now on, no matter where I went”; “there was now no point in even dreaming about leaving Glasgow, as there was no home to return to anymore” (2019: 280).

McGarvey’s and Harrison’s respective narratives of dislocation in Glasgow are both framed in stories of denied love, and stage a constant oscillation between anger for that loss and a yearning for an irredeemable past. Let us now briefly examine how each writer foregrounds this oscillation.

At the beginning of her narrative, Harrison describes her relationship with Glasgow as one of “love-hate” (2019: 16), and at the end of it, she theorises this stance as one that provides a privileged perspective, as “you have to be angry enough to fight to make it better (not too comfortable), but you also have to be compassionate enough to care and optimistic and hopeful enough to believe another city is possible” (2019: 357). *The Glasgow Effect*, beyond its sometimes verbose academic digressions, is indeed a book about emotions as much as ‘ideas’. Anger, albeit articulated more obliquely than in McGarvey’s memoir, is very much at the origin of Harrison’s

project, which takes shape with her moving in 2008 to Glasgow, a city she ‘hates’ instantly, upon her arrival, and which she often unfavourably compares to the southern cities/regions where she has lived before—the London area and Nottingham (2019: 357). *The Glasgow Effect* often articulates a stark polarisation between the world of her affects—family, places and landscapes—located in the English cities she has lived in, and Glasgow as the site of her artistic/political project—a city that often functions as a screen onto which she ‘projects’ her life, her passions and her emotions. This rift between body and affects frequently emerges in her narrative—“I felt totally disconnected from everything I had known before”, she says in the ironically titled “Welcome to Scotland” chapter—and this can only be partly explained as stemming from “culture shock” (2019: 59), conveyed in the book by her self-/identification as a stranger, as well as to a number of occasional references to clichéd identity constructions of ‘Englishness’ and ‘Scottishness’ (such as the iconic greasy chips on her book cover). It is in fact the deprivation of love that generates Harrison’s resentment, a quiet, composed anger: “the further away from home I moved, the less love there seemed to be”, she says, “the warmth of life was missing, literally and metaphorically” (2019: 83). A personal experience that reverberates in the words of other fellow strangers: “you will never find love in this city... there is no love in this city!” (2019: 82), an Israeli friend prophecies, echoing and amplifying Harrison’s own perceptions.

Unlike Harrison’s, McGarvey’s anger feels righteous, and is louder and more unapologetic. His is also an account of an individual journey of ‘redemption’, but he ‘naturally’ embodies the authentic voice—male and working-class—authorised by the Glasgow discourse to tell the story—to *be* the story. While his investigation of the geographies of inequality and segregation still at work in Glasgow and in the world we live in is valuable and convincingly articulated, his narrative is explicitly anger-driven. From its very title this is indeed a book that takes part in and attempts to explain “the anger of Britain’s underclass”, an anger that is developing uncontrollably in many directions: “Brexit Britain is a snapshot of how things sound when people who are rarely heard decide to grab the microphone and start telling everybody how it is. When people vote against their own interests because they don’t think it’s going to matter either way” (McGarvey 2017: 129). Having shared the experiences that have generated that blind anger makes McGarvey’s voice authoritative, and the choice of his narrative’s central metaphor for social segregation—that of “a safari of sorts, where the indigenous population is surveyed from a safe distance for a time, before the window on the community closes and everyone gradually forgets about it” (2017: xx)—not only accounts for the political dynamics of that anger, but by evoking an act of imperialist exoticisation, it inscribes it firmly within a wider history of global subalternity. In *Poverty Safari*, social anger is strangely redeemed by the idea of family-love, which projects onto both the past and the future of the author’s life. This is a theme that may be less immediately evident than resentment, but that is in fact almost as pervasive. It appears in the opening dedication to his siblings—“I love you and look forward to the day we can sit around a table again as a family” (2017: vii)—, it shapes McGarvey’s retrospective, fraught forgiveness of his mother, presented as a victim of the deprived world she had grown up in rather than a perpetrator, and his retrieval of a denied love—“I like to think, perhaps naively, that her love for me meant the thought of me being frightened or helpless was so upsetting to her that it caused her to overreact” (2017: 14-15)—and it emerges most clearly at the end of his memoir, where he describes bonding with his newborn, an unexpected emotion that brings responsibility and change—“One year later, and everything in my life has changed. Not necessarily because I wanted it to, but because it had to” (2017: 202).

## 5. Conclusion

The history of Glasgow as one of Britain’s epicentres of industrial strife and unrest, with the ramifications of this in the present, should indeed still be the object of literary investigation and memorialisation, but it should count as *one* aspect of the city’s complex history and reality, and there should be room and acceptance for other narratives and discourses. Also, the ‘language’ in which such history is narrated needs to evolve and change, in order to be effective.

The Harrison-McGarvey fraught dialogue is indeed interesting insofar as it exposes the problematic relationship between the fluid nature of local/national/class identities and the relative fixedness of their representations, and the inevitable crevices and fissures that these discrepancies generate. It also stages an ambivalent relationship with the Glasgow discourse. On the one hand, it is indeed firmly inscribed in it—based on the parameters of this discourse, Harrison, as an outsider and a middle-class woman, arguably did not qualify as a narrator of the city’s stories and harsh reality from the very beginning. The scale of the popular attack to a barely outlined project that revolved around a question that ironically today, in pandemic times, sounds almost a cliché—“how would your career, social life ties, carbon footprint and mental health be affected if you could not leave the city where you live?” (2019, back cover blurb)—, can only be justified within the well-defined lines of the (literary) imagination of the city, and within that same imagination only a voice like McGarvey’s could have been seen as fully entitled to ‘setting the record straight’. On the other hand, the affective trajectories traced by the two writers seem, by the end of their respective narratives, to run against the grain of the same discourse that shaped their encounter—away from the fixed pattern of misery and



defeat and towards opening up to change and ‘love’. While Harrison eventually sheds some of her negative expectations about Glasgow, and “by fighting for a fairer city” she can bring herself to hope “to rebuild it, find ‘local love’, and finally make this brutal place feel like home” (2019: 280), it is indeed McGarvey that seems to undergo the most dramatic change, by becoming uneasy with the same discourse that has mobilised and empowered him. The process of writing has seemingly brought awareness of the limitations of his initial response, shaped as it was by his “assumptions and prejudices about Ellie herself – as a middle class person” (2017: 188). Giving up his role as leader of the angry mob, he now admits that “the old way didn’t work”, and that the best contribution he can make to society and his community is “to raise a healthy, happy and secure child”, and “to first transform myself and, having done so, find a way to express how I did that to as many people as possible” (2017: 202). McGarvey’s apparent embracing of a new life philosophy, shaped by and through (neoliberal) individualism, is possibly the most eloquent example of how his narrative, after exploiting the Glasgow discourse, eventually moves beyond its limits.

Is there a way to reform the Glasgow novel—to make it transcend the crystallised Glasgow discourse and yet still speak of the city’s complex heritage, including those secret maps of segregation and exclusion still at work in its poorest districts? In theory, yes. But the field of modern and contemporary Scottish literature, so extraordinarily rich and vibrant, is also rife with angry tensions—the complex and contested histories of its definition and of the definition of its canon have often been marked by heated debates and iconoclastic ‘erasures’. The risk here is that the understandably growing impatience with the Glasgow discourse will eventually lead to one of the many strange ‘amnesias’ that have characterised the tormented history of this city, epitomised in recent times by the spectacular and spectacularised explosion that in 2015 removed from sight the Red Road flats and their history of slum and unfit housing, unemployment and vandalism. What becomes invisible is often soon forgotten, and yet invisible history, as Anthony’s *Rat Film* lucidly demonstrates, can still powerfully shape our lives.

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