



FEMALE UNPERSONS: FEMINIST AMBIGUITIES IN SANDRA NEWMAN'S *JULIA*

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ABSTRACT. Sandra Newman's *Julia* (2023) represents a new approach among the rewritings of George Orwell's *1984* (1949). A retelling of Orwell's dystopia from the perspective of Winston Smith's love interest, Newman's novel interrogates *1984*'s representation of women. It is fundamentally feminist in tone, in that it gives voice to an underutilised female character, while also making it clear that the society imagined by Orwell is almost inevitably misogynistic inasmuch as it devalues, degrades, and prohibits personal relationships, erasing the very sphere that is traditionally female. In this respect, a key moment occurs when Newman's Julia herself acknowledges that, under patriarchy, women are by definition "unpersons"—an Orwellian term referring to the erased identities produced by torture. This paper seeks to explore an inherent contradiction in the rewriting's relationship to Orwell's original, focusing on how, through Julia's character, Newman's novel navigates the ambiguity surrounding the possibility of a viable "female" world and ethics within Oceania's patriarchal system which rigidly confines women to specific roles and positions.

Keywords: Sandra Newman, Orwell, 1984, feminism, ethics, intersubjectivity.

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NO-PERSONAS FEMENINAS: AMBIGÜIDADES FEMINISTAS EN *JULIA* DE SANDRA NEWMAN

RESUMEN. *Julia* (2023), de Sandra Newman, representa un nuevo enfoque entre las reescrituras de *1984* (1949), de George Orwell. La novela de Newman, que recuenta la distopía de Orwell desde la perspectiva del interés amoroso de Winston Smith, interroga la representación de la mujer en *1984*. La novela tiene un tono fundamentalmente feminista, en tanto que da voz a un personaje femenino subutilizado, pero también deja claro que la sociedad imaginada por Orwell es casi inevitablemente misógina en la medida en que devalúa, degrada y prohíbe las relaciones personales, borrando la propia esfera tradicionalmente femenina. En este sentido, un momento clave se produce cuando la propia Julia de Newman reconoce que, bajo el patriarcado, las mujeres son por definición «no-personas»—un término orwelliano que se refiere a las identidades borradas producidas por la tortura. Este artículo pretende explorar una contradicción inherente a la relación de la reescritura con el original de Orwell, centrándose en cómo, a través del personaje de Julia, la novela de Newman navega por la ambigüedad que rodea la posibilidad de un mundo y una ética “femeninos” viables dentro del sistema patriarcal de Oceanía, que confina rígidamente a las mujeres a papeles y posiciones específicos.

Palabras clave: Sandra Newman, Orwell, 1984, feminismo, ética, intersubjetividad.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Retelling Orwell's dystopia from the perspective of Winston Smith's love interest, Sandra Newman's *Julia* (2023b) represents a fresh perspective among the rewritings of George Orwell's *1984* (1949), interrogating the novel's representation of women.¹ Thus, it belongs to those texts that rewrite canonical works in order to highlight aspects which have previously received less attention, often giving voice to minor, marginalised characters (cf. Rebei, 2004, para. 2; cf. Kouachi, 2022, p. 230). In this sense, the idea that “all writing is, by necessity, either a rewriting or a reworking” (Bényei, 2023, p. 255) is perhaps doubly reflected in rewritings which are feminist in intention. *Julia* is fundamentally feminist in that it gives voice to an underutilised female character, following in the footsteps of works that use the same strategy to rewrite canonical texts, such as J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), a reimagining of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719); Audrey Thomas's *Tattycoram* (2005), inspired by Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1855–57); and both Sue Roe's *Estella: Her Expectations*

¹ For another recent Julia-centred retelling of *1984*, see Katherine Bradley's *The Sisterhood* (2023), published a few months before Newman's novel. *Julia* also appears within a broader recent wave of literary engagements with Orwell's works, including Adam Biles's *Beasts of England* (2023), which revisits *Animal Farm* (1945), and Paul Theroux's *Burma Sabib* (2024), which offers a fictionalised account of Orwell's formative years in colonial Burma.

(1982) and Kathy George's *Estella* (2025), which revisit Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860–1861). Newman's novel paints a ruthless picture of a dystopian society that most readers are probably already familiar with—thanks in part to the popularity of Young Adult dystopias since the 2000s²—but makes it clear that the society imagined by Orwell is almost inevitably misogynistic inasmuch as it devalues, degrades, and prohibits personal relationships, erasing the very sphere that is traditionally female. Newman's *Julia* herself acknowledges that, under patriarchy, women are by definition “unpersons” (Newman, 2023b, p. 280)—an Orwellian term referring to the erased identities produced by torture. Through these typically feminist insights, the novel recalls Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and a number of (female) feminist dystopias.

Orwell imagines a world that is horrific because it is misogynistic: “the idea of masculinity runs deep in the minds of the citizens” (Önvural, 2025, p. 203). Anne Mellor writes that “[w]hat Orwell has portrayed in Oceania is the complete triumph of a patriarchal culture [where...] women are consistently assigned to limited, gender-differentiated roles” (1983, p. 117). The question, however, might arise whether some of the misogyny that pervades the world of Oceania could come from Orwell himself. Although what we might regard as the gender politics of Orwell is clearly different from that of Oceania, some overlaps have been suggested by feminist critics of *1984*.³ “*Julia* ... speaks of what Orwell was silent about, and what ... as an inconvenient truth, Orwell criticism itself has ignored: namely that in Orwell's works, including his vast journalism, the female perspective almost completely disappears” (Maczelka, 2024, para. 5). While gender is not a main concern of Orwell's fiction, his works do suggest ideas about gender which might be foregrounded—and this is part of what Newman undertakes. *Julia* sets for itself a twofold task: firstly, it extends or complements Orwell's fictional universe.⁴ Additionally, while not departing from the logic of its vision, Newman implicitly criticises not only the inbuilt misogyny of Oceania but also Orwell's gender politics. This paper seeks to explore an inherent contradiction in the rewriting's relationship to Orwell's original, focusing on how, through *Julia*'s character, Newman's novel navigates the ambiguity surrounding the possibility of a viable “female” world and

² For a reading of Newman's *Julia* as a Young Adult dystopia, as well as an overview of the novel's reception, see Maczelka (2026). I am indebted to Csaba Maczelka for providing early access to his manuscript.

³ This is also the context in which Anna Funder's controversial 2023 biography of Eileen O'Shaughnessy, Orwell's first wife, *Wifedom: Mrs Orwell's Invisible Life*, was written. A further relevant context for *Julia*'s feminism is Newman's oeuvre: she is usually regarded as a feminist writer, although “[t]he classification of writers as feminists has been irrelevant in many ways since the 1980s” (Bényei, 2023, p. 247).

⁴ In my discussion, the characters of *Julia* and *Winston* should be understood as textual hybrids of the characters of the two novels. It is also central to my argument that there is little character development in the conventional sense in either of the novels, thus my analysis shall handle all the characters as static.

ethics within Oceania's patriarchal system, which rigidly confines women to specific roles and positions.

2.

As the main characters of their respective novels, Winston and Julia are also—incidentally—key figures for the depiction of masculinity and femininity in the world created by Orwell and Newman. Although Julia's distaste for Winston's way of thinking—she refers to his “truth fixation” and “taste for negativity” as “bloodythink” (Newman, 2023b, p. 102)—is a recurring theme in both novels, in Orwell, Julia's viewpoint is presented primarily as a symptom of her anti-intellectualism. As the narrator remarks, whenever Winston tries to discuss the ways in which he finds the Party's principles problematic:

she became bored and confused ... One knew that it was all rubbish, so why let oneself be worried by it? She knew when to cheer and when to boo, and that was all one needed. If he persisted in talking of such subjects, she had a disconcerting habit of falling asleep. (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 179; cf. p. 151)

Newman's novel retains the motif of Julia's struggle with Newspeak words: “‘Oh, I can't ever get Newspeak right,’ Julia said. ‘I'm not a bit intellectual’” (Newman, 2023b, p. 32; cf. p. 95, p. 126; Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 179). In 1984, Julia “was fond of using her hands and felt at home with machinery” (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 149), a field of work traditionally gendered as masculine. She does not enjoy reading (p. 149), so much so that she falls asleep while listening to Winston reading out Goldstein's theoretical book (p. 247; Newman, 2023b, p. 235; cf. p. 195). In Newman's novel, this book, which for 1984's Winston “fortifies [his] commitment to objective reality and truth”, confirms his own sanity, and provides him with hope (Patai, 1982, p. 860), is intensely disliked by Julia, who thinks that

all the book seemed to say was that believing contradictory things amounted to believing what wasn't true. The dimmest schoolchild could have told you as much ... The futile tone of it wearied her more than anything. It tasted of the stale breath of men for whom opinions trumped life. (Newman, 2023b, p. 235)

Although, as Jacqueline Foertsch points out, mid-century readers “almost surely ... read Julia's intellectual inferiority as a ‘natural’ female predisposition” (2007, p. 58), Julia's disposition, already in Orwell's novel and more so in Newman, might also be seen as asserting or celebrating the primacy of life, survival, and reality over theories and opinions. As it will be further argued, her ethical stance is a consequence of this life-centeredness.

An important aspect of this disposition is Julia's common-sense practicality (Stewart, 2004, p. 139; Tyner, 2004, p. 143). Orwell's text adheres to traditionally gendered binary oppositions, associating women with the body and emotions and men with the mind and rationality. Julia's practicality (Campbell, 1984, p. 133; cf.

Stewart, 2004, pp. 138–139; Mellor, 1983, p. 121; p. 119) clearly has a gendered dimension, in that her lack of interest in intellectual discussion does not diverge from women's traditional association with the body side of the body–mind dichotomy. In *1984*, Winston refers to her as “not clever” (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 149), and Julia herself would seem to be in agreement, although she does have her own theory of “anti-cleverness”, which she expounds in Newman's novel: she has learned that the best way to deal with police interrogations is “playing the part of a simpleton who couldn't keep up. ... Daft was good. Daft lived while clever died” (Newman, 2023b, p. 29). As in *1984*, in Newman's novel, Julia goes to great lengths to seem to conform to the Party's expectations for Oceania's citizens. Thus, her anti-theoretical and anti-intellectual stance can be seen as a conscious—perhaps particularly feminine—strategy that amounts to another—perhaps more effective—kind of cleverness.⁵ The additions of *Julia* flesh out her character also in this respect: Newman's Julia follows Winston to the Thought Police agent Weeks' (Mr. Charrington's) shop, because “it never hurt to have a little damning information on people, in case of need. It was one of the ways one avoided being turned in to the police oneself” (p. 58). Julia's practicality is also discernible in her clandestine activities like black marketeering, described in Newman's novel: she

loaded [the items she wanted to trade] in her tool bag, piled a layer of Anti-Sex leaflets on top, and slipped a ten-dollar bill into the top leaflet, for the benefit of any patrol who stopped her and asked her to inspect her bag. (p. 49)

The sentence highlights Julia's experience in bribery and the trade of illegal goods, and her adeptness in taking advantage of her image as an Anti-Sex League member in such situations, ultimately suggesting that in some ways, she is, indeed, “clever”, but her cleverness is in contrast with the theoretical outlook Winston and O'Brien stand for in both novels. It has been observed by many interpreters of Orwell's novel, for example by James A. Tyner, that the practicality with which Julia approaches all aspects of life contrasts Winston's “idealism” (2004, p. 134; p. 143; cf. Beddoe, 1984, p. 147).

Given Julia's association with the body, it is unsurprising that her practicality manifests itself also in various motifs connected to sexuality. In both novels, she is the one who approaches Winston (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 124; p. 130; cf. Newman, 2023b, p. 80) and takes it upon herself to work out the details of their meetings in an “alert and business-like” manner: “It seemed natural [for Winston] to leave this to her. She obviously had a practical cunning which Winston lacked” (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 146; cf. pp. 156–157; Newman, 2023b, p. 90). Although Winston himself benefits from Julia's abilities, the narrator's phrase “practical cunning”

⁵ Paradoxically, in his essays, Orwell identified anti-intellectualism—or more precisely, anti-theoreticalism—as a defining trait of his own thinking, and as a distinctly English characteristic. He consistently championed clear, accessible language over abstract, theory- and ideology-laden prose. In this light, the “real” Orwell arguably shares Julia's skepticism, and might have viewed Winston's tendency to get lost in theoretical abstraction the same way she does.

implies something pejorative, devaluing the world of practical experience as such, along with Julia. Orwell's Winston famously sums up Julia as "a rebel only from the waist downwards" (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 179; cf. Foertsch, 2007, p. 58), and *1984*'s narrator remarks that "[w]ith Julia, everything came back to her own sexuality" (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 152). Most readers of *1984* have accepted Winston's characterisation of Julia,⁶ sometimes criticising Orwell's portrayal, but, on the whole, what the narrator emphasises—that from Winston's limited perspective it is not obvious that there is more to Julia than her sexuality—appears to be an under-analysed aspect of the novel. Such an analysis might take its cue from the continuation of the passage cited earlier, which allows us to reevaluate the association between Julia (femininity) and sexuality: "As soon as this [sexuality] was touched upon in any way she was capable of great acuteness. Unlike Winston, she had grasped the inner meaning of the Party's sexual puritanism" (p. 152). Her acuteness, thus, is not restricted to organising trysts, but, at least in this area, she also seems to be more clear-sighted than Winston—it is Julia who realises that sexuality is a political issue.

The additions of Newman's novel locate both Julia's practicality and her sexuality not only in the broader framework of politics, but also in that of ethics, suggesting that, in both novels, sexuality is not only a political but also an ethical issue (the former has been recognised both by the characters themselves and some interpreters of *1984*). Mellor notes that, "[f]ar more than Winston, she has recognized that sexual repression is essential to the maintenance of the Party's power" (1983, p. 119); her "celebration of her own body, of sexual desire" in itself might be seen as "a powerful political rebellion" (p. 119; cf. p. 120). According to Malcolm R. Thorp, "[t]he hedonistic Julia, who is more passionate and less idealistic than her lover, perceives why sex is a political issue" (1984, p. 11). Thus, as both novels imply, Julia intuitively realises that much of the political fervour artificially whipped up in Oceania is a case of simple Freudian sublimation: as Orwell's Julia tells Winston,

[a]ll this marching up and down and cheering and waving flags is simply sex gone sour. If you're happy inside yourself, why should you get excited about Big Brother and the Three-Year Plans and The Two Minutes Hate and all the rest of their bloody rot? (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 153)

While Julia is, in both novels, explicitly positioned as a character unconcerned with theoretical abstractions or politics as such—"[Winston] earnestly assured her that this [their first act of lovemaking] was not only a sexual feat but a revolutionary act. Well, let it be what he liked" (Newman, 2023b, p. 108)—, her sexuality-fuelled rebellion against the Party *can* be viewed as politically motivated. Winston himself

⁶ According to Deirdre Beddoe, "[t]he sexually attractive and sexually active Julia objects to the regime because it stops her having a good time" (1984, p. 147; cf. Abrahams, 1983, p. 5). In Lillian Feder's words, "[s]he defines herself erotically" (1983, p. 403), while Bernard Crick points out that her relationship with Winston develops through sexual intimacy instead of romantic sentiment (2007, pp. 150–151).

claims that their first act of lovemaking “was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act” (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 145; cf. p. 36).

The precondition of Julia's sexuality-based defiance (Feder, 1983, p. 403) in both novels is that “the Party perceives a close connection between sexual abstention and proper political behavior” (Thorp, 1984, p. 11; cf. Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 153) and that “[e]rotic feelings and acts are ... forbidden because they are bodily manifestations of the individual self in union with another” (Feder, 1983, p. 403; cf. Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 306). The Party aims to eradicate all those forms of intersubjectivity which do not fall under the categories of “comradeship”, “duty to the Party”, and “love of Big Brother”. Thus, already on the level of rhetoric—both the Party's ideological language *and* the novel's narrative discourse—a masculine viewpoint prevails over the traditionally feminine sphere that is based on mutual gestures of care.

3.

Julia's aversion to abstraction might be interpreted in yet another way. Notably, she gains insight primarily through personal relationships and often puts her own and her loved ones' needs and happiness first, rather than focusing on universal ethical or political doctrines. It is by reinforcing these aspects of her personality that Newman's novel reframes the traditional, gendered body-mind dichotomy, underscoring the contradiction at its heart. On the one hand, the fact that, historically, women have been identified with the body, emotions, self-sacrifice, and unconditional care became the basis of their subjugation and exploitation. On the other hand, these attitudes coded as feminine still represent a potentially valid alternative to patriarchal society, more specifically, to what has been called patriarchy's “ethics of justice”. This is an understanding of ethics that subordinates everything, including human life and suffering, to the enforcement of abstract principles—as it happens in the case of Winston's “truth fixation” (the idea of morality as justice, meaning fairness and rights (see Gilligan on the work of Lawrence Kohlberg: 1982/2003, p. 20; cf. p. 73). Julia and other female characters in Newman's novel might be seen as embodying what Carol Gilligan, a prominent theoretician of feminist ethics, defines as the ethics of placing the emphasis on intersubjective relations and mutual gestures of care (cf. p. 90; p. 94).⁷

Newman's novel foregrounds how already in 1984 Julia's figure contains hints of the kind of ethics that are based on care and intersubjectivity, while Winston appears as a figure of an ethics of justice in both novels. One of the scenes where this difference in ethical outlook is most tangible is that of the Brotherhood initiation.

⁷ In her overview of Gilligan's ethics, Rosalyn Diprose points out how focusing on women's caring attitude might risk falling back on certain culturally ingrained stereotypes: “in valorising an attitude of care in women as a complement to a masculine ethics of justice, Gilligan risks entrenching those familiar gender stereotypes which some feminists have blamed for the continuing oppression of women” (1994/2005, p. 10). See Scaltsas (1992).

In the Brotherhood scene, in both novels, Winston vows to commit various atrocities without hesitation, provided they serve “the greater good” and principles he considers valid. Julia, however, is appalled at Winston’s attitude. Overall, the figure of Julia in both novels, but particularly in Newman’s rewriting, might be seen as embodying how “giving priority to responsibility and care assumes an essential interconnection between self and other” (Diprose, 1994/2005, p. 10), how women “are more involved in interpersonal, affective relationships than men” (p. 7), and “retain and develop more relationships” (Chodorow, 1978, p. 198). One aspect of this is that Julia’s main concern is trying to make the present bearable (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 179) rather than thinking about future generations. While Winston is preoccupied with the Party’s rewriting of the past, she proclaims that she is interested solely in herself and Winston (p. 179).

Julia is only able to relate to everything and everyone based on her lived experiences and on the immediate intersubjective context. For instance, she defies the rules and risks her own safety when she comforts Vicky, a young girl of seventeen she feels very close to, in the women’s hostel after an abortion. Vicky, one of the new characters added by Newman, might be seen as “the rewriting’s greatest innovation” (Maczelka, 2024, para. 17). Julia’s caring attitude also manifests itself when she gives the anti-sex pills she has attained for herself to the poet Ampleforth so that he can commit suicide before the Thought Police gets him, realising only later that in the Ministry of Love he would probably confess that she helped him (Newman, 2023b, p. 232). In both novels, Julia functions as the caretaker of Winston’s physical needs as well as “the agent of Winston’s sexual liberation” (Good, 1984, p. 54); she nurtures him by bringing food in a motherly way (Mellor, 1983, p. 121; Carpentier, 2014, p. 185). Her general openness to the richness of life is also obvious in the relatively large role played in her life by the proles: she regularly visits the prole black-goods merchant Mrs Melton (yet another addition by Newman), her prime source for securing the illegal items she uses to seduce Winston. Unlike him (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 60; p. 251; cf. pp. 80–81; p. 91), Julia knows some proles by name and is in regular contact with them, in this respect, too, guided more by her own lived experiences than by slogans (p. 309; cf. pp. 82–83; p. 61). She refuses to believe that “[a]ll the evil said of proles was true” until she is mugged by a prole man in the street (Newman, 2023b, p. 64). Overall, for Julia, taking care of those entrusted to her care and of those she loves is more important than abstract, theoretical ideas—her life-centeredness ultimately distinguishes the area of interpersonal relations as the primary concern of her ethical stance.

Julia’s ethical stance is clearly discernible in her difficulty with feeling hatred. O’Brien himself positions Julia and Winston at the two poles of the emotion–intellect and the body–mind dichotomies: in line with his “peculiar obsession” (Newman, 2023b, p. 102) with truth and the past (see Feder, 1983, p. 402), Winston is given Emmanuel Goldstein’s highly theoretical book (cf. Blakemore, 1984, p. 350), while Julia receives merely a brochure entitled “Why We Hate” (Newman, 2023b, p. 153). Instead of theoretical arguments, she is offered an introduction into a basic

emotional attitude. Her experience of reading the brochure, however, is far from unequivocal:

Julia found [the brochure] terribly impressive and had read it countless times with pleasure. And yet when she tried to practice hate—to feel hatred for a person—the best she could summon was annoyance or resentment. Trying too hard could set off bursts of fondness—for Winston, for O'Brien, for the prole washerwoman singing naggingly as she hung her eternal laundry. Most of all, Julia was troubled by surges of misplaced affection for the thinkpol Weeks. (p. 154; cf. p. 196)

Although she attempts to learn how to hate, and, for a while, appears to succeed, Newman's Julia, concerned with immediate personal relationships, cannot really feel hatred for abstract, hypothetical, invisible enemies (or anyone else). She is not enraged by Goldstein or the current enemy superstate (as visible during the Hate Week scene, see p. 168), and the Party, for her, is not something to hate but primarily something to trick (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 149; cf. p. 151; pp. 155–156). At first sight, there seems to be one exception to Julia's inability to hate: Big Brother, who, in Newman's novel, is not an abstract entity, but a real person. Initially, the hate she feels towards Big Brother ignites her hatred for all the other people she feels have wronged her:

She thought of more people who had wronged her and hated them one by one, and she felt cleansed. But always she returned to Big Brother. Without him, she would never have hated, and indeed, no one would have deserved her hatred. He was the source of it all. (Newman, 2023b, p. 291)

Here, too, Julia's understanding of hate takes the form of interpersonal hate in the narrowest sense, rather than hate against the system or its symptoms, like Winston's hate for both in *1984* and *Julia*. Throughout *1984*, Winston is struggling to mask the pure hatred he feels for the Party. His interest in the theoretical and abstract might be extended to include the metaphysical—Winston detests what he calls the Party's stifling of "the spirit of Man" (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 309), and his hatred itself is possible because impersonal intellectual fervour overrides his emotions.

In Newman's novel, Julia gets the chance to meet Big Brother—who has been deposed and is kept as prisoner—after she is taken in by the Brotherhood, who have successfully staged a revolution against the Party. She enters his room resolved that "[s]he would not pity him. He had not pitied her" (Newman, 2023b, p. 323), having acknowledged that she hates him and has wished to do him harm (had "fantasies of seeing Big Brother beaten, stabbed, torn to pieces" [p. 321; cf. p. 291]). However, once she is face to face with him, she finds herself feeling pity for the senile old man:

She didn't want to punish Big Brother. She didn't want to see him brought low. ... Julia tried to remember her hatred. ... She could not feel it. She couldn't want the blighting of his eyes, his confusion and illness. No: she passionately wished him better. ... No, she couldn't want a suffering person to suffer more. She could not find it in herself. (pp. 324–326)

Read in terms of Lévinasian ethics, Julia's experience might be viewed as the type of encounter with the Other in which the Face of the Other is "non-ignorable" (Van der Merwe & De Voss, 2008, p. 18), as the Other is a "suffering being in front of her that she responds to with kindness and generosity, however senseless it might be in that situation" (Large, 2016, para. 7; cf. Van der Merwe & De Voss, 2008, p. 16). The Big Brother scene is the episode which perhaps best demonstrates the degree to which Julia's outlook is in fundamental contrast to that of Winston. In both novels, Winston sacrifices Julia in Room 101, believing that the only way to save himself is to "interpose another human being, the *body* of another human being, between himself and the rats" (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 239). During his encounter with the prole prostitute in 1984, Winston is not only unable to establish a meaningful connection with the precarious human being in front of him,⁸ but, while recounting the "tormenting" memory" (p. 73; cf. p. 79) in his diary, "his teeth were set on edge" and "[h]e would have liked to spit" (p. 74). It must be mentioned, however, that despite his violent nature (and in light of the above example, somewhat paradoxically), Winston is not fully set on harming others. This is visible even late in Orwell's novel, when, in response to O'Brien's insistence that the Party's world will be based on hatred and pain, he insists that "[i]t is impossible to found a civilisation on fear and hatred and cruelty. It would never endure. ... It would have no vitality. It would disintegrate" (p. 308; cf. Cox & Levine, 2022, p. 167). Winston's belief that "the spirit of Man" is the principle which could defeat the Party (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 309; cf. Nussbaum, 2016, p. 50) evokes what Rosalyn Diprose terms "universalist ethics", meaning "uphold[ing] the values of the 'common good', by policing norms embedded in a rationale of communal welfare" (1994/2005, p. 21; cf. p. 95; p. 103).⁹ Thus, rather than a prime example of Winston's violence against women,¹⁰ the visit to the prostitute might simply be read as an instance of his inability to communicate with the Other (a given in Oceania) in the Lévinasian sense and of his visceral horror of what he perceives as a mangled body—anger upon seeing what a fellow human being has been reduced to. Whereas, in both cases, Winston might be seen as exploiting the vulnerability of the Other, which "seems to invite violence and can most easily be violated, scorned even by a failure to recognise it" (Van der Merwe & De Voss, 2008, p. 18; cf. Lévinas, 1999, p. 145), Julia is, at all times, obeying the "unavoidable command" (Van der Merwe & De Voss, 2008, p. 19) made by the Face of the Other, "[t]hou shalt not kill" (Lévinas, 1969, pp.

⁸ A similar example is Winston's memory of having stolen chocolate from his sister as a child: when she pressed her face against their mother "[s]omething in the gesture told him that his sister was dying" (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 189). This act anticipates his readiness to sacrifice Julia to save himself.

⁹ Martha Nussbaum writes that the "worthy moral ideals of justice and equality" are best served by "the cosmopolitan, the person whose allegiance is to the worldwide community of human beings" (1996, p. 4). Were the political setup different in Oceania, we might suppose that Winston would be such a character.

¹⁰ In Newman's novel, Julia diagnoses Winston as having "a bad case of Sex Gone Sour", in a feminist gesture ironically poking fun at how "naturally the woman was to blame. Who else?" (Newman, 2023b, p. 8)

34–35; 1999, p. 155). Julia's encounter with Big Brother also marks a moment of ethical revelation for her, as this is when she finds out that she is incapable of carrying out the task of learning to hate given to her by O'Brien, who, during the torture sessions,¹¹ demands that she desire other people's suffering (Newman, 2023b, p. 260). Julia's inability to induce such violent impulses in herself—which might be seen in gender terms as a “feminine trait”, echoing Gilligan's attribution of non-violence to women (see Gilligan, 1982/2003, p. 90; p. 100; p. 174)—is here cemented as an essential character trait.

One of the most interesting aspects of Newman's novel is the fact that, for Julia, her relationship with Winston is not the most important thing in her life, either in terms of length or intensity. Ultimately, it is her relationships with women that prove to be more important for her. It is especially her relationship with Vicky that enjoys primacy, also on the plot level: Vicky, rather than Winston, is present both at the beginning and the end of the novel (Winston never learns of her existence), and it is her relationship with Vicky that accompanies Julia throughout. Julia and Vicky's relationship might be read in the context of the ethics of care. Nancy Chodorow proposes that “relationships to men are unlikely to provide for women satisfaction of the relational needs that their mothering by women and the social organization of gender have produced” (1978, p. 199), as a result of which women often turn to other women for “love and emotional gratification” via “the creation and maintenance of important personal relations with other women” (p. 200). Having trained as a nurse and, by the end of the novel, working as one of Big Brother's caretakers, Vicky herself might also be viewed as a character standing for the ethics of care. While she does take care of Julia, as in the scene when she bandages Julia's arm after a failed robbery attempt in the prole quarter (Newman, 2023b, pp. 61–63) and when she tries to convince Julia to run away from London with her (p. 208), their relationship is initially based on Julia taking care of Vicky: Julia “had taken [Vicky] under her wing” (p. 31; cf. p. 22), and when she comforts Vicky after the latter's abortion, Vicky feels that “[Julia] forgave [her] when no other would” (p. 211). It is this dynamic, rooted in the responsibility she feels for Vicky, that prevails throughout the novel, which also reflects a broader pattern noted by Chodorow, who writes that “[l]esbian relationships do tend to recreate mother–daughter emotions and connections” (p. 200). When they share a kiss on a Community Hike, “it was easy for Julia to say to herself, *We will kiss and Vicky will stay. I'm saving her.* ... This was a person she could know. It was someone's real life in her arms” (Newman, 2023b, p. 212). The latter scene in particular cements this relationship as truly “personal”, in the sense that this bond does not have the political connotations that seem to be inherent in Julia's relationship with men (Winston is just one man among many for Julia, an affair based partly on attraction, partly on work). The closing chapter implies that Julia and Vicky will begin a romantic relationship, and the erotic nature of Julia's fantasy of painting Vicky's toenails (p. 333), which she associates with trying out one of the Crystal Palace's golden bathtubs with her (p.

¹¹ For more detailed discussions of torture and its implications for Winston in *1984*, see Törzsök (in press; 2024b).

339; p. 335), puts a gender-twist on her previous fantasies regarding Big Brother (p. 173), O'Brien (p. 6; p. 121; p. 165), and Winston (p. 77). As Vicky's character is entirely Newman's addition, it might also be argued that the presence of lesbianism in *Julia* is a counterpoint to the homoerotic undertones between Winston and O'Brien that have been noted by some critics (see Easthope, 1984, p. 278; Good, 1984, p. 52; Feder, 1983, p. 404; Foertsch, 2007, p. 57), and that are also suggested by the narrator in *Julia* (see Newman, 2023b, p. 14; pp. 188–189).

Relationships with women might be extended beyond Julia's immediate connections. Newman's novel introduces new mother figures, who are also central to its treatment of female experience and the concept of care. As Mellor points out, in 1984, "the mother is idealized as an entirely self-sacrificing woman" (1983, p. 117; cf. Gilligan, 1982/2003, p. 90), an ancient representational paradigm, the critique of which dates back to at least the end of the 19th century, to works such as Mona Caird's *Daughters of Danaus* (1894). In Newman's novel, Julia's mother is such a figure of self-sacrifice: the way she instructs Julia to denounce her to the Semi-Autonomous Zone (SAZ) police evokes the self-sacrifice of Winston's mother for her children in 1984 (see Connors, 1970, p. 468), an act that Winston links with the protective gesture of a Jewish mother he saw on a newscreen (p. 468; cf. Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 11; p. 185; pp. 190–191), while the newly added Mrs Melton ensures that her pregnant daughter can safely escape London (Newman, 2023b, pp. 295–296). The ethics represented by these mother figures is also based on the basic principle that "[w]e may experience our own commitments—such as commitments to protect those we love—as unquestionable" (Tessman, 2017, p. 25; cf. p. 108; p. 115). Yet, Newman's novel offers a variety of mothering attitudes rather than simply confirming the pattern of self-sacrifice that has traditionally been expected from women (see Gilligan, 1982/2003, p. 70; p. 82; p. 87); Vicky's abortion at the beginning of the novel is also the consequence of her having to give up her child to ensure her own survival.

It is significant that Julia herself becomes a mother, considering that the closest 1984 gets to discussing the female reproductive system is Winston's frustration at Julia postponing sexual encounters due to menstruation (Orwell, 1949/2009, pp. 160–161). The inclusion of pregnancy in *Julia* is one way in which the novel can be considered feminist (it does not shy away from details that may have been taboo in Orwell's time, thereby "modernising" the original novel for today's audience), although an ambiguity surfaces here. Instructed by the Party, Julia participates in the Big Future programme—as a result of which she supposedly becomes pregnant with Big Brother's child—, meaning that she is, essentially, forced to give up control over her own body. As Julia has been sleeping with various men, Big Future serves as a cover-up for an unwanted pregnancy. Julia, however, is also required to conceptualise her situation in terms of doublethink, on various levels. While she is doubtful whether artificial insemination actually takes place or whether the baby could be Big Brother's at all, in both matters, she has to believe the Party. Secondly, Julia has to simultaneously accept as true the fact that as a woman, she is an unperson in Oceania, but is celebrated when she enters the waiting room after the

procedure, is given exceptional treatment in the form of increased rations and bath tickets, and people give up their bus seats for her (in contrast to how Vicky's pregnancy is a cause for stigmatisation and exclusion).¹² Towards the end of the narrative, the importance of Julia's pregnancy as an asset for her survival is reinforced. Her Big Future badge, for instance, places restrictions on the kind of torture she can be subjected to ("[n]o abdominal" [Newman, 2023b, p. 256] and, as one of the Ministry of Love employees says, "[t]his one isn't to die. It's a pregnancy" [p. 270]). A similar idea is visible in Julia's claim that her baby is "valuable enough to be safe" (p. 217). It is also her pregnancy that ensures for her the prompt assistance of the evacuation team when she escapes from London, in line with a universal disposition: "the maternal body is a privileged target of medical and moral attention because it is the site of the reproduction of the social body" (Diprose, 1994/2005, p. 115; cf. p. 23). Pregnancy is forced upon Julia by the system, meaning that she is manipulated into pregnancy and motherhood by a thoroughly patriarchal and even misogynist system, but, on the other hand, pregnancy and motherhood hold "real" ethical potential within the novel's lifeworld. Notably, what Newman's novel thinks about these crucial questions seems to remain somewhat unresolved even by the end of the novel. Julia's caring attitude towards children in particular is a recurring motif of Newman's novel, the first instance of which is how she refers to Vicky's abortion as "murder" (Newman, 2023b, p. 38); her immediate reaction is that she "instinctively wanted to wrap [the foetus] in a blanket" (p. 28), and she is horrified both at the pseudo and the real Brotherhood initiation when she has to agree to throw acid in the face of children (p. 193; Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 199; Newman, 2023b, p. 337). These small moments of kindness, care, and responsibility contrast the ethically grey and generally bleak outlook that is prevalent in Oceania, especially given the novel's persistent depiction of cruelty (see Maczelka, 2024, para. 19). Finally, the birth of Julia's baby might be viewed as the promise of new life also in the sense that Julia and Vicky will bring up the baby together in the Brotherhood's headquarters, meaning that although Vicky loses her own child, she gains a second chance at becoming a parent.

4.

Another element that raises questions concerning the feminist credentials of Newman's novel is how Julia, made into the Party's prostitute at a private meeting with O'Brien, assumes a femme fatale—a "double agent" (Akram, 2024, p. 42)—role. Once again, she appears to momentarily rise from the rank of unperson to that of a woman who is a "diamond" to the Party (Newman, 2023b, p. 124). It seems that, for

¹² The fact that female Party members enjoy certain perks is also visible in the early scene when Julia says she would like to take a short break from work because of her period (Newman, 2023b, p. 15). She knows she is allowed to leave, because "Sickness: Menstrual was a privilege all girls used and abused" (p. 15). She also takes a plumber's auger (to unclog a toilet at home) without requiring further explanation: "Of course, the guards were all blokes; perhaps they thought it was a necessary tool of menstruation" (p. 15).

an Oceanian woman, the only way to leave behind “unpersonhood” is by coming to embody a patriarchal feminine archetype: that of the mother or that of the femme fatale. The most apparent implication of Julia’s job as a prostitute is the idea that, to get ahead in life, a woman must use her body. This reinforces the pattern suggested above: Julia, unlike Winston, is manipulated through her body rather than through her mind, which is in line with how, throughout Newman’s novel, she is presented as a non-intellectual character who has a more intimate relationship with her own body. O’Brien exploits her only coping mechanism against the Party’s oppression—committing sexcrime—, telling her that she is to learn how to hate by working “[a]s a whore”—“we wish you only to do what you already do” (p. 130). This aspect of her character is already present in *1984*. As, for example, Graham Good writes, “[w]hat attracts [Winston] to Julia is not her potential ‘wifeliness’ but her ‘whorishness’” (1984, p. 52); according to Good, Julia is “transformed from virgin into whore” (p. 53; cf. Mellor, 1983, p. 118). O’Brien is right inasmuch as she has, in a way, been prostituting herself (in fact, since her teenage years, starting with the affair with the Party official Gerber, see Newman, 2023b, p. 136), but Julia’s new job is fitting also because she is able to find a perverse kind of enjoyment in it: “[O’Brien]’s even called her a whore—a thing Julia had often called herself, and enjoyed as a badge of thrilling shame” (p. 196). Newman’s idea of developing Julia’s character in this way is also in line with how she has been read as a spy working against Winston in *1984* (see, for example, Good, 1984, p. 53; cf. Parrinder, 1981, p. 48).

Julia’s task, as O’Brien explains, is to seduce men and have them denounce themselves in the intimacy of sexual bliss. In this way, Julia fits into the traditional representational paradigm of the 19th- and 20th-century figure of the femme fatale. The task, performed in the rented room, involves seducing Winston as well as the poet Ampleforth, while simultaneously resuming her affair with Winston’s neighbour, Parsons—as it were, cheating on Winston. On the symbolic level of Newman’s narrative, the femme fatale motif is introduced by Weeks’s (Mr Charrington’s) allegory of the spider who “cares for his victim” (Newman, 2023b, p. 155), waiting for its prey in the web that is the rented room.¹³ Ironically, Julia’s downfall involves her falling into not only O’Brien’s, but also her own trap: “She was fucking though it killed her” (p. 78). In this way, Julia’s femme fatale role is in accord with how in Romantic and 19th-century literature the femme fatale becomes the victim of her own game and often functions as the remote-controlled tool of a powerful man: Julia’s role in her relationship with O’Brien might be likened to that of Trilby (Svengali’s tool in George du Maurier’s *Trilby* [1894]) or Lucy Westenra (Dracula’s tool in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* [1897]).¹⁴

¹³ Once Julia and Winston are arrested, it is revealed that Weeks has also been a spider weaving his own web: “his eyes dwelled on her and narrowed with intellectual pleasure. It was the face of the sated spider looking down curiously at the beetle’s husk” (Newman, 2023b, p. 240).

¹⁴ I am grateful to Tamás Bényei for bringing this point to my attention. We might view Julia not simply as O’Brien’s puppet, but also as his double: although O’Brien’s seduction is of an

Julia, however, comes to feel ill-at-ease in the femme fatale role, which can be seen as yet another expression of her matter-of-factness. She struggles to see the point in tempting loyal Party members such as Parsons to sin (Newman, 2023b, p. 225), and believes that Winston, who “hadn’t the foggiest conception what [murder, blackmail, suicide] really meant” (p. 193), is harmless as a child: “And for this, he was to be condemned? One might as well execute a boy of six for saying he would like to be a pirate. Indeed, the whole scene smacked of childhood” (p. 193; cf. p. 201; p. 96; pp. 249–250).¹⁵ Not long after Julia’s initial enthusiasm about her new role wears off, the idea of luring men to their death begins to weigh heavily on her conscience (see Akram, 2024, p. 43), as what she is required to do undermines and exploits intimate personal relations: “she felt it was a thing she couldn’t do—to make love to a man as a means of killing him” (Newman, 2023b, p. 131; cf. p. 282; pp. 338–339). Julia’s unhappiness with her task is obvious from her guilty awareness that “[s]he had killed Winston. She was killing him all the time he tried to love her” (p. 197). This guilt is a recurring motif in Newman’s novel:

The figure of Ampleforth, hunched in terror, kept recurring to her mind, then that of Parsons and his wife and children—all of them killed by her. ... All were to be murdered, and Julia their killer, Julia never again to be good or beloved. (p. 232)

These lines recall her initial doubts about accepting O’Brien’s offer, to the extent that, though disliking Winston’s fatalistic attitude, she herself temporarily adopts the same mindset: “And she would be a thing of [the Ministry of] Love, of murder—never again would she be anything else” (p. 131; cf. p. 201). Ultimately, Julia’s internal conflict underscores how the Party’s demands pervert natural human intimacy, forcing her into a role that corrodes both her morality and her sense of self.

Winston can be seen as a counterpoint to the ethics that Julia represents also from a gendered perspective. James Connors points out that Orwell’s Winston is

a frightening example of a writer so corrupted by his work on behalf of the Party that he is doomed to failure in his half-understood and belated attempt to revolt against a group of men whose views and values he shares far more than he realizes. (1970, p. 466; cf. Newman, 1949/2023a, p. 318)

In Newman’s novel, Winston is still enthralled by this kind of revolutionary politics: Julia thinks that “it was remarkable how his interests and [the Ministry of] Love’s interests were alike” (Newman, 2023b, p. 153).¹⁶ In particular, she is haunted by the sight of Winston kicking away a child’s severed hand after one of the prole districts

intellectual nature, while Julia’s methods are based on carnality (in line with the gendered body-mind dichotomy), both give their victims what they need, only to ultimately destroy them.

¹⁵ Julia also likens Winston to a child when she thinks of his diary as a “morbid toy” (Newman, 2023b, p. 109), and when she describes him as “[t]here [being] a mix of the geriatric and the boyish in his struggling form” (p. 80).

¹⁶ For Winston, the primary risk involves “merging into the Party’s collective self-annihilating unity” (Bényei, 2003/2009, p. 171).

is hit by a bomb—a motif that is already present in *1984* (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 191; cf. p. 251; pp. 80–81; p. 60)—becoming for her the main symbol of Winston's depravity. During O'Brien's initiation ceremony into the Brotherhood, upset by the two men's conversation, she worries about becoming an accomplice to Winston's potential crimes: "how could Winston so glibly agree to these horrors? And how did he think he could agree for her—as if he could choose whether or not she would throw acid in the face of a child!" (Newman, 2023b, p. 193). While Newman's feminist novel gives voice to a largely silenced character, Julia's relationship with Winston, in fact, requires her continuous self-erasure: "In Winston's dream, his woman would agree to any moral enormity, if it was what he wished. For him, she would die any death and commit any crime, quite without any motive of her own" (p. 194; cf. Önvural, 2025, p. 203; p. 211). In this way, Newman highlights how Winston's revolutionary fervour positions Julia not as a partner but as a moral extension of his will, erasing her autonomy and exposing the gendered imbalance at the heart of their relationship.

In both novels, the Brotherhood episode is dominated by masculine bonding (which is perhaps to be expected given the underground society's gendered name): Winston and O'Brien's conversation leaves no space for Julia to speak up. Weeks instructs Julia in advance to stay quiet for most of the meeting, but her lack of voice is viewed as natural by the two men already in *1984*: "[O'Brien] almost ignored Julia, seeming to take it for granted that Winston could speak for her" (Orwell, 1949/2009, p. 199). In Newman's novel, "[what O'Brien was saying] was nominally directed at Julia, too, but Winston answered for them both. Neither O'Brien nor Winston seemed to consider that Julia might respond" (Newman, 2023b, p. 192). All this conforms to the age-old tradition according to which "women have traditionally deferred to the judgement of men" (Gilligan, 1982/2003, p. 69), while the scene also serves as an example of "[t]he difficulty women experience in finding or speaking publicly in their own voices" (p. 16). Throughout Newman's novel, Julia objects to being used as a tool and resists the erasure of herself as an active agent. Although in *Julia* she has already been working with the Thought Police against Winston by the time she and Winston visit O'Brien together, O'Brien's strategy only becomes clear to her in this scene, when she realises that O'Brien has been deceiving her by "play[ing] out [her] fantasies" (Newman, 2023b, p. 196; cf. p. 198; p. 201). But the main cause of her dismay is different:

No one cared what she felt, or thought, or was. No one cared even that she had committed sexcrimes, or bought black-market goods. Nothing she did had meaning to these men. She ... could even do the work of Love, and she would still be killed when it suited their convenience[.] (pp. 196–197)

In both novels, Julia is gradually erased and written out from the Party's (here, the pseudo-Brotherhood's) patriarchal discourse. In Newman's novel, this erasure is associated with the Orwellian notion of the unperson—the non-entities people become after torture: "Julia too was an unperson. Whatever she did, she could be no worse" (p. 280). Julia's sense of her own worthlessness returns when she has a

mental breakdown at the sight of the decrepit, senile Big Brother: "All that world! Julia's life—not just gone, but trampled, scorned, turned at a stroke to worthless rubbish" (p. 327).

5. CONCLUSION

By the end of 1984, Winston "is transformed into a vacuous-minded Party hack. Thus, ... Winston's experience does not necessarily leave hope for a future transformation of Oceania" (Thorp, 1984, p. 14). In her gynocritical analysis of *Julia*, Sena Önvural writes that "Newman creates Julia as a human being like any other human being trying to survive in an oppressive regime" (2025, p. 215). While Julia's story includes moments that highlight the strength, resilience, and potential superiority of female experience, Newman's novel as a whole remains pessimistic. It also avoids taking a definitive stance on whether traditionally feminine qualities—ethical and intersubjective practices, as well as social dynamics—could form the foundation of a new world order in Oceania or if they are destined to remain small, hidden alternatives within a male-dominated world. *Julia's* engagement with gender politics and feminism is not straightforward: while the novel represents a broad spectrum of female experiences through themes of caretaking, motherhood, and sexuality, at times, it appears to reflect ideas rooted in patriarchy.

The bittersweet ending of the novel (Törzsök, 2024a, p. 46) reinforces this ambiguity. With Julia and Vicky reunited and among new friends, Julia's personal happiness seems ensured. What casts a shadow over the system that is being set up by the Brotherhood, however, is revealed during the bureaucratic routine of what they term "processing". Here, the narrative and Julia's ethical trajectory both come full circle: once disgusted by Winston's readiness to hurt children if it benefitted the Brotherhood (Newman, 2023b, p. 193), she now finds herself becoming part of the real Brotherhood, which entails her compliance with the same terms (see p. 337), revealing that O'Brien has in fact been truthful in the particulars of his pseudo-initiation. The scene might be viewed as a rewriting of the first Brotherhood initiation also in terms of how Julia gains a voice, rather than simply listening to the men's discussion and having Winston speak for the two of them. It is notable, however, that, unlike Winston, Julia requires someone else, Reynolds, to answer "yes" to the questions, meaning that it is not truly her voice that speaks, which allows us to, once again, question the feminist undertones of the scene. Even more important are the ethical implications of the episode: Julia initially responds "with a flash of rage" to the question about her throwing acid in a child's face (p. 337), and only agrees to what is requested of her because

[s]he didn't have the freedom to think of what was right. She must do what was *safe* [emphasis added]. It was as Ampleforth had said: one had no choice, one must only live through it as if one had. ... One was carried forward, and tried to be kind whenever one could. One survived, and then was sorry. (pp. 338–339; cf. p. 282; 131)

This scene might evoke her last encounter with Ampleforth in the Chestnut Tree Café:

when she looked at Ampleforth's face, with its yellow and purple bruises, she was filled with a chilling compassion. She knew it was wrong to feel this—but it mattered little whether she was right or wrong. Julia too was an *unperson* [emphasis added]. Whatever she did, she could be no worse. (p. 280)

In a situation where the individual is not given the freedom to decide what is right (that is, to make moral decisions and determine their own activities based on them), “safe”—a recurring word in the novel—becomes the only starting point for an ethics and an ethical existence. It seems that the Brotherhood’s “new world” does not provide Julia with the opportunity for free decision-making either.

While through the character of Julia the ending of Newman’s novel appears to suggest that an ethics of care might prevail on the level of individual relationships, enabling one to survive and even achieve personal happiness, within the dystopian world imagined by Orwell—and Newman’s novel remains within the parameters of this world—the principles that this entails, ethics based on care and interpersonal relations, cannot be realised on the scale of the whole of (still patriarchal) society. It appears that even in an ostensibly feminist rewriting, women in Oceania are destined to remain unpersons.

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