

**NEGOTIATING BOUNDARIES AND MARKING
CONTAMINATION: THE TRANS-CORPORAL FEMALE BODY
IN J. G. BALLARD'S COCAINE NIGHTS**

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Abstract: This paper explores the concept of trans-corporeality in J.G. Ballard's urban violence novel *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and utilises his earlier catastrophe novel *The Drowned World* (1962) as a supporting framework for interpreting female bodies as trans-corporeal spaces. *The Drowned World* centres around a lone female character who lives under a patriarchal regime, where she is moulded and suppressed within an androcentric world that parallels the catastrophic events unfolding on Earth. In *Cocaine Nights*, the female characters are exposed to urban violence resulting from the interaction between human and non-human entities, with their bodies serving as the site of contact. Drawing upon fourth-wave ecocriticism, the paper argues that the female bodies in *Cocaine Nights* challenge traditional notions of human autonomy and underscore the interconnectedness of all beings within the ecosystem. Through a detailed analysis of key scenes and characters, the paper demonstrates how these female bodies become spaces of negotiation and transformation, where the boundaries between human and non-human entities constantly shift. Additionally, the paper examines how the environments mark and impact the female bodies, leading to contamination and compromise through their experiences. By adopting a trans-corporeal perspective, this research offers a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between human and non-human entities, emphasising the vital role of environmental factors in shaping our physical and emotional well-being.

Keywords: trans-corporeality, female bodies, urban landscapes, environmental health, physical and emotional well-being

1. Introduction

J. G. Ballard's literary works have gained recognition for their bleak and dystopian representation of natural and urban environments and their scrutiny of humanity's darker impulses. His oeuvre is characterised by his deep engagement with ecological and environmental concerns, particularly in the context of post-industrial societies. In his cli-fi opus composed of *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Drought* (1964) and *The Crystal World* (1966), Ballard examines the consequences of environmental disaster and the transformation of the natural world into an alien and hostile environment. His urban disaster novels of the first half of the 1970s encompassing *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974) and *High-Rise* (1975) examine the breakdown of social order within the confines of modern urban spaces. In his urban violence novels composed of *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (2000), *Millennium People* (2003) and *Kingdom Come* (2006), Ballard further develops the psychological effects of violence on individuals in urban environments and the impact of social and psychological entropy on his characters. *Cocaine Nights* has been widely studied for how it explores contemporary social issues such as hedonism, boredom, violence, and surveillance (Matthews, 2013; Gleghorn, 2019; Altaç, 2020; Škobo and Đukić, "Manifestations of 'New Age' Religions"; Škobo and Đukić, "James G. Ballard's Urban Violence Quadriology"; Škobo and Đukić, 2023). However, the novel's treatment of the body, particularly, the female body, as a site of trans-corporeality has received no attention in the critical discourse.

Trans-corporeality is a key concept in the fourth wave of ecocriticism, which emphasizes the interconnectedness and fluidity of all bodies, human and non-human alike. This paper contends that the exploration of trans-corporeality in J. G. Ballard's *Cocaine Nights* unveils a previously overlooked dimension of the novel, particularly in its treatment of the female body. By examining the various forms of contamination experienced by female characters due to the transformation of the natural landscape (1), their exposure to toxins (2), and their encounters with trauma (3), we aim to shed light on the intricate relationship between the female body, environmental factors, and societal issues, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of Ballard's exploration of gender and the body.

2. Theoretical framework

This analysis employs a critical literary methodology rooted in contemporary ecocriticism, particularly building on the concept of "the new call to human-nature co-extensiveness," as introduced by Slovic

(2012; 443). Central to this approach is the idea of ‘trans-corporeality,’ a term derived from posthumanism, new materialism, and material feminism. Stacy Alaimo, a pivotal figure in these discussions, co-edited *Material Feminisms* with Susan J. Hekman in 2008 and further elaborated on these ideas in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* in 2010. Alaimo (2010, 20) defines trans-corporeality as “the very stuff of the ever-emerging world,” emphasizing that all embodied beings are intermeshed with the dynamic material world, constantly transformed by and transforming it.

In the context of capitalist societies, trans-corporeality reveals the adverse effects of mass production on the environment and human health, illustrating a constant interchange between human bodies and their surroundings across various domains—biological, technological, socio-economic, and political. In the volume edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert titled *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (2015), the scholars emphasize the vibrancy and agency of natural elements, which aligns with Alaimo’s idea of matter as an active participant rather than a passive backdrop. Further contemporary scholarship, including the works of Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, extends this ecocritical framework by exploring how “storied matter” in literature reflects the inseparable link between human bodies and environmental processes (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014). This concept emphasizes that material bodies and natural landscapes not only embody historical narratives of exploitation but actively participate in reshaping social and cultural identities.

Moreover, this critical lens enables an examination of how feminist scholarship addresses the historical objectification of women and marginalized groups (de Beauvoir, 1956; Mulvey, 1975; Hooks, 1992; Bordo, 1995). Trans-corporeality expands this feminist critique by positing that bodies and environments are not merely backdrops but active participants in the production of identity. For example, new feminist scholars such as Astrida Neimanis emphasize in “Bodies of Water, Human Rights and the Hydrocommons” (2009, 163) that human bodies are interconnected through a “hydrocommons”, where the flow of water reflects an ecological kinship that transcends individual boundaries. Neimanis’ view of water as a connective element resonates with Alaimo’s idea of trans-corporeality by illustrating how bodily identities are co-constituted through shared materialities.

Building on the foundational work of intercorporeality by Gail Weiss, Alaimo’s trans-corporeal framework foregrounds the inherent interconnections among human and nonhuman bodies (Weiss, 1999; 158). Alaimo extends this notion through Karen Barad’s concept of intra-

action, presented in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), which argues for the inseparability of material agencies from subjects. Barad's theoretical framework highlights that bodies and environments are dynamically entangled, continuously reshaping each other, a view that resonates with recent ecological discourse emphasizing the fluid boundaries between human and nonhuman entities.

In *Bodily Natures*, Alaimo (2010, 60) argues that the trans-corporeal subject arises from environmental health and justice movements, tracing substances across bodies and places. This perspective extends to issues of racism, as exemplified in Percival Everett's novel *Watershed* (1996), where bodily harm (i.e. the protagonist is being subjected to police brutality and lethal medical experiments during which his body becomes contaminated by the Anthrax virus) becomes a manifestation of the environmental racism of the U.S. military against native American lands (Alaimo, 64-70). Similarly, Ballard's urban violence novel *Super-Cannes* connects violence against immigrants within the business park Eden-Olympia to a desire to purify urban spaces, highlighting how transcorporeality spans diverse fields. In Eden-Olympia, business operations rely on the exploitation of immigrants from the nearby town of Cannes La Bocca. Tragically, any hints of potential depression among the executives and residents of this high-tech business park and gated community were repelled through acts of molestation against these very immigrants: "Whenever he felt the blues coming on, he would take one of the security men into La Bocca and provoke an incident with a passing immigrant. It worked a treat", as a residential psychiatrist Wilder Penrose puts it for one of the CEOs at Eden-Olympia (SC, 191). Violence against immigrants serves as an executive therapy for stress relief. Trashing Arab cars, beating Russian pimps, violent attacks and rape of immigrant women turned into a "kind of weekend fascism" (SC, 281) as they provided certain health benefits for the executives drained by the work.

Trans-corporeality is evident in environmental health movements, where substances and chemicals impact human health. This methodological framework enables an exploration of how characters in *Cocaine Nights* embody the intersections of gender, commodity culture, and environmental toxicity. Through the commodification of femininity, the novel illustrates how women are situated within a socio-cultural landscape that objectifies their bodies and exploits their identities. For instance, characters involved in running a beauty salon and selling exotic underwear adapt to the demands of a commodified environment. This aligns with Alaimo's assertion that places are "never merely

background" but "human landscapes in which people blend into their living spaces" (2010; 122). Additionally, Alaimo's call for a "scientific investigation into our coextensive environments" (2010; 20) emphasizes the notion that humans are integral parts of the material world, deeply interconnected with their environments.

According to The World Health Organisation (WHO), environmental health includes assessing and controlling all the environmental factors (physical, chemical, and biological) that affect a person's behaviour and health and creating health-supportive environments (Alaimo, 2010; 91). Human health and ability are affected by air pollution, medicaments and other substances and chemicals, which Alaimo (*ibid*; 12) associates with the concept of materiality "at a less perceptible level". In the context of disability studies, human bodies are seen as trans-corporeal spaces displaying "the ways in which built environments constitute disability" (Alaimo, *ibid*; 12). Environmental Illness (EI) or Multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) resulting from exposure to 'normal' twenty-first-century environments and substances and causing a range of reactions (i.e., rashes, tremors, convulsions, breathing difficulties, headaches, dizziness, nausea, joint pain, "brain fog," and "extreme fatigue") is the closest to the concept of trans-corporeality, as people with MCS take the world into their bodies (Alaimo, *ibid*; 114). In other words, they "experience their selves as coextensive with the material world [...] [full of] potentially deviant material agencies" (Alaimo, *ibid*; 116).

In Ballard's urban violence novels, urban environment simultaneously conditions humans' minds and behaviour in such a way that it generates people whose counternatural actions and illicit deeds, along with the products they consume and are exposed to — pharmaceuticals, xenobiotic chemicals, air pollution, and so on — make them become 'waste' themselves, toxic materials that should be mitigated. The residents consume products that, apart from harming the planet, may harm the human bodies to such an extent that they can be classified as "dangerous hazardous waste," thus creating the notion that "all that scary stuff, supposedly out there, is already within" (Alaimo, *ibid*; 18). In other words, the toxic bodies as by-products of EI emerge from "taking the world into your body" (Alaimo, *ibid*; 119). Ballard's protagonists constantly 'consume' and are 'consumed' by the environment (Škobo and Đukić, "Urban Landscape," 2023), hence their toxic bodies, just like the denatured landscapes they belong to, are identified as trans-corporeal spaces where biological, technological, social, economic, political, and other processes and systems circulate through and blend.

3. The female body in *The Drowned World*

In Ballard's cli-fi novel, *The Drowned World* (1962), the narrative revolves around a global flood, intertwining themes of women's oppression and the exploitation of nature. Cenk Tan's (2021) social ecofeminist lens, which focuses on the analysis of the sole female character, Beatrice Dahl, emphasises the oppressive impact of patriarchal capitalism on both women and the environment. The flood, symbolically associated with women, disrupts the Earth's balance, exacerbating the exploitation of nature and the degradation of women within the oppressive grip of capitalism.

Despite being the only female in the drowned city, Beatrice is exclusively valued for her gender, physical beauty, submissiveness, and fragility. Patriarchal standards confine her, leading to passive acceptance of objectification. Her fascination with material wealth and jewellery reflects an androcentric mindset, yet her complexity, as described by Tan (2021; 19), reveals hidden strength. Despite being portrayed as a 'sleeping python' with concealed power, Beatrice remains confined by androcentric norms, hindering her from resisting oppression and embracing her true female identity.

Beatrice's exclusive status as the only surviving woman remains ambiguous, but her character typifies mental instability, aligning with broader thematic elements in Ballard's works. This interpretation underscores the interconnectedness of gender inequality with societal issues, highlighting the impact of patriarchal systems on women in environmental catastrophes. Tan (ibid; 23) posits that her unattainable position accentuates the extent of her exploitation. Beatrice symbolises Everywoman, epitomising the oppression of all women under patriarchal capitalism and the exploitation of nature.

While Tan's analysis is rooted in social ecofeminism, emphasising the specific oppression of women in the context of environmental catastrophe and patriarchal capitalism, contemporary 'material feminists,' including Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Vicki Kirby, Stacy Alaimo, and others, provide a theoretical lens that transcends gender-specific concerns. They challenge essentialism and propose "a reconceptualization of nature" as an active, transforming force, as it "can no longer serve as the ground of essentialism," as Alaimo argued in "Ecofeminism without Nature" (2010; 302). Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality is applicable to the blurred boundaries between human and non-human entities in Ballard's post-apocalyptic landscape. Beatrice's journey exemplifies trans-corporeal transformation, where her body becomes a site of physical and psychological transformation. Hallucinations blur the lines between her body and the environment,

and exposure to the strange radiation of the flooded world induces mutation and transformation. This process mirrors a psychological shift, as Beatrice forms a deep connection with the non-human entities around her.

Beatrice's experiences illustrate trans-corporeal transformation, "a process of becoming-with that remakes both the human and nonhuman involved in the encounter," as defined by Alaimo (2010, 4). Fear and disgust transform into awe and wonder as she appreciates the interconnectedness of all life forms. The transformation of the natural landscape in *The Drowned World* signifies a call for the recreation and transformation of humans by changing their attitude towards the environment. In "Trans-corporeal Feminisms," Alaimo (ibid; 238) suggests that embracing the inseparability of humans and their bodies from the environment can lead to a positive change in trans-corporeal spaces.

4. Forms of contamination of the female body in *Cocaine Nights*

Ballard's urban violence opus introduces the world of gated communities, which reflect zones of incessant ennui as a product of the culture they inhabit — a culture where aggression, transgression, consumerism, and violence take precedence (Wilson, 2017; 157). Such a landscape is indicative of the forthcoming future. Within these communities, indifference towards nature mirrors the apathy of Ballard's subjects.

The novel *Cocaine Nights* takes central stage for the analysis of the reciprocal impact of natural landscape and human entities, with a particular focus on female characters. Laden with dystopian elements such as violence, technology, and perversions, it reveals a gated paradise dominated by leisure, where idle residents indulge in a languid lifestyle. Both Residencia Costasol and Estrella de Mar, the latter being "a peninsular resort twenty miles to the east of Marbella" (CN, 6), have mostly British occupants, "with a few Dutch and French" (CN, 96). However, there are marked distinctions between them. Estrella de Mar, built in the 1970s, has open access to tourists and visitors, a bustling nightlife, tennis competitions, amateur theatricals, lavish parties, and a continuous undercurrent of crime. The atmosphere of the leisure-driven paradise of Estrella de Mar is shattered by an arson attack in which five people are killed. Despite Frank Prentice's confession of the crime, the manager of the exclusive Club Nautico, no one truly believes that he may be the potential culprit. His brother Charles, a travel brochure writer, eventually arrives at the resort, endeavouring to persuade his brother to retract his confession but becomes drawn into the pleasures of this

languid paradise (Petrović 38). However, Charles' further investigation, which demands adapting to the community of Estrella de Mar and which he sees as a place of spiritual death, will lead him to uncover that behind the seemingly desirable social flourishing and the enviable energy of its dwellers lie deep pathological motives and activities (Petrović, 2007; 38).

Unlike Estrella de Mar, Residencia Costasol was created in the 1990s, with strict security rules and almost no visitors, except for a few. Even friends can pose an issue, as "gates and front doors need to be unlocked, alarm systems disconnected, and someone else is breathing your air. Besides, they bring in uneasy memories of the outside world" (CN, 96). It is an oasis for dozy dwellers inducted into a state of coma by doing nothing all day, as the complex itself is designed for such purposes. However, Bobby Crawford, a tennis enthusiast from Estrella de Mar and a 'psychopath as the saint,' and Elizabeth Shand, Estrella de Mar's business savvy, have somewhat different intentions regarding the revival of the place, aiming to make it more like Estrella de Mar in terms of the overall atmosphere.

Within Ballard's urban violence opus, apocalyptic futures unfold, depicting cities transforming into deserted concrete jungles. These landscapes symbolise the alienation of citizens through technological advances, emphasising the negative repercussions of such progress on both human figures and the natural environment. The pervasive impact of technology becomes a contributing factor to the social and psychological entropy, notably evident in *Cocaine Nights*. This novel serves as a canvas reflecting the inner and outer turmoil of its residence and their surroundings, emphasising the influence of popular culture, mass media, cinematography, and technology on both individuals and the environment. Female protagonists, integral to the narrative, undergo three distinct forms of contamination resulting from the transformation of the natural landscapes (1), their exposure to and consumption of toxins and pollutants (2), and traumatic experiences (3).

4.1. Transformation of natural landscapes

Ballard's exploration of the transformation of natural landscape in *Cocaine Nights* examines the progressive metamorphosis of townscape. As the natural soil gradually disappears beneath a layer of chemicals, Ballard in the preface to the novel *Vermilion Sands* poignantly notes that "cities are reduced to mere urban contexts meant for intersecting roadways" (7-8). This transformation not only alters the physical landscapes, ranging from retirement centres to squash courts, plunge pools to natural elements such as chocolate sand beaches on the

Spanish Riviera, but also isolates individuals within denatured social territories.

Along the Spanish coast, the once-scenic coastal pueblos are losing their pristine features, with every particle of the natural landscape either deserted or transformed for human use. *Cocaine Nights* vividly describes this change, portraying landscaped gardens and flowerbeds with cannas as “untouched by human feet since the day they were laid,” and villas amidst this idle paradise that fail to embrace the beauty of the nearby beach, as “the sea’s only two hundred yards away but none of the villas looks out onto the beach” (CN; 95).

The conflicting viewpoint arises as humans assert dominance over the natural world, creating concrete jungles that demand nature’s adjustment to humankind. In this novel, emerging subcultures, such as commodity culture, expose residents to different microcosms, trapping them in “an alienated world as capitalism’s terminal zone” (Gasiorek, 2005; 174). This also points to the presence of social entropy and the phenomenon of spiritual death, as nothing substantial happens in this retirement oasis whose disaffected populace is also nihilist in nature. This artificial environment profoundly affects the female characters, who, surrounded by luxurious villas and immaculate pools, reflect the sterile and spotlessly clean exterior.

In this seemingly idyllic but stagnant setting, women exhibit a sterility not only in their physical energy and enthusiasm but also in their sense of self. The luxury and monotony of Estrella de Mar contribute to a profound boredom that becomes a catalyst for change. The environment, built around obsessions with crime and transgression, shapes the residents’ behaviour, notably evident in places like Club Nautico and car parks where illicit activities unfold. For the women inhabiting this space, these surroundings become integral to their sense of self, as beyond these activities, they lack a genuine understanding of who they are. The prevalent illicit activities, including drugs, pornography, and violence, dominate the residents’ lives, creating a mechanical pursuit of life’s stimuli induced by the artificiality of their environment. Bobby Crawford’s observation that “town-scapes have changed, and the citizenry is not living anymore” (CN, 99) underscores the residents’ detachment from genuine life experiences, replaced by a numb existence driven by artificial stimuli.

Artificial features dominate the landscape of the sunny coast of Costa del Sol, such as the half-completed Aqua park, artificial hills with unused nightclubs, villa projects that are still in progress, and even golf courts multiplying “like the symptoms of a hypertrophied grassland cancer” (CN, 5). Furthermore, adjacent areas may seem even more

threatening for humans, such as Sotogrande without suburbs or centre, which “seemed to be little more than a dispersal ground for golf courses and swimming pools” (CN, 5). All this space on the coast is internalised, pointing to a man’s will to own and a lust for power. The internalisation of space reflects the internal world of the residents of these complexes — a state of brain death veiled in luxury.

Artificial elements, such as satellite dishes dominating the blue sky, a plethora of villas with empty swimming pools and tennis courts, indicate that the residents in Costasol “live[d] in an eventless world” (CN, 13). This state of affairs may not merely be due to the absence of a need or a will towards filling these landscapes with human presence, for socialising and for activity. It is also a matter of the absence of awareness for such things, which lies in the phenomenon called narcoma syndrome affecting all residents. It all stems from the corrupt system, and “our governments are preparing for a future without work” (CN, 81). As Gasiorek (2005; 175) puts it, old revolutionary ways for changing the system in its entirety have dissipated. Since politics cannot reach the public anymore, residents have found new means for reaching freedom in which criminality and psychopathology are celebrated (Gasiorek, *ibid*; 175). Conclusively, these oppositional practices lead the citizenry of this sunny coast to find sense and purpose in sociopathic behaviour between the occasional bouts of drug abuse and illicit doings. Politics, religion, and a return to nature “fail to excite the rest of [the residents]” (CN, 81).

The transformation of the natural landscape holds a reciprocal relationship with the bodies of the female characters, revealing the insidious contamination of women through the alteration of their surroundings. For instance, Laurie Fox, ensnared in a drug-infested landscape due to her father’s heroin habit, embodies the intersection of the natural environment and the female form. Her body becomes a wasteland in Estrella de Mar, a desolate terrain marked by the pervasive influence of substances.

Elizabeth Shand, the most successful businesswoman in Estrella de Mar, provides another intriguing example. Her body mirrors the contamination brought about by the transformation of the natural landscape into a hub of artificiality and business culture. Constantly seeking new properties, she is depicted as “a predatory widow visiting an entailed property about to fall in her grasp” (CN, 101), aligning with the landscape’s transformation into artificial entities. Her calculating mindset reflects the composed and strategic influence of business culture permeating her core.

Dr. Paula Hamilton, a former lover of Frank and the primary distributor of pills that sustain the torpid lifestyle of Estrella de Mar,

embodies the duality of this retirement oasis. Like the façades of the architecture that appear nearly impeccable, Paula seems calm and composed on the outside but harbours internal unrest. This parallel between Paula and Estrella de Mar reinforces the idea that, in this environment, everything, including human bodies, is treated as a commodity. Women, attempting to navigate this corrupt system, often find themselves playing roles of victims while simultaneously becoming accomplices in illicit deeds. However, exceptions exist, such as the abovementioned Elizabeth Shand, who emerges as a representative of women striving to cultivate a more empowered female ecotopia within this complex social equation.

Humans' alteration of the established natural order by embracing artificiality leads to hazardous consequences absorbed by both the human and the more-than-human world. In the zero-waste community of Estrella de Mar, feminine roles gradually assimilate into a commodified culture that promotes prostitution, drug abuse, and other actions not exclusive to any gender.

4.2. Toxins and pollutants

The concept of commodity culture, as Gasiorek suggests, objectifies human bodies—particularly those of women—turning identities and bodies into commodities for various gains. In this novel, the contamination of female bodies by toxins and pollutants reveals a complex relationship between the environment, gender dynamics, and the commodification within the community of Estrella de Mar. Here, women's bodies become sites of both physical and social contamination, illustrating how the consumption of toxins is not merely a lifestyle choice but a consequence of a system that treats human bodies as consumable objects. In this context, the protagonists embody trans-corporeal subjects, absorbing toxins through participation in this commodified culture.

In Estrella de Mar, constant stimulation is demanded, encapsulated in Dr. Paula Hamilton's mantra: "be honest, what else is there to do in paradise?" (CN; 39). Most characters in the novel voluntarily expose themselves to toxic chemical, with a few exceptions like Laurie Fox, whose addiction stems from her father's influence. Estrella de Mar is depicted as a "Zombieland ... perfused by vodka and tonic" (CN, 39), while the neighboring Costasol complex is "valiumed out of its mind," awaiting Dr. Paula Hamilton's "new prescription" (CN, 97). These tranquilized communities show how, under commodity culture, the boundary between the human body and environmental pollutants blurs. In this context, drugs and toxins transform into commodities, reinforcing

the objectification of residents, especially women, who both consume and are contaminated by these “products.”

Perpetual intoxication fuels “a social economy based on drug dealing, theft, pornography, and escort services—from top to bottom a condominium of crime” (CN, 138). Here, women’s bodies are commodified twice—first as consumers of toxins and then as objects within the very economy these substances support. This cycle of spiritual and physical contamination demonstrates how commodity culture degrades human bodies, reducing them to disposable objects within a consumption-driven system.

The residents’ addiction to mood-altering substances like cocaine and amphetamines, treated as “mood-enhancers, like brandy or Scotch” (CN, 138), illustrates how the toxins are trivialized and normalized within their lives. For Charles Prentice, a visitor from the “outer world,” this toxic economy is unimaginable. Yet, for the residents, their dependence on these substances reflects a deeper entanglement with commodity culture, where physical and spiritual degradation becomes a form of social currency in this hedonistic environment. The lethargic lifestyles and drug abuse create a paradoxical cycle in which individuals seek to “awaken” their senses while numbing them, turning their bodies into repositories for the very pollutants marketed to them.

Female characters are exposed to contamination on multiple levels. Drugs such as sedatives prescribed by figures like Dr. Paula Hamilton and psychiatrist Dr. Irwin Sanger, alongside “medicinal-quality heroin and cocaine,” (CN, 90) contribute to their toxic state. The abundant silos of cocaine and heroin that fuel the infamous “cocaine nights” (CN, 94), as well as the widespread use of amphetamines to counter depression, highlight how toxins have become essential commodities in this community. Many women in Estrella de Mar regularly use Valium and Largactil, which lead to hallucinations, delusions, extreme mood swings, loss of coordination, and physical impairments, leaving visible marks of degradation on their bodies that symbolize the environmental and social decay around them.

Despite social barriers, female characters engage in prostitution, vice, drug abuse, and drug dealing—actions redefined as “positive social ends” (CN, 136). Mixing alcohol with sedatives creates a fatal combination that dulls judgement, yet residents indulge in these activities, resulting in a day of anaesthetized torpor and a night of illicit pursuits. This directly contaminates their bodies, rendering women victims of their own choices, as seen with Bibi Jansen, the Swedish servant of the Hollinger family, who shifts from Prozac to acid and cocaine. Another extreme case is Anne Hollinger, who, despite claiming

to have stopped abusing drugs, is found with a hypodermic syringe during a fire in the Hollinger villa. Prostitution, particularly, amplifies this contamination, as women's bodies are both consumed by and contribute to the community's toxic economy. Laure Fox, for example, further contaminates herself not only through heroin use with Dr. Sanger but also through her participation in pornographic film sessions and sexual encounters arranged by Bobby Crawford, reinforcing the transactional and self-perpetuating nature of the environment she inhabits.

The degradation extends beyond the physical realm, as cultural norms deteriorate through incestuous acts and exploitative labor, such as women attending a party in sequin dresses after witnessing a car set on fire or participating in a local mother-and-daughter massage service offering 'discreet' intimate experiences. Ballard uses these examples to show that, under commodity culture, even interpersonal relations are commodified, further polluting the values of Estrella de Mar and exacerbating overall contamination of its social and moral fabric.

Elizabeth Shand, a major shareholder at Club Nautico and a powerful figure in the community, presents a contrast. She operates above the physical contamination that affects other women, embodying a "predatory" figure untouched by substance abuse. Focused on property ownership and the management of illicit activities, Elizabeth, instead of falling victim to contamination, manipulates others, thereby perpetuating the toxic culture of Estrella de Mar. Resembling Beatrice in *The Drowned World*, Elizabeth is depicted as "a jewelled cobra half-asleep on an altar" (CN, 57), with "her predatory mind [which] worked best at temperatures lower than the heart's" (CN, 104). She embodies action that is almost epidemic and dangerous, as the mastermind behind fatal ventures and constantly ravenous for new properties, akin to a 'predatory widow' eyeing an entailed estate.

Supporting Elizabeth is a group, including the Keswick sisters, who manage Thai restaurants that double as storage spaces for illegal substances. Unlike other female characters victimized through prostitution or addiction, the Keswick sisters avoid bodily contamination and, instead, function within the economy by managing businesses that facilitate the community's cycle of drug abuse. Through their roles, Ballard illustrates how even those who escape direct physical contamination are implicated in the broader economy that profits from the degradation of others.

4.3. Traumatic experiences

Exposure to a variety of factors—ranging from cultural influence and crime levels to environmental racism, pollution and toxins—significantly shapes the health outcomes of the female characters. The toxic environment they inhabit contributes to their obliviousness to the urgent need for change, impacting their well-being. This ignorance leads to detrimental effects such as memory loss, suicidal tendencies, mental disorders, and increased aggression.

Ballard's portrayal of the contaminated landscape in *Cocaine Nights* extends beyond the physical environment, probing the psychological dimensions of the female characters. The novel's narrative is woven with traumatic experiences that shape the feminine psyche within the toxic microcosm of Estrella de Mar. The female characters, exposed to a milieu saturated with crime, substance abuse, and moral decay, undergo profound psychological transformations. These traumas take many forms—ranging from violent acts like rape to involvement in illicit activities—and contribute to a complex web of psychological distress.

The brutal rape of Anne Hollinger, a harrowing incident that reverberates through the narrative, is indicative of the novel's exploration of violent trauma. The violation of Anne's autonomy and dignity symbolises the darker undercurrents of Estrella de Mar, where criminality intertwines with everyday life. Dr. Paula Hamilton's participation in filming the act, further normalizes violence within the community. The psychological aftermath of such traumatic events is palpable in characters like Laurie Fox, who, after being exposed to heroin by her father, descends into degradation, participating in pornographic films and engaging in sexual acts. The intersection of violence and degradation becomes a recurring theme, marking the female characters with enduring scars.

These traumatic experiences are inseparable from the rampant substance abuse that permeates Estrella de Mar. Drugs like heroin, cocaine, and amphetamines become mechanisms for coping with the pervasive ennui and emptiness of life in the resort. The transformation of the female psyche is evident in the altered states induced by these substances, resulting in hallucinations, delusions, and extreme mood swings. Characters like Laurie and Anne embody the destructive consequences of substance abuse, reflecting the toxic environment that shapes them.

The commodification of female bodies through the pervasive culture of consumption contributes significantly to the traumatic experiences of the women in Estrella de Mar. The objectification of their

identities, as seen in the case of Laurie and Anne, reduces them to mere vessels of exploitation, perpetuating a cycle of degradation. Both characters embody the loss of agency and identity in the face of commodification. The trauma inflicted through commodification goes beyond physical acts; it seeps into the very essence of the feminine psyche, leaving lasting imprints on their self-perception and interpersonal relationships. The haunting portrait of the feminine psyche within the contaminated landscape of Estrella de Mar is further exemplified by Dr. Paula Hamilton, “a typical woman (doctor) – a calm and efficient front, but inside rather shaky” (CN, 31). The description of her as having “a calm and efficient front” implies that she presents herself in a composed and professional manner, particularly in her role as a doctor. However, the contrasting revelation that she is “detached from her emotions and sexuality” (CN, 37) indicates an inner emotional turbulence or instability, and the loss of common feminine characteristics.

5. The complex dynamics of gender and commodity culture

Despite the significant presence of at least six female characters in this novel, surpassing those in *The Drowned World*, their existence does not alter the overall impression of humanity but rather reinforces established patterns of human behaviour in Ballard’s earlier work, albeit in a different context. Much like in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the female characters in *Cocaine Nights* amalgamate into a singular, abstract representation of femininity, suggesting the emergence of a ‘new kind of woman’ within the denatured social realm they inhabit. This woman conforms to the objectification of her body and, in turn, absorbs “the psychoactive fruit that falls from the tree” (CN, 39). In other words, women absorb the psychoactive element as it “stops them going mad” (CN, 58), serving as a coping mechanism within this toxic environment.

This portrayal moves beyond traditional gender roles by highlighting how cultural and societal forces shape female identity. Alaimo and Hekman’s (2008; 217) concept of pre-existing bodies challenges binary notions of gender, offering fresh insights into the interaction between the body, the environment, and cultural forces. In *Cocaine Nights*, both female and male characters exhibit ‘chameleon-like’ qualities (Gasiorek, 2005; 171), adapting to their surroundings and assuming roles influenced by their engagement with non-human elements, particularly within the realm of commodity culture.

However, the women of Estrella de Mar face a unique form of commodification, as their roles within this artificial society extend

beyond passive victimhood. Rather than mere bystanders, they are essential participants in the criminal undercurrents that define the community. Characters such as Carole Morton, a hairdresser running a beauty salon in the shopping mall, and the widows Susan Henry and Anthea Rose, who sell exotic underwear to cover up illegal activities, exemplify how women's identities and bodies are subsumed by commodity culture. Widows and divorcees are recruited by massage parlours, escort agencies, and bordellos to provide sexual services, thus transforming them into symbols of commodified femininity.

Beyond the beauty salons, other female residents in Estrella de Mar recognize the economic potential of the film business over traditional outlets. For instance, some women who initially ran beauty salons shift to starring in amateur pornographic films. These films, which Crawford describes as "more of a nature film" focusing on "the wildlife of the Residencia Costasol" (CN; 110), are emblematic of the commodification and desecration of female bodies within the community. This intersection of commodity culture and gender is further exemplified in Raissa Livingston, a widow who has become a "tank-trap full of vodka" who has "done a little acting before" (CN; 110), showcasing how the toxic culture in Estrella de Mar shapes female identity by merging femininity with objectification and substance abuse. Anne Hollinger also embodies this brutal commodification, becoming a victim of the societal forces at play in this consumer-driven world. Her fate, shaped by prostitution and induced trances, illustrates how women are caught in the destructive currents of commodity culture. The psychological toll of this environment is also explored through Dr. Paula Hamilton, whose emotional detachment reflects the erasure of feminine identity under societal pressures and professional roles, deepening the narrative's complexities of gender and commodification.

In Estrella de Mar, drugs are woven into the fabric of daily life, contributing to the banalization of substances and clandestine activities. During one scene, Crawford distributes sachets of cocaine to women, who tuck them into the cups of their swimsuits as though it were a normal, routine part of their lives: "He[Crawford] tore a dozen of sachets of cocaine from the plastic snake, which the women tucked into the cups of their swimsuits, and began to demonstrate the camcorder to them" (CN; 109). Here, the line between everyday life and criminality blurs, reinforcing the pervasive influence of commodity culture and its impact on gender dynamics.

The male-female dynamic in *Cocaine Nights* is further complicated by characters like Dr. Sanger, who sustains the trends established by commodity culture. Acting as a "shady character," he forms "ménages

of vulnerable young women" (CN; 31) and often assumes a Svengali-like role, positioning himself as a father figure to those in need. His role highlights the disturbing undercurrents of exploitation within Estrella de Mar, where acts like rape, pornographic films, and prostitution are normalized within a society that maintains a veneer of gender equality while concealing the pervasive degradation and objectification of women.

6. Conclusion

Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality emphasises the intricate connection between living beings and their material surroundings, challenging the notion of human autonomy. Examining J. G. Ballard's novels, *The Drowned World* and *Cocaine Nights*, within capitalist frameworks, underscores a more-than-human realm persisting despite humanity's dominion over nature. The essence of *Cocaine Nights* lies in the corruption of nature and material, reflecting the simultaneous corruption of the female entity and identity.

The industrialisation process led to the proliferation of urban settings and the abuse and exploitation of natural and material entities, including women. This has resulted in women grappling with urbanisation, attempting to understand their new roles and identities. In this modern-day utopia, all women are regarded as "totally promiscuous [...], if they want to be," (SC; 33). Their identities and roles are distorted, as their bodies are wastelands contaminated either through prostitution, use of drugs, and exposure to various chemicals. The insidious contamination of their bodies mirrors the environmental degradation surrounding them, highlighting the intricate relationship between human health and the polluted landscapes they inhabit.

In *The Drowned World*, Beatrice Dahl embodies trans-corporeality by merging with post-apocalyptic flora and fauna, blurring the lines between the human and non-human. *Cocaine Nights* examines this concept in greater depth, revealing the active negotiation and transformation of female bodies within their toxic, commodity-driven environment. In this affluent yet decaying community, women's struggles become entangled with environmental toxicity, symbolizing the deeper decay and corruption of society and challenging traditional boundaries of identity and autonomy.

As societies become more absorbed in corporate and digital lifestyles, issues like technology and substance abuse rise to prominence, reducing the human experience to a wasteland that mirrors environmental decay. Through Ballard's portrayal of the trans-corporeal female body, he critiques human-centric views and dominant

paradigms that shape our understanding of the world. This analysis extends the conversation to include broader themes of ecology, feminism, and the representation of humanity in literature. It prompts us to rethink the deep, intertwined connection between individuals and their environment, challenging traditional notions of independence and inviting a fresh perspective on our place within the web of existence.

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**APSTRAKT: PREGOVARANJE O GRANICAMA I OZNAČAVANJE
KONTAMINACIJE: TRANSKORPORALNO ŽENSKO TELO U ROMANU
KOKAINSKE NOĆI DŽ. G. BALARDA**

Ovaj rad istražuje koncept transkorporalnosti u jednom od romana urbanog nasilja Dž. G. Balarda *Kokainske noći* (1996) i koristi njegov raniji "katastrofični" roman *Potopljeni svet* (1962) kao okvir kojim potkrepljuje tumačenje ženskih tela kao transkorporalnih prostora. Roman *Potopljeni svet* se fokusira na jedini ženski lik koji živi pod patrijarhalnim režimom, u kome ona biva oblikovana i potisnuta u androcentričnom svetu, a to istovremeno prati katastrofične događaje na Zemlji. U *Kokainskim noćima*, ženski likovi su izloženi urbanom nasilju koje proizlazi iz interakcije između ljudskih i vanljudskih subjekata, pri čemu njihova tela služe kao mesto kontakta. Oslanjajući se na četvrti talas ekokritike, ovaj rad nalaže da ženska tela u *Kokainskim noćima* dovode u pitanje tradicionalno poimanje ljudske autonomije i ističu međusobnu povezanost svih bića u ekosistemu. Detaljnom analizom ključnih scena i likova, rad pokazuje kako ova ženska tela postaju mesta pregovaranja i transformacije, gde se granice između ljudskih i vanljudskih subjekata konstantno pomeraju. Takođe, ovaj rad ispituje kako okruženja obeležavaju i utiču na ženska tela, dovodeći do kontaminacije i kompromisa sa tom sredinom kroz njihova iskustva. Sagledavanjem stvari iz transkorporalne perspektive, ovo istraživanje pruža opsežno razumevanje odnosa između ljudskih i vanljudskih subjekata,

naglašavajući važnu ulogu faktora životne sredine u oblikovanju našeg fizičkog i emocionalnog blagostanja.

Ključne reči: transkorporalnost, ženska tela, urbane sredine, zdravlje životne sredine, fizičko i emocionalno blagostanje