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Assembling Reading and Writing in the Face of Loss: Christa Couture's *How to Lose Everything* and Dakshana Bascaramurty's *This Is Not the End of Me*

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ABSTRACT

Through nonfictional texts dealing with complicated and traumatic experiences related to loss, readers and writers seem to become more intricately entangled. Following Rita Felski, reading is said to ignite a process of "recognition" (23) which might be paralleled to the self-discovery process which writing may achieve. Sympathy and mutual identification arise and bring readers' and writers' identities closer, creating an intersubjective space where health and illness assemble their relations. This analysis of Christa Couture's *How to Lose Everything* and Dakshana Bascaramurty's *This is Not the End of Me: Lessons on Living from a Dying Man* will attempt to show that there is a tight link between reader and writer through nonfiction which transcends the literary text. In addition, the healing nature of this connection will be highlighted, which supports the idea of using reading and writing techniques as therapeutical strategies in the coping with emotional turmoil and distress.

Keywords

Bibliotherapy; Care; Healing; Life Writing; Loss; Scriptotherapy

1. Introduction

Literature hosts an evident potential for communication. Literature communicates—through words—fact or fiction, experiences, ideas, emotions, and sensations. Undoubtedly, narration occurs as a result of a narrator's voice; ultimately, the literary connection operates when the narrative voice finds a reader with whom to share those experiences, ideas or emotions. For that reason, reader and writer are thought to be interconnected by the text. The figure of the reader was remarkably valued after the emergence of the so-called reader-response theory in the 1960s, but the figure of the author may have been disregarded after the publication of Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author," as he no longer considered the author as "the past of his own book" (145). However, for the purposes of this article, the role of the author will gain relevance in the consideration of a particular genre known as life writing, which encompasses a wide range of autobiographical texts like diaries, memoirs, travel narratives, epistles and personal testimonies. More specifically, there will be a focus on illness narratives where the writer's experiences are highlighted, and still, the possibility of a reader is acknowledged. Thus, intimacy becomes a cornerstone in the concoction of autobiographical pieces which face straining situations which can appeal to readers' current needs.

Revealing intimate thoughts and emotions related to painstaking issues like loss can be thought to expose one's vulnerability. Nonetheless, it is interesting to ponder on life writing texts dealing with instances of loss like illness, death or separation, as they are intrinsic components of life. It is our aim to explore the benefits of producing life writing texts delving into loss, and what is more, the benefits which those texts can project on the reader or the receiver of such stories. With this, there will be an attempt at unveiling the potential healing nature of a relationship originating from a nonfictional text based on a grieving experience, especially if that experience is shared. The occurrence of trauma binds sufferers together, following Patrick Carnes's idea of "trauma bonding" in the event of abusive relationships and addictions in general (30). It will be stated that readers and writers enduring a particular sorrowful situation may forge a collective identity emerging from loss and intended to initiate or to contribute to a healing process. For this, we will first prove that there is solid background supporting the idea that readers and writers—or the narrative voice in a text—interact throughout the reading and writing process, creating a tight link between both. Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature* and Nancy Miller's notion of entangled identities will be pivotal in this sense. Then, we will place a narrower focus on the nature of the emerging relationship between reader and writer selves, based on healing and mutual care. As reading and writing can have a therapeutic effect on the treatment

of physical strain, or mental or emotional disorder, the terms bibliotherapy and scriptotherapy will gain relevance in the discussion, demonstrating that creativity, and arts and literature in general, can have a therapeutic potential. The contemporary world should now seek the union of different disciplines to obtain more profitable results in the confrontation of problems and challenges. The Health Humanities originate from this notion of interdisciplinarity, as literary and artistic ways of expression have much to offer to the medical field. In fact, it will be suggested that, above all, human welfare can be achieved through basic gestures like listening, understanding and caring for others, which promote a sense of collectivity and togetherness.

Interdisciplinarity is at the heart of contemporary science and modern thinking. The new millennium brought a paradigm shift which would entail a more integrative and connective conception of science, one that involves the convergence of different ideas, perspectives and disciplines (Ahnert et al. 3). The Health Humanities, hence, seem an appropriate example to explore in this discussion, as it introduces humanities into the medical field, which suggests the productivity of artistic and humanistic products in relation to healthcare and wellbeing. It is our aim to prove that literature can be deemed a caring mechanism, especially in emotionally challenging situations marked by loss. However, it is important to remark that, in this paper, we will consider healing as a *process*, in contrast with the *state* of health (Kristeva et al. 56), which can be initiated through reading and writing. For this, a reference to bibliotherapy and scriptotherapy will be incorporated into the discussion, highlighting the importance of the figures of readers and writers and their experiences. That is the reason why our focus will be placed on nonfiction as a potential genre where to explore how readers and writers interact, not only through the literary text, but also beyond it. This enables us to see further implications which can transcend the literary relationship between both, suggesting the possibility of promoting a symbiotic connection that may personally enrich, or heal one another. To conclude, these ideas will be applied to the reading of two Canadian life writing texts: Christa Couture's *How to Lose Everything* (2020), and Dakshana Bascaramurty's *This Is Not the End of Me: Lessons on Living from a Dying Man* (2020).

2. Literary Healing Through the Dialogue Between Reader and Writer

Literature can be understood as a channel of communication through which ideas, sentiments and thoughts flow from the writer's side to the reader by means of a text. According to Felski, literature is capable of igniting recognition, of achieving a personal assimilation onto the text and its ideas. Felski explains:

> While turning a page I am arrested by a compelling description, a constellation of events, a conversation between characters, an interior monologue. Suddenly and without warning, a flash of connection leaps across the gap between text and reader; an *affinity* or an attunement is brought to light . . . In either case, I feel myself *addressed*, summoned, called to account: I cannot help seeing *traces of myself* in the pages I am reading. (23; emphasis added)

Through the act of reading, a connection arises between readers and writers. In fact, this link immerses readers not only in the text or in others' words, but also in themselves. Felski's words suggest that this link also triggers self-discovery or "self-scrutiny," which might contribute to discerning one's own personality and identity (26). As the text unravels, readers are invited to explore their inner selves, which proves the intricate connection between the text and the reader. However, we will also take notice of the role of the writer, even if disregarded after Barthes's "The Death of the Author." We will consider the text, especially in the field of nonfiction or life writing, as a composite of personal experiences and multiples selves which encounter, rejoin and share. That is, the text based on experiences becomes the link between reader and writer; from the combination of different, although interrelated, experiences, reader and writer can be said to create a sort of "social recognition" (Riestra-Camacho 92). Reader and writer do share a common experience through which one shows the other how to cope, how to undergo pain and how to pave the way for healing (96).

It is, thus, our contention that readers and writers can engage in an almost personal relationship through reading and writing, respectively, on the grounds of shared experiences. This approach is concerned with the figures of the author and the reader beyond their literary roles. Indeed, the text becomes the link between both, but it is important to remember that, in this case where nonfiction is the main focus, the text results from the writer's experience and the reader is particularly appealed to it because of its content—probably, because there is a particular interest in becoming acquainted with the writer's coping strategies in a given challenging situation. Therefore, reading and writing life writing texts can be identified with a process of personal discovery, assimilation and reciprocity.[1] There seems to be a kind of "self-extension," as Felski puts it, that reaches out to the reader in such a way that they "can see aspects

1 "Life writing" serves as an umbrella term to account for autobiographical or testimonial narratives, encompassing all its possible formats and subgenres, like diaries, memoirs, letters, biographies, autobiographies, travel narratives or journals. Throughout this article, synonymous expressions have also been used, like "autobiographical writing" and "nonfiction."

of [themselves] in what seems distant or strange" (39). The writer's self is projected onto the text to be merged with readers' own self and experience. Life writing provides a more convenient scenario to account for reader involvement in a story, as there exists a personal implication with the narration, whereas in the case of fiction, readers can be said to "never fully abandon their real-world parameters" (Martínez 112). Autobiographical writing, as well as testimonial writing, "expands the representation of an I, making it difficult to separate individual from collective experience" (qtd. in Riestra-Camacho 98). The interaction between the familiar and the distant, although related, results in the creation of entangled identities that are bound together through nonfictional texts which deal with a shared background.

Miller explores the notion of entangled identities in connection with the reading of autobiography and memoirs in "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir." Through texts dealing with loss, among other traumatic situations, readers can become emotionally attached either as a result of their empathic abilities or their shared experiences. The latter case enables the reader to immerse in the writer's own thoughts and perceptions, participating in the writer's narrative construction. Reading, then, becomes an act of companionship through which shared experiences converge and relate. Readers' recognition and participation give another dimension to the text, as it triggers the construction of what Friedman calls a "collective identity" (qtd. in Miller 544). The occurrence of loss—shaped through illness, death or separation in this discussion—can be deemed a common source of trauma which abounds in life writing texts and which, beyond writers' or readers' personal experience, creates an "affective atmosphere" (Anderson 77; Duff, "Atmospheres of Recovery" 58) that operates under relationality, as "the social is relationally constituted" (Anderson et al. 172). In this study, loss is considered the common ground behind readers' and writers' experiences, the one that brings them both to the literary arena. Links are created as well as a new collective self extends from one another encompassing their different—though parallel—experiences.

The resulting extended, collective self operates through similar experiences which mediate in the relationship between reader and writer. Given the truthful personal implication with the story, reading life writing texts can bring readers closer to a community of people affected by loss. By the same token, writing contributes to the notion of sharing, of unburdening, of giving visibility. Then, readers' recognition of the events narrated, together with writers' perspective, can establish a dialogic relationship which helps to build a common understanding and feeling. On the one hand, and more evidently, readers are given access to writers' account, but on the other, writers do also take part in readers' recognition and sympathy, as the former triggers and expands those processes in the latter. A web of relations thus appears and moves back and forth, from

one subject to the other, creating a sort of relational intersubjectivity. Miller states, "in autobiography the relational is not optional. Autobiography's story is about a web of entanglements in which we find ourselves" (544). In addition, "[t]he self and that which the self contends with in the world make up one nexus" (Larson xii), being the self both the reader and the writer, as each of them interacts with their experience of loss and moves beyond individuality to create a collective environment based on sharing.

Being part of a collective contributes to a sense of interconnectedness due to the process of sharing. Sharing experiences of trauma and loss would imply a clear need for collective work towards assimilation and acceptance. For that, mutual presence and group witnessing are fundamental in the process of overcoming trauma (Hübl and Avritt 199). It can be claimed that accompanying others through this *process* of acceptance targeted to healing (Kristeva et al. 56) reveals condolence and empathy, which suggests that the link existing between both sides is grounded on care. Nonfiction can open a channel of communication between reader and writer which, to our eyes, offers a field of mutual engagement and support. This can certainly be compared to friendly conversations through which relief and understanding can be achieved. Putting a traumatic experience into words is an important step towards recovery, which also implies that those listening are able to recognize their peers' suffering and, above all, are willing to render help (Cummings 386). Listening to others' stories, being willing to read them, or accompanying them through the process are intelligible instances of the caring network which expands through the processes of reading and writing thanks to life writing texts delving into traumatic experiences. Storytelling can build a literary community which may rise above the written material and reach a personal benefit through companionship, compassion, sympathy, and active listening/reading.

As stated above, the figures of the reader and writer are intricately related through the text. In this discussion, readers and writers are said to share experiences and, thus, to undergo similar pain, stress and emotional burden. Readers can approach the nonfictional text in an attempt to work through their trauma, but writers may also be inclined to write because of a need to unburden themselves. Reading and writing can thus be contemplated as potential healing tools, which leads the discussion to the therapeutic power of literature and autobiography. In this case, reading and writing can be linked to therapy thanks to the rewarding effects which they bring to readers and writers. Writing can be attuned to the remembrance of past experiences together with the retrieval of its subsequent feelings. Throughout this process, the writer actively engages in conscious remembering—even if biased or distorted—,which is thought to result in the initiation of the healing process (Lapsley 73). Revisiting the past establishes a connection between the writer's present and past

selves in an attempt to reconcile their present state with past "ghosts" and with their future to come, allowing for advancement, progress and improvement (Brewer 40). This is why, according to the main ideas behind scriptotherapy, writing through trauma is said by Henke to cause the "therapeutic reenactment" or "empowerment" of the subject (qtd. in Horáková 165). On the other hand, Smith also argues that the reader accompanies the writer through this remembering, which triggers recognition and accelerates a similar process in their inner selves, allowing for a personal *transformation* (qtd. in Ostenson 61).[2] Reader and writer see their identities entangled, as well as their experiences relatable. All in all, readers' and writers' past and present selves are mirrored through the text, deriving from the sharing of past wounds which are now intended to move towards acceptance and healing.

The therapeutic power of literature has been studied under the name of bibliotherapy. However, this notion does not make any distinction between genres; that is, it refers to the healing power of texts, either fictional or nonfictional (Beatty 106). The development of this technique as a therapeutic practice "is being taken up enthusiastically up by a range of healthcare professionals, libraries, bookshops, local government departments and universities who see value in providing guided reading materials to help people deal with mild to moderate mental health issues" (Canty 32). The occurrence of loss is generally associated with the development of some type of subsequent emotional strain or post-traumatic stress, which justifies the increasing tendency, production and sale of nonfictional books related to overcoming hardship since 2002 (Rak 78–79) as well as self-help books (McLoughlin). Life writing comprises a wider range of texts which, in contrast with self-help books, do not establish prescriptive rules regarding *how to cope* with anxiety or depression. Life writing authors advocate for revealing and sharing, following no prescriptive purpose. The author—characterized as an ordinary individual—seeks in writing their book a personal challenge whereby his or her traumatized self can be retrieved from forgetting and be healed. For that reason, reading these non-prescriptive sources is not only a diversion from the current hardship the reader may be

2 In the article "The Healing Power of Stories: Reading and Rereading *A Monster Calls*," Ostenson refers to Smith's difference between informative and transformative reading, especially in the context of education. Informative reading is aimed at the retention of facts and data, whereas transformative reading seeks a deeper engagement of the reader in the text through self-reflection. Within the classroom, transformative reading practices need guidance as their effects do not occur naturally in every reader. It might be argued that, for these purposes, life writing texts could work more efficiently in the provocation of such transformative effects, as the connection between reader and writer becomes more intimate thanks to the closeness of the first person.

experiencing, but also a source of interconnectivity, fellowship and solidarity, which can boost a sense of comfort and contribute to the healing process.

As noted earlier, the roles of reader and writer are complementary, and even reciprocal, as nonfictional texts of our interest generally appeal to a potential reader, and then, readers manage to assign meaning to the text through the reading process and its subsequent self-reflective exercise. The uses of both reading and narrating have been proven beneficial in the context of psychotherapy, helping to create "new cultural, symbolic and linguistic attachments" (Kristeva et al. 57) that may heal patients dealing with past traumatic experiences connected with illness. In this case, authenticity is pivotal, as it will help the reader identify with the writer's concerns, problems and struggles. The narrator's "capacity for self-description and self-analysis" (Sommer 198), together with the reader's recognition of it can be conceived as a "means of repair" (Frank 135). Loss, either shaped by illness, death or separation, becomes a disruption in one's course of life, which first requires the individual to digest the new circumstances. Writing can be paralleled to this process of "digestion," assimilation or acceptance, through which the writer can find his or her true self, the true, permanent one despite the occurrence of loss (138). Through the writing process, authors can see themselves as endowed with the ability to overcome disruption—the illness *per se*—and its destabilising effects (139). This deliberate use of writing aimed at a therapeutical effect is known as scriptotherapy, through which we may argue that writers become their own therapists while also being patients. Indeed, writers gain agency by narrating their experiences, as the self-discovery process in which they engage becomes healing in nature. Stories marked by disruption and destabilization are the main focus of illness and recovery narratives; the individual then uses writing to "work through" trauma—following Dominick LaCapra's words (697)—and initiates a curative process.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, more and more texts exploring emotionally challenging situations have been published (Barnett). This might be seen as an attempt to establish a connection between those who narrate their personal experiences and others who might been struggling through similar situations. Christa Couture, author of *How to Lose Everything*, which will be analyzed in the following section, once said, "I wanted to kind of put something out there that might help someone else as much as I was helped by other people's work" ("How to Lose Everything"). She had previously read others' experiences, so the time came when her instinct led her to continue the ripple. Thus, care has been suggested to characterize reader-writer relations in the genre of life writing. Carol Gilligan proposed the idea that care implied "hearing the difference" (120), which derives in the development of mutual concern, of reciprocal relations and, more generally, of a committed relationship with the other. The dichotomy between self and other eventually blurs and they all interact in equal

terms (Riestra-Camacho 98). That is to say, the other is suddenly associated with the familiar, which highlights the fact that similar experiences can bring all of us closer and create a caring network based on the four pillars proposed by Joan C. Tronto: caring about, taking care of, care-giving and care-receiving (qtd. in McAvinchey 130). Both readers and writers, thus, relate to one another and become active in the healing process, as agents attempting to take care of others and subjects to be taken care of.

This connection arising between reader and writer and the intermingling of their different, though similar, experiences eventually creates a web of relations that is supported by a caring structure in which both readers and writers aim at the initiation of healing. The relatedness of experiences, as well as the idea of mutual concern, lead us to the consideration of assemblages. An assemblage is defined by Deleuze and Parnet "as a multiplicity, which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures" (qtd. in DeLanda 1). The world implies, by nature, diversity and heterogeneity based on non-uniformity and "symbiotic" relationality (DeLanda 2). We may suggest that an intertwinement of identities towards a collective sentiment is bound to occur between reader and writer through life writing texts. Individuals may develop a feeling of belongingness which is articulated around the text, as a result of a common experience related to loss. We may consider that life writing *assembles* readers and writers together after the occurrence of a shared traumatic experience. Furthermore, the existing connections operating among these literary identities and their experiences defines the notion of the assemblage as dynamic and socially nurturing, as every reader and writer can benefit from a caring structure. Writing and reading about experiences concerned with loss can be deemed the source of an interhuman assemblage which triggers healing among its participants.

All in all, life reading and writing seem a potential field where to explore the intertwinement of experiences, feelings and identities. It has been contended that autobiographical testimonies delving into one's past experiences with loss may serve as a unifying component that brings the other or what is different closer. Despite the heterogeneity of experiences, a common ground remains. Relations are likely to be established, through differences or similarities, through sympathy and recognition. These individuals who trust on the literary text to establish personal connections conform an assemblage based on social relations that, above all, attempt to bring positive effects for each other. The nonfictional text serves as a gluing and sharing structure where to articulate liaisons and where to seek comfort and care, a place that Cameron Duff defines as an "assemblage of health" ("The Ends" 1; "Atmospheres of Recovery" 1) and which can be understood as a safe space in which recovery can be explored communally.

3. Analysis Of (Con)Texts: Christa Couture and Dakshana Bascaramurty

Together with the increasing popularity of life writing texts, memoirs are specifically making their name in the field lately. Canadian society seems to be warmly welcoming autobiographical texts. Not only is this being sensed through the increase in sales in recent years (Alarcón), but also through other elements operating in Canadian popular culture, like television. *Canada Reads* is a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) programme which attempts to promote English Canadian literature (Hazlett). Even though a particular focus was placed on Canadian fiction, there is a growing interest in the consideration of nonfiction, too. In 2020, a memoir was awarded the final prize: *We Have Always Been There*, by Samra Habib. In this case, the spotlight was placed upon stories concerning current issues and controversies which delved into the lives of others, and which highlighted their difficulties and acknowledged their personal progress. Therefore, the relevance of nonfictional texts—especially memoirs—dealing with personal, cultural or social issues seem to have been introduced into the Canadian literary arena with remarkable success. Our primary concern in this case lies in two different texts related to the occurrence of illness, death and separation, mostly connected with cancer and its consequences. The analysis of Christa Couture's *How to Lose Everything* and Dakshana Bascaramurty's *This Is Not the End of Me: Lessons on Living from a Dying Man* will conduct the development of this section, intended to showcase how life writing provides a space for a caring and therapeutic relationship to develop between reader and writer.

The memoir entitled *How to Lose Everything*, by Couture, shows the resilient character of its author, whose life condenses several instances of loss which had unravelled through one Canadian woman's life until mid-adulthood. Hit by the amputation of her leg due to cancer, by her two children's death and by her ultimate divorce from her husband, Couture resignifies loss and adopts it as a way of life. Her aim is not necessarily concerned with providing a guide on how to cope with loss, but rather, a friendly approach to one plausible attitude towards illness, death or separation. In 2020, Bascaramurty published *This Is Not the End of Me: Lessons on Living from a Dying Man*, an interesting biographical text narrating the story of Layton Reid, a man diagnosed with cancer in his thirties in the midst of his joyful marriage and parenthood. Bascaramurty plays the role of the author as well as witness to Layton's physical and mental weakening towards death. The text can be described as a composite of different voices which are not only restricted to Bascaramurty's appreciation of Layton's single experience; there are also references to Layton's family's own coping, together with Layton's own writing retrieved from his Facebook account or from some letters addressed to his then infant son.

3.1. Being There: Reader as Writer, Writer as Reader

It is our argument that readers and writers are entangled through nonfiction. Their inner selves are connected and assembled together through a process of sharing, and thus, a collective relationality which in the books is presented through the "listener/storyteller" binary. In the event of sharing, these figures become intertwined in such a way that they both benefit from the role of the listener and the role of the storyteller, since unburdening occurs by listening to others' advice and by opening oneself up to others. This proves the suitability of life writing as a potential channel to allow for this symbiotic relationship in which writers take advantage of their capacity to self-narrate to unburden themselves and readers profit from others' words to ignite their own revisiting of the past, acceptance and healing.

In her memoir, Couture reflects on this interconnectivity underlying the roles of listener and storyteller, hence of reader and writer, as the former relies on the latter and *vice versa*. As a therapeutic activity, reading a nonfictional text of this sort gives prominence to the way in which past traumatic experiences may affect us. For that reason, Couture suggests that we can all become not only passive readers behind a text but the active narrators of our own story: "Find a place for them [your memories], for safekeeping. Tell a person close to you . . . Write a letter and drop it . . . in a mailbox . . . Walk into the woods, dig a hole and cry or sing or sob or tell your most painful memory into the earth" (149). This acknowledges the value of every experience and every individual, of ordinariness, going back to Felski's words (43). Couture is the author of her memoir as well as the narrator and the protagonist of her story, but she volunteers to become a witness to others' experiences: "Or *tell* me. *Tell* me right now to this page, and I will remember for you. I will remember the name of your child. I will remember the laugh of your sister. I will remember the place where your home stood—just as you will remember these pages for me" (149; emphasis added). Having finished her own writing process, through which she has become able to address the sources of loss and pain, she wishes to accompany others through the process. She is now able to reverse her role as storyteller into a listener. The patient/author can now become a sort of caretaker or doctor who is willing to take care of others' problems and preoccupations, as it happened when Couture herself tried to comfort her therapist when remembering her own losses (145). In compelling the reader to tell their own story which the author volunteers to listen, the relationship between the narrator and the reader transcends the literary, becoming a human link grounded on listening, sympathy and care. What is more, reviews like Lye's show this duality by saying that the book can be perceived as "a heartfelt conversation with a friend" (qtd. in Couture 3). In the event, it can be seen that loss gathers readers and the author around the text.

Likewise, Bascaramurty's text serves to illustrate the ambivalent nature of this link between reader and writer. Whilst Bascaramurty authors the book, the story is focused on her friend's story. As the author attempts to verbalize the consequences of Layton's advanced cancer diagnosis, she acts as a witness, as a *reader* of the whole situation. The journalist accompanies Layton throughout the whole process, as a friend and supporter. At some point, we might sense that he lacks emotional support at home. Layton's wife Candace is portrayed as a brave, strong woman who manages to sustain the family and raise a child without the presence of a healthy father. She takes care of everything in the household, including Layton's medical treatment and appointments. However, we learn that: "[Layton] just needed [Candace] to *listen*, not to always try to find a solution to his problems" (64; emphasis added). With this, Layton reinforces the importance of listening in caregiving, asserting its valence as a therapeutic action. Bascaramurty's witnessing of Layton's and his family's experience through cancer allows a faithful writing of Layton's thoughts and feelings, turning the text into a source of solace for those who, little by little, lose Layton. On the other hand, Bascaramurty herself admitted that this process of "writing Layton" helped her reconcile with the unexpected loss of her father: "Writing about these last years of Layton's life helped me in this very unexpected way with coping with, you know, all of the grief that came with losing my dad" ("What a Dying Young Father"). Even if writing in this case is not triggered by an internal motivation, its self-analytical outcome is achieved anyhow. Bascaramurty sees Layton day after day, she *reads* his emotions and puts it all into words. Acting as a reader and a writer simultaneously provides her and Layton's environment with comfort and solace which can contribute to ease the pain (Bascaramurty, "What I Learned").

Couture's and Bascaramurty's texts show how tight the link between readers and writers is. In fact, their connection transcends and gives way to the creation of a collective caring structure—an interhuman assemblage—based on compassion and sympathy. Listening and understanding are pivotal in therapy as well as during any relationship (Jonas-Simpson 222; Reis et al. 15). Through life writing, the roles of reader and writer intermingle and operate symbiotically, in such a way that they are enabled to unburden themselves and also to attend others' needs. All in all, human relationships should function on the grounds of balance, coordination, cooperation and comprehension. The universality of loss will reach each of us, meaning that we will always need support from others. For that, it is important that we sustain our closest and stand by their side when they most need it. Following Couture's reflection, we all have a story to tell and we all deserve to count on someone who wishes to listen to it (149).

3.2. Healing Words

As stated above, reader and writer may mirror the "patient-therapist" duality, highlighting the connection between the life writing genre and the notions of bibliotherapy and scriptotherapy. Couture's and Bascaramurty's books can be representative of these trends, as Lye—one of Couture's reviewers—mentioned her ability to find solace in the author's words after having undergone cancer and motherhood herself (qtd. in Couture 3). Then, Bascaramurty herself finds comfort throughout the narration of Layton's story to overcome her father's death ("What a Dying Young Father"). When considering bibliotherapy and scriptotherapy, the power of words should be openly recognized, since healing through words is possible (Kaur 219). The therapeutic effects of these practices stem from the expressive flow of words inherent in both reading and writing. In life writing, these processes involve not only recalling memories but also embarking on an introspective journey which gives name to the sources of pain and the emotions that they evoke. For Couture, the most effective way to address her pain and multiple losses was songwriting and writing her own memoir. "Letting the words pour" from her (69) served to recall memories and to be healed from the burden that these words represent.

In the event of losing a beloved one, words may also serve a fruitful purpose. Layton's interest in writing letters and Facebook posts is concerned with the survival of his memory. He would like to have a part of himself with his son after his death. Through objects meticulously collected in a box, his letters and his posts, Layton's family—and especially his son—would be able to remember him; or rather, to feel him closer. Words in this case can be sensed as an illustration of a healthier Layton, so the words in his posts can remind his friends and family how he would have been like had the illness not assaulted him. Candance finds comfort in her remembering the beginning of their relationship thanks to those letters which Layton left for her: "The letters helped transport her back to the earlier days of their relationship—before Layton's sickness had consumed their lives. It was a nice way to reset her memories of him" (Bascaramurty, *This Is Not the End* 188). When she read and reread them, she could hear his voice in her head. Therefore, words are connected with Layton's identity before the onset of the illness. Those surrounding Layton, and Layton himself, were suddenly attacked by the so-called "good grief" (248): a sentiment that condenses a sort of nostalgia for what life could have been for Layton and his family if it had not been for cancer. Then, reading Layton's words, as if he were personally talking to us, can be curative because of the permanence which characterizes written words. Cancer and death imply loss, whilst words can still retain Layton's thoughts, ideas and emotions and ultimately, his personality and his sympathy and care for others. Relatives and friends acknowledge the helpfulness of these

letters, recognizing their friend's effort while writing, compiling and arranging those letters (Bascaramurty, *This Is Not the End* 149). It is even Layton who invited his friends to say what words they would like to be told after he died, appreciating the healing potential of his own words: "He had planned to write letters initially, asking close friends for prompts on what sort of greeting they might take comfort in receiving from him after he was gone" (186).

The connection between language and one's memory leads us to consider materiality as an interesting component within life writing. The "Finn box" in *This Is Not the End of Me* becomes Layton's material biography, as it contains not only Layton's own letters to his son, but also a series of objects that could help the child "get to know" his father (162–63). Objects do also retain one's identity, or rather, remind others of one's identity. Similarly, Couture's house, and especially its walls, would remind her of the happiness of love and motherhood, as well as of the loss of both: "These walls had witnessed too much . . . Every dark moment / Every dark night" (125–32). Objects—and even scents or views—bring us back to particular moments in life. It is our contention that words can also operate as a container, not only of linguistic sense, but also of personal content. On the one hand, Layton's Facebook posts retained his lively spirit, which proves the power of words to convey one's personality. On the other hand, Couture composes her own songs which attempt to preserve every "heartache" known for her (56). Her lyrics are strongly connected with emotions; for her, songwriting in the first person serves as a channel to unburden and externalize her preoccupations, as if it were a lyric diary or any other kind of expressive writing in which the first-person voice—and its emotional upheaval—is heard all throughout the text (Carroll 170). Words can then become a potential tool to retain some part of ourselves in a process of growth, transformation or decay. Remembering and reminding are easily triggered by a type of self-narration, so when returning to those texts, we are enabled to see beyond the present moment and sympathize with our previous state of self. Any other witness to these texts, as it could have been the case of Layton's family and friends, will approach the writer's most intimate and truthful side and profit from the remnants of his or her self.

4. Conclusion

The analyses proposed for Couture's memoir and Bascaramurty's chronicle of Layton Reid's illness are intended to support our thesis that life writing can gather people together and bring therapeutic effects throughout the process of both reading and writing. These texts show that individuals and their individual stories can be relatable. Through a common experience, individuals can

be assembled into a collective. Collectivity is assembled by means of relatability, recognition and sympathy. Readers who might engage in the reading of both works are motivated to follow a process of healing similar to the writer's. Couture proves to have reached resilience, to have accepted her wounded past. She is now able to recall memories and to assume the impact of loss. On the other hand, Bascaramurty's narration shows the intertwinement of different perspectives, as she performs the role of an observer and intermediary while also giving prominence to Layton's voice and his family's. Remembrance becomes Layton's major concern; while Couture was concerned about the recollection of life experiences, Layton also conveys his will to use memories to maintain him alive. Not only does Layton worry about his own irreparable loss, but also about the idea that his existence—after death—might result in oblivion. Confronting loss, either through Couture's account or Layton's texts, is about courage, about acceptance, about overcoming denial, about expressing oneself. For those undergoing similar situations, readings these accounts can result in the creation of human, caring bonds.

Nonfiction treating situations related to loss, like Couture's and Bascaramurty's texts, can be further explored as a healing tool to be actively employed in medical practices, which seems to align with the main aims behind Health Humanities. The concept of care in this analysis is not necessarily related to chemical treatments, but to humanity. Caring for others becomes an indispensable step to reach cooperation, sympathy and solidarity. Reading about others who are vulnerably positioned widens our horizons, as this contributes to develop a realistic outlook on life. Sympathizing with those testimonies implies getting in tune with others' souls and, consequently, getting to know oneself better. The reader, in these transformative types of reading, is no longer an observer, but a participant in the story. Sympathy creates bonds among people in the world, especially when sharing a traumatic past (Carnes 30); though life writing texts of this sort, then, readers and writers become entangled and can relate to each other.

Although the notion of loss is known for its vastness, our focus on the topic throughout this article has been articulated by Couture's and Bascaramurty's approach to illness, death and separation, which are depicted as universal facts, because life also implies losing, no matter age, place or social status. To cope with it, literary pieces and more specifically, life writing texts like memoirs, autobiographies or chronicles, may be helpful thanks to the extra-literary connection which arises from the reader to the author or narrator. Careful listening, thorough comprehension and human sympathy feature this relationship, operating dialogically among all the participants in the resulting interhuman assemblage. Raising awareness about others' circumstances can, additionally, provide more thorough self-knowledge, as we may recognize ourselves in others' words and experiences. Human bonding emerging from literature is

symbiotic, which leads us to the conclusion that medical practices touched with human closeness and care might result in a—to some extent—relieving experience despite illness, loss or even death.

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