

“SLUTS” AND “SLAVES”: THE INTERNET AND THE EVOLUTION OF FANTASY IN DENNIS COOPER’S ONLINE WORK

“SLUTS” AND “SLAVES”: INTERNET Y LA EVOLUCIÓN DE LA FANTASÍA EN LA OBRA DIGITAL DE DENNIS COOPER

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Abstract

This article explores a yet unresearched part of Dennis Cooper’s production: his blog posts and, in particular, his “Sluts” and “Slaves” monthly posts, where he compiles explicit and sometimes sordid texts and images of gay sex workers apparently found online. First, this paper will situate these blog posts in the fields of citational and online literature, arguing that they are an example of ‘flarf’. In so doing, it also extends the notion of “flarf” from poetry to narrative. Then, this paper explores the continuities and differences between the blog posts and Cooper’s other work, most notably *The Sluts* (2005), to argue that —while similar in their focus on the internet and “the impossibility of truth”— the blog posts present a significant transformation that compels readers to confront their own desires.

Keywords: Cooper, flarf, digital literature, found language, fantasy, desire.

Resumen

Este artículo explora una parte hasta ahora poco investigada de la producción literaria de Dennis Cooper: sus publicaciones en blogs y, en particular, sus entradas mensuales tituladas “Sluts” y “Slaves”, donde recopila textos e imágenes explícitas,

y a veces sórdidas, de hombres trabajadores sexuales supuestamente encontrados en internet. En primer lugar, este trabajo situará estas publicaciones en el campo de la literatura citacional y online, argumentando que son un ejemplo de ‘flarf’. Al hacerlo, también amplía la noción de ‘flarf’ de la poesía a la narrativa. A continuación, este artículo explora las similitudes y diferencias entre las publicaciones en el blog y otras obras de Cooper, especialmente *The Sluts* (2005), para argumentar que, si bien similares en su interés en internet y la “imposibilidad de la verdad”, las publicaciones en el blog presentan una transformación significativa que obliga a los lectores a enfrentarse a sus propios deseos.

Palabras clave: Cooper, flarf, literatura digital, found language, fantasía, deseo.

1. Introduction

On January 15th, 2021, Dennis Cooper uploaded a new post to his blog.¹ Like every fortnight, the post featured a collection of advertisements for male sex workers or gay men. One such ad included a selfie of two young blond boys in black T-shirts who stand awkwardly in front of a bathroom mirror. The text that accompanies the image reads:

These boys are under the control of notorious sex trafficker barebacksex67. [...] He sells the kids with the text that they are his friends... Nausea! [...] The guy with the longer hair on the left, on the other hand, is a minor and will be 17 at the end of March next year. I also don't know if he escaped from the institute, but the fact that he was being searched by the police is registered as a missing person: <http://www.police.hu/hu/koral/eltuntszemelyek/473371> “I'm sorry”, barebacksex, but you have to stop selling the kids, and “sorry”, dear potential customers, but you don't have to molest 16-year-old kids if you just need sex. (January 15th, 2021)

The hyperlink led to a profile on the missing persons website of the Hungarian police,² which featured a young man who somewhat resembled the one in the picture. Two responses followed the text above: one was by a user named @anonymous and read, in part, “I had these two boys absolutely filthy [...] And yes they don't come alone”. The second was supposedly written by the same user the text above mentions, @barebacksex67, and read: “If you wanna play a game, I'll send you to Saw”.³

Have we stumbled upon a child trafficking ring? Is the boy in the picture really the same as the one on the missing persons site? Has Dennis Cooper, one of the most famed contemporary writers from the United States, become a sex trafficker? The answer is probably not. Since achieving international fame and recognition with his printed books, Cooper has turned to the Internet to develop new fiction. His blog, which he established in 2005, has become his most significant output. Every

fortnight he publishes posts which feature images, texts, and comments from profiles by sex workers and gay men. He calls them “Sluts” and “Slaves” posts, respectively. These posts evidence profound resonances with his previous work, most notably his 2005 novel *The Sluts*. However, as this study will make evident, the DC Blog marks a profound shift in his oeuvre. Cooper has so far refused to clarify the provenance of these blog posts or whether he creates them himself. Despite their having become one of his most significant and frequent outputs, and considering the curiosity they generate among a loyal legion of blog readers, no research so far has sought to explore them. However, as the frequent questions about these posts suggest, there is something profoundly interesting, perhaps morbidly so, about these texts that begs the questions: What are these posts? Where are they located within Cooper’s work? What do they tell us about the role of the Internet in Cooper’s world?

This article aims to characterize Cooper’s “Sluts” and “Slaves” blog posts within their literary context. To do so, it relies on two broad areas of scholarship: digital literature (literature that is born online) and citational literature (literature that heavily quotes other sources), particularly the genre of flarf (Epstein 2012). Starting from this position, this study also explores how the blog posts relate to other works by Dennis Cooper, particularly as it pertains to discussions of the Internet and “the impossibility of truth” and fantasy in Cooper’s oeuvre (Férez Mora 2013; García-Iglesias 2022a). At the same time, it also argues that Cooper’s blog posts mark a transformation in Cooper’s discussion of this impossibility of truth to challenge the reader in new directions. Therefore, this article aims to describe these blog posts critically and situate them within Cooper’s work. This paper does not engage with the ethics of writing, publishing or reading materials that relate to violence and sex and which may be deemed extreme by some readers.

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2. Dennis Cooper and the DC Blog

Dennis Cooper (California, 1953) is a fiction author from the United States who is well known for his “alarming and transgressive fiction” (Kennedy 2012a: 1). Cooper’s most famed books are those that make up the ‘George Miles Cycle’, published between 1989 and 2000 (*Closer*, *Frisk*, *Try*, *Guide* and *Period*) and his best-selling and award-winning 2005 novel *The Sluts* (2005). Since then, he has published a number of other works, including gif novels,⁴ and in 2021, a new novel, *I Wished*. Cooper’s work has frequently been seen as influenced by French literature, especially fin de siècle postmodernism and authors such as Marquis de Sade, Arthur Rimbaud, Jean Genet and Georges Bataille (Lev 2006a). He has also been associated with youth cultures such as the Blank Generation (Young and

Caveney 1992), because of how his work is perceived as “vapid, post-punk nihilism” (Jacob 2004: 298). Yet, others have positioned him alongside Dodie Bellamy, Robert Glück, and Kevin Gillian, as part of the New Narrative of San Francisco (Lev 2006b). Furthermore, Cooper’s emphasis on the embodied aspects of sex, violence, and sexual violence have provoked interesting comparisons with artists such as Andrés Serrano, Damien Hirst, or Karen Finley (Brantley 2014). Regardless of the comparisons scholars have established between Cooper and other authors, the fact remains that Cooper’s works themselves have been the subject of abundant scholarship (e.g. Young and Caveney 1992; Baker 2012; Brintnall 2012).

As has been mentioned, Cooper’s work has frequently been explored in terms of the embodied and violent eroticism that pervades it. As Pedro Antonio Férrez Mora writes, “sexual expression and violence in Dennis Cooper’s poetics are inseparable” (2013: 82). Sex and violence become, in Cooper’s work, a conduit to fruitful engagements with a variety of themes, such as embodiment and truth, or the absence thereof. Benjamin Jacob explains that it is a “fascination with the body — especially its fragility” — and with the “materiality of the flesh” that characterizes Cooper’s novels (2004: 294). It is the body that remains central to much literary critical engagement with Cooper’s work. Férrez Mora goes as far as to argue that, in Cooper’s oeuvre, “adored, opened-up, abused, torn apart, reluctant, inviting, raped, or even dead..., no matter the form, the focus is always on the flesh” (2014: 73). Yet it is not always the presence of the body, but also its absence, that interests Cooper. In fact, talking about Cooper’s perhaps best-known work, *The Sluts*, Férrez Mora (2014) also contends that the absence of a physical, material body and its substitution for a prosthetic body through computers draws the narrative together. Linked with this absence of bodies is also another key theme in Cooper: the absence of reality or truth. Timothy Baker comments that in Cooper’s work, most notably in *The Sluts*, “there is no grounded underlying reality to which reference can simply be made; instead, the characters are repeatedly forced, both by the events and their own consciences, to reconsider reality and their relation to it” (2012: 52-53). In a way, Cooper’s refusal to create narratives containing a framework of objective reality against which characters and their actions can be measured leads to Leora Lev’s assertion that “Cooper’s work destabilizes epistemological certainties” (2012: 88). This absence of reality or truth, or the fact that these cannot be attained or known —which this paper and other scholarship refer to as “the impossibility of truth”— is also frequently articulated through narratives that evidence the futility of searching for the said truth (Férrez Mora 2013).

This futility is most clearly evidenced in *The Sluts*, which features a polyvocal narrative. *The Sluts* (2005) narrates the story of a gay escort named Brad through a

series of posts to an escort review website and to a forum. The novel opens with a multitude of reviews of Brad by a series of anonymous users —as rave reviews accumulate, contradictions emerge about Brad (his attitude, age, body, even whether he is alive). Thanks to these, Brad becomes an object of fascination —so much so that the narrative moves to a blog where users discuss Brad and try to ascertain his existence and whereabouts. Eventually, two men decide to impersonate Brad and his lover, and new reviews appear of the “fake” Brad. In the end, as users begin to increasingly question the veracity of the reviews, the person who had been impersonating Brad’s lover submits a final post/suicide note confessing to making up the reviews to appeal to other users’ sexual fantasies. As Diarmuid Hester explains, “Brad is not an emotionally riveting character, he’s just a whatever, he doesn’t even exist” (2020: 205). This is further emphasized in one of my previous studies, where I explained that in the context of an anonymous online space, “these men’s fascination with Brad can only be explained because, in his emptiness, Brad acts as a receptacle to their fantasies. Because he is nobody, he can also be anybody: he can mutate and transform to meet every user’s specific sexual fantasies” (2022a: 613). However, as the novel advances, the anonymity that characterises the online community also makes it impossible to establish any fact about Brad, leading to tensions between those users who see this as allowing them to explore their sexual fantasies and the many who, instead, feel frustrated at this ‘impossibility of truth’. It is this impossibility that eventually forces the collapse of the community. As we will discuss further below, the absence of truth or reality, and its substitution for fantasy, is not unique to *The Sluts* but has long been evolving through Cooper’s work.

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These elements of violent eroticism and the absence of any framework of reality have caused a multitude of sometimes opposite reactions to Cooper’s work. The explosive, graphic, violence (and sexual violence) that is characteristic of Cooper has led some critics to chastise his work. Perhaps the most cited example of this is Michiko Kakutani’s argument that “unlike Dostoyevsky or Baudelaire, contemporary artists like Cooper and Hirst are just interested in sensationalism for sensation’s sake. Their peek into the abyss isn’t philosophically interesting; it’s just an excuse for a self-congratulatory smirk” (1996). On the other hand, however, numerous scholars have argued that Cooper’s themes focus on “the frail, constructed, nature of culture’s timeless ‘truths’” (Jacob 2004: 304), or that they “inscribe the ethical and aesthetic limitations and paradoxes of self-other relations” (Lev 2006b: 206). In this sense, I have previously suggested that Cooper’s work “conceptualizes the function of fantasy” in an era of Internet anonymity (García-Iglesias 2022a: 617).

In May 2005, Cooper launched the DC Blog. Since then, the blog has become the home of heterogeneous content published almost daily: reviews of exhibitions, films

and books, historical studies of art, or deeply researched insights into topics such as the artistic influences of Satan or archival footage from concerts by Guns N' Roses. The blog also includes short fictional pieces by Cooper, most frequently the aforementioned fortnightly “Sluts” and “Slaves”.⁵ All this work has made of the blog a heavily populated repository of Cooper’s cultural world. In turn, this has attracted a devoted group of followers who routinely comment on each post and engage in friendly and intimate conversations with Cooper, generating a growing community (Hester 2020). The explicit and sometimes violent content Cooper publishes, including the “Sluts” and “Slaves”, has also led to the blog being taken down on several occasions by the hosting site —although it has always been reinstated (Sidahmed 2016). Cooper himself has explained that “the blog [...] has become sort of my main project now. [...] I think of it as important as writing a novel” (Kennedy 2012b: 191). In fact, the interactions between Cooper and his community of blog readers have led to the publication of a compilation of fiction written by the readers themselves and frequently workshopped on the blog (Cooper 2007). The blog itself has been the subject of some scholarship as a key part of Cooper’s oeuvre (e.g. Hester 2020). However, to date, no academic work has sought to characterize and situate the “Sluts” and “Slaves” posts within Cooper’s work.

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3. The Anatomy of a “Sluts” and “Slaves” Post: From Creation to Reception

Every month, Cooper publishes a “Sluts” post (on or around the 15th) and a “Slaves” post (on or around the 31st). In 2021, Cooper published twelve “Sluts” and twelve “Slaves” posts, which were downloaded and analysed (alongside the comments they generated) for the present study. On average, each “Sluts” post included twenty-four different profiles, whereas “Slaves” included twenty-seven. Both posts received, roughly, ten comments from blog readers. Both kinds of posts are similar in format: they contain one or more images of each ‘profile’, a name, age, and location, as well as some text description (supposedly written by the profile owner) which varies in length and style. They also feature a “guestbook” with comments about each person from supposed ‘other users’ —which also range in topic, length and style. An example of a “Slut” from the November 2021 entry is @bahnhof_boy, an 18-year-old man from Frankfurt, who describes himself in these terms:

I would like to meet an older discreet sponsor to fulfill my dream and start a business. A sponsor, a mentor, and a good friend all in one. I don’t take drugs. I drink alcohol only occasionally but not hard. I give bjs at the bahnhof for \$ but I will stop. I don’t have a naked photo in my profile because I don’t want to be naked since I’m not gay, I am cheerful.

@bahnhof_boy’s profile includes a comment on its guestbook by user @moneyfornothing which reads: “Happy to help you start whatever business you like if it leads to my cock exploding deep in your throat while I call you a fucking slut”. It also includes four pictures of @bahnhof_boy, all showing a young, thin man, with a dyed-blond mohawk. In some of them, he is sporting a blue tracksuit while walking in a park; in others, he is seen smoking shirtless.

@bahnhof_boy’s profile is relatively “clean” or “vanilla”. Many other profiles, however, are much more sordid in their content, and make explicit mentions of suicide, self-harm, violence, or child-abuse. For example, a “Slaves” post from November 2021 features the profile of @ExArmyHotWheelsStud, which reads:

Been in a wheelchair since March when some drunk guy threw me out of a fourth story window. My lower body is still hot and hasn’t turned to mush yet but it will and hence my hurry. Quite like the idea of getting mauled in abandoned industrial area. #hood #gagging #choking #facefuck #mouthfisting #fisting #FF #deepthroat #wheelchair #disabled #paraplegic #earplugs are always best

While a “Sluts” post from August includes the profile of @BoyOwner:

I have a friend who wants to sell his teenage son. The boy lives by court order with his grandparents in Las Vegas, his grandparents don’t like him or know about his lifestyle so if he goes missing they wont [sic] care. The boy is fantastically undisciplined.

These two (which are by no means the most harrowing, sordid or violent posts) suggest just how dark and morbid some of the content in these posts is. Neither the provenance of the images nor of the text is explained in any of the posts: Cooper does not provide any information about where or how he found the content, how he selected the profiles or edited them. Some of the images in the profiles portray celebrities, influencers, or adult entertainers such as soccer player Aaron Moody or Instagram influencer Oliver Forslin, all of whom may be recognized by a reader “in the know” about gay culture. The vast majority, however, seem to be of anonymous individuals across the world. In many instances, the profiles contain links to social media sites (such as Twitter) which sometimes lead to actual accounts but other times do not. Similarly, in many cases, the comments left on a profile’s “guestbook” seem not to be directly related to the actual profile or appear to belong to a larger conversation we do not see.

Despite the profiles being much shorter, there is a clear resemblance between the blog posts and Cooper’s novel *The Sluts*. As explained above, as *The Sluts* advances, contradictions about Brad begin to accumulate to the extent that by the end of the novel not even Brad’s own existence is certain. Similarly, in the “Sluts” and “Slaves” posts, profiles and guestbook comments frequently generate contradictions about the profiles they are supposedly reviewing. For example, in the guestbook of

a profile named @Guhh (from the October 15th “Sluts”), one user by the name of @kay2k comments: “fake”, while another user, @openyours, replies: “true”. This reminds us of the great amount of contradictory information about who Brad was or what he was like in *The Sluts*. Furthermore, just like in the novel, the guestbook comments also provide supposed glimpses of an offline world. For example, these are two “guestbook” posts from different profiles:

His current sugardad (we socialise) is faking longterm covid issues in an attempt to get rid of him for good (vapid, needy, narcissistic, alcoholism) reasons. But he’s right about his ass. (@Bobby1984 commenting on “Slut” @merryxmassoon, December 15th)

He stole 150 euros from my bedroom drawer, I have already reported him to the police, it is only a matter of time before he is arrested (@cumgetme commenting on “Slut” @Eatadick!, January 15th)

There is no certainty about whether @merryxmassoon’s “sugardad” is actually faking COVID-19 symptoms, or whether @cumgetme really had money stolen from him and reported @Eatadick! to the police. It is this type of unverifiable statement that ties the online and offline world together in obscure ways. This unverifiability is not only present in the blog posts but is a key element of Cooper’s *The Sluts*, which makes anonymity and unverifiability its central theme (Baker 2012; García-Iglesias 2022a). Cooper, as we mentioned, provides no clear explanations about the processes of finding, selecting, editing, and compiling these materials into “Sluts” and “Slaves”, despite blog readers frequently inquiring about their provenance. When asked, he either does not answer, or replies that he finds them online and edits them.

All in all, this section has explored the anatomy of the “Sluts” and “Slaves” posts and the information available about their creation. In order to do so, a comparison with Cooper’s *The Sluts* has been established, since both the blog posts and the novel share important links. The following section will argue that these posts are an instance of the literary genre known as flarf, extending this concept from poetry to narrative, and that they are located at the intersection of digital and citational literature.

4. “Sluts” and “Slaves” as an Example of Flarf Literature

There are two outstanding elements in the “Sluts” and “Slaves” that may help better understand and contextualize these posts: the apparent use of content found online and the use of hyperlinks. As we will see below, the presence of these elements is not incidental to the blog posts, but an essential part of them that requires critical attention. Cooper explains that he finds online and only lightly

edits the vast majority of the texts and images present in the blog posts. This establishes a clear first link with citational literature, which is defined as “all works of fiction that incorporate a significant amount of found language” (Comitta 2020). Within these, there exist those which consist almost entirely of “found language” (that is, on text found elsewhere). These are the “literary supercuts”, which have been defined as “texts made entirely or almost entirely of found language [which] stand out in the genre of citational fiction because of their radical rejection of originality [which] turns writing into a kind of editorial or archival labour” (Comitta 2020). These can range from full novels or short stories to just sections within larger works, such as the passages devoted to describing whales in *Moby Dick* (largely sources from other texts). Other examples include Eduardo Galeano’s *Memoria del fuego* (1982-1986) or *The Best American Book of the 20th Century* by Soci  t   R  aliste (2014). Tom Comitta argues that the value of literary supercuts lies in how “the accumulation of similarities across source materials or within a single source can reveal [...] how we write, think and exist in the world” (2020). While literary supercuts have been around for a long time, only a handful of research has been produced about them, including key essays by Jonathan Lethem (2007) and David Shields (2010). In fact, “it’s particularly surprising that we don’t have a detailed and complex understanding of this kind of fiction” (Comitta 2020). This gap is important given how the Internet has made it easier for authors to access almost infinite sources of texts and simplified their manipulation into literary supercuts.

The relevance of the Internet for citational literature is best exemplified through what is known as “flarf poetry”, the creation of poems “by collaging together found language gathered from the web” (Epstein 2012: 311). Most frequently, flarf poets use *Google* to search for ready-made language and then go on to make “strange, funny, unsettling collages of their results” (Epstein 2012: 318). Key authors in this recent movement (it only gained prominence after 9/11) are Gary Sullivan, Raymond McDaniel, Nada Gordon, and Drew Gardner. Most early flarf thrived online through mailing lists, blogs, or forums. While it is true that the notion of “flarf” has traditionally been applied solely to poetry, both the processes and the approaches to language of flarf are similar to what Cooper says he is using. When Andrew Epstein argues that flarf relies on “the verbal detritus which teems on the web and saturates our culture” (2012: 318), it is not difficult also to see the texts and images that Cooper uses as a type of “junk” material that proliferates online and reproduces through social media, for example. As evidenced above, some of the images portraying “well-known” people seem to be endlessly recycled online. Similarly, when flarf is said to be “often rebarbative, abrasive, and distasteful, but its humour and strangeness can be powerfully affecting” (Epstein 2012: 318), we appreciate the emotional complexities that Cooper’s posts generate, a sort of

obscene titillation. As one reader comments:⁶ “Love your Sluts posts. To be honest, this month’s I found pretty hard to read, but couldn’t look away until I had finished the post”.

In addition to this, thinking of these posts as flarf compels us to reflect on the importance of the Internet. Brian McHale explains that “flarf [...] is a sort of cyborg poetics, involving a collaboration between flesh-and-blood poets and digital technologies. It is a zone where the real world in which poets live overlaps with cyberspace, or dovetails with it” (2015: 180). This close relationship, which Cooper has made clear in the case of his blog posts, demands that we also consider the position of the “Sluts” and “Slaves” posts in relation to the field of digital or online literature, “fiction written for and read on a computer screen that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium” (Ciccoricco et al. 2010). Electronic literature has been the subject of abundant scholarship, including that contained in Joseph Tabbi (2018) and Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman (2013). In particular, it is worth noting the body of literature focused on blog posts as a distinct literary genre that “has attained the mainstream as a form of digital personal diary, an outlet for citizen journalism, a community space for special interest forums, and a medium for more passive entertainment” (Morrison 2013: 369), which is characterized, among other things, by extensive reliance on hyperlinks.

In the DC Blog, Cooper relies on hyperlinks to contribute to the narrative by directing readers to other sites, such as social media profiles, police websites or *YouTube* videos. Hyperlinks are not incidental to the blog posts, but rather an essential and defining part of them. In an interview about his blog, Cooper explained:

DC [Dennis Cooper]: [...] I guess I’ll archive it.

DK [Danny Kennedy]: Yeah, you said you imagined releasing it as a CD ROM.

DC: But it won’t work because the links won’t work. It has to stay on the Internet—that’s what I like about it. I mean I pulled some things I’ve written up there and put them in the short fiction. Some of the writing things are alright but, no it just exists on the Internet.

DK: Yeah, and that’s integral to it. It can’t be separated from that.

DC: Yeah, yeah you can’t. Even so, it slowly dies because the links die, different things die. (Kennedy 2012b: 201)

In other words, what Cooper’s words reveal is that without the hyperlinks and images that establish a multitude of connections (some explicit, some implicit like the image subjects being familiar to only those readers “in the know”), the blog loses its essence. These pieces are “integral to it”. Cooper’s statement positions the “Sluts” and “Slaves” solidly within the field of online or digital literature. This

latter point is seconded by Yra Van Dijk (2015) and Katherine Hayles (2008), who likewise suggest that a key element of this literature is that it would be deprived of its character if moved offline. This circumstance clearly echoes Cooper’s position about the need for the blogs to remain online. Furthermore, even Cooper’s acknowledgement that the posts’ longevity is compromised (as hyperlinks and the pages these lead to may disappear) echoes concerns about the obsolescence of online literature. As Simone Murray writes, “even the most critically acclaimed hypertext fictions remain curiosities in the literary canon, their dissemination beset by problems of software and hardware obsolescence” (2015: 311).

5. “Sluts” and “Slaves” in Cooper’s Work

Having established the “Sluts” and “Slaves” blog posts as examples of flarf, it is time to move from the form to the content of these writings and identify connections with and departures from Cooper’s previous work, so as to situate these posts in the general context of his oeuvre. The “Sluts” and “Slaves” have some clear connections to previous work by Cooper, most notably in the pervasive presence of the Internet as context, and also in the impossibility of truth. Their clearest antecedent is Cooper’s 2004 novel *The Sluts*. At the same time, however, the blog posts mark a significant evolution of Cooper’s notions of impossibility of truth and fantasy. This section, thus, will both identify continuities and departures from previous work and argue that the blog posts further complicate Cooper’s notion of “fantasy”.⁷

As has been suggested so far, the Internet, with its potential for connection and anonymity, has remained a long-standing interest in Cooper’s work. This is particularly evident in *The Sluts*. Talking about this novel, Férrez Mora reflects: “It is not that erotic activity in the novel takes place through computer screens, it is that erotic activity is singularly played-out on the computer screen. Sexuality in Cooper’s narrative is typed about, which can only lead to the formulation of one question: what are the characters, men or machines?” (2014: 74). That is, the internet and its material instantiation in the computer appear as a quasi-character in the novel. I have further emphasized this aspect (2022a) by arguing that *The Sluts* is the tale of an online community coming together and becoming undone around the fantasy of a person (Brad) who turns out perhaps never to have existed in the first place—a narrative void. As the users are unable to transcend the barrier of anonymity that pervades their community, and thus are unable to verify any of the facts about Brad, the community collapses. In this way, the internet becomes a tool for Cooper to explore fantasy, almost being a character, as Férrez Mora argues, that brings about the collapse of the community.

In the blog posts, Cooper relies on the Internet yet again but does so to further elaborate on the notion of fantasy and the impossibility of knowing any truth. In order to trace this evolution, however, it is necessary to go back not to *The Sluts* but to *Frisk* (1991), the second novel of the George Miles cycle. *Frisk* narrates the story of a man (Dennis) obsessed with (or, perhaps, traumatized by) a series of snuff photographs he saw as a teenager. He constantly fantasizes with disembowelling his young lovers in search of “truth”. As the novel progresses, Dennis mails a letter to a former lover, Julian, describing one such disembowelment of one of his lovers. Julian and his sibling, Kevin, decide to visit Dennis to find out if the murder of Dennis’s lover actually happened. Towards the end of the novel, as the murders are proven never to have happened, Dennis explains:

“I don’t know”, [...] “Well, that’s not totally true”. [...] “I sort of know...well, basically because I realized at some point that I couldn’t and wouldn’t kill anyone, no matter how persuasive the fantasy is. And theorizing about it, wondering why, never helped at all. Writing it down was and still is exciting in a pornographic way. (Cooper 1991: 186)

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In *Frisk*, the murderous fantasy of disembowelment is Dennis’s own—it may at times seem tempting for Kevin, but in no way does it serve to build emotional, affective, or social connections between characters. This is drastically different from *The Sluts*, which, as Baker argues, “presents not individual consciousnesses, but a collective discourse which has no direct bearing on reality” (2012: 60-61). This is, as I have suggested (2022a), the key transformation that *The Sluts* evidences: the fantasies become a shared venue, the social glue that binds the community together. Just as with *Frisk*, fantasies prove impossible to actualize into reality, truth is impossible to attain, but in *The Sluts*, this does not bring about the demise of a single character, but rather of the community built upon those fantasies.

The argument throughout this article is that the “Sluts” and “Slaves” posts push this evolution of the impossibility of truth being achievable significantly further. When talking about works such as *Frisk* or *The Sluts*, we are talking about characters or character communities that remain fictional. No matter how immersive or captivating, the story is clearly fictional. In the blog posts, that is not so clear. Readers keep asking Cooper about the provenance of the texts:

Some impressively articulate profiles today. I couldn’t resist googling Elliot Danks, ha. I wonder if it’s the same person I found. Did you see the ad somewhere or...? Was very proud to see that an escort operating from my hometown (Bloodbaby from Bournemouth) made your pick of the fortnight! A great honour for a very dull and non-descript place, if I say so myself! Incidentally, do you find the posts online (and, if so, where) or did you write it?

Thus, the blog de-stabilizes perhaps the only certainty that *Frisk* and *The Sluts* provided: the authorial figure of Cooper. If the murdered and disembowelled twink and the character of Brad were the absences of *Frisk* and *The Sluts*, respectively, in the blog it seems that it is the figure of Dennis Cooper himself that is absent, which generates a lacuna through the blog’s refusal to clarify whether Cooper finds the posts or creates them himself.

This, in turn, generates a significant change for the readers of the blog. In *The Sluts*, it was the multiple characters who formed the community who had to decipher not just whether Brad existed and the events of his life were real, but also their own desires in relation to Brad and the sexual practices described in the novel. The community in *The Sluts* collapses because users seem unable to reach common ground on Brad: some wish he was true, and others, instead, see him as an excuse to share and talk about their sexual fantasies, knowing full well they cannot be realized. Instead, in the blog, it is the readers who are faced with this complex question: they are forced to confront their desires and feelings about the posts they are reading, without being clearly able to discern whether they are fictional or not. This incapacity makes readers feel disturbed while also captivated by the text:

These month’s slaves are out of this world. I couldn’t stop scrolling even as I found myself cringing. The Manchester emo farm, if it exists?, is particularly out there —do I want to go or do I not?

Hey Dennis —Nice group of escorts. Xenosexual was a new one to me and drool over that fantasy. Particularly enjoyed the backstory from Guhh. Londonboy was very tough though.

I don’t know what’s happening, Dennis. I think the pandemic and lockdown has made our slaves even more off the hook than usual. Same with the escorts. Things are getting crazier —but I certainly seem to enjoy these more and more, which I’m not sure about how to feel!

Readers have to face their own desires and fantasies in relation to the men portrayed in the posts, just as community members had to do in relation to Brad. What is interesting is that, as evidenced from the readers’ comments, this process is complicated by the absence of any certainty about whether the men in the posts are real (and found online) or created by Cooper. The impossibility of knowing any truth (since Cooper refuses to provide it) makes it difficult for these readers to come to terms with their own emotions —they cringe while wondering if they want to visit a sex venue, they drool over some fantasies while finding others ‘tough’, and they wonder why they are increasingly enjoying the posts. As one user writes:

Dennis, I’m kinda fascinated by these escorts, even if they could sell themselves better. I mean, they are horrifically broken but they’re also appealing in the extreme. If only you know where you find them, we could stalk them and figure out if they’re faking it!

So far ignored by research, Cooper's "Sluts" and "Slaves" posts signal a powerful turn in Cooper's work: they continue the themes already present in novels such as *The Sluts* but transform them to force the readers to negotiate their desires and fantasies in a context where truth (whether the posts are real or created) is impossible. Furthermore, this could only happen online. Earlier in this study, it was argued that the internet was an essential piece for understanding Cooper's "Sluts" and "Slaves". The use of hyperlinks that lead to supposed websites for missing people, social media accounts, or emails, complicates any assumptions about the posts. As a reader comments about a post featuring an email address:

Hey Dennis, I know you [sic] in the past you've said you don't like saying where you find your slaves, but considering one of them left a link to their maybe email (it doesn't work), is there any chance you'd be willing to let us know where you got them or if you crafted it yourself?

This comment evidences this complexity: an email is available but it does not work. Is it because the email is fake, another creation by Cooper, or it existed but it is no longer available? As I have explained in a study of online creative writing, "online interactions are framed by the impossibility of reliably identifying an outside reality, a reality beyond-the-screen" (García-Iglesias 2022b: 385). This reinforces just how much the readers of Cooper's blog are in a similar position to the community members of *The Sluts*.

The impossibility of any truth being achievable, even that of Cooper himself, does not immediately take on a negative connotation in the blog. In *The Sluts*, impossibility compels the collapse of the community—but many of its members had already taken advantage of that impossibility of truth to build their own fantasies. Upon the collapse of the community, they simply find alternative communities to engage in. Férrez Mora (2022) describes how Cooper's work, particularly in *Frisk* (1991), speaks to an all-pervasiveness or infinity of desire, which is not curtailed but rather facilitated by impossibility. Cooper explores how erotic identity "tends to infinity" as it exists at the intersection of selfness and otherness (Férrez Mora 2022: 12). In "Sluts" and "Slaves", the absence of truth may equally lend itself to infinite interpretations of the blogs, opening the way for infinite desire. Further research should seek to engage with blog readers to better understand how they navigate this context.

6. Conclusion

This article has sought to explore a new area of Cooper's work: his blog posts. These have become a key output from the author, and provide an almost daily

insight into his thinking. Despite this, to date, there have been no scholarly engagements with these materials—even while there is abundant work on his other productions, such as *The Sluts*. In this paper, I have tried to do two things: first, I have sought to describe the blog posts and contextualize them within the field of literary studies. Doing so, paying special attention to the found language and the hyperlinks—which Cooper himself said were essential to the posts—made it possible to situate “Sluts” and “Slaves” in between digital literature and citational literature. I have suggested how the blog posts may be seen as flarf. In addition to this, I have examined the many continuities between Cooper’s previous work, most notably *Frisk* and *The Sluts*, and the blog posts. This has revealed that they share a fascination with the internet (in the case of *The Sluts* and the blog posts) and that they engage in discussions about what desire is in a context where truth is impossible to attain. However, I have also identified a major difference: in the “Sluts” and “Slaves” posts, it is the readers who are forced to confront their desires and fantasies in the absence of information about the men featured in the posts. This, as in *The Sluts*, generates both fascination and disgust.

Above all, the analysis of Cooper’s “Sluts” and “Slaves” posts is fruitful in that it demonstrates that they are examples of flarf and exist at the intersection of citational and digital literature. This has two important implications: the first is that, to my knowledge, this is the first exploration of Cooper’s “Sluts” and “Slaves” posts and, thus, it has required carefully describing what these posts actually are. And, secondly, it pushes the boundaries of flarf beyond poetry. Already in 2009, Shell Fischer argued that flarf, which had originated as a personal source of entertainment among a group of friends, “is showing signs of having cleared a spot among the ranks of legitimate art forms” (2009). And yet, despite flarf having gained popularity, there remains a lack of serious consideration about this genre. This study has thus argued that the unique combination of found text and the use of hyperlinks positions the “Sluts” and “Slaves” posts as flarf narrative, locating them in between citational and digital literature. The remaining question would be: Where do we go from here? In *The Sluts*, the community collapses as infighting breaks out about what the purpose was of their online engagements (fantasizing or finding the truth?). Will readers be satiated after years of posts and decide to disengage? Will someone feel so outraged by them to prompt the closure of the blog? How will they perdure? Copies of Cooper’s blog have been “saved” by the Internet Archive over 256 times between 2016 and now, but as links begin to break—leading to nowhere—will they remain the same?

In conclusion, Dennis Cooper’s “Sluts” and “Slaves” serve as a powerful example of the emergence of a new hybrid genre that blurs the lines between digital literature and citational literature by means of a sort of narrative flarf. Through his

blog, Cooper invites readers to reflect on the ways in which truth —among other things— has been shaken and cannot be easily pinpointed in the era of “liquid modernity”, as defined by Zygmunt Bauman (2000). Cooper’s “Sluts” and “Slaves” would appear to be calling for the reconfiguration of two concepts, literature and truth, and to be an invitation for readers to reflect upon the way in which frames traditionally used to narrate human experiences have been profoundly shaken in the era of the internet and, as Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy have put it, the “global screen” (2007). Cooper’s blog raises important questions about the future of online engagement and the preservation of digital literature. As readers continue to engage with the blog, it will be interesting to see how they will respond to its confrontational approach to desire and truth and how it will perdure in the ever-changing digital landscape.

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Notes

1. <<https://denniscooperblog.com>>.

2. At the time at which the posts were retrieved for analysis (23 Feb. 2022), the hyperlink led to a website of the Hungarian Police with a profile of a missing teen. That profile is no longer available.

3. As evidenced in this example, the content of the posts is rife with sordid, violent, and borderline criminal activities. This paper, in turn, features some of those posts, which some readers may find distressing.

4. Gif novels are literary pieces comprising only gifs, which are static images or short, looping videos. Examples are *Zac’s*

Haunted House (2015), *Zac’s Control Panel* (2015), *Zac’s Freight Elevator* (2016), *Zac’s Coral Reef* (2018), and *Zac’s Drug Binge* (2020) released by Kiddiepunk press and available online: <<http://www.kiddiepunk.com/zines.htm>>.

5. It is worth noting that these posts were originally titled “Sluts” and “Slaves”. However, such titles made it difficult to share the links on social media (which banned these terms). Thus, Cooper now chooses a particularly striking quote from each post to use as a title. Despite this, the posts are still referred to as “Sluts” and “Slaves” by Cooper and the readers. (personal communication)

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6. Excerpts from Cooper's posts have been quoted literally and dated. However, readers' comments are paraphrased and no date is provided. This is to preserve their anonymity: while Cooper may reasonably see his writing as public, readers often address Cooper directly in their comments and may see them as a

conversation with him rather than a contribution to a public forum.

7. It is relevant to notice that, for the purpose of this study, the term fantasy is not used as akin to fictionality, but rather as equivalent to a broad understanding of sexual fantasy (see García-Iglesias 2022a; García-Iglesias 2022c)

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