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A EUROPA EM QUE ESTAMOS

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Cultural lags: ageism, sexism, localism. A Cultural Agenda for Europe in the Twenty First Century

Luísa Leal de Faria

Abstract

When recently reading an autobiographical text by a young English writer, published in 2018, I was struck with a growing difficulty in working out the meanings of countless references that crop up in every page, connected with places, media productions, public personalities and events that make up the daily life of a social group within the Millennial generation. I then tried to isolate the layers of incomprehension that obscured several cultural meaning, and found that one might be due to a generational difference, another to the persistence or the coming back of some gender conventions that were supposed to have been overcome after the turn of the century, and lastly, another might be due to specific meanings given to places that become embedded in trends and fashions specific to very local and socially restricted groups.

Although not invested with earthshattering meanings, these cultural gaps are significant, and to try to bridge them may help bring different generations closer, offer a better understanding of gender roles in contemporary society, and stress the relevance of the local in a globalised world.

Keywords: ageism, sexism, localism, Millennials, cultural gaps.

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Resumo

Ao ler, recentemente, um texto autobiográfico publicado em 2018, de autoria de uma jovem escritora inglesa, vi-me confrontada com um conjunto de dificuldades de interpretação relacionadas com inúmeras referências a lugares, produções televisivas, personalidades públicas e acontecimentos que pautam a vida quotidiana de um grupo social pertencente à geração “Millennial”. Procurei então isolar os diferentes níveis de incompreensão que obscureciam diferentes significados culturais, e identifiquei três: um, possivelmente devido à diferença de gerações, outro à persistência ou ao regresso de algumas convenções de género que pareciam ultrapassadas na viragem do século e, por último, o conjunto de significados atribuídos a lugares e a espaços por grupos sociais específicos que reflectem tendências e modas.

Embora estas questões não tenham importância decisiva na interpretação cultural, tentar negociar os seus significados poderá ajudar a aproximar gerações diferentes, oferecer um melhor entendimento dos papéis de género na sociedade contemporânea, e sublinhar a relevância do local no mundo globalizado.

Palavras-chave: idadismo, sexismo, localismo, “Millennials”, fissuras culturais.

When, a few months ago, I read Dolly Alderton's *Everything I Know About Love* (published in 2018), I found myself having to google, more and more often as the reading proceeded, places, objects, television shows, music and films mentioned in the book in order to try and capture the atmosphere where it is placed and connect with the experiences it conveys. Also, many expressions used by the author in this autobiographical text led me to further inquiries on line just to check whether my understanding of their meanings might still be right; and, to be completely candid, I found words that I did not recognise at all. I put myself through the exercise of checking meanings not only because I thought the book was worth it, but mostly because, as the reading advanced, I became fascinated with what appeared to be a cultural gap engendered by a significant age difference. What about intergenerational relations, a concern that acquires more and more relevance in international and national policies, from the United Nations to the United Kingdom? Should I worry about not getting the meaning of "FOMO", or "hell for leather", "to go on the pull" or "booty call"? Should I be embarrassed about my ignorance? At a second level of approach, how different is the experience of dating now, in the age of online communication and dating apps? Surprisingly, if I may anticipate my findings, not that different from previous generations, as far as feelings and social meanings are concerned, perhaps because the author doesn't rely too much on those devices. And then, another level of cultural difference became gradually perceptible: the difference of space, of inhabiting a different location where daily life is embedded in different codes, from the supermarket chains to the brand of bread you buy, from television networks to the reality shows on display. What about globalization, then? The local is the reality, never mind the international chains that provide a Zara everywhere, or the global media that make Rod Stewart a familiar voice across generations: there is so much more involved in the negotiation of cultural codes.

This may seem matter of fact: of course, different generations

speak differently, social groups develop their specific codes of dress and address; favoured restaurants, bars, dishes and drinks change with time. And the lived experience of a specific time can never be fully recaptured at a different one; or, for that matter, neither can the experience of a particular social group be fully recaptured and understood by a different one, even more so if they live in a different country and speak a different language. And yet, as a reader of English literature, past and contemporary, I always felt that I understood the underlying meanings and the implicit references that shape the discourse of different literary voices. Until now. With Alderton's book I faced several rather alarming possibilities. One, that my reading skills had not kept up with the times; two, that the English culture of the young in the noughties of the 21st century had changed beyond recognition for older generations; three, that in the age of globalization local idiosyncrasies gain unexpected power and shape local micro-cultures that become almost undecipherable to one another.

Stuart Hall famously stated "to put it simply, culture is about "shared meanings" (Hall, 1997, 1). Although this definition is deceptively simple, it helps to focus on the basics: if meanings are couched in elaborate codes, either you master the keys to decipher the codes, or you do not share the culture. The feeling of not sharing some meanings in Alderton's book was all the more annoying and intriguing because there was so much else that spoke directly to me. She is funny, she has the kind of sense of humour that captures the nonsense, the ridiculous and the soundbites of the times in a style that is direct, articulate, insightful, sometimes over the top in a hilarious way. And yet, each page is packed with references to popular culture, like TV shows, movies, music and probably polemics and ways of speaking used in news channels, cultural programs, social media and the day to day life of young white middle-class women and men. In short: I think I did capture the essential meanings of the experiences narrated, but I missed many details.

I need to make an observation right at the start, that functions almost as a disclaimer. This is not a book about race and/or ethnicity, or about class, not even about gender, although the entire book is about a young woman, the author: wealthy middle-class, white, Jewish family, straight. In that sense, it would be worth examining from a feminine, not necessarily feminist, perspective. It is an autobiographical text that qualifies as an object of analysis within the frame of a feminist epistemology which, since the 1970s, has claimed that narrating experience generates knowledge. From Carol Hanish's famous statement that "the personal is political" (Hanish, 1970, 2006), to the more recent examinations of how personal narratives may qualify as truth in a post-truth era, or in a post #MeToo atmosphere (Budgeon, 2021; Baer, 2016; Rivers, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018), the possible relevance of looking into seemingly apolitical personal narratives for evidence of significant, yet unacknowledged political realities has begun to be stressed.

This is a coming of age narrative that focuses on a teenager who lives with her parents in a well-to-do London suburb, attends a private school, becomes a young woman, goes to the university (at Essex for a graduate course, then to City University for a Master's), has a lively social life, tries to find out who she is as she drinks heavily and engages in a number of encounters, one night stands and relationships with boys, then with men, looking for love. She is also concerned about finding a job, about being able to support herself, wanting to be totally independent. All the while she is a woman's woman, who values and cherishes her women friends and is uncompromisingly loyal to them. In many ways, she is your regular, normal teenager becoming a young woman. At that level, there are not too many surprises. Of course, a number of behaviours differ widely from what expected behaviour in the same age range used to be in the late twentieth century. But the feelings, the insecurities, the sense of humour are completely relatable.

Still, if we want to read the book from a cultural perspective (not literary, or psychoanalytical) the three levels of interpretation that I mentioned at the start are relevant fields of analysis. The first has to do with a pervasive characteristic of Alderton's writing which consists in the use all sorts of references to popular texts of all kinds – literature, film, television, music – to characterize the people she is talking about. Some references are well known outside of the UK and have acquired an almost classical status. These are a part of the culture that, as a reader, I share. But others are embedded in the daily television shows of English or American provenance, so they are probably quite unfamiliar to people who live elsewhere and never even heard of them. To be fully understood, they need to be explained. They need to be decoded.

The second relates to the state and nature of feminism throughout the first decades of the 21st century as well as the whole idea of a succession of generations, from the Baby Boomers of the late forties to the mid-sixties, then Generation X born 1965-1979, followed by the Millennials, born 1980-1994 and last, Gen Z, born 1995-2012. Some researchers are already talking about a next generation, Gen Alpha, born 2013 – 2025 (University of Southern California, Age Groups, Demographics). Dolly Alderton makes several references to the generational situation, trying to understand her own relative position as a Millennial, already surpassed by the Gen Zs. She doesn't make any theoretic statements on feminism, let alone on gender issues, but her position as a single young woman, living through her twenties and turning thirty, cry out for an examination of the positions she occupies and the views she holds as a young, single woman. This examination can be framed by recent reflections on the last wave of feminism or, maybe, as Angela McRobbie says, the aftermath of feminism (McRobbie 2008; Gill, 2016)

At the third level meanings are more implicit than explicit. They have to do with the deciphering of meanings embedded in

the uses, behaviours, tastes, fashions of everyday life. The first overall level at this point is London itself, the space of the city, invested with a plethora of meanings relating to where you live. Where you live in London or where you would like to live is a function of symbolic space that Michel de Certeau explained on a theoretic level, when he stated that words that give names to places hold a kind of magical power: "Linking acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions, these words operate in the name of an emptying-out and wearing-away of their primary role. They become liberated spaces that can be occupied. A rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning" (de Certeau, 1988, p. 105). This new geography expresses, after all, the symbolic meaning attributed to certain streets or neighbourhoods, connected to class or age group. But then there are other countless references, immediately intelligible to those in the know, but opaque to the others. I will try to select relevant examples to illustrate those points.

Age gap and reading skills

Alderton's *Everything I know About Love* is a memoir of a sort. It earned a 2018 National Book Award for autobiography and was shortlisted for the 2019 Non-Fiction Narrative Book of the Year in the British Book Awards, among other distinctions. More recently it was adapted into a BBC/Peacock eponymous television drama series, adopting a clearly fictional shape. Although most of the book does, indeed, narrate the author's experiences and reflections, it also provides recipes, a section with emails pretending to be somebody else, shopping and other lists, and it features a number of hilarious pages that take the shape of collective emails announcing fictional events based on real life occurrences. All these potentially ridiculous situations are filtered by an implacable critical mind and overblown to the level of nonsense. They are not exactly autobiographical

although they are certainly the distillation of numerous events of the same kind that mirror the fashions of the time: vanity projects, grown up dinner parties, Christmas greetings and New Year resolutions, hen parties, weddings and baby showers. In these imaginary emails the reader captures the outlines of fashionable life styles cultivated by well off young women and men of the same age group as the author.

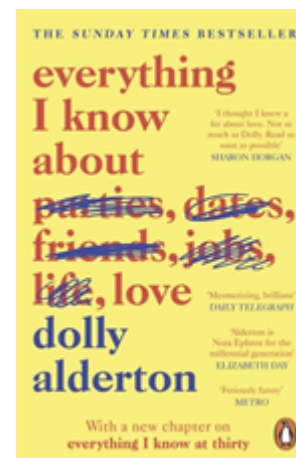


Fig. 1. The cover of Dolly Alderton's 2018 best seller *Everything I Know About Love*

If these emails are clearly invested with an intention of social commentary, the more autobiographical or introspective chapters in the narrative seem to take for granted that the reader shares the same cultural references; or, if not, the author doesn't care to explain. This is where the reading became challenging, but not less interesting. I will try to list some of those challenges.

Let me take, as an example, the first group email, dated 10th November, written as Lana, who invites "dear everyone I've ever met and a few people I've never met" to "an event called Lana's Literary Salon, taking place in an abandoned car park in Leytonstone. The idea is that the evening will evoke the mind-expanding conversational traditions of the Oxford Union with the atmosphere of *Noel's House Party*." (Alderton, 2018, p. 60).

The reader is certainly aware of the existence of the Oxford Union and its rather highbrow profile. Alderton joins it in the same sentence with a BBC “light entertainment series” (I am quoting Google), that was highly popular throughout the nineties of the past century, apparently full of innuendo. In this piece Alderton targets the pseudo-intellectuals, be they aspiring politicians, fashionable television presenters, film or documentary makers, and exposes the ridicules of wokeism and fake camaraderie in talk shows, all the while being complicit with a reader who shares the same sense of humour and, hopefully, the same cultural references.

A few quotes from this text will help illustrate the literary devices that are used throughout the book. “To begin with, there will be some spoken-word poetry written by India Tower-Baggs on the subjects of her recent life-changing haircut, the difficult choice of selecting her default web browser setting and finding her way back to herself through a mix of ayahuasca ceremonies and Zumba classes. She will perform all her work with a slight Jamaican accent despite attending Cheltenham Ladies’ College.” (Alderton, 2018, p. 60) If you don’t know exactly how expensive this College is, just google it, and you will find all the information you need. The articulation of the seemingly seriousness of form with the futility of the content forms part of Alderton’s frequently used comic devices.

The next paragraph of the email concerns “Ollie”, who is starting his own political party, called “Young Clueless Liberals”. He will be reading his manifesto and will be interviewed by journalist “Foxy James” (T4, MTV News). The highly innovative and exciting aims of the party are threefold: “first-time buyers, student fees and the reopening of the Fabric nightclub.” If “Foxy James” may be a fictive name, MTV News did exist for a while, and at some point “evolved to a digital series that covers trending topics from pop culture to [social justice](#) issues to electoral politics and beyond”. The Fabric, or fabric nightclub is also real (my source

for both: Google). The main event of the evening is announced next, and requires a full quotation:

“Then, the headline act: my short film. *No One Minds That Ulrika Jonsson is an Immigrant* explores the themes of cultural identity, citizenship and sovereignty in a future dystopian setting. After the three minute film ends, Foxy will interview me on stage about it for two hours – we will reference the film and its crew (mainly my family) as if it is a universally recognized piece of work and speak with the showbizzy, eye-rolly, in-jokey camaraderie about behind-the scenes stories as if I were Martin Scorsese giving a director’s commentary on *GoodFellas*” (Alderton, 2018, p. 61). I had to look up Ulrika Jonsson and I quote, from Google: “Eva Ulrika Jonsson (born 16 August 1967) is a Swedish-British television presenter and model. She became known as a TV-am weather presenter, and moved on to present the ITV show *Gladiators*, and later featured as a team captain on the BBC Two show *Shooting Stars*.” The article about Ulrika Jonsson on Google is extensive and she is certainly a very well known TV celebrity both in the UK and in Sweden. No need to explain, I am sure, the sense humour encapsulated in the topics of migration, cultural identity, citizenship and sovereignty applied to a beautiful, blonde, successful, multi-married, mother of 4 Swedish-British woman. But you would miss the fun if you didn’t know who Ulrika Jonsson is. And in the same page she manages to nod to Kerouac: “much like Kerouac I’m just not a morning person”.

The same email is packed with references to social and cultural practices of Alderton’s age and social group that stress their absurdity: in the “venue” there will be “craft beer, brewed by my flatmate on the balcony of our Penge newbuild. The Death of Hackney tastes like a sort of fizzy Marmite and smells like a urinary tract infection and is yours for £13 a bottle. Enjoy” (Alderton, 2018, p. 61).

In fact, although beer is consumed in large quantities in Alderton’s frequent drinking binges, prosecco is the drink of choice for

Dolly and her friends, and this seems to be a taste acquired by Millennials. Alderton herself mentions a job she landed when she was twenty six, as a script assistant on the E4 TV show *Fresh Meat*, “a comedy about student life”, where she was expected to do a “hepcat pass”, that is: “to make sure all the language was in keeping with youth; that it was authentic; that there wasn’t a trace of middle age in the ink.” (Alderton, 2018, p. 337) And she goes on to give examples: “I circled mentions of cava and wrote “they’d drink prosecco” next to it. I advised what texts would have been read on an English course or what albums they might have been listening to” (Alderton, 2018, pp. 337-338). Let me just note that the producers of *Fresh Meat* were born in 1970 and 1971, and still the age gap made a difference (Alderton was born in 1988)

The book is dotted with references to ordinary objects and practices that make up the fabric of everyday life in London like finding apartments on Gumtree, shopping on Etsy, using Bebo pages, mentions of Prezzo restaurants, Hovis bread, Bakewell slices, Marmite, Yule Logs, toffee vodka, foam parties, Mezze sharing platters, the Nisa local, Tammy Girl strapless dresses, fascinators, Mulberry Bayswater handbags, molecule perfume, boarding school tuck shops, nightclubs like Fabric, Fluid or Koko, Caravan King’s Cross, Rosemary Conley videos, Magic FM. I did have to look up what an “Ann Summers nurse outfit” was, among other things.

The countless references to media programs and reality shows imply sharing a knowledge of everyday entertainment that is probably only accessible to those living in England for quite a long time. Some of these shows were broadcast abroad, so chances are that they are known elsewhere. But most were not, to my knowledge. Far from being exhaustive let me just mention a few: Eggheads, Acorn Antiques, Noel’s House Party, Made in Chelsea, Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?, The X Factor, Country Life, Kennan & Kel, Strictly: It Takes Two, Dancing on Ice, Time

Team, Gogglebox, The Archers, Loose Women, East Enders, Happy Days, The Vicar of Dibley, Challenge Anneka, Fresh Meat, the presenters Ant & Dec. Alderton mentions also the American shows Kennan & Kel, Seinfeld, Girls, Friends and, of course, Sex and the City. Also The Sims (game), Desert Island Discs (radio) are some of the media shows and games that apparently don’t require further explanation.

Then, there are all the references to film actors and TV personalities. Just by mentioning them, Alderton needs not explain or describe. Most references are humorous, but only if the reader is in the know. Nigel Harman is Farly’s type of boy, Dolly’s is Charlie Simpson (Alderton, 2018, p. 2); at a party, still in her teens, she sees a boy named Joel and comments: “Joel is a famous North-London heart-throb; a Jewish Warren Beatty with gelled spikes and acne scars; a Danny Zucko of the suburbs.” (Alderton, 2018, p. 24); at some point one of her fictional characters is “Penge’s Carrie Bradshaw” (Alderton, 2018, p. 191); there is this manager of a local restaurant in Italy “who looked like a sixty-something Italian John Candy” (Alderton, 2018, pp. 264-265). After being left by David, she writes: “As the days passed, I felt a combination of loneliness, embarrassment, grief and anger. I felt like an idiot; like a sort of frumpy female character on *The Archers* who gets wooed by a dastardly, beautiful stranger before he leaves, taking all her money.” (Alderton, 2018, pp. 285-286). And David would be referred later as “a wolf in Glastonbury stall-owner’s clothing” (Alderton, 2018, p. 287). Lauren frequents her local vape shop so often that “all the staff greet her like the Fonz” (Alderton, 2018, p. 332). “A sixty something woman with Jilly Cooper hair” (Alderton, 2018, p. 346) crops up, among countless other references of the same kind.

On almost every page we find the names of pop stars, songs, groups. Just a sample: the song “Lover, You Should’ve Come Over”, the group Ministry of Sound, The Dead Kennedys, R.

Kelly's "Ignition", Emo, Beenie Man and Other Dance Hall Legends, John Martyn (her favourite singer), Paul John Weller, Joni Mitchell, Marvin Gaye, Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks*, Phil Phillips "Sea of Love", Blue Man Group, "I would walk 500 miles" by the Proclaimers, "Umbrella" by Rihanna, The London Gay Men's Chorus, Pulp song "Stacks", Jarvis Cocker, among many others, of global fame or not so much.

In the midst of the constant references to objects of popular culture we find, at a subtler level, evidences of a more sophisticated nature that reveal a cultivated mind. Still in her teens, a compulsive user of MSN Messenger, she meets Lauren, they try to start a band, and she comments: "We thought ourselves to be a sort of two-person Bloomsbury Group of early noughties MSN Messenger" (Alderton, 2018, p. 13). "A time when shagging was like potatoes and tobacco, and I, Sir Walter Raleigh" (Alderton, 2018, p. 21), is the metaphor she uses when she discovers sex; lines by T. S. Eliot emerge when she writes "I am so grateful that I fetishized the measured-out-in-coffee-spoons minutiae of adulthood so vividly as a teenager because the relief of finally getting there meant I have found very little of it to be a burden" (Alderton, 2018, p. 107). She drops comments like "a sort of Blanche Dubois hysteria" (Alderton, 2018, p. 111), "someone who could be Patrick Bateman" (Alderton, 2018, p. 181), or "when you approach thirty, married friends will have a sort of amnesia about what being single was like. They will become your Mrs Bennets" (Alderton, 2018, p. 356). If she hints at Tennessee Williams, Brett Easton Ellis and Jane Austen, she explicitly quotes Margaret Attwood (Alderton, 2018, p. 42), Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and David Foster Wallace (Alderton, 2018, p. 342) and more surprisingly, at least for me, "The Amorous Shepherd", the English translation of Fernando Pessoa/Alberto Caeiro's "O pastor amoroso". She reads the poem at her friend Alex's wedding in Brooklin and quotes the lines "I don't regret anything I was before because I still am, I only regret not having loved you" and starts to cry.^[1] I may be quite mistaken, but this

choice seemed to me quite sophisticated, considering the amount of poems in English suitable for wedding ceremonies.

My provisional conclusion is that the age gap is very relevant when it comes to capturing the feeling of life lived through the particular experience of the subject, in a particular time and place. What Raymond Williams called "the structure of feeling" may be misunderstood, or even missed. So, we should all make an effort to build bridges across generations through discourse.

Being single in the aftermath of feminism

The episodes of Alderton's life narrated in *Everything I Know About Love* do not follow a strict chronology. There are not exactly flashbacks, but the narrative is structured according to topics or series of events that make sense in themselves and may overlap with others, treated in other chapters. The early chapters talk about her teens, her use of MSN Messenger to meet boys, and her wish to overcome that phase of life as quickly as possible, and become a grown up. "I always thought that my fascination and obsession with the opposite sex would cool down when I left school and life began, but little did I know I would just be as clueless about how to be with them in my late twenties as I was when I first logged on to MSN Messenger. Boys were a problem. One that would take me fifteen years to fix." (Alderton, 2018, p. 18) This statement, that closes the chapter intitled "Boys" announces much of what will follow.

Everything I Know About Love follows her narrative of the self until she is thirty, when she seems to come to terms with who she is. The main steps of that trajectory hinge around love, of course, but also bring to the surface the way of life of a young single woman in London, through the first two decades of the twenty first century: going to the university, sharing a flat with friends, going to pubs and to parties, drinking, dating, travelling, all of the above punctuated by references to looking for a job or jobs, and trying to support herself. Although we sense that she comes

from a well off family that might provide a security net, Alderton is a young woman of her generation, one we might call a “Top Girl” (McRobbie, 2007). And, although her story never deals in situations of sexual harassment as it came to the fore after the #MeToo movement, it is deeply embedded in the sexism analysed by Sara Ahmed (Ahmed, 2015).

Angela McRobbie devised a number of expressions to encapsulate the changes in feminism in the late twentieth and early twenty first century from “top girls” to “phallic girls”, finding inspiration in Joan Rivière’s “Womanliness as Masquerade” (Rivière, 1929), which she transformed into “the post-feminist masquerade” in the early decades of twenty first century. To wear womanliness as a mask in order to compete in the professional world of men in the middle decades of the twentieth century, as in Rivière’s analysis, morphs into the apparent normalization of full gender equality in Western culture eight decades later. Now, we seem to take for granted that women have already achieved all the goals that were fought for in the early feminist waves. But, in that sense, women have been the victims of a “new sexual contract”(McRobbie, 2007, 719). “The meanings which now converge around the figure of the girl or young women (which, from a UK cultural perspective, have global export value including films like *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Bend It Like Beckham*), are now more weighted towards capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility and participation”, writes McRobbie (McRobbie, 2007, p. 721). As a result, women are put under enormous pressures, both from a political environment where they are expected to achieve professional success and from a social environment where they are expected to be beautiful, happy, fulfilled in family and motherhood. And then, there is the individual field of frustrated desires, of the stress of wanting to lose weight, of wanting to conform to the role models seemingly approved by magazines, television shows, movies and general opinion, and falling short. The aftermath of feminism is the moment when women use again the gestures of seduction in

order to achieve power over men, consciously performing the traditional expected roles in a still patriarchal world with the ironical twist of knowing what they are doing: a post-feminist masquerade.

Although contested, post feminism continues to be a relevant analytical category in media and cultural studies. It is a “sensibility” (Gill, 2016, p. 612) and also “a critical analytical term that refers to empirical regularities or patterns in contemporary cultural life, which include the emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency as dominant modes of accounting; the disappearance – or at least muting – of vocabularies for talking about both structural inequalities and cultural influence; the “deterritorialisation” of patriarchal power and its “reterritorialisation” in women’s bodies and the beauty-industrial complex; the intensification and extensification of forms of surveillance, monitoring, and disciplining of women’s bodies; and the influence of a “makeover paradigm” that extends beyond the body to constitute a remaking of subjectivity – what I have recently characterized as a central part of the “psychic life of postfeminism”.” (Gill, 2016, p. 613; Gill, 2017).

In the context of post feminism or the aftermath of feminism, many parts or *Everything I know About Love* are worth analysing. But none more than the reflections on being single. Shelley Budgeon pointed out, already in 2008, that “historically singleness has operated as a marginalized status while heterosexual couples have occupied a privileged position that confers upon its inhabitants a range of social, economic and symbolic rewards” (Budgeon, 2008, p. 301). In spite of all the claims about independence and legitimacy of alternative ways of living produced in the last decades, “the ideological force of couple culture is such that its privileged status is rarely recognized or questioned” (Budgeon, 2008, p. 302). In Alderton’s narrative we find highly amusing parodies of hen parties, bridesmaids roles, weddings and baby showers, that reflect a kind of outsider

position coupled with a fear of being left out. Her narrative takes place within a frame that Catherine Rottenberg calls “neoliberal feminism” (Rottenberg, 2014, 2017), very much aligned with both McRobbie’s and Gill’s conceptions. But in Alderton’s we feel that she is often trying to comply with the expected social norms, while she is knowingly disrupting them. And the expected social norms along the second decade of the twenty first century were still underpinned by an ‘ideology of marriage and family’, “which is based on the assumption that everyone desires a sexual partnership, that a sexual relationship is the only truly important personal relationship, and that those who are in one are significantly happier and more fulfilled than those who are not.” (Budgeon, 2008, p. 302).

During the first part of her twenties, Alderton enjoys being single, being free to go anywhere either alone or with other girls. She even makes a statement that places the narrative very much within the post-feminist “sensibility”. After going to a posh London hotel with a friend who had promised that it was a hotbed for “bored millionaires with buckets of booze who want the company of fun, young people” (Alderton, 2018, p. 45) and surviving the experience, she comments: “My friends and I continued to believe what we were doing was a great act of empowerment and emancipation. My mum often told me this was a misguided act of feminism; that emulating the most yobbish behaviour of men was not a mark of equality. ... But I still think there were moments when those years of partying were a defiant, celebratory, powerful act; a refusal to use my body in a way that was expected of me.” (Alderton, 2018, p. 48). The twenties were the decade when Alderton lived through many of the experiences that are almost textbook for the privileged young women of her generation: partying, drinking, travelling, setting house with friends, dating, and also dieting and going into therapy. Although ridden with bad decisions, with resolves not fulfilled, with insecurities and frustrated expectations, we feel that those were happy years, filled with the joy of sharing life

with true friends and the excuse of youth for every shortcoming.

Yet, on approaching thirty, the mood begins to change. The chapter “Enough” points to a turn in resolve: she stops stalking potential conquest on line; she deletes her Facebook account, she stops with the midnight hours, she invests all her time in her work and friendships (Alderton, 2018, p. 302), among many other signs of a newly found serenity and maturity. “Enough” means not only that she has enough of a rather adventurous life, but also that she is enough for herself: “I don’t need any words or looks or comments from a man to believe I’m visible; to believe I’m here ... Because I am enough. My heart is enough. The stories and the sentences twisting around in my mind are enough. ... And I am more than enough. (I think they call it “a breakthrough”) (Alderton, 2018, p. 305). So, she follows this chapter with “Twenty Eight Lessons Learnt in Twenty-eight Years”, filled with wisdom and humour, followed by “Homecoming”, where she openly confesses all her perceived shortcomings in the experience(s) of love. Except for one, the most enduring: “Nearly everything I know about love, I’ve learnt in my long-term friendships with women. Particularly the ones I have lived with at one point or another. I know what it is to know every tiny detail about a person and revel in that knowledge as if it were an academic subject. When it comes to the girls I’ve built homes with, I’m like the woman who can predict what her husband will order at every restaurant.” (Alderton, 2018, p. 314). She stresses the same point at the end the book. The last sentence reads:

When you are looking for love and it seems like you might not ever find it, remember you probably have access to an abundance of it already, just not the romantic kind. This kind of love might not kiss you in the rain or propose marriage. But it will listen to you, inspire and restore you. It will hold you when you cry, celebrate when you’re happy and sing All Saints with you when you’re drunk. You have so much to gain and learn from this kind of love. You can carry it with you forever. Keep it as close as you can. (Alderton, 2018, pp. 357-358).

All this is a consequence of turning thirty.

I didn't want to be weird about turning thirty. Being weird about turning thirty is a cliché. It's not feminist, it's not cool, it's not modern or progressive. It's heteronormative, it's hysterical, it's bourgeois, it's suburban. It's very predictable. It's too Rachel Green. It's princessy, precious and completely pathetic. I didn't want to be any of these things. I was a nervous wreck about turning thirty. (Alderton, 2018, p. 329)

On the verge of turning thirty, Alderton feels like living through the last years of a whole generation, the Millennials. After having been the centre of attention from the media – “we fascinated, repulsed, worried, beguiled and formed the zeitgeist” (Alderton, 2018, p. 337) – her generation is being replaced by Generation Z. She describes a new feeling of nostalgia for her lost twenties, finally outgrown but for ever remembered, “rambunctious, restless and ramshackle. Roving, raucous and rebellious. My roaming decade; my roaring twenties.” (Alderton, 2018, p. 349).

Alderton has been called “the millennial Nora Ephron”, “because her body of work (...) taps into one of the most all-consuming fears of the female experience in our 20s, 30s and beyond: the fear of being left-behind”, writes Emma Clifton (Clifton, Capsule, 2022). Alderton calls it “the plight of comparison”: no one wants to be left out, and when your friends “start falling in love, moving in with partners, buying property, having children

... there's something that feels frightening if you don't feel that you're involved, even if it's not something you want”, she says.



Fig. 2. The cover of Alderton's 2023 novel *Good Material*

Being a millennial has also often been equated with an overwhelming use of social networks and dating apps. But this is again a surprise in Alderton's text. Although it is mentioned in the book, this is not the kind of practice that she favours. In an interview given to the BBC in 2022, referring to Tinder and Hinge, she declared “I feel lucky to be a millennial that dated before apps” (BBC, 7 June, 2022; also Walters, 2021). So, a cultural lag that might prevent a full understanding of the text, is simply not there. Alderton's feelings and experiences are conveyed through the conventions of description, using, it is true, a number of metaphors, metonyms, euphemisms, metalepsis or periphrasis not always intelligible to the older reader, but still not memes.

To finally come to terms with being single by choice at thirty is, probably, the closest to a feminist standpoint in the book. One is reminded of the plight of Bridget Jones, near the end of the twentieth century, also trying to find love and being pursued by the judgement of another generation – her parents and their friends – implying that there must be something wrong with her if at thirty she is not only single, but doesn't have a boyfriend. Even worse, her married friends, the “Smug Marrieds”, “patronize us and make us feel like failed human beings.” Bridget Jones feels like she has turned into Miss Havisham when she is with her married friends and other married couples (Fielding, 1997, p. 40). Or how a negative view of feminism impacted upon television comedies, like *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City* or *Desperate Housewives*, transforming Betty Friedan's concept of the “feminine mystique” into the “feminist mystique”: “Whether we ask the Ally McBeals, Carrie Bradshaws, or Bridget Joneses, their collective point is clear: single women are distressed, lonely, and miserable. The women depicted in these series are deeply discontented and utterly confused about why – despite their designer-clad, well-proportioned bodies, meaningful careers, and fat check books – they experience something much like Friedan's eloquent description of a “strange stirring, a sense

of dissatisfaction, [and] a yearning.” (Elizabeth Kaufer Busch, 2009, p. 87)

For Dolly Alderton it is perhaps in the fictional character of Jen, in her recent novel *Good Material*, that she comes to terms with being single, or alone. Although the novel is written from the point of view of a male character, Andy, towards the end there is a shift and Jen, the girlfriend who broke up with him, takes centre stage. The character is thirty five, and she decides, at last, to quit a very successful job and fly to Cartagena, and see where she will end up. Her friend Jane had summarized Jen’s way of being: “You’ve always been alone ... You were alone when I met you, you’re alone in a crowd of people, you were alone when you were with Andy ... don’t have a kid or get married because you’re worried about being alone ... Be alone, Jen. You know how to be alone without being lonely. Do you know how rare that is?” (Alderton, 2023, p. 334)

Shelley Budgeon compared the social implications of being single as a man or as a woman, noting that, “particularly in later life some women do interpret singleness as a personal failure rather than as a choice.” (Budgeon, 2008, p. 308). For men, on the contrary, the word “bachelor” carries the connotations of choice – unlike the “old maid” stereotype – and bachelorhood is seen in a positive way, albeit with a few exceptions, in the cultural imagination. Nevertheless, these social categories may be undergoing a process of readjustment and change. To be single by choice, as a woman, is becoming more and more widely practiced, not only because women postpone marriage and children for the sake of their careers, but also because, like Dolly Alderton, they feel comfortable by themselves.

My provisional conclusion comes in the shape of a couple of questions: are we facing a change of paradigm in the social constructions of “couple culture” and the “production of singleness”? If so, how does the new paradigm impact upon contemporary culture? The condition of women is still not a story

of achievement and complete fulfilment of expectations. We need to be on the lookout.

Local meanings and global impacts

Everything I Know About Love takes place mostly in London, and it takes for granted that the reader shares a kind of subjective knowledge, linked to class, education, social habits, fashion and trends in general, that invests with meaning references to places like dwelling areas, streets, restaurants, shops. We find, in short, a very localised kind of daily experience which, at another level, can be placed in the broader context of London as a global city. Peter Ackroyd, in his magnificent *London: the Biography*, captured the endless meanings of the city as it morphed along the centuries as a living creature into the shape it acquired at the end of the twentieth century. Towards the end of the book, when he is writing about the changes that took place in London in the 1960’s and after, he asks: “And yet what is it, now, to be a Londoner?... Is London, then, just a state of mind?... On more than one occasion in its history, it has been described as containing a world or worlds within itself. Now it has been classified as a ‘global city’, and in Hebbert’s words as ‘a universe with its own rules, which has genuinely burst out of national boundaries’. So it does truly contain a ‘universe’ like some dense and darkly revolving cloud at its centre” (Ackroyd, 2001, p. 767)[2]. It is this mixed atmosphere of the local, for which the reader may need more inside information, and the global, that projects London as a place shared globally, that may require looking into. In fact, from the ‘unreal city’ of T. S. Eliot, to the capital of world finance, London encapsulates such a multiplicity of contradictory or complementary meanings that it would be pointless to try to enumerate them. What I want to stress is just that, for anyone not living in London, not even having visited London for a number of years, there is still the constant visibility of the city through the news, through the permanence of the highly photogenic pageantry that is broadcast to millions on the occasion of events pertaining

to the royal family, through movies and television shows; and also the London that makes up the background of literary texts, too many to count. This idea of London, constructed through its mediated projections, doesn't clash with the closer reading of the London that transpires through Alderton's book. On the contrary, It is enriched by it. Yet, some decoding is required, and not all may be successfully achieved.

First and foremost, London itself is teeming with meanings. The city is the stage of an unstoppable dynamic that reinvents its space at a breathless rate. A piece published in the August 2019 issue of *National Geographic Magazine* called "How London became the center of the world", with the subtitle "Three decades of growth reinvented the urban landscape in London – and transformed it into the preeminent global city", adds a question: but amid growing pains and with Brexit looming, can it stay on top? (Parker, 2019). In 2019, the piece explored the magnificent achievements since the turn of the century, emphasizing that "London is bigger and richer than ever. Three decades of growth transformed London from a fading grande dame into the preeminent global city and a leading center of culture, finance, and technology." The innovation of the past few decades is presented in way that provides a first level of description, relevant if you want to take the next step – interpretation.



Fig. 3. An historic directional sign in Clamp Hill in Stanmore – dismantled in 2010. David Howard - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/satguru/3138718978/>

Where you live in London or, for that matter, anywhere else, is always already encoded in multiple layers of social and economic meanings. If you live in Lisbon, as I do, you know which neighbourhoods are fashionable, affluent, gentrified, popular, low income, whatever, and you know that the suburbs are not necessarily posh. Some are unfortunately slums. In this implicit knowledge is important, because the narrative sometimes hinges upon finding a place to live, sharing a flat with friends, having to move. Right at the start of *Everything I Know About Love*, Alderton states that she spent her adolescence on the internet, and explains why: "I grew up in the suburbs" (Alderton, 2018, p. 4). Being removed, at age eight, from Islington into Stanmore was a "cruel decision" of her parents, that placed her at "the blank margin of the city", transforming her into an "observer of fun, rather than a reveller at the party" (Alderton, 2018, p. 5).

The neighbourhood is clearly affluent but, for Alderton, it is neither urban nor rural – it is just somewhere in between. Perhaps because she attended a boarding school and later Exeter University, Stanmore as a place doesn't occupy much space in the book. Yet the way she describes the feeling of affluent suburbia with the statement "the North London suburbs were a vacuum for identity. It was as beige as the plush carpets that adorned its every home. There was no art, no culture, no old buildings, no parks, no independent shops or restaurants" (Alderton, 2018, p. 5), is indicative of an ideal of a city, London, through its absence. Life in the suburbs is characterized by its homogeneity in the golf



Fig. 4. A Prezzo restaurant

clubs, the branches of Prezzo, private schools, streets, houses, cars, hairstyles, in short, a place where “unless you played golf, wanted your hair highlighted or to browse a Volkswagen showroom, there was absolutely nothing to do.” (Alderton, 2018, pp. 5-6).

The move to London, at twenty four, is vital for Alderton. From then on, in the narrative, London is the main background. And London, through her eyes of Alderton, needs to be decoded. London is a place of the imagination. It elicits a sense of urgency for keeping up, for participating, for not being left out of unknown possibilities:

It is a feeling I grew very used to – panicked and throaty; a sense that everyone in London was having a good time other than me; that there were pots of experiential gold hidden on every street corner and I wasn't finding them (Alderton, 2018, p. 105).

But London is also a very real city, where to find a place to live when you are young and on a tight budget is difficult.

Where to look within a narrow budget gives clues into the way of life of the author and her milieu. Her first flat, shared with friends “was just off a notoriously dodgy crescent that joined the Chalk Farm end of Camden Town with the Kentish Town end” (Alderton, 2018, p. 109).

“Camden felt like the right place for us to be: it was central, it was near all the nicest parks and, best of all, it was perilously, hopelessly uncool. None of our friends lived there. ... Occasionally, during the years we were there, we'd go for a party or a night out in East London and be surrounded by young, cool, gorgeous people and we'd wonder if this was really where we were supposed to be at our age” (Alderton, 2018, p. 112).

So, East London is where you want to live, if you are cool and in your twenties. Five years later her friends go their separate ways, and she needs to find a place for herself, which was difficult, again due to budgetary limitations. Eventually, she found a place

“right in the middle of Camden” (Alderton, 2018, p. 320).



Fig. 5. A Nisa local in Camden Town

Long gone seem to be the days of cool Sloane Square or affordable Notting Hill. The ‘swinging London’ of the sixties and seventies, with trendy centres like Carnaby Street or King’s Road in Chelsea had already seen a dislocation to the East with the development of the Docklands and Canary Wharf, and to the Southeast, where Peckham and Forest Hill are deemed desirable to live in. Each place can be more or less trendy, more or less desirable according to the unspoken codes of different social groups. Alderton notes, about Camden High Street around 2012, that she and her friends were “confronted with swarms of Spanish teenagers on a school trip or forty-something men with Paul Weller haircuts and winkle-picker shoes who were still waiting for Camden’s glory years of Brit-pop to return” (Alderton, 2018, p. 112). So, Camden had gone from cool to uncool without foreign teenagers or middle-aged men who emulated Paul Weller even noticing.[3]

In her imaginary emails Alderton mentions other locations. Upon being invited to the wedding of “Jack Harvey-Jones and Emily White” (“Jemily”, by the way), she receives an email from the couple on the location, the organization of the wedding and what gifts are expected.

We are aware, Dolly Something Alderton, you are single with an income of £30,000 at best while we have a joint annual earning of £230,000. We also understand that we live in a £700,000 flat in Battersea, the deposit on which was paid in its entirety by our parents, while you struggle to scrape together £668 every month to pay your rent ... (Alderton, 2018, p. 242)

Or, when “Natalia” sends an email on the organization of “Karen’s” baby shower, she writes:

When you arrive at my flat (Karen’s BFF) in Belsize Park, I would like you to really take in its size, layout and period features, because that will make up a large portion of the afternoon’s conversation. I’ll talk at length and with boastful authority about getting my kitchen redone, making every renter in the room feel like a piece of shit, and I’d appreciate it if none of you pointed out that my dad paid for the flat in full (Alderton, 2018, pp. 289-290).

An email addressed to “Dear All” sent in December starts with “Happy Christmas from all of us (just me – I live on my own now) here at SE20’s overpriced and under- maintained 32 Bracken Street!” (Alderton, 2018, p. 190). “So I set up home all by myself in London’s trendy Penge. The area is leafyish – maybe more brachy, actually – and is VERY ‘up and coming’ (Metro, 2016). Which is probably why it is costing me £1,200 to rent a large studio with a mezzanine bedroom above the cooker.” (Alderton, 2018, p. 190).

Such reflections and remarks, poking fun at the expense of living in London or, implicitly, at the vagaries of trends and fashions, place the narrative in a very small niche of privilege. Alderton and her friends may lack funds to rent better flats, but they never go hungry or lack the means to enjoy themselves. The London we read between the lines is affluent and surprisingly safe. The author moves around town in the middle of the night in public transportation, and there is never even a hint of threatening presences or any kind of danger. The same thing happens when she goes to pubs, nightclubs and hotels or houses of people she

doesn’t even know, sometimes by herself. We don’t see or even remotely feel the presence of the dispossessed, the migrants, the homeless sleeping rough that concern public policies in London. Absent are, also, concerns about pollution, the environment or sustainability.

But the book is not about those concerns. London is experienced as the place where Alderton lives, and feels almost like a big village, or a collection of villages, each with its own features and personality. These spaces are also subjected to constant change, moving from almost rural to urban, from industrial to white collar, from residential to touristy, and the social and cultural meanings relating to places like restaurants, bars, hotels, pubs, shops, change according to unspoken codes intelligible to different social groups in different ways. It is those unspoken codes that remain almost impossible to completely decode for a person from a different age group or a different country.

At the same time, London as a global city is highly intelligible and magnificently open to the scrutiny of anyone who cares to know about its history, its conditions of living, its opportunities, its challenges. On a macro level I might risk to say that we can know everything there is to know about London, just by reading the news, watching television, going to the movies and consulting the numerous sites where the Government, Parliament and all sorts of institutions and think tanks publish their transactions. Still, at a micro level, the everyday codes of behaviour and the hierarchies of taste and preference of different social groups remain opaque to those that do not ‘belong’.

Another provisional conclusion points to the need to understand the relations between the local and the global and how they play in the imagination. Should we extract meanings from the obvious absences of social references in a book like Alderton’s? Can we draw implications about a general indifference from Millennials into the state of the world?

In conclusion

In the context of the topic “The Europe Where We Are”, the reflections developed above may seem trivial and possibly totally irrelevant. Yet, beyond the political, economic and social evidences of crisis such as migrations, climate change, wars in Ukraine and the Middle East; beyond, also, the signs of major changes in the life of countries, like the aftermath of Brexit in the UK, or the election of Donald Trump in the USA, culture is about the possibility of sharing meanings, being able to bridge differences and negotiate positions, and it implies a concern with the humble day to day evidences of living.

Dolly Alderton’s memoir deals with serious personal issues with good humour, and in a way is an X-Ray of a generation: the Millennials. The cultural lags I identified, between my experience and those I found in the book, may be evidence that older generations should make an effort to understand the younger, that sexism and feminism are very present still in contemporary culture, that the local may lock meanings in unintelligible discourses that prevent more transparent communication.

On a minor note, I might add that reading about Alderton’s work led me to find realities I thought had been completely overcome in the age of social networks and global media. And yet, here they are: Alderton wrote a dating column for the style segment of *The Sunday Times*, “in which she put herself “on the frontline” of dating “bankers, lawyers, musicians, barmen, taxi drivers and conspiracy theorists” (English, 2022), and later she took on the role of Agony Aunt in the *Sunday Times*. She was very successful in this role, published a book called *Dear Dolly* based on her Agony Aunt experiences, co-hosted *The High-Low* podcast with Pandora Sykes, turned to writing fiction and has already published two novels: *Ghosts* and *Good Material*. Meanwhile, *Everything I Know About Love* has been fictionalized and turned into a major BBC 1 series.

Alderton has been called the Nora Ephron of Millennials, she is considered an expert on the Millennial generation (Rodionova, 2024, Lupino, 2022), “the frankest millennial writer” (Parker, 2024), and in the capacity of an expert on Millennials she even wrote “Seven lies millennials are told” for *The Sunday Times* (Alderton, 2019). In countless interviews she has been sharing her views and experiences, she has contributed to clarify popular and funny aspects of contemporary youth culture, such as “Hun culture” (Ewens, 2019). There is no question that her voice carries weight. Thinking about where we are, in Europe, today, we should also look at the footprint Millennials have left in the culture.

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Notas

- [1] “Não me arrependo do que fui outrora Porque ainda o sou. Só me arrependo de outrora te não ter amado.”
- [2] Reference to Michael Hebbert, author of *London: More by Fortune Than Design*. John Wiley & Sons, 1998.
- [3] Incidentally, Paul Weller has just reinvented himself once more as an actor in the latest Steve McQueen movie *Blitz*, 2024.

