

“Bad Belgians, Bad Belgians,” or The Importance of Reading “Over Het Kanaal” (2011) Transnationally (Part One)

By Mathieu Bokestael – October 11, 2023

PART ONE – Reading *Over Het Kanaal* Transnationally: Asymmetrical Focalisation, Authority and Affect

‘Bad Belgians, bad Belgians’ (p. 121) shout the neighbouring children in Annelies Beck’s *Over Het Kanaal* [*Across the Channel*] (2011) when Marie, a recent Belgian refugee, walks by. Though set in the Glasgow of the First World War, this Dutch-language novel remains untranslated, with these alliterative insults being some of the few English words in the text. The words stand out on the page, not only linguistically, but also for the affective responses they elicit in the reader. Their affective power, in turn, reminds of the loss incurred by not reading across languages or nations. In this two-part blog post series, I want to explore why such readings are important in the context of the novel, and what they offer a transnational Scottish literary studies. To do so, I first briefly contextualise Beck’s work. I then consider what reading the novel means in the contemporary contexts of Belgium, Scotland, and Ireland, as they are affected by transnational histories, flows of migration, and similar housing crises. I close this first post by considering how the focalisation strategy of the novel allies affect and authority in order to command certain ethico-political responses to these crises in the reader. In the next blog post, finally, I will contextualise *Across the Channel* within the discipline of (a transnational) Scottish literary studies by looking at Flemish literary journal *Deus ex Machina*’s recent issue on Scottish literatures.

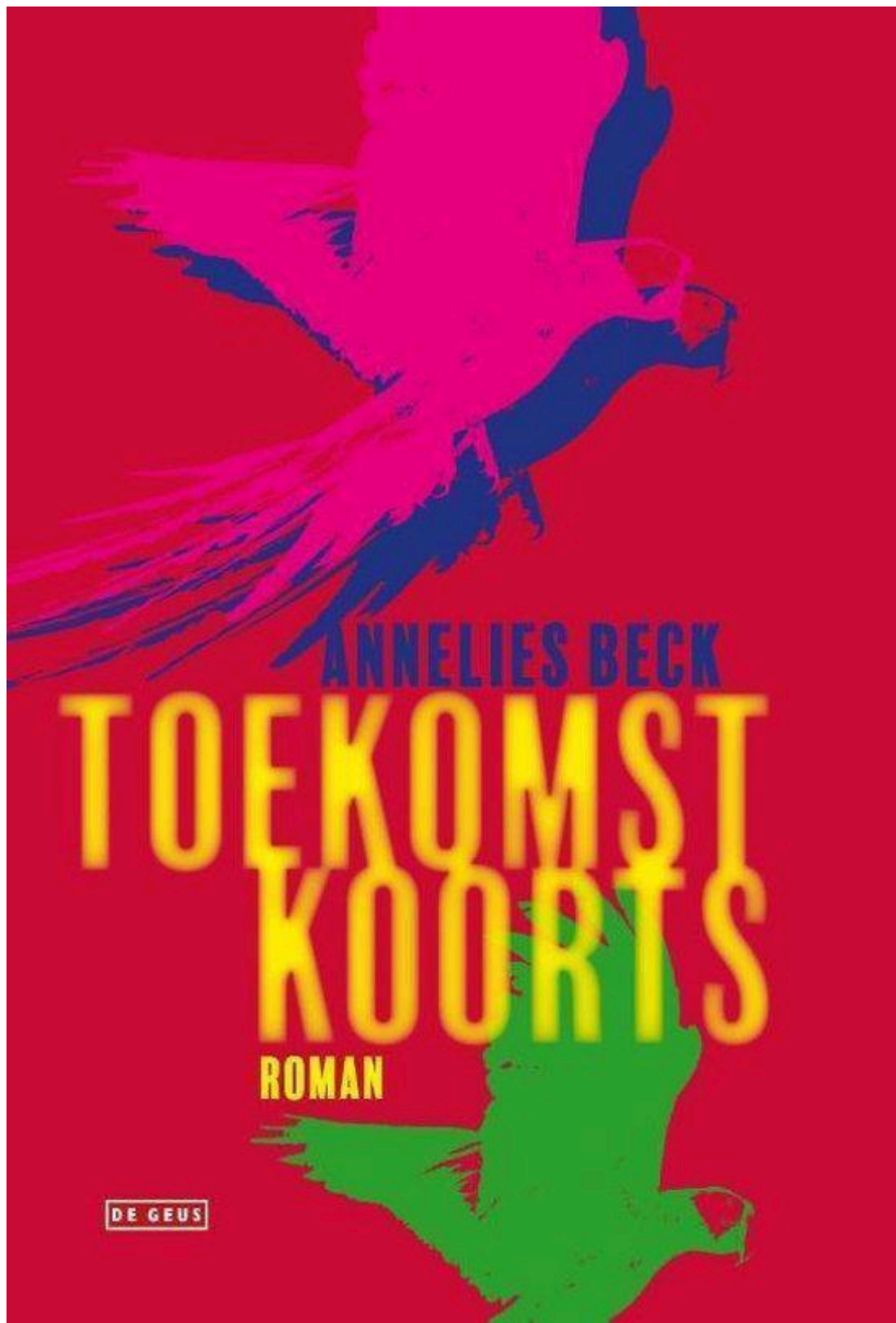


Figure 12: Cover of Annelies Beck's "Toekomstkoorts" ["Frenzy," 2019]

Bad Belgians and Colonial Spectres in Beck's novels

To Flemish audiences, Annelies Beck is mostly known as a leading and well-respected current affairs journalist on Flemish television, but her literary engagement is also significant.

She is a recurrent guest at [Passa Porta](#), the International House of Literature in Brussels, and has interviewed numerous authors such as Maggie O'Farrell, John Banville, Hanya Yanagihara, Douglas Stuart or Édouard Louis. Beck herself has collaborated on two picture books—*Toen De Zee Stil Was* [*When The Sea Was Still*] in 2015 and *Gedachten Denken* [*Thinking Thoughts*] in 2022—and has written two novels: *Over Het Kanaal* [*Across the Channel*] (2011) and *Toekomstkoorts* [*Frenzy*] (2019).¹

Beck's novels betray her educational and professional backgrounds. Befitting her journalistic work, they are eminently political novels, and they are strongly informed by her degrees in history and Brazilian studies. For instance, while the atrocities committed in the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo are increasingly being documented², Belgium's other attempts at expansion — multiple early projects in South America under Leopold I, or a concession in Tianjin amongst others — are less well known. Beck's second novel *Frenzy* delves into a later attempt at settling parts of what is now the Mato Grosso state in Brazil, an attempt fronted by ex-Congo settlers intent on replicating the Central-African project by setting up a meat factory in Pantanal, a vast area of wetlands near the Bolivian border, and expanding from there. The violence that accompanies this nineteenth-century expansionist project is mirrored in the second plotline of Beck's book. In the twenty-first century, an architectural development scheme at the site of the meat plant illustrates how contemporary capital reproduces neocolonial violence.³



Figure 2: Cover of Annelies Beck's "Over Het Kanaal" ["Across the Channel," 2011]

Reading *Over Het Kanaal* in 2023

If the writing of *Frenzy* in the years leading up to 2019 seems to anticipate former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power on the one hand, and to immediately respond to the violence and expulsions accompanying the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro on the other, then *Across The Channel* seems equally relevant today despite being published over ten years ago. Set against the background of the First World War and delving into the author's own family history, the novel details the lives of fifteen-year old Marie Claes, her family, and the growing community of Belgian refugees in Glasgow. As such, the novel holds particular resonance after the so-called '2015 European Migrant Crisis' and within the contemporary context of the war in Ukraine. If part of *Frenzy*'s merit lies in highlighting some of the forgotten colonial histories and the politics of memory in Belgium — a country which is arguably still very much in denial about its own history⁴ — then *Across the Channel* is here to remind Flemish readers of another forgotten history. Although the military history of the First World War and its trenches is well-known, the history of its refugees is more obscure. The novel exists to remind Belgians and Scots (and others) of past solidarity, both given and received. Few people on either side of the channel, for instance, seem to remember that the 250 000 Belgian refugees still constitute the largest group of displaced persons to ever seek refuge on British territory (Winterman, 2014). Yet as Alison Fell, principal investigator for the *Tracing the Belgian Refugees* project at the University of Leeds, puts it, there is a lot to learn from the fate of the exiled Belgians (*Tracing the Belgian Refugees*, 2020).

Figure 3: Video from the Imperial War Museums entitled "Tracing the Belgian Refugees"

Fell's words seem to ring even more true in 2023, and more similarities between the novel, its historical context, and the contemporary moment emerge as the novel progresses. In an interview, Beck emphasises that the novel mirrors real history: early responses to the 'brave little Belgians', though somewhat paternalistic (2011a, p. 147), are infectiously supportive — a case of 'Belgianitis' as both a character in the novel (p. 121) and a diary entry at the Imperial War Museums describe it (Beck, 2011b). Yet, as the war — which was only expected to last until Christmas — drags on, a certain solidarity fatigue sets in, and initial enthusiasm dies down (Winterman, 2014). Reading the novel in 2023, the similarities with our contemporary moment are clear and an analogous solidarity fatigue has been reported within the context of the war in Ukraine (European Economic and Social Committee, 2022). Notably, *Across the Channel* features Scots blaming Belgian refugees for the housing crisis in Glasgow (pp. 171, 195), whilst blame for the contemporary Irish housing crisis, despite being engineered well before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is similarly being cast on the newly-arrived Ukrainian people by xenophobic, nationalist, and anti-immigration voices under the 'Ireland is Full' hashtag on Twitter.⁵

Reading *Across the Channel* alongside *Frenzy*, then, shows how the novels mirror each other. If, in the former, Belgians are cast as victims of the imperial violence of the First World War, in the latter, they are cast as actors of a colonial greed that sets a series of transhistorical expropriations and evictions in motion. Indeed, even in the twenty-first century such expulsions persist, both within the fictional world of *Frenzy* and without. Yet, if Glasgow was at all able to support the Belgian refugees, this was not in the least because of the wealth it gained through its central role as the 'Merchant City' in the British Empire. Meanwhile, although Felix, one of the main protagonists in *Frenzy*, participates in the colonial settling of Pantanal, his initial fleeing to Brazil is precipitated by the expulsion of his family from the land they tilled and by his fear for repercussions following his insurgent

response to these and other acts of class violence (Beck, 2019, pp. 20-26). In that sense, his move to Descalvados is as much 'forced' as Marie's journey to Glasgow is. It is equally hard, therefore, to disentangle the solidarity of the 'good' Scots from the violent threads of Empire as it is to extricate Felix's 'evil' participation in the Belgian colonial project from class oppression. Reading *Frenzy* alongside *Across the Channel*, then, complicates easy binaries between 'good Scots' and 'bad Belgians'. Such a transnational lens therefore not only highlights forgotten histories, but in doing so also questions the memory politics which make such forgettings possible. Why, for instance, is there so little awareness of the Belgian refugees on either side of the channel, or why are Belgium's multiple attempts at expansion in South America so easily forgotten? What power structures do these memory politics serve?

Constructing a Call to Action: Affect, Authority and Asymmetrical Focalisation

It seems, moreover, that there is as much to be learned from the novel's depiction of the 1915 Glasgow Rent Strikes as from its depiction of the fate of the refugees. While *Across The Channel* can certainly be read as historical fiction, it is also a coming-of-age story, in particular a political one. Fifteen-year-old Marie slowly realises that despite what her parents told her, this is not a regular 'holiday' and that she may in fact be a refugee (p. 80), a '*bad Belgian*' in the eyes of the neighbouring children. Marie's journey of politicisation mostly develops through her encounters with Edith McTeer, a fictional Mary Barbour-like suffragette. Though a fictional character, Edith introduces the Belgian teenager to two major feminist movements of the historical Glasgow of the 1910's: the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and the Glasgow Women's Housing Association (GWhA). Although the dangers of 'presentism' — of uncritically reading the past through the lens of the present — must always be kept in mind, Neil Gray still argues that the Red Clydeside, a period of political radicalism in early twentieth-century Glasgow in which both the WSPU and the GWhA operated, has much to teach us about our contemporary moment (2018).⁶ This is an idea which the novel takes very seriously and there is ample historical commentary at the end of the book, which describes the lives of its historical protagonists, and makes a point of disentangling fact from fiction (pp. 341-349).

One of these historical protagonists is William Ballantyne, Marie's future husband. Ballantyne — like Beck — was a journalist and it is hard not to read him as an alter ego of the author, especially since the novel delves extensively into the questions of journalistic ethics and politics. To grasp the relevance of this remark, it is important to note that by far most of the novel is focalised through Marie's eyes, with only a few chapters written from Ballantyne's perspective as exceptions. These sections seem to be mostly excuses to investigate the office politics of the newsroom (pp. 59-62, 94, 100), the ethics of wartime reporting (pp. 59-62, 147, 279, 325), the politics of truth (pp. 177-178, 220), the commodification of news (pp. 94, 100), or the competing roles of journalists as reporters, commentators and/or activists (pp. 100, 147, 215, 318). In these conversations, Ballantyne is figured as a journalist with a strong sense of duty and ethics (p. 279) who is not afraid to take a stand against superiors (p. 100), quit his job (p. 143), and instead take up a position reporting at the Western Front (p. 146) when he is dissatisfied with the politics of the newspaper. Within this dual, but highly asymmetrical distribution of focalisation, the reader is tempted to associate Ballantyne with the implied author, and to read the novel as allegorising its own authorial politics and poetics through the figure of the Scottish journalist. This is intensified by the fact that similar conversations on the practice of journalism also coalesce at the end of Beck's other novel *Frenzy* (pp. 188-190). It seems, then, that throughout her

work, Beck is interested in interrogating her position and role as a writer-journalist. In that sense, *Across the Channel* is a novel about how to write a novel about the war.

If Ballantyne's perspective sediments the gravitas of the journalistic ethos and Beck's authorial duty, providing the story with an air of authority, factualness, historical accuracy, and ethics, Marie's point of view offers the reader a first-hand insider perspective to the history of the rent strikes. Her teenage naiveté, especially, allows her experience of the strikes to be one of learning, emancipation and politicisation. The success of the strike, the novel for instance reminds us, culminates in the first rent controls in British history — the 1915 Rent Restriction Act which froze rent to pre-War levels — and, though this isn't addressed in the novel, in the first introduction of British public housing provision in 1919 (Gray, 2018, p. xviii). Moreover, invited to identify with Marie as the primary subject of focalisation, the reader is also forced to adopt her affective responses. Thus, Marie's political awakening is mirrored in the reader, as we witness how the affective power of collective action overwhelms her. Chanting on St George's square, 'shoulder to shoulder, men and women and children together ... [w]hat happened to her could not be described with words. She just felt happy' (p. 313).² Marie's experience of the rent strikes, then, teaches us that 'the threat and practice of collective tenant organization and direct action is a prerequisite condition for radical housing transformation' (Gray, 2018, p. xix). It shows that the domestic spheres of social reproduction are as much spaces of class struggle as the public spheres of economic production are, and unveils the deeply gendered assumptions of much of the history of the labour movement in which the question of social reproduction was often obscured or marginalised in favour of an emphasis on male workplace relations (Gray, 2018, p. xxv).

In addition, while identification with Marie's character invites readers to experience the same journey of politicisation as the young protagonist, this journey extends from housing rights to the othering of refugees. After all, if refugees are being blamed for the housing crisis both within the fictional world of Beck's novel and without, then the concept of a 'migrant crisis' is a misnomer. Instead, the lack of affordable housing and the undermining of asylum rights are both part of a series of broader, longlasting transnational and transhistorical hospitality crises. Indeed, arguably even the concept of 'crisis' — as it connotes a rupture of the status quo — is ill-advised. Rather, what are commonly conceived of as housing or migrant 'crises' are symptoms of longlasting states of exception in which hospitality, housing, and migration are being depoliticised as basic human rights. When readers, then, are forced to see themselves as 'bad Belgians' through the eyes of the neighbouring children, they are also coerced into witnessing the othering and vilification of refugees first-hand, whether or not they are Belgian, and whether or not they identify as migrants or refugees. After all, it is arguably precisely in the dramatic disjunction between self-perception and outside projection that lies the recognition of both the abjection that is produced by such othering, and of the transnational and transhistorical nature of the concept of refugee and migrant 'crises', as they are both materially as well as rhetorically (re)produced — that is to say, through both economic and geopolitical policy as well as through language and discourse. The novel's politics of literary identification, then, extend from the affective power of collective action to the othering of refugees which '*bad Belgian*' Marie experiences in the eyes of the neighbouring children.

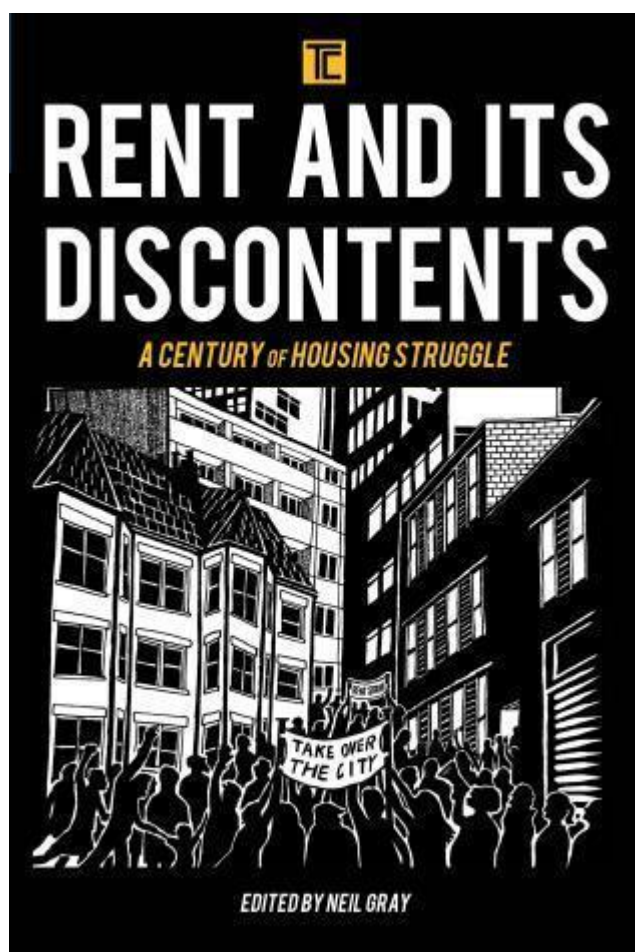


Figure 4: Cover for Neil Gray's *"Rent and Its Discontents: a Century of Housing Struggle"* (2018)

Transnational Crises

That such lessons are relevant for readers of all nationalities is not only reiterated by Ballantyne's claim that 'Belgians and Scots are in the same boat' (p. 100)⁸; Gray's analysis of contemporary and historical housing 'crises,' rather, is also markedly transnational, focusing on both Ireland and Scotland. Historical parallels between the two countries abound as dispossession, eviction and displacement are tragically common in Scottish and Irish history, whilst, more recently, Rent-To-Buy schemes in both countries have depleted public and social housing provision, and moved collective real estate assets into private hands (Gray, 2018, pp. xxi-xxix). Unsurprisingly, therefore, while I have highlighted the blaming of Ukrainian refugees for the contemporary Irish housing crisis and the similar scapegoating of Belgian refugees in Beck's novel, the contemporary Scottish case is no less bleak.⁹ Temporarily housed in unsanitary cruise ships unfit for long-term living, Ukrainians in Scotland are similarly unable to find long-term accommodation (Bryant, 2022). In short, if the political-economic constellations which made Rent-To-Buy schemes possible are transnational, so are its resulting 'housing crises.'

In addition to these transnational political economies, the many waves of migration between Scotland and Ireland are also well-documented. Glasgow's population, for instance, increased from 200,000 to over 1,000,000 between 1851 and 1921, and this was largely connected to increased migration to the city (Meek, 2016, p. 80). Already in 1861, some

200,000 Irish-born immigrants lived in Scotland, accounting for about 7% of the total population (ibid., p. 80). The industrialised Govan — where the Glasgow rent strikes started and where many of the confrontations with bailiffs, factors or police took place (Gray, 2018, p. xx) — was a particularly popular destination for Irish-born migrants who comprised up to 11.5% of the population in the area (Meek, 2016, p. 84). The connections between Ireland and Scotland are therefore manifold, revealing how Scotland's history is 'global' and 'primarily relational' (2022, p. 3) as Murray Pittock's new book puts it.

Given the 'primarily relational' nature of Scottish histories, then, reading *Across the Channel* is not only a worthwhile exercise for Belgian or Scottish audiences. Rather, the dual focalisation dynamic between Marie Claes and William Ballantyne — one highlighting the humanitarian plight of the refugees and stressing the affective power of collective action whilst the other bestows an air of authority, gravitas, and factuality to these affects — offers a reading experience which resonates transnationally and across intertwining histories. Through its appeal to literary identification and affect, *Across the Channel* commands ethical responses in all of us. Reading the novel alongside *Frenzy*, for instance, shows how the novels complicate the transnational and postcolonial memory politics of Belgium, Scotland, and Brazil. Meanwhile, reading the novel within the context of the contemporary Irish housing crisis and the war in Ukraine also highlights the transnational and transhistorical nature of these manufactured 'crises' in which migration, hospitality and housing are being depoliticised as basic human rights. In this blog post, therefore, I have tried to argue for the importance of reading Beck's work transnationally and transhistorically. In the next post, I will briefly reflect on what Beck's novel can contribute to the study of Scottish literatures and a transnational Scottish Literary Studies.

1. The title 'Toekomstkoorts' is translated as *Frenzy* in some promotional material for the novel, though 'Future Fever' is a more literal rendition. [↵](#)
2. See for instance Verbeeck, 2020. [↵](#)
3. On the history of that settlement, see Domingos, 2009; Duarte, 2018; Stols, 1987; and Wilcox, 2008. [↵](#)
4. On this, see for instance Azabar et al, 2023; Bobineau, 2017; Brouwers et al., 2022; Savoy, 2020; Goddeeris, 2015; Verbeeck, 2020. [↵](#)
5. See for instance Bray, 2023; Burne, 2023; Clarke and McQuin, 2023; Creagh, 2023; McAuley, 2023; or Uludağ, 2023. [↵](#)
6. On this, see also Mooney, 2023. [↵](#)
7. 'schouder aan schouder, mannen en vrouwen en kinderen door elkaar ... Wat haar overkwam viel met geen woorden te beschrijven. Ze voelde zich gewoon gelukkig' (p. 313, translation mine) [↵](#)
8. 'Belgen en Schotten zitten in hetzelfde schuitje' (p. 100, translation mine). [↵](#)
9. Although focusing more on issues of 'land banking', Chamberlain and Walker's report for the Scottish Land Commission has some useful data on land and housing development in Scotland (2020, pp. 1-11). [↵](#)

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