William Shakespeare’s Caliban and Margaret Atwood’s Surfacer: Survival Through the Third Space/Thing

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ABSTRACT

Caliban in William Shakespeare’s The Tempest and the unnamed narrator in Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing, both dwelling in an underpopulated island for quite some time, bear striking similarities, particularly when seen as two characters who have fallen victim to colonialism. This paper begins by comparing the modern exploitation in Surfacing and traditional colonizing practices in The Tempest. Afterward, it goes on to highlight the role Caliban’s and the Surfacing narrator’s fathers played in making the colonization of their children justified, so to speak. Then, this paper compares the way these two characters undergo transformation. Alongside elaborating on Caliban’s and Atwood’s unnamed narrator’s comparable temperaments, this paper will discuss the way these two characters come to negotiate the hegemony of imperialism. Employing the ideas of Homi Bhabha and Margaret Atwood regarding the third space/thing, this paper, in its conclusion, addresses the measures taken by these two characters to tackle the hegemonic power through compromise.

1. Introduction

An ambitious project to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death, the Hogarth Shakespeare series, launched in 2015, invited contemporary acclaimed novelists to reinterpret the works of the Bard. Following The Winter’s Tale, The Merchant of Venice, and The Taming of the Shrew retold by Jeanette Winterson, Howard Jacobson, and Anne Tyler,
respectively, Margaret Atwood’s *Hag-Seed* is the fourth in the series modernizing *The Tempest*. The title *Hag-Seed* reminds us of one of the many derogatory tags Prospero employs to insult Caliban. *Hag-Seed* chronicles the story of Felix Phillips, a high direktor in the realm of the theatrical performance, who is robbed of his rightful position, very much like Prospero, by his rival, Tony Price, “once the toadies of Felix” (Atwood, *Hag* 10). Felix will spend the next 12 years “living in a hovel, ignored in a forgotten backwater” (10) in rural southern Ontario. His deposition as the artistic director of the Makeshiweg Theatre Festival augments previous anguish brought about by the loss of his daughter, Miranda. In an attempt to tackle his isolation and revive Miranda on stage, Felix embarks on tutoring a drama course at a nearby correctional center.

One might wonder, then, despite such an evident retelling of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, why the study has not included *Hag-Seed* as well in the comparison. Although Felix has been characterized fully in the novel, we rarely get to hear from the Caliban of the piece, Leggs, not to mention the inmates themselves; they are, almost always, projected through Felix’s viewpoint. The weight the black Irish Leggs carries fails significantly to live up to that of his original counterpart in *The Tempest*. As Alexandra Harris argues, the individuality of the inmates has not been dealt with adequately and their repeated roars of “Scurvy monster” don’t lend their words much weight.” Unlike the play staged at Fletcher Correctional which fails to voice its actors’ inner thoughts, she goes on, Caliban’s language is the “direct expression of a richly perceiving mind.” Furthermore, while nature plays a pivotal role in both *The Tempest* and *Surfacing*, the shack in the backcountry Felix resorts to falls short of the natural space wandered by Caliban and the *Surfacing* narrator.

Francois Jost divides literary relations into two main categories: analogies and influences. Despite the importance of direct influences and interactions, he believes that one should not overlook the significance of resemblances and “confluences,” since comparatists “believe that affinities are better than direct influences for providing the fundamental homogeneity of a particular civilization and the literary intelligence common to all national elites” (37). It is the pleasure of picking up these affinities in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, two works centuries apart, to which this present study aspires.

Caliban in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and the unnamed narrator in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, both dwelling in an underpopulated island for quite some time, bear striking similarities, particularly when seen as two characters who have fallen victim to colonialism. *Surfacing* unfolds the story of an unnamed female character who sets about a journey into a Quebecois wilderness, having her lover, Joe, and another young couple, David and Anna, as her companions. The journey, which was initiated as a quest for “the grail,” which is the narrator’s missing father, “becomes a search for her missing memories, which will prove the key to her past and to her true self” (Tolan 41). *The Tempest*, on the other hand, chronicles the account of the Duke of Milan, Prospero, who was overthrown by his brother, Antonio, who considered him “incapable” to manage “temporal royalties” (Shakespeare 1.2.110–11). Consequently, Prospero and his daughter were marooned on a bark; however, they could make it to the shore “by Providence divine” (1.2.159). Once on the isle, employing the knowledge he gained through his books made it possible for Prospero to manipulate the indigenes there, particularly Caliban and Ariel. 12 years following his arrival on the island, his magical ability, executed by Ariel, makes Prospero able to raise a tempest and shipwreck his brother and his company, who were sailing to Italy, and bring them to the shore safe
and sound: “Not a hair perished: On their sustaining garments not a blemish, / But fresher than before” (1.2.218–19). Alongside elaborating on Caliban’s and Atwood’s unnamed narrator’s comparable temperaments, the present paper will discuss the way these two characters come to negotiate the hegemony of imperialism.

Prior to developing the argument, however, I deem it necessary to touch on a dispute between the scholars over who is the real colonized subject in The Tempest. While a large body of research considers Caliban as the indisputable character whose right to own the island has been denied by Prospero, Kelsey Ridge has questioned Caliban’s eligibility to possess the isle. She argues that Caliban’s mother, Sycorax, was forced to leave Argiers, i.e., Algeria. Following her settlement in the island, Caliban was “littered” of the Argiers-born Sycorax (Shakespeare 1.2.282). Ridge goes on to deduce that “despite being born of the island, he remains the child of a colonizer and not the island’s original inhabitant” (237). Yet, the weight Caliban lends to the play is so considerable that no other characters can champion. As Harold Bloom has reasoned,

What is certain is that Caliban has aesthetic dignity, and that the play is not wholly Prospero’s only because of him. You could replace Ariel by various assistant sprites (though not without loss), but you would not have The Tempest if you removed Caliban. (Raffel and Bloom 139–40)

The argument in the present paper, hence, will proceed with the generally held assumption and will consider Caliban as its focal exploited subject in The Tempest.

In the first essay of Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, the Canadian literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye through employing examples of world literature as ancient as Aristotle’s Poetics to the present era explores the systematic modes of fiction in one of which the protagonist’s “escape from society” constructs the building blocks to their salvation. Similarly, Margaret Atwood in Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature traces the ways nature had been represented up to the middle of the nineteenth century. While in the late eighteenth century, Edmund Burke’s cult of the beautiful and the sublime, which focused on the inspirational and “awe at the grandeur of Nature,” was predominant in nature poetry, in the first half of the nineteenth century a Wordsworthian Romanticism reigned supreme, which viewed nature as “a kind Mother or Nurse who could guide man if he would only listen to her. In the popular mind, the two modes often combined; in any case, Nature was ‘good’ and cities were ‘evil’” (Atwood, Survival 46). It is this urban evilness with all its modern civility the protagonist-narrator of Surfacing seeks refuge from: “I tried for all those years to be civilized but I’m not, and I’m through pretending” (Atwood, Surfacing 173). To put it another way, the protagonist in Atwood’s Surfacing, by resorting to nature, finds a space to discard the suffering baggage and wounds once inflicted upon her in the city. It is not just that she resorts to old Mother Nature as a purgatory space, but the conformity to the values of the modern society from which the narrator in the novel seeks refuge that help her reconstruct herself piece by piece.

2. Modern exploitation in Surfacing and traditional colonizing practices in The Tempest

At the outset of Atwood’s Surfacing, the narrator discloses the spread of a disease: “I can’t believe I’m on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches
are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south [i.e. America] …” (3). The disease the narrator touches upon is not only inflicted on trees but also trespasses upon the domain of humans and strikes them as well. Jannie Edwards pinpoints some aspects of the “American disease” internalized by the narrator, one of which is “her go[ing] along with her lover’s consumer attitude by agreeing to dispense with an inconvenient pregnancy. She complies with his materialist desire, but suffers the consequences of repressed guilt” (47). Although what the narrative initially lays out is that she and her ex-husband have decided to have the child aborted, later the readers realize that the unwanted embryo was conceived out of a liaison. To put it another way, she was forced to abort her child, because it was conceived through an extramarital affair, and her lover, already a husband and a father, found the presence of the illegitimate child a threat to his own married life. The novel becomes, at this point, a criticism leveled at a modern society which allows men to enjoy a promiscuous lifestyle, regardless of whether they shirk the responsibility of starting a family or not, “flesh making more flesh, miracle, that frightens all of them” (Atwood, Surfacing 148). Therefore, the narrator in the novel withdraws from the adulterated civilization and its imposing policies on a promiscuous lifestyle devoid of any commitments by either partner and abortion as one of its repercussions – the pangs of which lingers on in the psyche of the narrator and would haunt her into the woods.

Concerning the play, Caliban who once enjoyed his freedom on the island, “For I am all the subjects that you have, / Which first was mine own king. And here you sty me / In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me / The rest o’th’island” (1.2.342–45), finds himself manipulated through such labors as making fire, fetching wood, and serving Miranda and Prospero who would punish him every now and then through giving him “cramps, / Side-stiches that shall pen thy [his] breath up – urchins / Shall, for that vast of night that they may work, / All exercise on thee [him] …” (1.2.326–29). The justification behind Prospero’s maltreatment toward Caliban stems from his attempted rape and, more importantly, his inability to speak the language and his different physique which is described in Prospero’s scornful terms as, “… A freckled whelp, hag-born) not honoured with / A human shape” (1.2.283). Caliban can be defined as a natural man insofar as he displays an appreciation of natural music:

the isle is full of noises,
Sansounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not:
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again – and then, in dreaming … show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again. (3.2.133–141)

Ironically, Caliban who has been depicted as misshaped and disproportioned throughout the play so “often speaks with the tongue of an angel” (Raffel and Bloom xix), and “while other ‘low’ characters in the play speak in prose, Caliban is regularly poetic” (xx).
3. Spurious seeds sired by devilish fathers

Both Caliban and the Surfacing narrator are implied to have been begotten by devilish fathers. Prospero accuses Caliban thus: “Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself” (1.2.320). Burton Raffel has given credibility to this claim by explaining that “we know it was widely believed that witches [Sycorax] copulated with devils” (xix). Bill Ashcroft, on the other hand, elaborates on the assumed justification of colonizing and subjugating Caliban who has been characterized throughout the play as “a savage and capable of all ill,” born “of a vile rather than a noble union and whose parents represent an evil natural magic which is the antithesis of Prospero’s art” (18). In the case of Surfacing, the narrator’s father, for whom “Christianity was something he’d escaped from” and who wished to protect his children against its “distortions” (Atwood, Surfacing 52), would downplay Jesus as a “historical figure” and God as a “superstition.” He would argue “so reasonably” that “[r]esurrection is like plants … but people are not onions … they stay under” (104). Catholics’ belief that “if you don’t go to Mass you’ll turn into a wolf” (53) accounts for the failure of the searchers to locate her father’s whereabouts: “Maybe that’s why they didn’t waste any sweat searching for my father, they were afraid to, they thought he’d turned into a wolf; he’d be a prime candidate since he never went to Mass at all” (53). One of the breached codes, which distinguish their fathers from the rest, is their not going with the flow. In the case of Caliban, his colonization and contemptuous treatment become justified, so to speak, since his father and as a result Caliban himself do not belong to the human’s domain. When it comes to the Surfacing protagonist, she has a Christian agnostic as her father who refrains from accompanying the masses to the Masses. Nonconformity, then, whether in one’s origin, shape, language, or in one’s religious beliefs, most of which is passed from one’s parents, provides the grounds for exploitation in these works.

4. Caliban’s transformation: anagnorisis or tentative slyness?

It is not only having a witch as his mother and the devil as his father that justifies the civilizing process but also Caliban’s lack of language: “The ‘civilizing’ mission is based on the profoundly speciesist assumption that ’barbaric’ languages have placed other men at the level of animals, placing them in need of cultural redemption” (Ashcroft 24). That might shed a light on why Caliban, who frequently employs language to curse, almost abruptly as the play comes to a halt, becomes more lenient toward Prospero not only in his manners but also in the register he employs.

Joshua R. Held has examined the significance of sincerity in the context of sixteenth-century England and views sincerity, particularly in the way that Shakespeare utilized it, as “potentially simple, public, perceptible expressions of private impressions” (70). In order to analyze how sincere Caliban is in this sense, Held has explored Caliban’s final statement which has stirred so much disagreement in academia: “I’ll be wiser hereafter, / And seek for grace” (5.1.296–7). While some researchers are optimistic in viewing Caliban’s change for the better, among whom Sister Corona Sharp goes so far as to employ Aristotle’s notion of anagnorisis to label such a discovery on the part of the character, others have doubted the authenticity of Caliban’s claim and are more skeptical toward such an abrupt repentance. The readers will find it hard to come to realize the real rationale behind this change; was it to get off the hook and evade an
impending punishment by Prospero, or should we consider it a genuine transformation? Bill Ashcroft argues that the play represents Caliban as a “vanquished and marginalized miscegenator with no hope and no future” which explains why “Shakespeare is incapable of conceiving any future for him” (17). Stephan Greenblatt, similarly, finds readers’ irresolution with Caliban’s fate disturbing: “With Prospero restored to his dukedom, the match of Ferdinand and Miranda blessed, Ariel freed to the elements, and even the wind and tides of the return voyage settled, Shakespeare leaves Caliban’s fate naggingly unclear” (36). To quote Liza Graham, “Is he still Prospero’s property, loaded onto the ship to be displayed in Milan for pieces of silver? Or is he left on the island, King of an empty stage?”

Caliban’s final statement is not, however, the only instance in which the language undermines itself, and the realization of the true meaning of the text is postponed. Susan Bassnett elaborates on yet another antagonizing role of language in The Tempest showing the contradictory accounts of Caliban on the one side, and those of Prospero’s and Miranda’s on the other side. “There is clearly no trust between master and slave, colonizer and colonized, and language reinforces the abyss that divides them” (85). While Caliban labels his behavior toward them as affectionate: “And then [when Prospero and Miranda taught him language] I loved thee, / And showed thee all qualities o’tisle” (1.2.337–38), Prospero and his daughter consider Caliban wicked: “… I endowed thy purposes / With words that made them known. But thy vile race, / Though thou didst learn, had that in’t which good natures / Could not abide to be with” (1.2.358–61).

The same indecisiveness and deferral of the reliance in the narrative can be traced in Surfacing whose narrator not only mentions but also practices the fragmenting role of language: “Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole” (147). The next section will elaborate on how the narrative the Surfacing narrator utilizes, for a considerable part of the novel, is devoid of any wholesomeness.

5. The Surfacing protagonist: natural in aspect, untruthful in manner

The adulterated idealization of femininity, i.e., becoming an object of seduction to the opposite sex through copying “a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture [centerfold] that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere” (Atwood, Surfacing 169), expected of the protagonist is another American/modern disease to which the Surfacing narrator and Anna fall prey. Anna, a typical modern woman puppet manipulated by the expectations of the male gaze, has been so immersed in her role as an object of seduction that “slap[ping] layers of make up on her face” (Tandon and Chandra 60) becomes her utmost concern even on such an under-populated island:

There’s a zippered case on the counter in front of her, she’s putting on makeup. I realize I’ve never seen her without it before; shorn of the pink cheeks and heightened eyes her face is curiously battered, a worn doll’s, her artificial face is the natural one… . “You don’t need that here,” I say, “there’s no one to look at you.” … Anna says in a low voice, “He [David] doesn’t like to see me without it,” and then, contradicting herself, “He doesn’t know I wear it.” I glimpse the subterfuge this must involve, or is it devotion: does she have to sneak out of the bed before he’s awake every morning and into it at night with the lights out? (Atwood, Surfacing 41)
Very much like Socrates’ metaphor of the three beds, “one existing in nature, which is made by God...There is another which is the work of the carpenter...And the work of the painter is a third” (qtd. in Daiches 14), imitating and following a centerfold as a role model removes Anna’s natural visage thrice from what Alice Ridout calls the “original core” (74).

Unlike the “rest,” among whom Anna serves as the foil in the novel, who would “pluck blackberries, / And daub their natural faces unaware / More and more from the first similitude” (Browning 152), the narrator resists fulfilling such grooming requirements and withdraws from daubing her visage. When she turns to the mirror to brush her hair, she senses a “surge of fear” in her hand which will not let her proceed:

I know that the brush is forbidden, I must stop being in the mirror. I look for the last time at my distorted glass face: eyes lightblue in dark red skin, hair standing tangled out from my head, reflection intruding between my eyes light blue and vision. Not to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it’s toward the wall, it no longer traps me, Anna’s soul closed in the gold compact, that and not the camera is what I should have broken. (Atwood, Surfacing 180)

By discarding the mirror as a means of representation according to the norms and expectations of the masculine modern society, she “rebels against woman’s reduction to the status of an object” (Tandon and Chandra 51).

Although she becomes natural and authentic in appearance by shunning makeup and cosmetics, her narrative, in some parts of the text, undergoes a disguise. In other words, not only is there the question of makeup (removal) but also of making up stories – a metaphorical disguise from which the narrator is purged after her dive into the lake. There are numerous instances in the text in which an earlier version of a narrative undergoes a significant revision as the readers’ perusal advances toward the end of the novel. The narrator’s making up different stories, very much like a makeup, but, in its figurative sense, is distanced from the verisimilitude. Therefore, with different versions of narratives, the novel becomes in a figurative sense, as Macpherson argues palimpsestic, “a text that is layered over with meanings that erase and disrupt the picture that the reader receives” (33). One of the earlier instances of such a palimpsestic narrative in the text occurs when the narrator of Surfacing attacks marriage as an institution of which she claims herself to be a member: "It was good at first but he changed after I married him, he married me, we committed that paper act. I still don’t see why signing a name should make any difference but he began to expect things, he wanted to be pleased. We should have kept sleeping together and left it at that" (Atwood, Surfacing 36); she even fabricates a separation to their postnuptial relationship which she melancholically shares with the reader: “a divorce is like an amputation, you survive, but there’s less of you” (39). However, later in the text, the readers come to realize that the relationship between the narrator and her teacher was not a conjugal one, but she acted rather as his mistress. That explains why her so-called husband treated her as an “invalid, not a bride” (88). Another instance in the text is where her once assumed-to-be-drowned brother turns out to have been rescued by their mother: “he got saved only by accident...She leaned over and reached down and grabbed him by the hair” (71).

These various fabricated versions of narratives she “pieced together” artistically: “A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports; but a paper house was better
than none and I could almost live in it, I’d lived in it until now” (145; emphasis added). The stories she has made up not only obstruct the readers’ grappling with a straightforward narrative but also camouflage the reality she dares not to confront: her inability, as an adult woman, to negotiate marriage and motherhood (Pundir). In other words, she makes up a phantasmagoric world within her mind to alleviate the pain of the reality without. The different layers of her narrative, very much like a palimpsest, keep being written and peeled away until she becomes mature enough to confront reality. Following her descent into the lake, during which she catches the glimpse of her aborted child, she faces the reality of her father’s being dead and gone for good and admits the part she had in aborting the fetus: “Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn’t a child but it could have been one, I didn’t allow it” (Atwood, *Surfacing* 144). The dive into the water, as an element of nature, marks a turning point in the novel and precipitates the surfacing and rebirth of a more reliable narrator. It is only then that she ceases fabricating stories about her past and becomes true to herself and to the readers. Her unreliable narratives with multiple perspectives, in the end, provide the reader with enough explicit clues to tinker these fragments into a whole. Subsequently, it is the paper house and the insincerity she sets fire to and the narrative she pens onward is to remain there as the final and reliable version.

Therefore, as it has been argued, both Caliban and the *Surfacing* narrator are not reliable, and one cannot be certain whether the terms metamorphosis and transformation can be applied to their changes as the play and the novel come to an end. *Surfacing* ends, to borrow T. S. Eliot’s wording, “not with a bang but with a whimper” (1359). When Joe calls out the narrator’s name, she is hesitant to answer back: “He calls for me again, balancing on the dock which is neither land nor water, hands on hips, head thrown back and eyes scanning. His voice is annoyed: he won’t wait much longer. But right now he waits” (Atwood, *Surfacing* 199). The reason which accounts for her reluctance toward maintaining her uncivility and the reason behind Caliban’s seeking for “grace” guide us to a single resolution these two characters have come to make: Survival through the third space/thing.

### 6. Survival through the third space/thing

Borrowing Victor Turner’s notion of liminality or the threshold, Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* elaborates on a “slippage” which makes it impossible to settle down and associate oneself completely inside the threshold of any given cultural system. In other words, one’s consciousness is split in half, oscillating between two poles: that of one’s native community and that of the other (imperialistic) culture. This space of in-between-ness is the third space in which there is no such thing as pure nationalism and cultural purity.

Caliban and the *Surfacing* narrator adopt the same measure in handling the exploitation exercised toward them. Both the play and the novel suggest that should a person resist the hegemony of imperialism, the stakes are high where they end up. In the case of the play, when Caliban is noticed for the first time by Trinculo and Stephano, the jester and the butler, respectively, his very exotic appearance provokes thought on how to gain, financially or, otherwise, through Caliban’s manipulation. While the inebriated
Stephano is entertaining the possibility of presenting Caliban as a gift for any ruler, Caliban’s unnatural appearance to Trinculo hovers somewhere between the domains of “a man or a fish” (2.2.24), which allows some room for presenting Caliban in a public show once back in civilization, by means of which he could make a fortune:

TRINCULO. Were I in England now (as once I was), and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man. Any strange beast there makes a man…Legged like a man, and his fins like arms. (2.2.28–32)

STEPHANO. If I can recover him, and keep him tame, and get to Naples with him, he’s a present for any emperor that ever trod on neat’s leather. (2.2.70–72)

For 12 years, in one way or another, Caliban has attempted to redefine the power dynamics. Prospero, however, has always gained the upper hand. Caliban’s tempting Stephano into foul play, the murder plot to take Prospero’s life in exchange for the throne, was in vain as well. It might be that Caliban, in the end, has come to admit the invincibility of Prospero, and his desire to own the isle, on the one hand, and the hatred he has toward servitude, on the other hand, arrive at a reconciliation under what Bhabha calls the third space. It is the liminality, the moment “when the past has lost its grip and the future has not taken definite shape” (Turner 133), of the third space, which accounts for the irresolution the readers encounter at the end of the play to conceive any possible future for Caliban.

Much in a similar vein, the natural woman in Surfacing, who once found language distracting to her wholesomeness, eventually comes to admit the essentiality of language: “If I go with him [Joe] we will have to talk … we can no longer live in spurious space by avoiding each other, the way it was before, we will have to begin. For us it’s necessary, the intersession of words” (Atwood, Surfacing 198). Furthermore, she turns the mirror around and gets dressed in her knife-slashed clothes though “clumsily, unfamiliar with buttons” (197). All these signs account for her reentering the urban life she ran away from. In so doing, she is well aware of the consequences should she fail to shape up and adapt herself to the standards:

That is the real danger now, the hospital or the zoo, where we are put, species and individual, when we can no longer cope. They would never believe it’s only a natural woman, state of nature, they think of that as a tanned body on a beach with washed hair waving like scarves; not this, face dirt-caked and streaked, skin grimed and scabby, hair like a frayed bath-mat stuck with leaves and twigs. A new kind of centerfold. (Atwood, Surfacing 196)

Her state of a natural woman feeding on plants and living the life of a recluse can be prolonged no longer, neither can she resume the lifestyle she used to have in the city. Now that she has conceived and the possibility of motherhood is not far-fetched, with Joe’s articulate love for her, the future has opened up a new opportunity. In contemplating how to adapt herself with this new thing and in oscillating between hegemonic culture and the notion of the natural woman, she has very much progressed toward what Atwood calls the “third thing”: “The ideal would be someone who would neither be a killer or a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world” (Conversations 16).
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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