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Unwelcome consequences: Christina Dalcher's *Vox* and John Lanchester's *The Wall*

Abstract. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' Doomsday Clock, first introduced in 1947, recently moved the fictional clock forward; it now rests at 100 seconds to midnight, or 100 seconds from destroying ourselves. The numerous threats posed by nuclear weapons, pandemics, weaponized technology, and catastrophic climate change create an 'environment of misery' in which all action—and all inaction—is fraught with risk. Two recent novels employ dystopian visions of the United States and Britain, respectively, and explore the consequences of social engineering that takes place to minimize (perceived) risks and increase safety. Dalcher's *Vox* (2018) and Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019) are two novels that are a commentary on a world in which risk is pervasive and in which (in)action can exacerbate dire circumstances. At the same time, the novels highlight that local (national) action is doomed to fail if it does not also consider the global interconnectedness of challenges and risks.

Keywords: contemporary fiction, dystopian, risk, authoritarianism, oppression.

Introduction

In his memoir from 2018, Wolfgang Ischinger notes that "nobody has created so much chaos and insecurity in the world as president Donald Trump did since he took office in January 2017" (Ischinger 2018: 14). The former German ambassador to Washington, D.C. continues to say that "nobody could predict that the new American president, of all people, would be the one person to question all of the status quo—free trade as much as the canon of Western values, or the reciprocal assurances of safety, which are anchored in article 5 of the NATO treaty" (Ischinger 2018: 14)[2]. For the former diplomat, the greatest dangers that result from Trump's erratic and unpredictable words and actions are a fundamental sense of loss of trust (Ischinger 2018: 34) among nations and, importantly, the inability to make any valid prognosis in the context of diplomatic and international relations (Ischinger 2018: 36). Not being able to make predictions increases uncertainty,

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2   Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

risk and danger, and, simultaneously, minimizes a sense of well-being and safety. Due to the former president's behavior, the particular risk that Americans were and are perceiving is a threat to the very essence of the United States, to its democracy. The 2019 Freedom House report confirms that democracy is in retreat in the United States, and Michael Abramowitz, the organization's president, points to an environment in which assaults on the rule of law, demonization of the press, self-dealing, and attacks on the legitimacy of elections are essential factors that contribute to this decline of democracy.[3]

The former American president's impact on American society looms large in Christina Dalcher's novel *Vox* (2018), but there are other geographies in which perceived risks—risks posed by nuclear weapons, weaponized technology, catastrophic climate change, and a devastating global pandemic—lead to division and partisanship within a country and to leadership by so-called 'strongmen' who are on a path to reshaping their nations according to their idiosyncratic visions and ideas. While he does not single out a particular leader, it is an amorphous yet dictatorial state machinery that began shaping citizens' lives in John Lanchester's *The Wall* some time before the protagonist was born, and the state's isolationism may allude to Britain's vote to leave the EU, to Brexit[4]. Read together, the novels are a commentary on a world in which risk is pervasive and in which, vexingly, both action *and* the lack of action can equally exacerbate dire circumstances. In *Vox*, two female characters are contrasted to illustrate the constant need for a citizen's vigilance toward the government, on the one hand, and the pernicious results of a decision to not become involved, on the other hand. *The Wall* explores how very specific actions—to construct and protect a wall that surrounds the British Isles—are doomed to fail when local interests and plans do not also consider future consequences and the global interconnectedness of challenges and risks.

In a short essay, George Orwell explores the question of why writers write. He asserts that the writer's "subject matter will be determined by the age he lives in," and claims that the purpose of writing is political, driven by a "desire to push the world in a certain

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3 Abramowitz links the state of American democracy to Trump's presence in American politics, which he describes as "straining our core values and testing the stability of our constitutional system. No president in living memory has shown less respect for its tenets, norms, and principles" (Abramowitz 2019: 25). See also Zachary B. Wolf, who wonders "if this whole America thing is teetering on the edge of collapse" (Wolf 2020: n.p.), and Neil Steinberg, who sees the US senate as an "echo" of the Roman collapse (Steinberg: 2020: n.p.). The issues at stake are explored in *How Democracies Die* (2018), where Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, two scholars of constitutional democracies, feel compelled to compare the American situation with other (failed) democracies they study—most notably Europe in the 1930s and Latin America in the 1970s.

4 In an interview with John Lanchester, James Kidd comments that "[t]he entire planet, it seems is uniting to help Lanchester promote *The Wall*. Immigration, globalization, Brexit, Trump, a mounting refugee crisis, environmental collapse—you name it, it informs Lanchester's dystopian fable" (Kidd 2019: n. p.).

direction, to alter people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after" (Orwell 1946: n.p.). Orwell's own fiction demonstrates how utopian/dystopian fiction is particularly well suited to engage a political purpose because, as Szabo notes, such fiction has "a referential present as a starting point, [and] the utopian world is presented as augmented reality" (Szabo 2018: 130). Conversely, the dystopian work presents a regressed or undesirable world. Both *Vox* and *The Wall* are counter-utopias in H. G. Wells' definition of counter-utopia as "a subgenre of dystopia, [whose] main function [is] to warn, to describe negative scenarios regarding the future of mankind" (Szabo 2018: 131). Sociologist Patricia Leavy, in an interview on the links between fiction, feminism, and qualitative research, confirms that "[f]iction [...] promotes empathetic engagement and compassion" on the part of the reader with the fictional world (Leavy 2019: n. p.). Importantly, as Jan Váňa asserts, "literature is more than just a product of allegedly more fundamental social forces. Literature is to a considerable extent autonomous. Literature has agency and the potential to 'mobilize'" (Váňa 2020: 2). The same scholar holds that "[f]ictitious accounts of the social world can help to investigate new connections between personal experiences and social structures, with the dystopian genre serving as a particularly good example here" (Váňa 2020: 7). Both *Vox* and *The Wall* are counter-utopias or dystopias that weave a general sense of unease, uncertainty and dread into the respective cautionary visions. In doing so, the novels invite associations with current events that readers on both sides of the Atlantic are familiar with and also, perhaps, inspire them to imagine a different world, a different society, as Orwell has it, to strive after.

Studying these particular novels presents a very different kind of risk. They are both contemporary literature, which Gupta defines as "the literature of our time, or of the present" (Gupta 2012: 2). In the same place, Gupta speculates that "we probably choose to read contemporary literature because we expect it to be directly relevant to our lives and our world. We hope to find in it expressions and issues with which we are familiar" (Gupta 2012: 2). Since both novels are recent, it is uncertain if either one is strong enough to withstand the test of time and readers' tastes. Yet this risk must be taken, because both texts are creative attempts to interpret a world that many find disturbing and frightening.[5]

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5 Another problem when dealing with contemporary literature stems from the fact that it may be very recent. Reviews on *Vox* and *The Wall* and interviews with the authors are readily available, but a scholarly corpus on the novels is still scarce. See, for example Maria Pinakoulia's "Female Struggle and Negotiation of Agency in Christina Dalcher's *Vox*," which focuses on the female body as a site of (male) violence and power relations. Kirsten Sandrock studies how Shakespeare functions as an intertext in *The Wall* in "Border Temporalities, Climate Mobility, and Shakespeare in John Lanchester's *The Wall*."

Risk⁶

Since the publication of Ischinger's memoir and Dalcher's and Lanchester's novels, the world has, unfortunately, encountered many new and not so new hazards. The final two years of Trump in office have surpassed the ambassador's stark assessment of the 45th president and include two impeachments and his thwarted attempt to disrupt the democratic process on Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021. Natural disasters—wildfires in California and elsewhere, floods, draughts, etc.—appear to be becoming ever more frequent, costly and disastrous in many places around the globe, and are routinely linked to climate change. Finally, the world has been subjected to the Covid-19 pandemic for more than two years and with no clear end in sight. It is apparent that the natural, political, environmental, economic, societal, and individual aspects of the world do not only harbor big risks and few securities, but that the perception of these risks increases while a sense of security is being eroded for many people. One might suspect that the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson would empathize with this summary of the 'state of the world', for he writes in his essay "The Scholar" (1863) that "[a]s soon as there is life there is danger" (Bosco & Myerson 2005: 301). The question arises with regard to what distinguishes Emerson's perception of danger from ours, and an obvious difference between the 1860s and the 2020s is that instant access to tragic news nowadays greatly diminishes the sense of safety globally.

The scholarly study of risk has permeated many disciplines, and in the introduction to his *Social Theories of Risk and Uncertainty*, Jens O. Zinn argues that the proliferation of studying risk is part of so many disciplines that it is hard to discern specific methods, approaches or results. However, he notes that "[t]he most general assumption shared by all approaches on risk is the distinction between reality and possibility" (Zinn 2008: 3). "As long as the future is interpreted as either predetermined or independent of human activities," he writes, "the term 'risk' makes no sense at all" (Zinn 2008: 3). Rather, he contends, "[t]he concept of risk is tied to the possibility that the future can be altered—or at least perceived as such—by human activities. It might be that we can directly control the occurrence of an event or that we can at least make provisions for the aftermath" (Zinn 2008: 3).

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6 The complete etymology of the term 'risk' is uncertain and disputed; the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not trace it back to beyond the medieval Greek *risicon* and the post-classical Latin *risigum*. From the latter develop *rischio* (in thirteenth-century Italian), the French *risque* (since 1578) and, finally, *risk,* which has been in use in English since the early seventeenth century. Remarkably, the meaning of 'risk' has remained stable across languages and centuries, and the term is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a "danger or inconvenience, predictable or otherwise," or as a "possibility of harm, an unpleasant consequence." Interestingly, all these languages already had other words to capture the basic attitudes—such as harm, chance, luck, adventure, danger, fear, etc.—and thus did not 'need' the term risk.

The two dystopian novels of interest here are Christina Dalcher's *Vox*, published in 2018, and John Lanchester's *The Wall* from 2019. Both the American writer, Dalcher, and the British writer, Lanchester, are interested in experiments in willful social engineering that are led by a powerful few and imposed on everybody else. In both novels, unwelcome consequences ensue, but they do for different, even opposite, reasons. In *Vox*, the first-person narrator and main protagonist comes to realize that she has increased her personal risk and that of her family by neglecting to act when there was still time and, possibly, meaning for action. Thus, risk here results from acts of omission or, put simply, passivity. In *The Wall*, another first-person narrator understands that he was born into a situation that seems irrevocable and that had begun with his government taking action, being proactive, precisely to avoid an increase in risk and calamities for an entire nation. When read together, these novels suggest that there is a qualitative difference to risks (and safety). Put differently, concrete risks can be experienced (wildfires, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, industrial accidents, plane crashes, etc.) either in person (although one would hope not) or via news outlets or social media. Such catastrophes typically entail investigations that seek to uncover causes to help prevent repeats of the events and so minimize risk. An example is the devastation of New Orleans during and after hurricane Katrina in August of 2005 compared to the much more minor destruction wreaked by hurricane Ida in August of 2021. After the 2005 disaster, in which the storm broke flood walls and levees, the city invested in improving barriers and hoped to avoid another flooding. The actions taken by the city matched the findings of 2005 and had the desired effect, that is, to minimize risk, 16 years later. The risks that the protagonists deal with in *Vox* and *The Wall* are qualitatively different types of risks, because they are invisible.[7]

Invisible risks are insidiously dangerous, that is, they are harmful in ways that escape the attention of their sufferers until it is likely too late to remedy the situation. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck is credited with coining the phrase 'risk society' in his eponymous book from 1986, and he expanded the concept in his 2008 publication, *World Risk Society*. Beck's earlier publication coincides with the beginnings of the 'green movement' (later, the Green Party) in Germany and focuses on how the risks in industrialized civilizations differ from those of earlier civilizations because today's risks, he insists, "escape perception and are localized in the sphere of physical and chemical formulae (e.g. toxins in foodstuffs, or the nuclear threat)" (Beck 1986: 28). In Beck's view, today's risks, such a climate change, the hole in the ozone layer, ionizing radiation, or the contamination of food by pesticides tend to be "invisible" (Beck 2007: 104). According to Beck, these risks can only be 'seen' and measured by scientific methods and culturally represented by scientific and media knowledge systems. In other words, Beck's

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observations in *Risk Society,* subsequently expanded to the transnational or global view in *World Risk Society,* emphasize a dramatic shift in how risk is both produced *and* perceived: from direct, tangible, and experiential to invisible, pervasive, and often irreversible (atomic energy, gene technology, microelectronics). Since Beck's works have been published, the list of 'invisible' risks has grown if one includes phenomena like biological engineering, artificial intelligence, or intentionally partisan public discourse via news media or social networks.

It is useful to turn one's attention to the present moment because, as Zinn says, "[r]isk discourse and theorizing is linked to historical constellations. It is inevitably confounded by 'Zeitgeist' (*spirit of the age*)" (Zinn 2008: 3). What stands out in our time is that "defining and negotiating risk has a lot more to do with *emotions*" (Zinn 2008: 14). Zinn specifies that emotions relating to risk are "not concerned solely with worries, concerns and fears, but also with the physical experience of risks. It might be embodied in excitement, [. . .] or in social suffering" (Zinn 2008: 14). Significantly, emotional responses increase as a sense of stability decreases. As a consequence of increased liberation and individualization, the absence of 'master narratives' leads to insecurities. As Zinn writes, "[t]here are no longer unquestioned traditions available, referring to the nature of men and women. Instead family relationships, gender roles, and the division of labor have to be negotiated and justified. We can no longer apply them unquestioned" (Zinn 2008: 32). As the control over one's biography becomes a subject of negotiations (and such control, indeed, may still not be achievable), there may be an inclination to be swayed (or not) by public discourse.[8] In other words, an individual's biography may unfold in response to public discourse, which they embrace or oppose based on personal inclinations. As a consequence, a person's (or citizen's) reaction to and stance toward (polarized) public discourse becomes a responsibility. Being aware of this responsibility is at the heart of Dalcher's novel.

Vox

Arguably, *Vox* and *The Wall* are texts that address an 'invisible' risk, especially that of harmful and manipulating public discourse, in order to show how it can lead—intentionally or not—directly to a dystopian nightmare. Christina Dalcher is a theoretical

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8   Much has been made, for example, of Trump's appeal to his supporters being based on his rhetoric and his confirmation of beliefs espoused by a fundamental base. Berlatsky, for instance, asserts that "Donald Trump ran an openly racist campaign for president, calling Mexicans rapists and criminals, regularly retweeting white supremacists and at least initially balking at repudiating former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke" (Berlatsky 2020: n.p.). See also Terry Smith's *Whitelash: Unmasking White Grievance at the Ballot Box,* which traces racist voting strategies and also makes a case for racist voting to be illegal. Trump's rhetoric translated into policies once he came to office. Uyeda cites his anti-immigrant agenda: family separation at the border and travel bans from Muslim-majority countries (Uyeda 2020: n.p.).

linguist by training and known for her short stories and flash fiction (i.e., very short pieces) that have appeared in journals worldwide. *Vox* is her first novel and was written in the space of two months.[9] At the time, Donald Trump had not yet finished half of his term in office. Although Dalcher says in an interview that she avoided overt parallels to American public figures so as not to 'date' her work, the allusions are sustained throughout the book and are inescapable for any reader who followed the news at the time.[10] She notes that we are living in dangerous times and that divisions have resulted in attempts to silence each other; she stresses that under such 'tribal' conditions, free speech and exercising one's right to free speech are more crucial today than ever.

The novel's premise is a change in government that took place about a year and a half prior to the events of the plot. A conservative and misogynist president, head of the Pure Movement, is surrounded and supported by his fans, who are also followers of the fundamentalist Reverend Carl Corbin. The objective of this movement was (and is) to recreate their (fantasy) version of a 1950s America in which society is predominantly white, straight, and in which the only acceptable form of living together is the family.[11] Within the family, moreover, the man works and the woman's place is at home. Resurrecting this nostalgic image of America by a few dedicated fanatics is appealing to some at first and then spreads quickly. Jean, the main protagonist, explains that "[s]omewhere along the line, what was known as the Bible Belt, that swath of Southern states where religion ruled, started expanding. It morphed from belt to corset. But the corset turned into a full bodysuit, eventually reaching all the way to Hawaii. And we never saw it coming" (Dalcher 2018: 17). LeTourneau compares the world view of Trump's base with the confederate world view, according to which "the democratic process cannot legitimately change the established social order, and so all forms of legal and illegal resistance are justified when it tries" (LeTourneau 2017: n.p.). The same writer contends that the nostalgia for the (imagined) stability and social order of the (monochrome) 1950s is a response to "the intertwining fears about changing demographics, immigrants,

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9 Some reviewers have pointed out parallels that exist between Vox and Margaret Atwoods *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Both texts deal with a totalitarian hold on people's lives and the loss of freedom—especially for women. Through Atwood's character Offred, the reader follows subtle and subversive strategies of resistance in Gilead. In *Vox*, the main character is quickly freed from her restrictions and the plot moves to how the oppressive government is overturned and how life returns to 'normal'. Despite apparent similarities, the two novels are not suited to be compared to each other.

10 The interview aired on France 24 on International Women's Day, 8 March 2019. Less than a year after the novel's publication, *Vox* had already been translated into 17 languages.

11 See Berlatsky, who notes that "Trump made it clear in his campaign that 'Make America Great Again' meant that America was greater when white people's power was more sweeping and more secure" (Berlatsky 2020: n.p.).

Muslims, women, LGBTQ, globalization, the impact of the Great Recession, the decline in religious affiliation and racism" (LeTourneau 2017: n.p.). Thus, according to LeTourneau, the Trump votes come from a "confederate" mindset and have to be read as a reaction to what this mindset considered to be (threatening) changes to their preferred social order.

Underlying *Vox* is the "confederate world view." Some twenty years prior to the Pure Movement's taking over, Jackie, Jean's college roommate, places white men (and some women) at the heart of an anger that erupted when the (white man's) world became a liberal environment that diverged from social norms they believed to be both natural and inviolable:

> The straight white dude [. . .] is angry as shit. He feels emasculated. [. . .] It's gonna be a different world in a few years if we don't do something to change it. Expanding Bible Belt, shit-ass representation in Congress, and a pack of power-hungry little boys who are tired of being told they gotta be more sensitive. [. . .] And don't think they'll all be men. The Becky Homeckies will be on their side. (Dalcher 2018: 20)

One of the "Becky Homeckies" speaks up during a televised interview. The woman, identified only as someone wearing a blue cardigan, formulates her thoughts about the twenty-first century:

> We don't know who men are or who women are anymore. Our children are growing up confused. The culture of family has broken down. We have increases in traffic, pollution, autism rates, drug use, single parents, obesity, consumer debt, female prison populations, school shootings, erectile dysfunction. That's just to name a few [factors that are examples of a culture that has broken down]. (Dalcher 2018: 39-40)

The juxtaposition of Jackie's and the woman's viewpoints underscores how the opposed opinions are extreme and irreconcilable. Moreover, each perceives the other side as an enemy who threatens their safety. The worlds that are thus created in and through discourse are a risky place for all.[12]

Jean and many others did not see the implications of the rhetoric of the fundamentalist fanatics, and they now find themselves prisoners in their own country, because women are no longer issued passports. Like Jean, who used to be a cognitive linguist

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12 Threats can emerge from within one 'camp', too. The evangelical pastor Robb Ryerse wrote in early 2020 that he was not going to vote for Trump in 2020, because he believed Trump's pro-life stance to be mere pandering to his base instead of coming from genuine conviction. Ryerse notes that his published opinion provoked name-calling, insults, and other vitriol directed at him. He concludes that the general (political) situation has "normalized hatred in defense of President Trump" (Ryerse 2020: n.p.).

and researcher, women are also confined to being housewives after having been removed from their jobs by force. All females—grown, children, and even infants—are forced to wear 'wrist counters'. The devices, which men euphemistically call bracelets, count the number of words that the wearer speaks. Any word that exceeds the one-hundred-word daily limit causes an electric shock that becomes stronger with each infraction and can even be lethal. Women are not only rendered practically speechless, but they are also forbidden to engage in any kind of reading (newspapers, books, and even recipes for cooking are forbidden) and writing. They are allowed to watch television, where they can choose from sports channels or propaganda channels that repeat ad nauseam the new hierarchy: God, man, woman. In this society, which white men engineered in accordance with what serves them and makes them feel safe, women have become powerless and silent. Everyone who does not fit is deported to labor camps and wears wrist counters set to zero. Unsurprisingly, such individuals include gays and lesbians, (female) adulterers, non-whites, and single women. Jean's old roommate, Jackie Juarez, is one of the women forced into a labor camp, who can no longer utter a single word. While her name is Mexican and she is also a lesbian, one can suspect that the actual reason for her imprisonment is the fact that she had been an outspoken activist and feminist before the Pure Movement gained control of government.

Jackie and Jean had been roommates in college but have not spoken in twenty years. Their relationship grew distant because Jackie, ever eager to entice Jean to help collect signatures for/against various causes or go on street protests against growing gender inequalities in politics, the judicial system, and academia, eventually grows tired of Jean's resistance. Jean prefers to stay home and study; in other words, she remains passive and uninterested in what is going on around her. Jackie accuses her of "living in a bubble," and the last words she says to Jean are: "Think about what you need to do to stay free" (Dalcher 2018: 16). The two young academics do not experience a conflict regarding their respective general values. Their emotional responses, however, are at odds because, perhaps, of their priorities and (academic) interests at the time. Jackie is training to become a sociologist and thus acutely perceives the risks to women when the congressional, senatorial and judicial presence of women keeps shrinking. Jackie's perception of risk escapes Jean's awareness completely, because Jean is not only pursuing academic studies in a different field (cognitive linguistics), but she had recently begun dating her future husband and is thus more focused on romance than social causes: "[t]hat semester was the beginning of the end for Jackie and me. I'd started dating Patrick and preferred our nightly discussion about cognitive processes to Jackie's rants about whatever new thing she had found to protest" (Dalcher 2018: 96). For the individual, risk assessment, it seems, depends on many different (and unpredictable) factors and determines what event(s), therefore, may stand out. Jean's passivity is connected to new-found love and her inability (disinterest) to see things from Jackie's perspective. For Jackie, everything

feels like a danger to women's rights and liberties, and she is compelled to act. While the plot of the novel confirms that Jackie's worries were indeed justified, the problem that is highlighted by the young university students is that the future can never be known. The elements that pose risks in the present can only be identified in the context of an imagined future whose arrival needs to be either ushered in or prevented. It is likely fair to assume that every individual's imagined future—and hence current awareness of risk—is as unique as they are for Jackie and Jean.

In hindsight, Jean realizes that her ignorance (and that of many others like her) enabled the Pure Movement, that is, those who had very particular ideas about shaping the American society, and that her silence then has led to women's permanent silence now. In Jean's thoughts to herself: "[g]ood work, Jean. You gassed up the car and drove it straight to hell. Enjoy the burn" (Dalcher 2018: 93). The (older) Jean here voices regret at the choices her younger self did and did not make, and anger at herself for finding herself trapped in a situation that appears irreversible. One's voice and language, of course, are central to *Vox*. The novel's title is a Latin word that means "[t]he human voice" and "[a] spoken utterance" (Glare 2004: 2104). In addition to the one-hundred-word-limit imposed on all females, language is the sole focus of Jean's research when she tries to find a cure for aphasia, which results when the Wernicke area in the brain is damaged. The government, in the meantime, wishes to find a way to create aphasia—whether the drug will be used as a biological weapon against foreign enemies, or to render selected 'undesirable' citizens not only speechless but incapable of coherent speech, or both, is never explicitly stated. Either scenario, however, inspires great horror. Language becomes a topic in many places in the novel. Jean wonders, for instance, if her daughter Sonia, who is a first-grader, will ever be able to acquire a 'normal' person's linguistic skills, and she has a scathing comment after she meets with her (male and incompetent) head of the research project. She had wanted him to authorize sending a dose of the cure for aphasia to Italy (where her mother is suffering from the illness). Morgan denies her request by saying that "[r]elations between us and Europe are—he searches for a word—'not good'. Just like Morgan. Of all the English terms he has to pick from—'tenuous', 'strained', 'problematic', 'tense', 'adverse', 'hostile', 'unpropitious'—Morgan chooses 'not good'" (Dalcher 2018: 230). Jean's evaluation here implies that language is a tool that needs to be used and that, moreover, needs to reflect some sophistication if the speaker wishes to be clear or persuasive. While there is, ultimately, a 'happy ending' to the plot, Dalcher's text insists on the importance of exercising the rights and obligations that come with the gift of having a language and a voice: to pay attention to the language of others and to use one's own voice to contribute to the conversation. Neglecting the latter comes at the peril of losing the privilege altogether.

The Wall

John Lanchester, born in Germany and one of the most renowned writers and intellec-tuals in England today, strikes a very different tone in *The Wall*. This novel's title, too, immediately evokes specific connotations for contemporary readers. Writing for *The Guardian*, Johanna Thomas-Corr notes in the month of the novel's publication that the text is "a calculated extrapolation of our present [British] anxieties about rising sea levels, anti-refugee populism, post-Brexit scarcity and intergenerational conflict" (Thomas-Corr 2019: n.p.). Two months later, on the other side of the Atlantic, Alec Nevala-Lee states: "'The Wall' arrives at a moment in which the definition of a wall is a matter of national debate, and it actively invites such associations" (Nevala-Lee 2019: n.p.). Nevala-Lee is making a reference to Trump's controversial building of a wall to keep immigrants from crossing into the United States from its border with Mexico. In addition, a reader may think of the Berlin Wall, which was a tangible reminder of the Iron Curtain and the Cold War until 1989. Whichever association comes to mind, they all have in common the idea that a wall separates two sides; it creates a world in which there is an inside and an outside, an 'us' and 'them', and Lanchester uses the wall in this sense in his fifth novel.

The main protagonists of The Wall are all young men and women in their early twen-ties. They have no memories of what the world was like before it drastically changed under the watch of their parents' generation. The exact reasoning about who made what arguments in favor of building a wall around the entirety of the British Isles, and the logistics, remain vague. Rather than a fixed date, the "Change" came as the result of a process:

> the Change was not a single solitary event. We speak of it in that manner because here we experienced one particular shift, of sea level and weather, over a period of years it is true, but it felt then and when we look back on it today still feels like an incident that happened, a defined moment in time with a before and an after. There was our parents' world, and now there is our world" (104).

Rising sea levels in Britain and elsewhere appear to have caused two distinct but related problems. On the one hand, Britain needed a wall to protect itself from the rising water. On the other hand, elevated sea levels forced many other people to migrate. Many of those seem to want to go to Britain, and the country wishes to protect itself from a wave of "Others." To 'protect' its citizens from an invasion by refugees, the government decided to build the wall. The risks they did not consider involve thinking about what happens to an isolationist country in a globally interconnected world, and one result is scarcity. An example is the availability of food. Hafi, the main protagonist's companion, recollects what she has read in "old" books, from times before the Change,

and these records strike her as if people were living in paradise: "[t]he produce you could get before the Change [. . . .] Everything, all the time. Tomatoes and fruits, hams from you name it, meat whenever you liked, all of it all year round, anything you wanted from anywhere at any time" (Lanchester 2019: 73). The absence of any trade (or any contact) with the rest of the world means that now "[e]verybody grows their own food" (Lanchester 2019: 136) and is limited to what kinds of food can thrive on British soil.

Another example of an outcome that many did not necessarily anticipate is that making a fortress of Britain and the isolationist policies created enmities that cannot be overcome. As one character assesses the motives, they were "[a] selfish, self-interested turning away from the world. A refusal to our responsibilities. [...] You can't argue with people who want you to drown, to be overrun, to be washed away" (Lanchester 2019: 106). In the interests of protection, the lives and threat to the lives of others do not matter. As long as it does not happen in Britain, it is acceptable when others on the outside do not survive so long as those on the inside do.

The world as Joseph Kavanagh knows it is a place where everything is always the same, nothing resembles things as they used to be,[13] and there are no individual choices. As he notes, "everything about the Wall means you have no choice" (Lanchester 2019: 4). The novel begins with a focus on the wall and Joseph's first day of required service as a "Defender", and creates an atmosphere that is dominated by (external and internal) frigidity: "It is cold on the Wall. That's the first thing everybody tells you, and the first thing you notice when you're sent there, and it's the thing you think about all the time you're on it, and it's the thing you remember when you're not there anymore. It's cold on the Wall" (Lanchester 2019: 3). These are the thoughts of the first-person narrator as he is starting his tour of duty on the wall that had been built to encircle and protect the British Isles by those who came before him. Put differently, the fortification (whose official name is the "National Coastal Defence Structure;" Lanchester 2019: 21) separates 'us' from 'them', and guarding this separation is so serious that every young man and woman is drafted to serve his or her two years on the barrier. The wall reminds those serving there that life has become reduced to a very simple but limiting format: "[n]o leeway, no space, nothing but black and white, the rulebook or anarchy, nothing but the Wall and the Others and the always waiting, always expectant, entirely unforgiving sea." (45)

Aside from permanently unpleasant and windy temperatures, the notion of 'cold' suggests other things, too. Before he was born, Kavanagh's government implemented a strategy of total isolationism to keep the homeland's population number stagnant and to keep the British people safe from terrorists and migrants. This strategy becomes more

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13 The young people on the wall do not have first-hand experience of how things used to be. But like Haifa reads about food items no longer available in old books, they can also listen to older people talking, or watch films in which people travel to foreign destinations and walk on beaches.

cruel and violent as time passes. Until about ten years ago, "Others [that made it across the wall] who showed they had valuable skills could stay, at the cost of exchanging places with the Defenders who had failed to keep them out" (Lanchester 2019: 44). To keep a steady number of citizens, the rule is: "[o]ne in, one out: for every Other who got over the Wall, one Defender is put out to sea" (Lanchester 2019: 34). This cold valuing of a skilled newcomer over a 'failed' defender, however, does not suffice to keep the country safe, because 'word got out' and enticed many other Others to follow suit. "Now," as Kavanagh explains, "Others who get over the Wall have to choose between being euthanized, becoming Help [slaves owned by the state], or being put back to sea" (Lanchester 2019: 44). There are no exceptions, and nobody can escape, because all (rightful) citizens have an implant, a chip that verifies belonging or unmasks otherness: "[n]o biometric ID, no life. Not in this country" (Lanchester 2019: 170).

Serving as a Defender is a harsh and cold duty, and also an experience that changes people's personality. The desire to get away from the wall is so great for some that they succumb to the government's lure, which is a permission to leave in exchange for agreeing to produce children. As Kavanagh sees it, there is a paradox that ensues from the country's total isolation and an unwillingness on the part of many to bring children into an unbearable world. The paradox is thus that there may not be enough defenders to continue to protect the country. "To have 'Defenders'," Kavanagh thinks, "people need to breed. But people don't want to Breed, because the world is such a horrible place. So as an incentive to get people to leave the Wall, if you reproduce, you can leave. You Breed to leave the Wall" (Lanchester 2019: 33). Clearly, the relationship between the parents of these (potential) children and their offspring will be difficult: the children may well ask them what they were thinking to expose them to a world with no options, which is the accusation that Joseph Kavanagh makes to his parents.

If future relationships between parents and children are thought to be potentially dysfunctional, those between Joseph Kavanagh and his friends and their parents is already beyond repair. "It's guilt: mass guilt, generational guilt. The olds feel they irretrievably fucked up the world, then allowed us to be born into it. It's true. That's exactly what they did. They know it, we know it. Everybody knows it" (Lanchester 2019: 53) is how Kavanagh summarizes the phenomenon. The implicit reproach is that the parent generation went along with the government's proactive measures, did not think enough for themselves, and did not protest; the result is guilt and broken communication with the next generation. Kavanagh confirms that "none of us can talk to our parents. By 'us' I mean my generation, people born after the Change" (Lanchester 2019: 53). Kavanagh's attitude toward each of his parents leaves little hope for the generation gap to be bridged:

> My mother is hard going. She just feels guilty all the time; her expression in repose, whenever I'm in the room, resembles a grieving sheep [...] My father is worse than my

mother. The thing about Dad is he still has the emotional reflexes of a parent. He wants to be in charge, to know better, to put me straight [...] I don't want to know their advice or to know what they think about anything, ever. (Lanchester 2019: 55)

Kavanagh's government, with the intent to increase its citizens' safety, had not anticipated the risk of these citizens losing their familial bonds, their humanity, or their sense of even being a human being. At a particular moment, Kavanagh thinks about the notion of home (after having served some time on the wall) and realizes that "the whole concept of home was strange, a thing you used to believe in .... Home: the place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in. ... But once you had spent time on the Wall, you stop believing in the idea that anybody, ever has no choice but to take you in. Nobody has to take you in. They can choose to, or not" (Lanchester 2019: 52). The (pro)active measures of the government, meant to keep its population safe, has produced a 'homeless' and 'inhumane' citizenry which has to struggle for survival every day—be that on the Wall or within its parameters.

Kavanagh's perspective changes when he begins to see what he is doing from the viewpoint of the Others: "[w]e were cold but the Others were colder. We were bored and tired and uncomfortable and anxious, they were angry and frightened and exhausted and desperate [...] How we must seem to them! We must seem more like devils than human beings" (Lanchester 2019: 63). The isolationist policies of his government, however, have been in place too long and are functioning too well for Kavanagh to develop thoughts of resistance. Instead, he retreats inward in an attempt to ascertain his individuality: "[a]t the same time I was in the middle of my friends and peers and colleagues, my fellow Defenders, I was privately scheming to get away from them, to become somebody else" (Lanchester 2019: 71). Kavanagh, like his peers, is not accustomed to thinking and acting for himself—they are expected to 'function'—and his attempts at 'becoming somebody else' only lead to doubts: "Maybe there isn't a real self, just different versions of us we wear in different settings and with different people" (Lanchester 2019: 75).

Before the protagonist can resolve his internal struggle, he and his colleagues are arrested when some Others are able to cross the wall one night. Kavanagh, Hifa and others are cast out to sea, and the remainder of the story involves their struggle for survival in a place that is 'no place'. When they find a cliff and join their little boat to others already there, they become members of a small community that tries to do its best with very limited resources. The experience allows Kavanagh to shed uncertainties he had felt about the world in which he grew up—especially the separation of outsiders from insiders: "If I was an Other and they were Others perhaps none of us were Others but instead we were a new Us. It was confusing" (Lanchester 2019: 188). Kavanagh's insight that "nothing before the sea was real" (Lanchester 2019: 201), however, comes

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too late. The proactive risk to isolate the country from the rest of the world that was taken before he was born resulted in a reality for Kavanagh and his friends that precludes any organized resistance. There is no 'happy end' for this dystopia, because the situation has progressed too far to be reversible. Kavanagh, Hifa and the others will remain adrift on the sea. At the same time, it is clear that this kind of existence will not be sustainable.

The denouement of the dilemma occurs abruptly and through a sleight of hand on the narrator's (Kavanagh's) part. Hifa asks him to tell her a story. As he tries to think about a story, Kavanagh remembers that stories are supposed to have happy endings, and these are the last lines of The Wall: "I said this to myself over and over again, that's what a story is, something that turns out all right, and then it came to me, and what I said out loud began like this: "It's cold on the Wall." (Lanchester 2019: 254). The very last sentence, i.e., the beginning of the story he will tell Hifa, is identical to the first sentence of *The Wall*. This repetition points to the fact that there is no exit from this dystopia. However, the repetition also invites the reader to speculate that the nightmarish events of the novel (hopefully) may have been 'just' a story.

Conclusion

If one thinks of risk and safety in the context of an emotional reaction to what is perceived as such, it comes as no surprise that both *Vox* and *The Wall* are first-person narratives. In both cases, the protagonists can only rely on themselves. While Jean regrets not having seen the signs of risk when she could have, maybe, done something about it, Joseph Kavanagh needs to find ways to understand circumstances that have always been beyond his control. *Vox* ultimately stresses the need for the individual to stay engaged with and participate in (public) discourse, while *The Wall* reminds the reader that stories have the power to both delight and teach.

Johan Wolfgang von Goethe once commented that "[t]he dangers of life are infinite and among them is safety." By showing the desire to be and feel safe (at least for white men, in *Vox*), Dalcher and Lanchester point to the risk that lies at the heart of precisely such desire.[14] These counter-utopian/dystopian imaginings provide an impetus to think about the risky world we live in. As such, they are a contribution to a discourse that concerns all and that, simultaneously, underscores the important role that literature

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14 Many sources observe how in the United States white supremacy discourse has moved from being on the periphery of political discourse to have more recently become part of mainstream politics. Clark Simon, from the Center for American Progress, states that white supremacist discourse "seeks to rehabilitate toxic political notions of racial superiority [. . .] and attempts to build a notion of an embattled white majority which has to defend its power by any means necessary" (Simon 2020: n. p.). John Blake comments on "white masculinity that allows some white men to feel as if they 'can rule and brutalize without consequence'" (Blake 2021: n. p.). As he cites examples of white men having been acquit-

continues to play. As Mark William Roche notes in his *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*, "[t]he purpose of the literary prophet is to be proven wrong, that is, to motivate action in the present, such that the worst-case scenario of the future not take place" (Roche 2004: 240). Literary prophets or not, one can only hope that Dalcher's and Lanchester's scenarios will be proven wrong.

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ted of violence against their (non-white) victims, he is compelled to state that "[l]aws [. . .] not only protect white vigilante violence but, in some cases, seem to embolden vigilantes" (Blake 2021: n. p.). In Britain, supporters of Brexit argue that democracy in the EU is failing and that, importantly, Brussels has undermined British autonomy. In addition, they refer to the adverse impact of the euro, the migrant and climate crises, and thus embrace isolationist attitudes. See for example, Robert Tombs' recent This Sovereign Isle: Britain In and Out of Europe (2021).

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