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Special Issue

Risk: Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Guest editor
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Contents

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Introduction to the Special Issue

Risk: Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Most etymological dictionaries explain that the English word risk comes from the Latin *resicum,* which was a nautical expression used to define a cliff or reef (Donald 1874: 439), which posed danger to sailors and maritime trades. The Latin word comes from the Greek navigation term *rhizikon*, which meant "root, stone, cut of the firm land" and was a metaphor for difficulty to avoid at sea. Possibly, the term *rhizikon* transferred to the Arabic world *rizk*, meaning fate or uncertain outcome. In this understanding, risk cannot be totally controlled by mankind. Risk in the Middle Ages meant danger, an act of God or force majeure, so it was understood as a natural event (Kelly 2018: 21). Nowadays, risks and catastrophes have taken on global proportions, and what distinguishes current risks is their artificiality; these are potential catastrophes we have brought upon ourselves.

Risk understood as threat and insecurity has always constituted human existence; in a certain sense this was even more the case in the past than it is today. Illness or premature death, famine and plagues were greater threats to individuals and their families in the Middle Ages than today (Beck 2009: 4). Although nowadays we are more than ever preoccupied with the prospect of catastrophe: nuclear war, environmental disaster, terrorist attack, accidents and terminal illnesses, economic collapse, risk is not an invention of modernity. However, as Beck claims (1992: 21), risks in the past were more personal; they had a note of bravery and adventure. They were not global dangers such as ecological disaster or atomic fallout, which ignore the borders of nations and pose a threat of self-destruction of all life on Earth.

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According to Hoydis, "[a]pproaching risk as an object of study, one faces the task of trying to differentiate between partially contrasting and overlapping risk discourses which are usually either driven by formal-normative or cultural-sociological concerns, pursue either action- or system-oriented perspectives, and can be probabilistic-technical, economic, anthropological-political, psychological-cognitive or sociological-philosophical in orientation" (Hoydis 2017: 3). Each scientific community or branch of research has its own understanding of risk, as there is no universal set of characteristics for describing risk (Slovic 1997: 284). According to Bob Heyman (2012: 605), the "ubiquity of risk thinking in modern cultures challenges definitional efforts." Different concepts are used interchangeably or in opposition to define risk, and among them are: uncertainty, contingency, chance, hazard, and danger. In the 1980s Ulrich Beck first formulated his thesis of the 'risk society'. It provoked a debate in contemporary culture, and the use of the term has increased rapidly since then.

A study of fictional literature also provides different insights into the pervasiveness of risk in its various manifestations. Risk comes in many forms, and today it is conceived principally as danger, as "the tension between the vision of stability and predictability and a precarious and uncertain world" (Knights & Vurdubakis 1993: 730).

Through the selection of six articles and a book review in this volume we wish to demonstrate the diversity of approaches to risk as an object of study. **Maria Antonietta Struzziero** explores physical, psychological and emotional risk in Maggie O'Farrell's novel *Hamnet* (2020), which presents a portrait of a marriage after the death of a beloved child, whose loss is attributed to the bubonic plague, and resonates with present fears and risks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adelheid Rundholz analyzes two dystopian novels: Christina Dalcher's *Vox* (2018) and John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), in which risk pervades the world portrayed. The constant threat of rising waters, rising fear, rising political division, and totalitarianism have contributed to society's ills depicted in the aforementioned novels.

Present-day risks derive from general concerns with modernization and globalization, and have been especially identified with environmentalism. **Corinne Fournier Kiss** reflects on ecocatastrophy connected with the Brazillian backlands (*sertão*). Her considerations are in tune with Kate Rigby's concept of "natural disaster".

Aleksandra Niemirycz analyzes M. Shelley's, J. Keats' and C. K. Norwid's interpretations of the Promethean myth. She discusses their understanding of the actions of the mythological hero who wanted to protect humans from risk and gave them safety by means of fire.

Hernando Blandón Gómez looks at the risk during the social mobilization of Colombians in the city of Medellín in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. He analyses street art, which is interpreted as political action that grew as a result of social unrest.

Literature has always recorded a history of patriarchy, sexual violence and resistance. **Silvia Martínez-Falquina** explores the important problems facing Canada's and the USA's Indigenous women. Her article examines the role of literature within the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIM) movement, and illustrates the most significant features of its poetry and fiction.

Jacek Partyka reviews *#MeToo and Literary Studies* (2021), which is a collection of essays on literature that addresses rape culture and sexual violence, and takes the floor in a debate about literature that can promote justice. For years academics have been exposing and critiquing gender-based violence and male domination, but the continued power of #MeToo after its 2017 explosion adds new urgency and wider awareness about the risk women face every day all over the globe.

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"Caught in a web of absence": Risk, death and survival in Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet*

Abstract. Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet* (2020) is a reimagining of the death of Shakespeare's only son, and the existential havoc that the event causes in the protagonists' life. However, the title is slightly misleading because the novel's central character is Hamnet's enigmatic mother, Agnes Hathaway, better known as Anne. The narrative oscillates between two timelines: the present begins on the day the plague first afflicts Hamnet's twin sister Judith and soon after takes away the boy himself, a trauma that risks breaking both the family bonds and fragmenting the individual psyche. The past swings back to Agnes's meeting her future husband about 15 years earlier. Though Hamnet died of unknown causes, O'Farrell attributes it to the bubonic plague that raged throughout the country at the time with devastating consequences, an aspect of the story that is highly topical due to the Covid-19 pandemic. *Hamnet* is a text crossed by a number of deaths, both in the family of the dramatist and of his wife. As such, it is argued, the novel explores various forms of risk: physical, psychological and emotional. At the same time, it examines the different strategies that the human psyche activates to heal its wounds.

Keywords: plague, risk, death, trauma, survival, safety.

Introduction

"The words exist, if you know how to listen"
Maggie O'Farrell, *Hamnet*

Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet* (2020) is a reimagining of the death of Hamnet, William Shakespeare's eleven-year-old only son. The tragic event ripples through the calm surface of the protagonists' daily lives, tips over into psychological devastation, and has far-reaching emotional, domestic and artistic reverberations.

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The title, however, belies its real subject because, though the text is permeated with Hamnet's presence, even as an eerily, ghostly creature long after his death, both in the family and in the pages of his father's theatrical production, the protagonist and pulsating heart is the boy's mysterious mother, Anne Hathaway, in the novel called Agnes which, as O'Farrell explains, is the name that appeared in her father's will. Actually, the two names, "Agnes and Ann were simply treated as versions of the same name" (2008: 10), Germaine Greer maintains in *Shakespeare's Wife* (2008), adding that scholars found dozens of examples "where Agnes, pronounced 'Annis', gradually becomes 'Ann'" (Greer 2008: 10). So, "the child born Agnes Hathaway grew up to be Ann Shakespeare" (2008: 11)[2].

At the same time, the famous playwright is somehow relegated to a secondary role, never named directly but only variously referred to, in relation to the other characters, as "the son", "the Latin tutor", "her husband", "the father". Actually, he is one of the many ghosts that haunt the text, moved to the periphery of the novel's geographic world. He is seldom at home in Stratford-upon-Avon, where the story takes place, and his life in distant London is little known even to his family; he mostly exists in the memories that his wife and children cherish of him, a presence kept alive by his letters to them.

Hamnet is a text crossed, and punctuated, by a number of risks to face and deaths, both in the family of the dramatist and of his wife, shadows that loom large in their lives and make their presence felt throughout the book.

As such, the article argues, the novel explores various forms of risk: physical, psychological and emotional, the latter ones triggered by the trauma of loss and grief. At the same time, it examines the different strategies that the human psyche activates to overcome and survive a traumatic event and re-emerge on relatively safe existential ground. In addition to this, at its core, *Hamnet* is also a tender study of motherhood and family life; an exploration of marriage, as well as an insightful look into the creative process itself.

A restless boy, a witchy forest girl and a kestrel

Hamnet is a third-person present tense narrative, for the most part focalized through Agnes's female eyes, but inhabiting different minds. The novel moves to centre stage the almost obscure figure of Shakespeare's wife, as well as Hamnet, so overlooked and forgotten by scholars, giving both of them a personality and a voice, and giving voice to their silenced story.

O'Farrell's is an important shift of perspective because, as the writer herself asserts in an interview with Sarah Hughes for *The Guardian*, Anne Hathaway is usually given no agency, and "there's so much hostility and misogyny towards her. The narrative is that

2 The article will refer to Anne Hathaway as Agnes in discussing Maggie O'Farrell's novel. Germaine Greer uses the form 'Ann', a spelling that is retained when quoting from her text.

she was illiterate, that she was a peasant, that he hated her, that she forced him into marriage" (Hughes 2020). A malicious view of her finds space even in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920), voiced by Stephen Dedalus. In the 'Scylla and Charybdis' episode, he refers to her as "the ugliest doxy in all Warwickshire, […] a boldfaced Stratford wench who tumbles in a cornfield a lover younger than herself" (2011: 244). Then Stephen goes on to add that as soon as the dramatist realized he had made a mistake, he "got out of it as quickly and as best he could" (2011: 243), leaving her behind to escape to London, thus becoming a ghost for his family.

Scholars have frequently used "the distorting lens of what he expressed through his characters or the speaker of his sonnets" (Shapiro 2006: xvi) as 'sources' to have access to the dramatist's feelings and fill the silences and opacities of his life. To argue their point and support the narrative that Shakespeare's was an unhappy marriage, critics also invoke the famous will, in which he left only his "second-best bed" to his wife, as also Stephen Dedalus does, defining it "the swansong […] wherein he has commended her to posterity" (2011: 260). However, they tend to ignore that in Elizabethan times the 'best bed' was usually kept on view downstairs for visitors to admire. William left the marital (second best) bed to his wife. That bed surely had more emotional value than the show-piece bed. On this critical tendency, James Shapiro aptly observes that "the plays are not two-way mirrors" which can offer a window into the dramatist's feelings where he left no other documents, such as letters or diaries, to refer to, a critical methodology that is characterized by "circularity and arbitrariness" (Shapiro 2006: xiv).

In her recent *The Private Life of William Shakespeare* (2021), Lena Cowen Orlin acknowledges that "the nature of Shakespeare's emotional relationship with Anne […] is a privacy that will remain intractable" (49); however, she asserts that there was purpose in the union and that it suited him, even though "the very idea that Shakespeare could himself have made a positive life choice flies in the face of settled opinion" (49). In fact, she concludes, marriage freed him from a planned indenture and an unwanted life in trade, and set him free to become a poet and playwright. As for the long debated issue of the bed left to his wife, Cowen Orlin claims that "all Shakespeare's bequests hint at the possibility that there was a sentimental significance in the second-best bed as well" (194).

Peter Ackroyd is also very critical of the speculations that Anne Hathaway had coaxed an inexperienced young man into bed and trapped him into "a *mésalliance* or forced marriage" which, instead, he considered "an eminently sensible arrangement" (2006: 83). The whole narrative of their unhappy married life, he argues, is "an insult to Anne Hathaway who, like many of the silent wives of famous men, has endured much obloquy" (2006: 84).

In the novel, a disparaging view of Agnes is voiced by Shakespeare's mother, Mary. Being somehow both puzzled by, and even afraid of, her ability "to look at you, right into

you, right through you" (O'Farrell 2020: 206)[3], Mary considers her daughter-in-law a "sorceress [who] bewitched and ensnared her boy, lured him into a union. This, Mary can never forgive" (207).

However, O'Farrell maintains, "there's not a single shred of evidence for any of that" (Allardice 2021) and, as a counter-argument, she adds, "when he retired, he could have lived anywhere. He was incredibly wealthy but he chose to go back and spend his retirement with her in Stratford. This doesn't suggest to me a man who hated his wife or regretted his marriage" (Allardice 2021).

Actually, in her meticulously researched *Shakespeare's Wife*, Germaine Greer, sifting through the archives, wills and birth records of people whose lives ran parallel to the young Shakespeares, traces, and exposes, the evolution of the fantasy narrative concerning them. She offers a corrective to all the male biographers who manipulated the meagre facts known about Shakespeare to construct misogynistic narratives about Anne Hathaway. Greer pointedly observes: "By doing the right thing, by remaining silent and invisible, Ann Shakespeare left a wife-shaped void in the biography of William Shakespeare, which later bardolaters filled up with their own speculations, most of which do neither them nor their hero any credit" (2009: 4). This tendency resulted in biographies mostly built on fanciful hypotheses: "All biographies of Shakespeare are houses built of straw, but there is good straw and rotten straw" (Greer 2009: 8). She goes on to add that Anne was "like so many young women of her age in being unmarried" (34), and that "it is her husband who is the exception to the rule, being himself a minor" (88).

O'Farrell acknowledges Germaine Greer's book as one of the many influences on her portrayal of Agnes, along with a series of additional sources that she researched in preparation for the book and to inscribe her 'other' narrative. O'Farrell retrieves Anne Hathaway from obscurity and the disparaging obfuscating sexism of scholars and scriptwriters of Oscar-winning films, and brings to life a fascinating female portrait of an unconventional, free-spirited creature who seems to be endowed with special, mysterious gifts.

Hamnet is divided into two parts, the caesura between the sections being represented by Hamnet's death. The novel oscillates back and forth between two timelines and the opposite poles of 'risk' and 'safety' that punctuate both trajectories. The present narrative, which actually opens the novel, begins in 1596, on the day the plague stealthily enters the safe world of the playwright's household, bringing death and devastation. The past narrative swings back first to Agnes's recollection of her childhood, then the meeting with her future husband while he is tutoring her stepsiblings, William's courtship and their marriage, followed by the birth of their three children.

3 Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.

Though risk, loss and death are introduced at the very beginning of the novel, on the day the plague appears in the Shakespeares' lives unexpectedly, they also accompany the protagonists' past. So, first the article will focus on the past time axis- which is gradually presented through a series of flashbacks that alternate with the present narrative thread- both to take readers back into the youthful stage of Agnes's and Will's life, their respective problematic family relationships, and their encounter, and, above all, because old traumas shed light on the protagonists' psychology in their adulthood.

Agnes's past story starts almost as a fairy tale: "There used to be a story in these parts about a girl who lived at the edge of a forest" (45), the narrator recalls. It is a tale that suggests a deep connection between humans and the natural world and that, repeated from teller to listener, appears to conceal "a promise, [...] a hint that something is about to happen" (45). The story recounts "the myth of Agnes's childhood" (51), and the special, fond relationship she had with her mother, who profoundly doted on her baby girl. Agnes's safe idyllic life is abruptly interrupted by the death of her beloved mother while giving birth to her third stillborn child, one of the many deaths punctuating the text. She vividly recollects the appalling sight of her mother's bed soaked in blood, "a room of carnage, of violence, of appalling crimson" (55), in her arms the dead baby child with a waxy, wizened face wrapped in a bundle, a priest muttering strange words over both mother and baby. It is an event that seriously jeopardizes Agnes's psychological integrity and almost threatens to fragment her self, as "reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists" (Freud 1917: 244).

The child Agnes feels that "the world has cracked open, [and] the sky above her could, at any moment, split and rain down fire and ash upon them all" (56). She retreats into the forest to give free vent to her suffering, piercing her skin with thorny brambles, as if the self-inflicted physical pain might help attenuate the emotional wound left open by her loss. Alone with the trees, she cries out her anger at the God of the church they go to every Sunday: "She calls on him, she bawls his name. You, she says, you, do you hear me, I am finished with you" (56). This wound disrupts her safe childhood world and affects her so deeply that she no longer believes in God; it is a trauma that she will relive with even more excruciating pain when Hamnet dies.

Agnes is left alone to cherish the tender, vivid memories of her mother, missing her hand "that held Agnes's, to stop her from falling, and it was warm and firm" (51). She does not find the same source of safety and emotional support in her stepmother, "the woman in the house" (56) that her father marries after some time, Joan, a name "that made Agnes think of a howling dog" (52). Joan has no patience with the children, and shows no affection for her and her younger brother Bartholomew, who Agnes loves profoundly. She hits Agnes with a shoe when she is angry with her, "leaving purple blotches on her skin" (53), a pain that is "so surprising, so unfamiliar" (53) to the child, who learns the art of invisibility so as not to draw her stepmother's notice to her and

thus avoid being beaten. At this stage the girl's existential trajectory abruptly swings from the warm safety of family affection to deprivation and risk. There follows "a time of confusion, of the seasons following hard upon each other" (53) for Agnes, whose personal and emotional world has been emptied, leaving only a void, an absence. However, she forces herself never to cry, but simply keeps asking everyone when her own mother would come back, unable to accept the idea that she is lost forever. Except for the old apothecary's widow, everyone denies that she had another mother; she can't understand why they tell lies, because she remembers everything about her and does everything not to erase her presence from the family and keep her memory alive at least in Bartholomew.

Deprived of the security of maternal affection, Agnes grows up yearning for an *other* to fill the void that threatens to engulf her, counteract the death drive that pushes her towards the brink of the abyss, and save her. So, when she first meets eighteen-year-old William at Hewlands, the Hathaways' residence, where he is Latin tutor to her half-brothers, she recognizes a kindred soul: both abused by one of their parents- Agnes by her stepmother, William by his bossy father; both misfits, with something special inside they want to share with the other. She finds emotional safety in him, viewing in him the ideal signifier that can help her reconstitute the texture of the self on safer grounds.

Will glimpses Agnes from the window of the schoolroom at Hewlands, unaware that she is the farmer's eldest daughter; he mistakes her for a young man as she emerges from the forest "with a brand of masculine insouciance or entitlement, covering the ground with booted strides" (33), holding a kestrel on her outstretched fist. The themes of mistaken identities, gender-blurring and affinity between girl and boy twins are some of the Shakespearean themes blended in O'Farrell's novel, and that at one point will have a pivotal role with momentous consequences.

In the neighbourhood Agnes has a reputation for being a free-spirited young woman, by many considered to be "strange, touched, peculiar, perhaps mad" (37). She is often seen talking to bees or wandering by herself through the forest to collect plants that she uses "to make dubious potions" (37), so a sort of witchy, quasi-mythical creature. Even at home they look upon her with suspicion as they believe that, being a gifted herbalist, she is very good with potions and curses. Indeed, her stepmother feels at risk, and "lives in terror of the girl putting hexes on her" (37), especially after her husband, the girl's father, dies. He bequeaths his daughter a substantial dowry in his will, an endowment that, giving Agnes a degree of social safety and financial independence, makes her a more attractive party than many women of her time, who had to rely on paternal permission when choosing their future husband. Yet, she is generally thought "to be too wild for any man" (37), so probably difficult to marry.

However, when the restless young William begins to talk to her, he is strangely intrigued by the fanciful tales circulating about her, and confused by her combination of contrasting attributes: dressed like a servant but speaking like a lady, boldly meeting his eyes like a man would and yet distinctly feminine in her figure and form. There is an immediate palpable chemistry between the two, which they do not hide from each other; almost bewitched by her, he touches her arm and feels her shiver. She finds his hand and "her fingers grip the flesh between his thumb and forefinger" (43), holding it as if she wanted to decipher something in the complex text of his mind. When he asks her name, he mishears her saying "Anne" (42), which reminds him of his dead sister by the same name, an echo of the 'ghost' of the dead haunting the life of the living. Soon after, however, she corrects him, saying that her name is "Agnes" (44), but pronounced differently, "Ann-yis. Agn-yez" (44), a linguistic slipperiness that appears to hint at the deceptively mysterious nature of her identity. Then, unexpectedly, she kisses his mouth, leaving him dizzyingly stupefied, and after turns to go away. When the reader meets Agnes and Will next, they are in an apple storage room on the farm, the same place where they had exchanged their first kiss. It is a marvellous scene of the couple's first breathtaking lovemaking, a passionate scene of youthful sex and one of the most original lovemaking scenes in literature.

O'Farrell revises the traditional misogynistic narrative of the canny older woman trapping the inexperienced young boy into an unwanted marriage. In the novel, Will, with his disgraced father and his uncertain prospects, is no catch for Agnes, who is socially respectable and financially independent. In this perspective, it is *she* who takes a risk by making the poorer match with a boy considered to be "penniless and tradeless, not to mention rather young to be courting a woman who is of age" (73), both by the local community and by Agnes's stepmother, who speaks openly and contemptuously against the possibility of their marriage.

A significant difference with the predominant traditional narrative of their life-story is that in the novel there is an indisputable attraction between the two; they are passionately in love with each other and want to spend the rest of their life together. It is a certainty that both of them have from their first meeting, each one feeling safe in the other and trusting the other unconditionally. Somehow, the reader perceives that it is the meeting of two special individuals who confront and complete each other.

Visible absences and invisible enemies

The present time axis in the novel, as mentioned before, begins on the day the plague reaches the village and creeps into the Shakespeares' life, putting the safety of the family, and of entire communities, at risk. O'Farrell attributes Hamnet's death at the age of eleven, whose real causes are unknown, to the bubonic plague, which is plausible as the Black Death actually raged through the country at the time. It first makes its

presence manifest with the ominous marks it leaves on Hamnet's twin sister Judith. Soon after, however, while Judith gradually recovers and is safe, it is Hamnet who falls into its baneful grip and dies, an event that has momentous emotional and psychological consequences, and threatens to break all family bonds, leaving them traumatized and overcome with grief.

The novel closely follows the spread and devastating consequences of the virulent pestilence in a section in which O'Farrell charts how the plague reached Agnes's children, reconstructing "the chain of random events and haphazard encounters that could have led the fatal bacterium *Yersinia pestis* to the Shakespeare house" (Greenblatt 2021: 2). The description of the progression of the plague is an astounding narrative sequence, "a tour de force of contact-tracing" (Greenblatt 2021: 2), of the kind we have become familiar with out of necessity.

O'Farrell follows two separate sources of the plague – a glassmaker in Murano and a cabin boy on a merchant ship – that at one point will meet. The pestilence makes its way from Alexandria, Egypt, via fleas, a monkey, cats, rats, and a cabin boy to infected rags wrapped around a glass necklace from Murano, Italy, that will reach a seamstress in Ely street where Judith gets infected unwrapping the box containing the *millefiori* beads. It is a narrative that, in this historical moment, resonates with tragic topicality; as we still live in the ghastly shadow of the global Covid 19 pandemic and its succession of risky variants, despite scientists' constant efforts and progress to track the contagion and prevent its riskier mutations, we are gripped by a growing sense of precariousness and insecurity, deprived of the certainty of a safe future to look forward to. However, the topicality of the novel should not mislead readers into thinking that it was O'Farrell's deliberate attempt to capitalize on the surge of interest in books dealing with epidemics. It is pure coincidence that *Hamnet* was published when the world was in the grip of Covid-19; actually, the novelist had begun researching for the novel three years before, and would never have imagined that "a fatal disease could at any moment be sweeping towards you, from far off continents" (O'Farrell 2020), and change people's daily life.

O'Farrell also traces to the cataclysm of Hamnet's death and its traumatic aftermath the source of inspiration for Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), a tragedy written four years later in which the playwright, looking for his dead son everywhere and fathoming the depth of his grief, at last finds him in the alchemy of his most famous play. If Shakespeare's loss of his son is behind the composition of his most famous play, it is not to be easily ascertained. Some critics feel confident that, unlike Ben Johnson, who left poems on the death of his children, Shakespeare's failure "to memorialize Hamnet betrays a much deeper grief; others, a comparative callousness". Maybe his silence is simply evidence that "he did not write autobiographically" (Cowen Orlin 2021: 6).

However, the correlation established by O'Farrell between *Hamlet* and the child's death as the source of inspiration for the composition of his play is persuasive. First of

all, it rests on the similarity between the two names, Hamnet and Hamlet; they were "in fact the same name, entirely interchangeable in Stratford records in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries" (Greenblatt 2004: 3), according to both Steven Greenblatt and Germaine Greer, scholars who are also quoted by O'Farrell in the novel's foreword. Furthermore, it is implausible to think that the playwright was unaffected by the boy's death, which, according to Greenblatt, "could have caused a psychic disturbance that helps to explain the explosive power and inwardness of *Hamlet"* (2004: 17). In 'The Death of Hamnet: An Essay on Grief and Creativity' (2009) Eugene Mahon goes beyond the similarity between the dead child's name and the play's title, focusing instead on the language of *Hamlet*. He observes the presence of frequent linguistic twinning and variations on the theme of doubling which, he contends, are unconscious references to the dead twin, whose loss is even accentuated by the presence of the living sibling. Surely, the child's loss "was a brutal, existential assault on the playwright's psyche" (2009: 426); language, then, is "a supreme act of sublimation" (2009: 425) used "as an attempt to repair the broken heart through the dual ministry of mourning and art" (2009: 435).

Greenblatt openly traces the composition of *Hamlet* back to the playwright's experience of grief for the loss of his only son, a traumatic event that seems also to be reflected in Shakespeare's other works of the period, specifically among them *King John* (1596). In this play there is the portrayal of a mother, Constance, who is so frantic after her son's death that she tears her hair and even contemplates committing suicide:

> "Pand. You hold too heinous a respect of grief.
> Const. He talks to me that never had a son.
> K. Phi. You are as fond of grief as of your child.
> Const. Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
> Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
> Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
> Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
> Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form". (III.4.90-97)

Peter Ackroyd observes that, even though it is impossible to gauge the effect that Hamnet's death had upon the dramatist, in the period immediately following the loss of his child Shakespeare rewrote *King John,* and Constance's lament on the untimely death of her young son was one of the additions to the play. In such cases, Ackroyd maintains, "it may not be appropriate to draw strong lines between the art and the life, but [...] it

defies common sense to pretend that Constance's lament has nothing whatever to do with Shakespeare's loss of Hamnet" (2006: 271).

The idea that there is a connection between Shakespeare's tragic hero, Hamlet, and his dead child is also at the heart of a contemporary avant-garde play, *Hamnet* (2017), co-written and co-directed by two Irish dramatists and directors, Bush Moukarzel and Ben Kidd, staged by the Irish theatre troupe Dead Centre, in Dublin, to rave reviews. In the play, Hamnet actually hopes to meet his father and, in an effort to impress him and gain his approval, he is "learning the most famous speech in the world" (Moukarzel & Kidd 2017: 12), the soliloquy from *Hamlet*. Then, when the dramatist finally shows up via a video apparition, symbolically crossing the threshold separating life and death, he asks his son to stop haunting him, a request to which Hamnet retorts: "But *you're* haunting *me*" (44) (emphasis in the original). The boy also reproaches his father for having neglected him and never been with him, so actually being a ghost in his life.

O'Farrell's novel opens with the image of the adolescent Hamnet, who "is coming down a flight of stairs" (3); he moves through his family's empty apartment, then on to the street and into his grandparents' neighbouring house, puzzled by the unusual silence and absence of life in all the rooms. At first, the reader is unaware of what the boy is searching for; after a few pages, there are textual traces that gradually tilt the apparent tranquility of the scene into an atmosphere of tension, hinting at something that is amiss: "If this were a normal day" (10), the narrator remarks, implicitly suggesting the opposite. Other dark forebodings of risk are sown in a short paragraph standing by itself, where a third person external narrator observes events and comments on them: "Every life has its kernel, its hub, its epicentre, from which everything flows, to which everything returns. This moment is the absent mother's: the boy, the empty house, the deserted yard, the unheard cry" (8). It is a cluster of words pointing to some impending crisis. After a few pages the reader discovers that Hamnet is in a frantic search for help because his beloved twin sister, Judith, is unwell, and he is utterly confounded to be so alone in a house that is usually teeming with life and activity. He keeps calling out the names of all the family members, especially his mother, but nobody answers, so he runs back to his house, where Judith lies on the pallet, sick and feverish, with a pair of buboes showing at the base of her neck and her shoulder.

The narrator's eyes linger on the description of the girl, almost a copy of Hamnet: "They are as alike as if they had been born in the same caul" (15). There is a constant insistence on the similarity and deep affinity between the two, of oneness, so much so that they like tricking people, "exchang[ing] places and clothes, leading people to believe that each was the other" (200). This will reach a tragic climax when Hamnet himself is seized with the plague, and the last membrane of separation between the two seems to be lacerated to tragic effect.

Seeing his beloved sister's swollen neck and shoulder, he decides to go and look for the physician; he is somewhere else with another patient, and Hamnet walks back home in very low spirits, hoping that, in the meantime, his mother has come back. "But there is nothing: only silence" (27).

Hamnet's thought of his mother shifts the narrative onto Agnes, who is, "in fact, more than a mile away" (16), intent on her routine activities in the fields, tending to her bees. Yet, small, almost imperceptible, signals appear to intrude upon and disturb the peaceful atmosphere of the place: "There is a sensation of change, an agitation of air" (17). The agitation turns into "an incoming storm" (18), and sends the reader's attention back to "the unheard cry" (8) that Agnes has not heeded and that will haunt her for the rest of her life because of what would happen shortly thereafter.

Swapping places to trick death

When Agnes comes back home at last, she sees that Judith has a high fever. Hamnet, shaking, his face stricken and wet, reproaches her angrily for her long absence, and looks at her with an inquisitive expression to find confirmation of what he is dreading, aware that his twin sister's life is at risk. However, though Agnes can see into people's mind and read their future, at this critical moment she fails to notice that Hamnet himself is not well, so she sends him out to call his sister Susanna and his grandmother Mary for help.

When Hamnet enters his grandmother's cookhouse he is overwhelmed by the unbearable heat, which conjures up in his mind the "fumes from the gates of Hell", and he has a weird vision: "He sees, or seems to see, just for a moment, a thousand candles in the dark, [...] goblin candles" (126), though they soon disappear once he blinks his eyes. Susanna, on seeing him, frowns as she vaguely senses that there is something wrong with him; she is puzzled by his appearance, "white-faced, shocked, quite unlike himself" , so she tries to attract her grandmother's attention. Mary herself is caught by surprise and is frightened by the boy because he "look[s] like a ghost" to her (127).

While attending to her sick granddaughter, Mary remembers her own psychological devastation at the loss of three of her children, other ghostly presences in the novel. The view of Judith in bed, full of buboes, inevitably brings back to her mind her own dead daughter, Anne, who also died of the pestilence when she was only eight, "covered with swellings and hot with fever, her fingers black and odorous and rotting off her hands" (128). She fears that Judith will be added to the other losses in the family, as she knows all too well that "cruelty and devastation wait for you around corners", and "the trick is never to let down your guard. Never think you are safe" (195-96), because nothing is given to us to possess forever. On seeing that Judith's condition is very serious and convinced that the girl will die, she decides to send a message to her son in London, urging him to come back home before it is too late.

For her part, being acutely aware that the layer separating the world of the dead and of the living is frail, almost "indistinct from each other, rubbing up against each other" (129), Agnes seems to perceive the presence of the dead Anne in the room. She even addresses the child in her mind and has a silent conversation with her, repeating to herself that "she will not let Judith cross over" (129) into the other world, to convince herself that things are not as bad as they appear to be.

Ghosts have a central role in the text: they are powerful signifiers of the ever-present risks in human life, metaphors of lost futures, as well as a way of representing the turmoil of dramatic, psychological conflicts. Above all, their presence in the novel can be decoded in light of Jacques Derrida's notion of hauntology formulated in *Spectres of Marx* (1994) which, interestingly, begins with a reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Derrida considers the ghost as a metaphor that pushes at the boundaries of thought, flouts established certainties, and challenges basic binary oppositions. So it is a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence, "always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*" (Derrida 1994: 11). The ghosts in the novel pervade and disrupt every aspect of the protagonists' life; they are a 'presence' in their unconscious that cannot be silenced or ignored, and that testifies to the weight of an unacceptable, unprocessed loss. Attending to these ghosts becomes a sort of ethical injunction, an otherness that the protagonists are responsible for preserving.

When the physician arrives at last, he refuses to enter and remains on the doorstep to avoid contagion; to Hamnet, he is "a terrifying sight, a creature from a nightmare, from Hell, from the devil" (146). Cloaked all in black, to protect himself against the risk of the pestilence the physician wears on his face "a hideous, featureless mask, pointed like the beak of a gigantic bird" (146), a sight that makes Hamnet scream. The mask is a precautionary measure we have come to know all too well, used both by people at large and by nurses and doctors in hospitals against risks of infections, and nowadays part of our daily attire when going out.

None of the family members, concerned about, and focused on, Judith's conditions, observe Hamnet closely. At one point, unnoticed by the rest, the boy decides to lie down; he is not well and his head is filled with a strange, confusing kind of pain that makes his head "enormous, significant, bigger than him" (198). After some time, with a tremendous effort, he crawls from his bed and makes his way down the stairs to be with his mother and Judith, who has been moved close to the fire. Unable even to speak, he crouches next to the little girl. Seeing that she is worse, he begins to cry because he feels death's presence in the room, ready to snatch his twin sister away and leave him fractured by his unbearable loss. When Judith tries to comfort him, murmuring "You shall be well", he grips her fingers in anger: "I shall not. [...] I'll come with you. We'll go

together" (199). It is at this point, in his feverish last hours, that "the idea strikes him" (200) and the novel reaches the eerie climax of the first part.

Thinking of their playful ability to swap places, Hamnet imagines he can hoodwink death into believing that he is Judith, and take her risk on himself to save her. He slides into Judith's place and pulls the sheet over their bodies, so that "it will be easy for Death to make a mistake, to take him in her place" (201). He breathes his own life and strength into Judith's ear, whispering to her "you will stay, [...] and I will go. [...] I want you to take my life. It shall be yours. I give it to you" (201). And that is exactly what happens: by an extraordinary, mysterious act of will, and an extreme gesture of love, he saves Judith's life and he himself dies.

Hamnet's is a form of love in which, as Kristeva observes, "the individual is no longer indivisible and allows himself to become lost in the other, for the other" and, she adds, in such psychological conditions, "a risk that might otherwise be tragic is accepted, normalized" (Kristeva 1987: 4).

Facing the loss

The pages recounting the family's gradual awareness of Hamnet's true condition foreground with great emotional impact one of the central themes of the novel: how, by ignoring or failing to see an imminent risk at the edge of a person's vision, devastation and tragedy can unfold against the banal everyday routine, and lay bare the fragility and precariousness of the edifice on which human life rests. The section is dominated by the same hushed atmosphere that opened the book, a tone of "great soundlessness [that] falls over the room" (251), to signify the silence of death into which Hamnet has fallen.

In this section, O'Farrell's narrative perspective resembles "the way a film might use a camera, stealing up on scenes from unexpected angles" (Allfree 2020), shifting in and out of the different characters' minds, both to allow us to closely follow their thought processes and give a direct insight into their fears, and to draw the reader into the emotional and psychological turmoil provoked by the tragedy that befalls the family. This is also rendered visually, adopting a perspective that resembles the technique of some painters; Agnes wakes up abruptly, when "it is the deepest part of the night, the most lethal hour" (244), a darkness which is the objective correlative of her state of mind. She has dreamt of being whipped by the great, invisible force of the wind, a symbol of her subconscious fear for Judith's condition. She lights a candle and its flame slowly pushes back the darkness in the room and illuminates the scene, an image that has an almost Caravaggesque touch, and mirrors the process by which the truth gradually surfaces in the individual consciousness.

Agnes approaches Judith's pallet and at first is befuddled by the image confronting her: she sees a strange intertwining of feet and clasping of hands that she cannot understand, "two Judiths, curled up together, in front of the dying fire" (245). Then she realizes

that it is Hamnet and his twin sister, fused into each other, their body parts switched and mixed up. When she uncovers them, she understands that Judith has been spared but, in exchange, Hamnet's life is at risk and "a strange, dementing confusion starts up inside her" (246). She reproaches herself for having been such "a fool, a blind idiot, the worst kind of simpleton" (248), falling into the cruel trap that fate had set for her; she feels irrationally responsible for her child's present state, having failed as a mother to protect him. None of the potions she keeps giving him seems to pull him back and restore him to life because, unbeknownst to her, her son has tricked death into taking him in place of his twin. The image of the reversal of the twins' conditions- the one slowly returning back to life, the other slipping away into the clutches of eternal darkness- poignantly renders how vital it is to be constantly aware that risk, devastation and death are just one step away from safety and life, and closely interknit.

Holding Hamnet in her arms, Agnes's mind reflects on how vicious the plague is and how it manifests itself on the child's body: "It has wreathed and tightened its tendrils about her son, and is refusing to surrender him. It has a musky, dank, salty smell. [...] it feeds on pain and unhappiness and grief. It is insatiable, unstoppable, the worst, blackest kind of evil" (249). It is another narrative segment that, at this historical moment, has gained accidental pertinence and reverberates with great emotional impact on readers who still have in their eyes the sight of the many lives that have been, and still are, snatched away by Covid 19.

Agnes realizes that her son is actually beyond the precipice upon which human life teeters: "Her son's body is in a place of torture, of hell" (249), and there is nothing more she can do for him, if not comfort him. Hamnet's final moments see him struggle between opposite pulls: on the one hand, his need "to lie, to surrender himself", covered by the white blanket of the "snow [...] falling, softly, irrevocably, on and on" (250) and rest "in his place of snow and ice" (251). This section, with its cluster of images and range of lexical choices, echoes the final paragraphs of James Joyce's short story "The Dead", from *Dubliners* (1914). On the other hand, the pull of life is still strong: "He is not going to sleep, he is not. He will carry on" (251); yet, he is too weak to struggle, "he needs to rest, for a moment" (251), and at last "he takes his last breath" (252).

The first part of the novel ends with the moving image of Hamnet cradled in his mother's arms, as when he was a baby: "In the room in which he learnt to crawl, to eat, to walk, to speak, Hamnet takes his last breath. [...] Then there is silence, stillness. Nothing more" (252), words that clearly echo the last words from *Hamlet*: "The rest is silence".

A 'new' Hamnet

The second, shorter, part of the book is dominated by the central theme of grief, of how different family members try to cope with the trauma of loss, its terrible costs, its enduring emotional wounds and psychological damage. It opens with the scene of all the

family gathered to mourn Hamnet, the only exception being William who is still on his way to Stratford. As disease and death haunt the country, Bartholomew urges the motionless Agnes to wash and lay out the body of her dead son who must be buried quickly, as decreed by the town authorities, for fear that the plague might spread with enormous risks for the whole population of the village. It is a devastating scene that sees Agnes losing touch with both herself and the people around her; actually, the narrator introduces her as "a woman" curved over "the body of a child" (257-58) lying on a wooden surface, a condition of existential and psychological alienation that takes hold of her and plunges her into utter anguish and grief.

Hamnet's death opens a void that puts a serious strain on the bond between husband and wife, because Agnes's despair is mixed with anger at her husband for not being there to support her. The whole family seems to fall apart, no longer held together by the boy's presence, all of them fragmented, shattered, each one trying to retrieve a semblance of life.

Agnes, tormented by guilt, "is a woman broken into pieces, crumbled and scattered around" (277). So, she falls prey to depression and melancholia, a psychological condition that lasts for years and that can be analyzed in light of what Kristeva writes in *Black Sun*: "Those who are racked by melancholia, [try] to address an abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times [...] lays claim upon [them] to the extent of having [them] lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself" (1989: 3). The 'black sun' of melancholia pins her down "to her bed, for the first time in her life" (345) and deprives her of any will to live. In fact, Agnes's is a "devitalized existence that [...] is ready at any moment for a plunge into death" (Kristeva 1989: 4); she faces the emptiness of psychic space and the failure of language to voice, and compensate for, the loss. She searches for her son for weeks and months, goes outside in the yard and calls his name aloud, but her call is lost in silence.

Susanna, instead, finds it hard to be in a house that has become a living memorial to Hamnet's presence, and with her mother who is "adrift in her life, [...] unmoored, at a loss" (299), disconsolate and aphasic, who weeps even for the most irrelevant reason. So, in order to save herself, Susanna spends her time helping her grandmother.

Judith, like her mother on the one hand, looks for and *feels* Hamnet's ghostly presence around her; on the other hand, she finds her own way of continuing to be together with her twin by taking refuge in a "gap" (295) between two walls, a place that was always theirs when they were children. Then, when the family moves to the new house that her father has bought for them, the midwife tells her that at night, along Henley Street, she has seen a figure "running like the wind" (337), between the old and the new house, hinting that it was Hamnet. From that moment on, without telling anyone else in the family, at night Judith slips out of the house and waits for him, all by herself, begging him to come and let her see him "even if only for the last time", because she is "only half a person without

[him]" (337). To all the family, Hamnet is a "non-present present, [a] being-there of an absent or departed one" (Derrida 1994: 5); his absence is actually a presence at least as powerful as when he was alive, and each one seems to be waiting for his materialization. Each one, then, has her own strategy to survive and keep the self safe.

As for the father, he continues to feel his son's presence everywhere he turns; every object, gesture reminds him of his dead son. Feeling "caught in a web of absence" (281), which he finds intolerable, shortly after Hamnet's burial he decides to return to London, leaving his wife furious to wonder how he can even think of departing from his family at such a moment, when they need him most. During the first year, in distant London, he fears he may run mad, and keeps wondering where his child is, bent on looking for him everywhere, "to find him, or a version of him" (315), and bring him back to life. And, four years later, he does it in a way that shocks his wife at first**.** At home in Stratford, Agnes sees the London playbill of a tragedy written by her husband that bears the name of her dead son. She cannot understand how this is possible and is so upset that she takes to her bed, refusing to get up and eat, or look after herself. She manifests the distinguishing psychological features that Sigmund Freud discusses in 'Mourning and Melancholia', where he argues that "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, [...] inhibition of all activity" (1917: 244) are the reactions to the loss of the loved object, whose existence is psychically prolonged in memories. According to Freud, in normal mourning one *introjects* the dead, that is, one's mind takes the dead into itself and assimilates them, a process that involves the idealization of the deceased person.

What Judith Butler observes on mourning sheds further light on Agnes's long-prolonged psychological dejection and vulnerability after Hamnet's death. Butler maintains that when we lose "some of the ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do" (2004: 22) because these ties compose us and we are transformed forever by such severances. So, she adds, we do not simply lose someone, but we go missing as well. In fact, this is what happens to Agnes, who is so splintered and even diminished by her loss as to be *other* both to herself and to the rest of the family. At last, she decides to leave for London, to see the tragedy for herself and confront her husband who, to her, is proving to be callous in his exploitation of their intimate family tragedy for mass entertainment.

Once in London, she goes to the playhouse, where O'Farrell sets the climactic and cathartic scene of the second part of the novel. During the performance, Agnes only begins to concentrate when a ghost appears on the stage, actually her husband in disguise, and an actor calls the dead man "Hamlet" (362). Disgusted, she decides to leave the theatre but is transfixed when a boy, actually a young man, arrives on stage, and "the King addresses him as 'Hamlet, my son'" (364). To her great shock, she realizes that, though her own son is dead, "yet this is him, grown into a near-man, as he would be now, had he lived, [...] talking in her son's voice, speaking words written for him by her

son's father" (364-65), a revenant that has taken on human form in her son's body. Her husband has 'resurrected' their child in Hamlet, even schooling the boy actor to move like him and speak in his voice. The Hamlet she sees on the stage "is two people, the young man, alive, and the father, dead. He is both alive and dead" (366).

As she watches, Agnes realizes that her husband "has changed places with his son. He has taken his son's death and made it his own; he has put himself in death's clutches, resurrecting the boy in his place" (366). It is, she thinks, "what any father would wish to do, to exchange his child's suffering for his own, to take his place, to offer himself up in his child's stead so that the boy might live" (366).

So, at last Agnes realizes the emotional toll their child's death has taken on her husband, and that the boy may be gone, but he is not forgotten. By writing the play, using the miraculous power of his art, her husband has pulled off the very feat that is impossible in ordinary life and redeemed himself; he has brought back the dead child in the only possible way he could, offering both of them a safe outlet for psychic survival, and also saving their marriage. Hamnet's memory lives on in the play and, through the ghost, speaks his final words in the novel, looking straight at Agnes and meeting her gaze: "Remember me" (367). At this point, the family can gradually leave behind a season of grief and mourning, and move forward to a safer season of change.

Conclusion

"He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone;
At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone".
Hamlet, Act IV, sc. v

The article has offered an in-depth analysis of O'Farrell's novel and identified various forms of physical, psychological and emotional risks. All of them, it has been argued, are connected to a loss that traumatizes the protagonists, takes time to be healed, and confronts them with a double terrible existential truth: the rapidity with which life can be extinguished when least expected, and the awareness that the selfsame act of loving another also demands an inevitable confrontation with death. At the same time, the discussion has also identified the various forms that resilience can take, and has examined the individual strategies that different characters activate to face and overcome the ensuing trauma in order to resume their life and re-emerge on relatively safe existential ground. The most notable, and enduring, form of working-through mourning in the novel is the artistic process that in the end leads Shakespeare to the composition of *Hamlet,* a terrifying psychic and creative journey that enables the dramatist "to

reinforce his inner representation of the deceased son and to nourish their ongoing relationship" (Bray 2008: 107). It is a cathartic act of creation through which he delves deep into his psychological and existential crisis and emerges from it. This critical hypothesis is corroborated by what Freud writes about *Hamlet* in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), where he observes: "It can, of course, be the poet's own psychology with which we are confronted in Hamlet", remarking that he is trying "to interpret only the deepest stratum of impulses in the mind of the creative poet" (51). Freud also infers a connection between Hamlet and Hamnet as, he adds, "it is known, too, that Shakespeare's son, who died in childhood, bore the name of Hamnet (identical with Hamlet)" (160), and suggests that the creation of the play was a therapeutic process for the dramatist.

Kristeva's observations on the process of creation will help draw the conclusion of the article: in *Black Sun*, talking about the mood of sadness connected to separation, she observes: "Literary creation is that adventure of the body and signs that bears witness to the affect", in the case of "sadness as imprint of separation and beginning of the symbol's sway". She goes on to add: "But that testimony is produced by literary creation in a material that is totally different from what constitutes mood. It transposes affect into rhythms, signs, forms" (1989: 22), imprints of an affective reality.

In O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, that is what Shakespeare does when composing *Hamlet*, succeeding in transmuting grief into richly evocative rhythms and signs, and transforming loss into artistic creation of the highest form. And that is what O'Farrell's text also does, the paper maintains, by using the power of language and imagination to extol the salvific power of love even while speaking of risk, loss and grief.

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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,

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2 Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

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, 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.

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.).

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 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,

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*."

because both texts are creative attempts to interpret a world that many find disturbing and frightening.[5]

Risk[6]

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

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.

control the occurrence of an event or that we can at least make provisions for the aftermath" (Zinn 2008: 3).

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

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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 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

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.).

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 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

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.).

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, 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]

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.).

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 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 intellectuals 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 twenties. 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)

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.

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 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 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.

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-

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 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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Brazilian backlands (*sertão*) – natural disaster or ecocatastrophe? An ecocritical reading of João Guimarães Rosa's landscapes

Abstract. In the wake of some realist novels and of Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões* [*Rebellion in the Backlands,* 1902], a body of writing known as "regionalist literature" developed in the 1930s around the *sertão*, the semi-arid region of the northeast center of Brazil, which becomes invariably depicted as a universe of natural and human catastrophe inhabited by characters of few words, emotions or thoughts.

At first glance, it seems that João Guimarães Rosa should be part of this regionalist lineage: all his stories revolve around the landscape of the *sertão*, and his only novel is entitled *Grande sertão: Veredas* [*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands,* 1956]. Nevertheless, not only does Guimarães Rosa locate his geographical *sertão* in a slightly different place than the regionalists did (i.e. in the Minas Gerais), but his way of describing the *sertão* as the product of the interactions between human practices and the natural environment renders his work distinct from these authors. To better highlight this difference, we will rely on the concepts of "natural disaster" and "ecocatastrophe" as defined by Kate Rigby in her book *Dancing with Disaster.*

Keywords: *sertão*, paradise, regionalist literature, biodiversity, natural disaster, ecocatastrophe, ecocriticism.

Literary representations of Brazil as a paradise on earth

The West has long believed in the real and concrete existence of a paradise on earth; until the Renaissance, it was convinced that this paradise, located in a place difficult to

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reach, somewhere beyond the oceans or on top of a mountain, would be discovered one day. As a rule, medieval maps of the world represented this paradise, even if its place varied from map to map. In *Visões do Paraíso* [*Visions of Paradise*], the Brazilian historian Sergio Buarque de Holanda shows that this set of beliefs was responsible for the production of a certain type of European discourse on Brazil. When Europeans first arrived in Brazil in 1500, they thought that this earthly paradise had finally been found: the first reports about the New World mention a lush natural setting, a mild climate, and a wealthy land where food was plentiful, thereby conveying the image of a country where an easy life freed from hard work was possible (Buarque de Holanda 2000).

The Eden-like features characterizing the descriptions of Brazilian nature during the 16th century had a long life. Even once the belief in the existence of such an earthly paradise had waned, these features continued to pervade numerous accounts of Brazil in the following centuries, and the identification of the country with its beautiful and generous natural setting would become a commonplace in literature – even if the descriptive accents shift across the centuries and according to prevailing literary influences. While the first literary descriptions of Brazil expressed a pure and simple enchantment in the face of the splendor of tropical nature, in the 17th and 18th centuries, among the writers of a generation already born in Brazil, a less naïve attitude towards nature emerged, which was reflected in the prevalence of the chronicler's enumerative devices: for Manuel Botelho de Oliveira (1636-1711) or Frei Manuel de Santa Maria Itaparica (1704-1768), for example, writing about nature meant lists and descriptions of fruits, plants and animals presented as abundant and delicious products for consumption. Rather than simply portraying Brazil as a place of great beauty, these accounts were intended to draw attention to its capacities for yield and commercial exploitation. In the Romantic period, after Brazil had gained its independence and its literature separated from the Portuguese, these more pragmatically driven inventories slowly disappeared to give way, as in all Romantic literatures, to a grandiose and sublime nature valued for its capacity to enter into correspondence with the most extreme states of mind of the poet – as in José de Alencar's work, for example[2]. As a rule, what emerges from this body of Brazilian literary texts (at least until the second half of the 19th century) is a deep confidence in the everlasting beauty and productivity of the national space, able whatever happens to remain identical to itself thanks to its innate capacity of regeneration. The idea that a natural disaster could disfigure is conspicuous by its absence in the literary imagination: Brazil hosts a safe landscape, in no way at risk of degradation, disappearance or exhaustion.

2 For these examples, as well as for a brief history of how Brazilian literature represented nature from its origins until the early 20th century, see Caravalho 2005.

The emergence of a Brazilian landscape of natural disaster: the *sertão*

In the second part of the 19th century, however, a very specific Brazilian landscape drew the attention of writers for reasons exactly opposite to those that were valued until that time: it is the scrubby region of the northeast center of Brazil, called the *sertão*, whose semi-aridity worsened to desertification in the last 30 years of the 19th century as a result of successive droughts (the most memorable one being that of 1877-1879). If the *sertão* had already been the object of idealized descriptions and Brazilian identity markers in the same way as the Amazon or other tropical landscapes, this disaster with catastrophic human, animal and vegetal consequences singularizes this region and totally reverses the imaginary representations earlier attached to it. In the literature of realism, it becomes a place of natural disaster par excellence, and Nature, instead of being the bountiful Mother, begins to be perceived as the Other, as a violent adversary animated by clearly hostile forces towards powerless human beings – as shown for example in *Dona Guidinha do Poço* by Manuel de Oliveira Paiva (written in 1892, but published posthumously in 1952), *A fome: cenas da seca do Ceará* by Rodolfo Teófilo (1890) and *Luzia-Homem* by Domingos Olímpio (1903).

The way natural disaster is represented in these novels is in agreement with what Kate Rigby, in her book *Dancing with Disaster*, calls the "modern myth" or "cultural narrative" of modernity (Rigby 2015: 4, 16): unlike premodern narratives which conceive natural disaster as a punishment from God or an astrologically determined misfortune (influence of a bad star[3]), the modern narratives, while keeping the connotation of bad luck contained in the word "disaster", construct a nature that neither acts in a predetermined way nor in the context of any morality and any consideration for human beings, but by sheer caprice or malevolence. Individuals are simply victims of their natural environment. They are conditioned by it, and the reverse is not true: there is no questioning, either from the narrator or from the characters, about any possible human responsibility in this disaster.

The writer and journalist Euclides da Cunha, who continues in his both scientific and literary book *Os sertões* (1902) [Rebellion in the Backlands] to weave the pattern of a *sertão* marked by aridity, misery and death, brings nevertheless a breach in the "modern narrative" by introducing a new and different element in his etiology of natural disaster: in a bold way for the time, he explains the desolation of the contemporary *sertão* not only by way of climatic reasons and unfavorable weather conditions, but also emphasizes, in one subchapter of his book entitled "How a Desert is Made", the significant role

3 As Rigby points out, the word "disaster" comes from the French *désastre*, which contains the word *astre* = "star", and signifies thus "the malign influence of an unfavorable planetary aspect or conjunction". Cf. Rigby 2015: 16.

played by man with his savage methods in exploiting nature: the aboriginal forest-dweller's methods of trimming trees with axes and then burning them to ashes, and of cultivating these naked areas until they were completely "exhausted" and "untillable", were copied and aggravated on a large scale by the colonizer, who planted farms (*fazendas*) surrounded by huge sugar cane and coffee plantations in the interior of the country. Contributing to this work of devastation was the arrival of the "hardy backwoods pioneer" in search of gold or diamonds:

> He attacked the earth stoutly, disfiguring it with his surface explorations, rendering it sterile with his dredges, scarring it with the point of his pickax, precipitating the process of erosion by running through it streams of water from the wild torrents. And he left behind him, here, there, and everywhere, great melancholy and deserted *catas* [holes], tracts forever sterile now, with the intense coloring of upturned clay, shedding a vermilion glow in the midst of the wilderness––tracts where not even the humblest of plants could thrive, and which bore the suggestive appearance of enormous dead cities, crumbled in ruins. (Da Cunha 1944: 44)

> *Atacou a fundo a terra, escarificando-a nas explorações a céu aberto; esterilizou-a com os lastros das grupiaras; feriu-a a pontaços de alvião; degradou-a corroendo-a com as águas selvagens das torrentes; e deixou, aqui, ali, em toda parte, para sempre estéreis, avermelhando nos ermos com o intenso colorido das argilas revolvidas, onde não medra a planta mais exígua, as grandes catas, vazias e tristonhas, com a sua feição sugestiva de imensas cidades mortas, derruídas.* (Da Cunha 1984: 33)

In passages like this, Da Cunha shows that he understood the existence of causal links between human socio-cultural practices and the way the physical environment manifests itself: the victims produced by natural disaster are far from being just "innocent", in the sense that human beings themselves contributed to the destruction of some landscapes. To qualify the way Da Cunha conceives the desertification of the *sertão*, and if we pursue borrowing the terminology of Rigby, the word "catastrophe" or "ecocatastrophe" would be more appropriate than "natural disaster" – even if in everyday contemporary language their meanings are similar. Indeed the etymology of "disaster", as we have seen, alludes to something inescapable and preordained. The word "catastrophe", for its part, is made up of the two Greek words *kata*, "down", and *strophe*, "turn": it signifies a "sudden turn or overturning" which has nothing predetermined in itself and does not necessarily lead to the end of something, but rather brings about a change of direction and practices (Rigby 2015: 17). This implies a human understanding of the origins of what happened and a human agency for building new paths.

Whatever the case may be, a whole literature called "regionalist literature" developed in the 1930s in the wake of these works, depicting the *sertão* as a universe of natural and human calamity. This literature is characterized by protagonists who, as if in mimicry of the hostile and arid landscape that surrounds them, appear hostile to each other, arid in their emotions, thoughts, words. The most well-known example is certainly the novel *Vidas Secas* (1938) [*Barren Lives*] by Graciliano Ramos, which tells the story of a family struggling to survive in the desolate landscape of the *sertão*. The characters are distinguished by a difficulty in speaking and expressing themselves, mostly due to their feeling of the uselessness of any communication in such an environment-inflicted misery. Discouragement and resignation reign supreme; no improvement can be expected from human acts. In these regionalist novels of the 1930s, da Cunha's allusions to a nature dependent not only on climatic hazards, but on what the human race does with it, went unheeded.

Guimarães Rosa's representations of the *sertão*

The *sertão* in the novel *Grande sertão: Veredas*

At first glance, it seems that João Guimarães Rosa should be part of this regionalist lineage: the sense of place plays an important role in all his work, and this place reduces itself, or rather enlarges itself, to the dimensions of a whole landscape called *sertão*. If this word does not appear straightaway in the titles of Guimarães Rosa's numerous stories, it is, significantly, retained for the title of his main work – *Grande sertão: Veredas* (1956). The only novel ever written by Guimarães Rosa, it is presented in the form of an immense monologue of almost 1000 pages (uninterrupted by chapters), for the benefit of an intellectual of the city by an older landowner named Riobaldo and meant to be the account of his turbulent youth as a *jagunço*[4]. This book has been translated into English as *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* – a quite loosely translated title, since while the original puts forwards typical Brazilian landscapes, like *sertão* and *veredas*, the English one neutralizes its power to evoke Brazil by using the more generic word "backlands"; besides, by introducing the "devil" in the title, the focus shifts from landscape to the demonic forces supposed to have played an important role in Riobaldo's life.

Reading Guimarães Rosa's novel with a "horizon of expectations" determined by the imaginative world built by the regionalist writers around the *sertão*, the reader must nevertheless quickly realize that the Rosanian landscape is not the same as in the

4 A *jagunço* is a bandit, an armed-hand hired by rich and influential people (mainly *fazendeiros*) in the backlands of Brazil, regions (still today) badly controlled by the government; his task consists, by means of unscrupulous acts like wars and murders, in eliminating all the rivals and possible opponents of their silent partner (both other *jagunços* or isolated persons) to impose his will and arbitrary power.

writings of these regionalists: his *sertão* is not that of the northeast region of Brazil, but the landscape of the Minas Gerais – which is an arid landscape too, but much more diversified than the "pure" *sertão*. As Guimarães Rosa himself explained to Edoardo Bizzarri, the Italian translator of his *Grande Sertão: Veredas,* the Minas Gerais is essentially made up of infertile and sandy *chapadas* (a kind of plateau) where only scrub grows – but between these *chapadas* there are *veredas,* or depressions of clay soil where all the water of these landscapes is concentrated and which, by extension, are green, fertile and animal-populated places. In common language, the paths and streams that run in labyrinthine networks in these oases are also called *veredas* (Guimarães Rosa 2003: 40-41). This diversified landscape allows Guimarães Rosa, unlike other writers of the *sertão,* to reuse all the literary commonplaces on the paradisiacal character of Brazilian nature, be it in the form of praise of its magnificence and exceptionality or in the enumerations of its extreme biodiversity. Hence, nature is said to be "a real delight" : "clear streams, springs, shade and sun" and "you don't see them like that anywhere else" (G. R.1963: 21); lists of plants and animals follow one another – prompting the translator of the novel into French to say that all these exotic terms "belong to the regional or perhaps imaginary fauna recorded by G. R. in his notebooks – not listed in the dictionary" (G. R. 1991: 57). What distinguishes these representations from the usual *hypotyposes* of Brazilian literature, however, is the extreme sensitivity and the loving sweetness that emerge from them, and which also introduces a completely unexpected contrast with the violence and cruelty of the daily world of the *jagunços*. Riobaldo, who, like all the other *jagunços* (although, as a "literate" *jagunço*, to a more refined degree), thinks mainly of hunting, hating and killing, is surprised to feel himself vibrating with tenderness and understanding with nature when he is in the company of Reinaldo-Diadorim, a *jagunço* towards whom he has ambivalent sexual impulses. He is literally dazzled by the beauty of the world, which he had never noticed before Reinaldo-Diadorim showed it to him:

> Until that time, I had never heard of anyone stopping to admire birds just for the pleasure of it, watching their comings and goings, their flight and alighting. That called for picking up a shotgun and taking aim. But Reinaldo liked to. 'It's really beautiful', he taught me. On the opposite side there was a meadow and lagoons. Back and forth the flocks of ducks flew. 'Just look at them!' I looked, and grew calmer. (G. R. 1963: 121)

> *Até aquela ocasião, eu nunca tinha ouvido dizer de se parar apreciando, por prazer de enfeite, a vida mera deles pássaros, em seu começar e descomeçar dos vôos e pousação. Aquilo era para se pegar a espingarda e caçar. Mas o Reinaldo gostava: – 'É formoso próprio...' – ele me ensinou. Do outro lado, tinha vargem e lagoas. P'ra e p'ra, os bandos de patos se cruzavam. – 'Vigia como são esses...' Eu olhava e me sossegava mais.* (G.R. 2001a: 195-196)

Riobaldo learns to see, and thus the animals, trees and flowers that surround him pass from the status of objects of his consumption (eating animals and fruits) or indifferent natural objects, to that of subjects-agents likely to interact with him and impact his mood and life in a positive way.

If, concretely, Guimarães Rosa locates his geographical *sertão* in a slightly different place than the regionalists did, and benefits from the leisure to intercalate within his story, without a blatant disjunction with reality, scenes of paradisiac nature, the fact remains that his *sertão* is also, for the main part, a hellish world governed by the dryness of climate and people, as well as by outlaws, "where the strong and the shrewd call the tune" (G. R. 1963: 13). There is in the novel a landscape of disaster that coincides perfectly with the *sertão* of the regionalists, and even exceeds it in silence, heat and doom: in the one called the "Sussuarão desert" [*Liso do Suçuarão*]: "There we were in that appalling thing: a weird, Godforsaken waste, shifting under foot. It was a different world, crazy, an ocean of sand" (G. R. 1963: 38). In spite of its terrible reputation, according to which nobody has ever returned from it, the intrepid *jagunços* agree to follow their chief in the hope of reaching their enemies more quickly. "What nobody had ever done before, we felt ourselves able to do" (G. R. 1963: 36). The pages dedicated to their expedition reflect a world of catastrophe at all levels: that of the action (languid characters having lost the ability to speak and to move; a frozen and colorless landscape), which is mimicked by the style (short, dry and breathless sentences) and reinforced by a vocabulary of negation, lack and emptiness: "Not the least sign of shade. No water. No grass [...]. And we were lost" (G. R. 1963: 41). The challenge launched by this ordeal proves too great, and the weakened and defeated *jagunços* return to less harsh landscapes.

Nevertheless, it is not on this image of an inexorable landscape that the Sussuarão desert has the last word: towards the end of the novel, Riobaldo, now leader of his group of *jagunços*, takes the risk of a new attempt to cross the plateau – without preparation of any kind, but by examining it attentively and with the purpose in each step to identify all signs of plant and animal life. The experience of this dreadful world is therefore quite different from that of the first, failed crossing; as if by magic, the desert comes to life and reveals little by little its secrets. "I heard the hum of bees all the time. The presence of spiders, ants and the wild bees proved there were flowers, too" (G. R. 1963: 412-413), and indeed, if closely looked at,

> The plants were not just rough grass, or the fearful monk's-head cactus [...]. Then came the blue-flowered treebine and the yellow sertaneja-assim and maria-zipe, dripping dew, and sinházinha whose delicate flowers are so laden with dew [...]. And herbage. And berry-covered bumelias. (G. R. 1963: 413)

> *Mesmo, não era só capim áspero, ou planta peluda como um gambá morto, o cabeça-de-frade pintarroxa, um mandacaru que assustava [...]. Depois a tinta-dos-gentios de flor belazul, que é o anil-trepador, e até essas sertaneja-assim e a maria-zipe, amarelas, pespingue de orvalhosas, e a sinhazinha, muito melindrosa flor, que também guarda muito orvalho [...]. E a quixabeira que dava quixabas*. (G.R. 2001a: 729)

They even find a pocket of drinking water, so that they "did not suffer too much from thirst" (G. R. 1963: 413). They do not suffer from hunger either, since they meet wild cattle. "It was an ugly world, exaggerated in all its features", but this bareness "contains everything" (G. R. 1963: 412). Were they "upheld by the strong arms of angels" or helped by the demon, as Riobaldo likes to believe at times? Whatever the case may be, the gap between the two journeys over the same landscape is striking: the immobile and implacable backdrop of the first crossing, which tightly conditions and then expels by its harshness all human beings from its territory, becomes in the second description a place that, while still terrible, can nevertheless offer the means for survival. Under the willpower of careful human gazes which seek to understand and absorb, a dynamic interplay has been created between human beings and the *sertão*: the frozen landscape of the ecocatastrophe is brought to life and reveals unsuspected riches.

The *sertão* in the stories of the collections *Corpo de Baile and Sagarana*

The narrative "*O Recado do Morro*" ["Message from the Hills"], a novella initially published in the collection of stories *Corpo de Baile* (1956), retraces the journey made through the *sertão* by a small group of men: Pedro and Ivo, locals, serve as guides to a German naturalist, a friar, and a rich landowner (*fazendeiro*). This journey, carried out by people of different origins, vocations and cultures, is also a journey through diverse types of knowledge and varying degrees of apprehension of the *sertão*. More specifically, there is a clash between academic knowledge, epitomized by the German naturalist (who always considers nature from an objective and external point of view), and the popular and practical knowledge of nature, embodied by the guide Pedro Orósio (who knows nature only by his immersion in it). Thus, if like his clients Pedro Orósio can see the beauty of the *sertão*, as to

> other things that Mr. Alquiste, the friar and Mr. Jujuca do Açude referred to – he couldn't understand them, without any explanation they remained out of reach for him; this was the case with their comments that everything there was a Lundianian or Lundlandia [5],

5 This is a reference to the famous Danish paleontologist and botanist Peter Lund (1801-1880), who discovered and explored several caves in the regions of Brazil crossed by the group in our story – an allusion, of course, that an uneducated person like Pedro could not understand.

> these kinds of names. No doubt that educated people had access to secrets; but these secrets were of no use for a farmer like him, who had only his health and sweat for his work, and God's protection in everything. A field worker, leaning over the earth from sunrise to sunset, and pulling all the strength out of his body, how should he benefit by continuously thinking? And even to understand what lay next to him, he only had the power to understand them according to the necessities of life – by hate or by love. More he couldn't do.[6]

> *Mas, outras coisas, que seo Alquiste e o frade, e seo Jujuca do Açude referiam, isso ficava por ele desentendido, fechado sem explicação nenhuma; assim, que tudo ali era uma Lundiana ou Lunlândia, desses nomes. De certo, segredos ganhavam, as pessoas estudadas; não eram para o uso de um lavrador como ele, só com sua saúde para trabalhar e suar, e a proteção de Deus em tudo. Um enxadeiro, sol a sol debruçado para a terra do chão, de orvalho a sereno, e puxando toda força de seu corpo, como é que há de saber pensar continuado? E, mesmo para entender ao vivo as coisas de perto, ele só tinha poder quando na mão da precisão, ou esquentado — por ódio ou por amor. Mais não conseguia.* (G.R. 2001b: 28)

On the other hand, Pedro Orósio, also referred to as Pedrão Chãbergo or Pê-Boi, is the one who knows the region best and is able to interpret the signs of the earth; that is what his different names and nicknames signify in different languages: Pedro comes from *pedra*, "stone" in Portuguese; Orósio from the Greek *oros* (ὄρος), "mountain"; Chãobergo from the contraction of *chão*, the Portuguese word for "soil", and *Berg*, the German word for "mountain"; and Pê-Boi is a combination of *pé*, "foot", and *boi*, "ox", an animal that, because of its strength, weight and resistance, is often associated with the ground[7]. Pedro is a man of the soil and the stone produced by the *sertão* landscape, he is an element of this landscape constantly in dialogue with the other elements, and that is why he can reverse the famous law of the *sertão*, a law of vengeance and of the victory of the strongest. Pedro was indeed doomed to die in an ambush perpetrated by seven individuals and organized by Ivo, jealous of Pedro's success with women – but Pedro gets the protection of the *sertão*. A hill gives out a terrible shout, "Death by betrayal" ["*Morte à traição!*"] (G.R. 2001b: 36), that could not be heard by ordinary people disconnected from the earth, but that was captured by Gorgulho, a poor dumb man with sharp senses. Without understanding the meaning of what was said by the hill, Gorgulho, by repeating the message and passing it on to others, manages to convey it across the *sertão* until it is transformed into a song by the poet Laudelim and deciphered by Pedro – who thus can

6 All translations of Guimarães Rosa's stories are mine.

7 I was inspired here by the analysis of the names of Guimarães Rosa's characters made by Anna Maria Machado in *O Recado do nome* (2003), expounded by Tannús Alves 2013: 26.

escape his terrible fate. As a result, for people who are deeply connected with it, the *sertão* has nothing to do with a *locus terribilis*, but plays the contrary the role of a sentient and sensitive creature sending them messages of protection and helping them to maintain suitable living conditions. As said in *"Estoria de amor"* ["Story of Love"], the *sertão* seen from the outside is scary, but once one immerses oneself in it and finds the key with which to understand it, it is perfectly possible to harmoniously interact with it. "Almost everyone is afraid of the *sertão*; not even knowing what the *sertão* is. Sertanejos are wise and aware men" (G.R. 2001c: 136).

"O Recado do Morro" shows that the unwritten law that inexorably rules the *sertão*, which is that of the strong, the violent, and the destructive, can be changed and has to be changed. Catastrophes, ecocatastrophes, as well as human catastrophes, are not part of an irrevocable destiny, they must not occur. This story is a call to cultivate, rather than an ethic of power and physical strength, a sustainable ethos based on the alert listening to the "other-than-human" voices.

"Cara-de-Bronze" ["Bronze-Face"], another novella originally published in the book *Corpo de Baile* (1956), appears as a continuation of this idea of elaborating new laws for the *sertão*. A landowner needs a man in whom he can have confidence to carry out a secret mission. To choose the most suitable person among his cowherds, it is not their physical performance that he puts to the test, but the degree of poetic attention they give to nature, their craft to "talk and feel until the husks of the soul softens". Part of the test was to answer this question: "Is it possible to like something immediately? How is that? How can that be?" The answer that pleases him best is the one given by Grivo, who did not respond with "yes" or "no", but with a poetic comparison with the magic of nature: "Isn't it in the lapse of a second that the silk floss tree suddenly dresses in white?" (G.R. 2001b: 103). The silk floss tree (*paineira* in Portuguese) grows fruits which have the form of big eggs that suddenly explode to give way to a mass of fibrous matter which resembles cotton – the metaphor thus suggests that unexpected positive feelings, like unexpected transformations of nature for even more beauty, can crop up without warning.

Grivo leaves for two years. When he comes back, nobody could know what he went to look for, nor what the aim of his expedition was. But what is certain is that he returns enriched with a wealth of knowledge about the *sertão* landscape, a place where "every tree, every plant, changes its name almost at every step" (G.R. 2001b: 108). This expedition serves as a pretext for the establishment of long lists of plants and trees, even if these enumerations are not put in the body of the text itself, but consigned to notes at the very end of the narrative. Guimarães Rosa, as in some passages of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* where we find the same type of lists (see above), seems thereby to pursue the tradition of the 17th century chroniclers eager to reveal the wealth of Brazil: but at the same time, as mentioned for example by José Miguel Wisnik (Wisnik 2016), these enumerations

function as a way to show that the *sertão* is a place where language is created. Gilberto Freyre had already pointed out in *Casa Grande & Senzala* [*The Masters and the Slaves,* 1933] that Brazil has a language in constant elaboration and development, to which new words need to be frequently added because the Portuguese vocabulary is not sufficient to express the complex Brazilian reality. In this context, there is no doubt that Guimarães Rosa actively contributed to this enrichment of the Brazilian language.

Assisted in his difficult peregrinations through the changing landscape of the *sertão* as well as through the moving landscape of new words by Saci, a playful Brazilian mythological figure and friend of nature[8] (G.R. 2001b: 111), Grivo learns to pay full attention to the diversity of things and to their living sources rather than to their inert and passive appearance. Had not his master expressed the wish, already before his departure, that the "who" (and not the "what") of things had to be found by him? (G.R. 2001b: 102)

Without depicting the *sertão* as a grandiose landscape (be it in its beauty or sublimity as in Romanticism, or in its nakedness and misery as in the regionalist movement), Guimarães Rosa, through his character Grivo, produces in this story the masterstroke of presenting this landscape as a genuine miracle thanks to its unexpected capacity for transformation, its refined diversity and its encouragement to constantly seek new words.

If some Rosanian stories present themselves as pure hymns to the biodiversity of the *sertão* and play the role of an invitation to be aware of it, others clearly express the deep concern that this biodiversity may well disappear, and that nature may become mute and withdraw from any fruitful collaboration with human beings. Such is the case in *"Estória de Amor"* ["Story of love"], also first published in the collection *Corpo de Baile*. In this story, the source of life for many peoples, namely the stream that supplies water to the Samarra farm run by old Manuelzão in the middle of the *sertão*, stops flowing one day for no apparent reason:

> When least expected, the brook stopped. It happened in the middle of a night going towards dawn, and everyone was asleep. But everybody felt, suddenly, in his heart, the snap of the silence that it made, the sharp lack of the sound, of the little noise. They woke up, spoke to each other. Even the children. Even the dogs barked. Then everyone got up, tried to find the backyard, went out with a light to see what was not there [...]. The sobbing brook had dried up with no remainder, and perhaps forever.

8 Sací is one of the more popular characters of Brazilian folklore. He is probably a derivation of a figure belonging to the Tupi-Guarani mythology (indigenous mythology), a magical one-legged child associated with nature. With the arrival of African slaves, he turned black and used to smoke a pipe. He likes to play tricks on people, especially those who are disrespectful of nature.

Quando menos esperassem, o riachinho cessou. Foi no meio duma noite, indo para a madrugada, todos estavam dormindo. Mas cada um sentiu, de repente, no coração, o estalo do silenciozinho que ele fez, a pontuda falta da toada, do barulhinho. Acordaram, se falaram. Até as crianças. Até os cachorros latiram. Aí, todos se levantaram, caçaram o quintal, saíram com luz, para espiar o que não havia. [...] O riacho soluço se estancara, sem resto, e talvez para sempre. (G.R. 2001c: 113)

This disappearance, mentioned at the beginning of the story as having happened three years previously, is a real enigma for the inhabitants of the farm, who now have to go very far to get their water supply. Whose mistake had it been? Where was the little brook now? Although these questions punctuate the text, they are never answered. The reader, as she becomes familiar with Manuelzão's biography and thoughts, cannot help but interpret the event as a warning signal from nature that has to be taken seriously. We learn that four years earlier Federico Freyre, a rich *fazendeiro* characterized as the incarnation of the "power of modern money" (G.R. 2001c: 155), had fallen in love with this remote corner of the world called Samara, and had acquired thousands of acres there. He then hired Manuelzão to cultivate this wasteland, to tame cattle, and to run the new farm, whose location was chosen, for obvious convenience, next to the creek. And it transpires that just one year after the farm was established the creek dried up.

The clearest clue in favor of interpreting the disappearance of the creek as a response to the mercantilization of nature is given in the parable of the *"Boi bonito"* ["Beautiful Ox"] narrated by old Camilo. In this story within a story, a landowner is in despair because he does not succeed in taming one of his oxen. He promises to give his beautiful daughter in marriage to the man who will manage to do so. One of the cowhands sets out in search of the ox, and he pursues him until he arrives in an enchanting landscape:

In a field of many waters. The *buritis* gave the sense of altitude, with their brooms of flowers. Only the grass of the *vereda*, which was crazy about being green – green, green, greenish. Hidden underneath, in these greens, a little stream explained itself: with the frenetic water – "I am a brook that never runs dry..." – it really didn't dry up. Everything resided in that little brook. That place didn't split in several parts. And this was the house of the Ox. The Ox, who came jogtrotting.

Num campo de muitas águas. Os buritis faziam alteza, com suas vassouras de flores. Só um capim de vereda, que doidava de ser verde — verde, verde, verdeal. Sob oculto, nesses verdes, um riachinho se explicava: com a água ciririca — 'Sou riacho que nunca seca...' — de verdade, não secava. Aquele riachinho residia tudo. Lugar aquele não tinha pedacinhos. A lá era a casa do Boi. O Boi, que vinha choutando. (G.R. 2001c: 181)

Faced with this mythical and harmonious landscape untouched by man, the cowhand understands that it would be a mistake to tame this Ox, and he asks the landowner to let this animal run free. What is suggested here is that otherwise this stream could well be at risk of drying up, as the stream that provided water for the Samarra farm.

In this story again, the protagonists are warned by voices usually unheard (voice of nature, voice of poor or marginalized people), which use the cracks opened by the ecocatastrophe to question the cultural narrative of modernity and its hostile attitude towards the natural world: human well-being is linked to that of other kingdoms, and the keys for a human-friendly collaboration with nature lie in the hands of human beings themselves.

Finally, some stories by Guimarães Rosa go even further and show not only a nature that refuses to collaborate with the new modern or colonial requirements, but a nature that is vengeful and destructive: *"Sarapalha"* for example, one of the stories gathered in the collection *Sagarana* (1946), takes place in an area that had been cleared many years earlier for the construction of a village and the establishment of rice plantations. In this venue, where the land has been violated and where native vegetation has been replaced by a monoculture, malaria soon arrives and settles in, decimating and driving out most of the population. "The land was no longer worth anything" (G.R. 1982: 118).

What is remarkable, however, is that the village comes back to life in another form: nature and the *sertão* take back their rights, as countless species of flowers and animals invade the deserted village. Nature had previously been mastered and organized, but as soon as the constraints disappear, it reinvents new possibilities of life and new relationships of interdependence. What is even more remarkable is that the few people left in the village manage to integrate perfectly into this new environment born in the ruins. "A better life than ours" does not exist (G.R. 1982: 122). Stricken by malaria, one of the characters experiences the greatest harmony with his environment during his crises, when nature adorns itself with its most beautiful colors and manifests, as if in solidarity, the same symptoms as his (cf. "shuddering", "quivering", "twitches", "tremble", "shaking", "convulsions"):

> The flowers of the mastic tree are shuddering yellow. There is a quivering in the pink stems of the frog grass. The *Heliotropium indicum* twitches its long leaves, as long as mango tree leaves. The branches of the broom tremble, shaking their little orange stars. And the *Luehea divaricata* drops cracked fruit, going into convulsions. – But my God, how beautiful this is! What a beautiful place to lie down on the ground and perish!
>
> *Estremecem, amarelas, as flores da aroeira. Há um frêmito nos caules rosados da erva-de-sapo. A erva-de-anum crispa as folhas, longas, como folhas de mangueira. Trepidam, sacudindo as suas estrelinhas alaranjadas, os ramos da vassourinha. A pitangueira se abala, do jarrete à grimpa.*

E o açoito-cavalos derruba frutinhas fendilhadas, entrando em convulsões. – Mas meu Deus, como isto é bonito! Que lugar bonito p'r'a gente deitar na chão e se acabar! (G.R. 1982: 137-138)

The ecocatastrophe caused by monocultures and malaria has obviously given rise to transformative practices and enabled the emergence of new ways of being and dwelling for the few people not (yet) decimated: they completely immersed themselves physically and psychologically in their environment, and the distinction between the animate and the inanimate no longer applies.

Conclusion: The *sertão* as a "planetary garden"

If the scientific etymology of the *sertão* seems to refer to the word "desert" (the first syllable would have disappeared, while the augmentative *-ão* would have been added), our reading allows us to interpret the word according to a second etymology. No longer as a *sertão* derived from *desertão* (that is, "great desert"), but a *sertão* resulting from the contraction of the verb *ser* (to be) and *tão* (so, so much)[9]. The *sertão* is the place where there are "so many things", the *sertão* is the place of the play and interplay of the multiple, of the connection, disconnection, and networking of all *veredas*, the *sertão* is a metaphor for the whole world and the whole biodiversity of the world. We can now understand why the narrator of *Grande sertão: Veredas* defines the *sertão* as having no borders and being "everywhere" (G. R. 1963: 4), and ends his novel with the word "passage" [*travessia*] (G.R. 2001a: 872) followed by the mathematical sign for infinity ∞ (which, strangely enough, has been forgotten or omitted in the English translation of that text).

From the ecocritical point of view, the greatest merit of Guimarães Rosa's texts is to show that the *sertão* is not a given landscape in which man is irreversibly condemned to misery, but a landscape subject to transformation depending on the way it is looked at, listened to and generally handled. If humans are unable to perceive its potential richness and diversity, if they refuse to see beyond its apparent harshness and violence – to which they have themselves contributed – and just aim to control and exploit it with the means of new technologies, the *sertão* will gradually turn completely mute and sterile. If, on the contrary, careful attention is paid to its voices, the *sertão* can then become a point of departure for an immense "planetary garden"[10] functioning on the basis of a "natural contract"[11], that is, a contract taking into account the rights and interests of

9 Cf. Mônica Meyer, in her book *Ser-tão natureza: a natureza em Guimarães Rosa*, Belo Horizonte (MG): Editora UFMG, 2008, had already decomposed the *sertão* in two words. Nevertheless, her ser-tão does not mean exactly the same as mine. For her, the more the physical space of the *sertão* is filled with spiritual life and transcendence, the more it becomes ser-tão.

10 For this expression, see G. Clément 2000.

11 In the sense given by M. Serres 2020.

other ontologies than the human one. As in his story *Campo Geral* ["General Field"], where the main protagonist Miguilim, a visually impaired little boy, cannot be aware of the beauty of the surrounding landscape until he gets glasses (G.R. 2001c: 105-106), Guimarães Rosa invites us to look at the *sertão*, and by extension at the world, with a reenchanted gaze able to recognize and admire its richness – be it real, hidden or potential. Where possible, this new gaze will be oriented toward the spirit of "dancing with disaster" (Rigby) and thereby prevent ecocatastrophes; and where the "turning point" has already taken place and damage incurred, it will help to identify such crises and to reflect and fight for the creation and use of more sustainable practices.

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Promethean struggle: Shelley, Keats, and Norwid in search of rescue in the risky world

Abstract. The myth of Prometheus sacrificing his freedom to give men authority over a powerful element of nature despite the will of the gods has, in modern times, inspired authors of different languages who kept transforming it according to their views. Both Western and Polish poets of Romanticism favoured the Promethean idea. In their Promethean – or Messianic – visions Mickiewicz and Słowacki emphasized the importance of armed or spiritual struggle for Poland's independence against Tsarist Russia, while English language poets praised the individual's rebellion in the face of the oppressive society. Cyprian Norwid's interpretation of the myth combined the individual and the collective. He saw Prometheus as a craftsman whose gift, fire – 'teacher of all arts' - is a tool for ultimate salvation through Beauty incorporated in masterpieces. Norwid's philosophy is profoundly rooted in Christian soteriology. According to the poet, the revival of both his nation and of the individual is possible only through arduous work, through creative effort understood as cooperation with Christ the saviour in the attainment of salvation leading to both individual and national resurrection.

Keywords: Norwid, Keats, Shelley, Byron, beauty, truth, Promethean struggle.

Human fear of death and suffering – the never-ending story

The human struggle for domination over nature, and sometimes for mere survival, continues to be one of the key themes of European literature and theological thought. We find it reflected in the Bible. In the *First Book of Moses,* commonly called Genesis, God, who created man "in his own image [...] male and female he created them, said to his supreme creature: Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing

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that moves upon the earth". Soon the abuse of this dominant power brought the danger of destruction of humankind because of human disobedience and lack of responsibility. The fear of death and annihilation of the world has accompanied us since the beginnings of philosophical reflection and is one of the founding themes of religious ideas, even if we replace strictly religious belief with confidence in science as a remedy to all pain and risk. We believe in science, which will let us find a radical solution, be it an alternative energy source, a miraculous vaccine or medication, a super anti-tank missile, or space missions aimed at conquering the Universe. We tend to forget that the Earth is and will remain our only home. Immersed in the chaos of conflicting thoughts and feelings, exposed to dangers not known to our ancestors, living in a world threatened with wars and diseases and in a parallel world of digital existence with all the multiplying information mingled with massive amounts of fake news, we go back to the sources of our culture to find out what went wrong. On the grounds of poetry, we recall the ancient myth of a Prometheus – Rescuer whose gift helped humankind cope with all the risks and find safety against the hostile environment.

Ancient roots of the Promethean ideas

Philosophers and poets of ancient Greece, who were able to contemplate stars in the unpolluted sky or the flow of clean waters in unpolluted rivers, gained profound knowledge of the nature of things and of man. Aristotle and Plato have inspired all their subsequent followers and opponents on the grounds of philosophy; Homer, Sophocles, Euripides continue to fertilize poetical visions. The idea of human impact on Earth and of human wrongdoings permeated the Greek and Roman myths, in which the gods continued interacting with the people and interfered in their fate, either supporting or preventing their actions. The myth of Prometheus is of special importance because of its universal and multifaceted value.

Carl Kerenyi, who devoted many years to studying the myth of Prometheus and wrote the most comprehensive study based on the original texts and analyses of images on Grecian urns, found out that the famous research carried out by the Polish ethnologist Bronislaw Malinowski gave an example of the myth's universality, since "the role of mythology among the inhabitants of the Triobrand Islands fits in exactly with the mythologem of the sacrifice of Prometheus, the primordial sacrifice of the Greeks" (Kerenyi 1963: xx).

Remaining on the grounds of the Mediterranean culture and its most powerful Scripture, we read that the people very soon distorted the divine plan for them and took the risk of being smashed "from the face of the ground" by God, who "saw that the wickedness of man was great, and the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart". According to the Bible, people got another chance thanks to the righteous Noah, who "found favour in the eyes of the Lord". So, he was able to build

the Ark, rescuing God's creatures because of God's will. The act of Prometheus was so much different – he acted against the will of the gods, who punished the people by making them struggle by themselves with no divine assistance.

The mythical figure of Prometheus has been a theme for literary works and comparative religious studies since the earliest known mention by Hesiod in his Works and Days, written in the eight century BC, although the myth itself is older. M. L. West, author of a worthy translation of Hesiod's works into English, noted that "we now know that it was not the product of Hesiod's savage fancy but a Hellenized version of an oriental myth, other versions of which are represented in a Hittite text of the thirteenth century BC and the Babylonian poem of the eleventh" (West in Hesiod 1988: xi–xii). However, we should appreciate Hesiod's creative contribution even if he was not the original author of the myth, like we do in the case of Shakespearian themes, to refer pars pro toto to the greatest genius of literature. With attention paid to minor details of his narrative, Hesiod was, for example, specific in describing the trick which Prometheus used to steal fire from the gods: "the noble son of Iapetos stole it back for men from Zeus the resourceful in the tube of a fennel (Hesiod 1988: 38). The same motif appears in Prometheus Bound", the tragedy written three centuries later by Aeschylus, who gave the figure of the rebellious ancient god inspiring strength. His Prometheus was aware of the meaning of his gift of fire, as well as of the inevitable punishment the gods doomed him to suffer:

> I, poor I, through giving
> Great gifts to mortal men, am prisoner made
> In these fast fetters; yea, in fennel stalk
> I snatched the hidden spring of stolen fire,
> Which is to men a teacher of all arts,
> Their chief resource. And now this penalty
> Of that offence I pay, fast riveted
> In chains beneath the open firmament. (Plumptree 1894: 97)

Prometheus gave people some protection in a hostile world, so they could live quite safely, but soon the Promethean sacrifice was wasted. His brother Epimetheus brought "a disaster to men who live by bread, since he was the original one who received the moulded maiden from Zeus for a wife" (M. L. West in Hesiod 1988: 18). Epimetheus willingly accepted treacherous gift from the gods. His wife Pandora, Prometheus' sister-in-law, opened the notorious box. Who can prevent a woman from being curious? Like Eve from the Old Testament, Pandora did not obey the gods' order. Unrestrained female curiosity unleashed all the calamities known to humankind since then: wars, diseases, floods, fires, and volcanic eruptions. One is temped to add climate change, but the ancients did not use the term, and, of course, they knew nothing abut the Covid

pandemic. Zeus forced Pandora to seal the jar up before Hope could escape. In Dante's Divine Comedy only those entering Hell were to give up any hope: Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate, while in the ancient myth humans could not enjoy any hope on Earth. But Prometheus gave them fire, 'their chief resource', not only as protection against wild animals and cold weather, but also as a tool for creative work. Thanks to Prometheus, people gained what had been previously restricted to Hephaestus' forge.

Promethean inspirations in modern literature

The myth of Prometheus gained special importance as a literary theme since Milton's Paradise Lost. We encounter its echoes in the writings of poets and thinkers writing in different languages, including the most prominent authors like Goethe, Maria Konopnicka, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz or Franz Kafka, who transformed the myth most radically.

Carl Kerenyi emphasizes that "we usually come to mythology through the poets, and the best approach to it is through the poets who are closest to us. By their treatment of the material, they can communicate to us not only the content of the myths but also the experience of mythology" (Kerenyi 1963: xxiii). In his fascinating book *Prometheus. Archetypal image of human existence* Kerenyi focused on Goethe's vision of Prometheus, the Lord of the Earth, while Shelley's name is barely mentioned in the *Index*. It may be assumed that Kerenyi chose Goethe as a pars pro toto example of a modern "mythológos who put his own thoughts, the product of intense experience, into the traditional mythological figure" (Kerenyi 1963: 6). Most probably he did not know any poems by Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821 – 1883), the Polish poet and thinker who had the most profound understanding of the essence of the ancient myth, of the figure who – according to Kerenyi (1963: 3) – "presents a striking resemblance and a striking contrast to the Christian saviour". If he had known Norwid's writings, he would have focused on his ideas not less carefully than on those of Goethe, the only poet he included in his most profound analyses.

The figure of Prometheus was especially popular in Romantic and post-Romantic poetry. The great and most influential author of the time, George Gordon Lord Byron, refers frequently to Promethean inspirations. The memory of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, read during his schoolyears at Harrow, remained vivid in his mind.

In his poem *Prometheus* Byron contained the essence of the myth and its importance for posterity:

> Of thine impenetrable spirit,
> Which earth and heaven could not convulse,
> A mighty lesson we inherit:
> Thou art a symbol and a sign
> To mortals of their fate and force.
> Like thee, man is in part divine,

A troubled stream from a pure source. (RA 2006: 888)

Byron's fascination with Aeschylus's hero transferred to Mary Shelley, who gave her most famous novel, *Frankenstein*, subtitle *The Modern Prometheus*.

The idea of drafting the story originated from lengthy discussions with Byron and her future husband, Percy Shelley, held in Geneva in 1816 during the excursion of the group of young and, by all their contemporaries' standards, immoral poets. However, Mary Shelley decided to follow Milton's view of the rebellious hero; she used a quotation from his *Paradise Lost* as a motto for her novel about the unfortunate scientist who wanted to be like the gods. Milton's Prometheus is Luciferian. The one who stole fire for people wanted them to become equal to the gods; fire was a pre-condition for any progress, for safety against the cold and wild animals, but fire could also mean destruction, so maybe the Greek gods considered it too risky to allow humans use it. Were they right? Mary Shelley's character, Victor Frankenstein, who believes in the progress of science at any price, reminds us of the dangers associated with stealing divine supremacy over nature – and of disasters released from research laboratories, like, for example, the awful consequences of the intense work of physicists involved in the Manhattan project, or, most recently, virologists from Wuhan and other well-hidden places. Success in science attained despite all the moral limitations may only bring destruction and unhappiness in the world of humans. Both Milton and Mary Shelley depicted the dark side of Prometheus.

Mary's husband, Percy Shelley, one of the best-known Romantic rebels, saw it differently. Despite his loudly proclaimed atheism, he created his Prometheus as a figure echoing Christ, who sacrificed himself for humanity. We can find interesting parallels in his greatest literary achievement, so much appreciated by the Young Poland poet Jan Kasprowicz, in the masterpiece worth reading today, when environment protection and sustainability concerns prove to be of critical importance for the future of our world.

Shelley begins his *Prometheus Unbound* – conceived as a "supplement" or "equivalent" of one of the two missing parts of the Aeschylean trilogy – with an extensive introduction in prose, presenting his sources, his writing method, and his goal, assuring readers: "I have [...] a passion for reforming the world. [...] I'd rather be damned with Plato and Lord Bacon than go to heaven with Paley and Malthus" (RA 1094). William Paley, a thinker now quite forgotten but famous in his time, was in favour of the usefulness of the idea of hell to control morals. Thomas Robert Malthus argued that wars, diseases, and famines were necessary to control the growth of the population, and his name is remembered in the context of neo-Malthusian thoughts which emerge now and then, being either praised or condemned as the *Malthusian trap*. Shelley's irony in contrasting the great thinkers of the past with his contemporaries veils his profound knowledge of philosophical ideas and their consequences for people; he was aware of the danger of theories and their consequences not dreamt of by the authors.

In Shelley's tragedy, the suffering Earth, one of the "dramatis personae, cries in despair: Misery, oh misery to me [...] Howl, spirits of the living and the dead, / Your refuge, your defence lies fallen and vanquished".

The Earth is put at risk, but in the poet's vision neither Prometheus, nor humankind are doomed; there are the seals, stronger than *Destruction's strength: Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance.*

Interpreting Shelley's Promethean visions, one must mention his reception by representatives of philosophies which proved to be dangerous for the world. Friedrich Engels tried to translate Shelley into German, and Karl Marx appropriated his ideas in a completely distorted way. It seems that only Mahatma Gandhi appreciated Shelley's ideals of non-violence and respect for nature. However, researchers who claimed that Gandhi's vegetarianism stemmed from Shelley's dietary attitude were completely wrong. Not eating meat and not doing harm to any living creature is one of the fundamental principles of Buddhism and other Indian beliefs constituting the whole background of the rich culture of the country colonized by England. Anyway, as Morton rightly stated, (2006: 41), "nowadays, Shelley is seen as prescient about health, nutrition, and the future of the planet".

Of the poets fascinated by Prometheus who gained appreciation during their lifetime, Robert Seymour Bridges, Poet Laureate, deserves special attention in the context of Norwid's poetry, and not only because of the merit of publishing the poetical heritage of Gerard Manley Hopkins, to whom Norwid is compared by some researchers who find similarities in both Christian thinkers' originality and innovative approach to the style and language of poetry. Bridges' poem *Prometheus the Firegiver: A Mask in the Greek Manner,* written in 1883, the year of Norwid's death, presents the aspect which was most important to the Polish poet: the creative power stemming from Prometheus' gift. Bridges' Prometheus gives people not only fire, but the ability to transform the Earth in a creative way:

> Now give I thee my best, a little gift
> To work a world of wonder; 'tis thine own
> Of long desire, and with it I will give
> The cunning of invention and all arts
> In which thy hand instructed may command,
> Interpret, comfort, or ennoble nature
> [...] with geometric hand,
> True square and careful compass he may come
> To plan and plant and spread abroad his towers,
> His gardens, temples, palaces, and tombs.
> [...] thy mind

Can picture what shall be: these are the face
And form of beauty, but her heart and life
Shall they be who shall see it, born to shield
A happier birth right with intrepid arms,
To tread down tyranny and fashion forth
A virgin wisdom to subdue the world,
To build for passion an eternal song,
To shape her dreams in marble.
(Bridges 1912: 23, 26)

The ideas presented by Bridges correspond with Norwid's beliefs. Shaping the Earth's dreams in marble was Norwid's dream in the years when he studied sculpture in Florence and admired the genius of his predecessors in this area of art.

It seems that beside philosophical attractiveness, the myth of Prometheus contained an idea that was especially appealing to poets who in their lifetime could not count on others' understanding or appreciation for their sacrifices made. In her poem *Felicia Hemans*, Letitia Elizabeth Landon gave a clear expression of that:

The fable of Prometheus and the vulture
  Reveals the poet's and the woman's heart.
Unkindly are they judged--unkindly treated—
  By careless tongues and by ungenerous words;
While cruel sneer, and hard reproach, repeated,
  Jar the fine music of the spirit's chords (RA 1454)

Byron and the poets *unkindly treated:* Shelley, Keats and Norwid

Among *those unkindly treated* we find poets of different languages, and three of them: Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats and Cyprian Kamil Norwid shall be discussed here.

Unlike Byron, the celebrity of the Romantic era, the three poets, rejected by their contemporaries for different reasons, gained recognition only posthumously thanks to the efforts of their *future grandsons* – if Mary Shelley, the editor and propagator of her husband's writings, can be included in this category, and if we forget about the reflected fame Shelley enjoyed thanks to his friendship with Byron, who attended his very romantic burial ceremony at the seashore. As Shelley's schoolmate and biographer observed, "there is scarcely a great poet from the time of Milton, down to the present day, who has not proved a mark for the invidious malice of his contemporaries. But among all authors of a past or present age, none has been more unjustly handled than Shelley" (Medwin 1847: 359). At least Shelley had a spectacular burial ceremony; his body, drowned in the

sea, was cremated on a beach near Viareggio. Prometheus's gift, fire, consumed the earthly remnants of his admirer. Zygmunt Krasiński, one of the Polish Romantics and once Norwid's close friend, when suffering in Rome from the poor condition of his heart, wrote jealously in his letter to August Cieszkowski: "Kto je spali, gdy pęknie, i zachowa popiół z niego? Czy napisze mi kto na urnie jak Shellejowi tu na cmentarzu: Cor cordium?" (Krasiński 1988: 92) 'Who will burn it when it breaks, and save its ashes? Will anybody write on my urn, like they did for Shelley, the heart of hearts?'. Well, Krasiński was not a rebel like Byron, Shelley or Norwid, who, paraphrasing Norwid's own words, newer bowed to circumstances, and never told the truths to stand behind the door.

John Keats also did not compromise on his vocation and praised the truth. He, like Norwid, was raised by his grandmother after the death of his parents, and, unlike Byron or Shelley (the latter being expelled from Oxford for his rebellious acts), could not have any formal classical education and struggled hard to study literature and art by himself, from books and through visiting collectors' galleries. Ian Jack's fascinating book *Keats and the Mirror of Art* helps us understand how individual paintings or the sculptures of the Parthenon marbles, robbed by Lord Elgin in Athens and exhibited in London, influenced the poet's writings and his concepts of art, which saves the most important treasures of human existence – the truth and the beauty: "a vase or an urn was sometimes 'the shape of beauty' that helped him to escape from mundane reality and disturbing thoughts" (Jack 1967: 216). Keats originated from a poor family. Though appreciated as a would-be physician, he rejected financial stability and gave up medicine because he knew that poetry was his real vocation. Having made friends in literary circles, he managed to have a few of his works published, but then, as a low-class *Cockney* poet, was faced with mistreatment "at the hands of the hostile critics [...] and unlike Shelley, could not sustain the abuse with which his creations were met" (Scrivener 1982: 273). Researchers found out that there were also political reasons contributing to the harsh critical opinions of Keats. The poet challenged the class structure of British society and praised those who struggled against oppression. As Evert Walter noted in *Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats,* the poet's "political liberalism found something to admire, without distinction as to nationality or specific circumstance, in all who had ever risen grandly to the challenge of tyranny' (sonnet 'To Kosciuszko')" (Evert 1965: 78).

Beside being poor and criticized as a poet by influential critics, Keats suffered from the then lethal illness called *consumption*, later known as tuberculosis. His friend, painter Joseph Severn, decided to take him to Italy, in search of a healthier climate, but the travel difficulties contributed to a worsening of Keats' health condition. After the long sea journey, the ship from England stayed even longer in port. Based on Italian regulations, all the passengers had to remain in quarantine for a couple of weeks. The health authorities were afraid of typhus, which was taking lives in England, and wished to avoid the risk of spreading the disease in Italy. Likewise, after the poet's death, they

burnt all his belongings and all the furniture in the house today known as the Keats-Shelley Museum and ordered that the funeral be held in sanitary conditions. We know the system too well, living in our "safer" time.

Norwid, deaf, half blind and ill, died in a home for Polish veterans run by the Polish Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul at Ivry – then a suburb of Paris, and today part of the city accessible in fifteen minutes thanks to the fully automated metro line, but in his times the location meant an exile, making the poet feel abandoned and lonely. After his death, Norwid's body was laid in a grave paid for five years only. Afterwards, the ashes were exhumed from the Ivry cemetery and put in a cheap common grave at Montmorency. It is painful when one remembers that Norwid so tenderly cared for his poor living and dead compatriots. He designed and sculpted several Polish tombs at three cemeteries in Paris. Norwid's prophetic poem about the great heroes appreciated only long after their deaths is, in a sense, autobiographical. Nevertheless, Norwid strongly believed in his future fame, and he was not the only one who cherished such hopes. Timothy Morton (2006: 35) rightly observed: "Romantic poets were acutely aware of their afterlives, and their works reflect that". And one must admit that they were right. Unlike Byron, whom today's researchers and readers seem to forget, the three *unkindly treated* poets keep fascinating subsequent generations, gaining not only sophisticated critical editions of the whole of their writings (Shelley and Norwid had to wait for that till the twenty-first century), but also increased admiration among the public. Film makers and rock stars of our times take inspiration from their lives and poetry, just to mention Mick Jagger reading aloud Shelley's *Adonais*, devoted to the death of Keats, in memory of his friend Brian Jones at a concert in Hyde Park, or Czesław Niemen's unforgettable music written for *Bema pamięci żałobny rapsod,* written by Cyprian Norwid in memory of general Józef Bem, the national hero of Poland, Hungary and Turkey.

Norwid – the Polish grandson of Prometheus

Cyprian Kamil Norwid, the Polish poet, sculptor, painter, engraver, and thinker so profoundly immersed in the sources of our culture, studied the ancient authors so intensely that he was able to depict ancient Rome in his *Quidam* as if he himself had lived there among our Greek and Roman ancestors. Norwid admired George Gordon, Lord Byron and Byron's Promethean ideas turned into life experience so much that – like Adam Mickiewicz – he decided to translate some of Byron's poetry into Polish. It is worth mentioning that Norwid, like Shelley, was a devoted translator of those whom he admired – of the greatest authors of all centuries. Therefore, his choice of Byron – beside Homer, Horace, Ovid, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Dante, Tasso, or Psalms, is meaningful, as Mieczysław Giergielewicz observed in his essay on Norwid's translation of *Moses's Prayer* (see: Giergielewicz in Günther 1962: 190). Norwid's admiration for Byron did not lead, however, to any attempt to imitate Byronic style or motifs. The

Polish poet was so much "himself" in his writings while remaining a careful reader of all the most important sources of Western Culture, both ancient and contemporaneous. Norwid included Byron among the greatest not so much because of *Don Juan or Childe Harold's Pilgrimages,* but primarily for his ability to sacrifice his life in defence of the Greeks' fighting for independence, which was Promethean to the full extent.

Norwid's fascination with Byron, reflected in his letters, is well known; literary researchers have analysed many aspects of it. George Gömöri (1973) presented the importance of "the myth of Byron in Norwid's life and work". Grażyna Halkiewicz-Sojak wrote the most in-depth analysis of Byron's recollections in Norwid's writings. She noticed that Norwid's contribution to creating the Byronic legend may seem surprising because "trudno na pozór znaleźć w XIX wieku dwie tak odmienne osobowości twórcze jak Byron i Norwid" (Halkiewicz-Sojak 1994: 5) ('apparently, one could hardly find two creative personalities who would be so different as Byron and Norwid').

Norwid himself emphasized, and was proud of, the fact that his birth (1821) coincided with Byron's death in Missolonghi in 1824. The death of Byron – a celebrity of the Romantic era – was known and remembered all over Europe in the context of the Greek war of independence. Norwid did not know that the deaths of the two poets less known during his lifetime, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1822) and John Keats (1821), coincided with the date of his birth even more precisely. The house in Rome where young Keats was dying of tuberculosis is located less than 200 metres from the house at 123 via Felice (today via Sistina), just behind the Holy Trinity church at the top of the famous Spanish Stairs, where twenty-five years later the young Norwid had his atelier for two years until January 1849, when he moved to Paris, the main centre of Polish emigration after the defeat of the November uprising of 1830-1831. Shelley had also lived in Italy, and both Keats' and Shelley's mundane remnants lay in the protestant cemetery in Rome. So, the three poets were close in time (by the death-birth vicinity) and in space, and most probably Norwid himself would have considered it important. Both English poets' resorting to the moral values which may prevent catastrophe, and to art, which is stronger than death, resounds with Norwid's thoughts transferred to his poetry, his prose, and his letters.

In his writings Norwid expressed ideas so valid today, when thousands are wandering round the globe escaping from wars and hunger, or simply in search of a better future. Being Europeans – living in our secure, welfare world for decades since the atrocities of World War II, all of a sudden we have been faced with not only the threat of another great war, but also with the challenge of being torn between utmost compassion and unbearable fear associated with all the risks associated with the strict application of the command left by Christ – to accept the needy in one's own home – in the situation when those in need may undermine our safety by bringing in not only helpless women and children, but also the cruellest terrorists acting on behalf of evil. Such dilemmas were not alien to people in the times of Norwid, he himself being an emigrant fleeing from

the oppressors who occupied his country, Poland, then divided into three partitions by Russia, Prussia, and Austria. He himself as a student was arrested and sent to jail in Berlin, accused of conspiracy against the authorities; he lost his health there and suffered from deafness in later years, when he lived in Rome, Paris, New York, and London, a poor emigree trying hard to make a living as a sculptor, painter and engraver, and to gain recognition among his compatriots as a poet and thinker. But very few of them could understand him, and fewer appreciated or accepted his innovative poetry. He objected to the commonly accepted rules and superstitions and never tried to please his readers by satisfying common tastes at the cost of compromising his artistic message; so, like Shelley and Keats, he could count on posthumous appreciation only.

In his letter to Joanna Kuczyńska of 1 February 1869, Cyprian Norwid wrote (Norwid 1971: 388):

> Jestem przeciwny systematom spółczesnym, które głoszą:
> „Europe aux Européens !"
> Selon moi – Madame ! – il n'y jamais eu des Européens, car nous tous nous sommes venus ici de l'Asie – de ce pays qui nous reste maintenant sur l'embryon de notre intelligence comme un rêve du Paradis !
> Ja pochodzę of Jafetowego wnuka, co przykowany był na szczycie Kazbeku w Kaukazie – od dziada mego Prometheusa. JA JEDEN przeczę temu systemowi krwi i ras. Ja jeden – ale cóż robić! – to moje mniemanie takie. Moim zdaniem Europa nie jest rasą, ale principium! – bo gdyby by ka rasą byłaby Azją!!! (Norwid 1971: 388)

> ["I am against the contemporary systems which preach: "Europe for Europeans!" I think, Madame, that there have never been any Europeans, since we all came here from Asia – from the country which now remains in the embryo of our identity like a dream about Paradise. I originated from Jafet's grandson, from the one who was bound to the peak of the mount of Kazbek in the Caucasus – from my grandparent Prometheus. I am the only one who opposes the system of dividing the blood and the races. I am the only one – but what can I do, this is how I think of it. In my opinion, Europe is not the race, but principium! Because if it were a race, it would be Asia!!!"] (translated by Aleksandra Niemirycz)

Driven by the same feeling of compassion and belief in the equality of all humans, Norwid opposed slavery and racism in his poem: *Do Obywatela Johna Brown*. Taking the risk of straying from the point, one should mention that Norwid's verses, with their multi-layer meanings, plays on words, and depths of interpretation, constitute great difficulty for their readers in the original, so it is easy to understand translators' unwillingness to cope with the task, and the resulting scarcity of available – and acceptable –

translations from Norwid, continuously collected and analysed by Agata Brajerska Mazur. Only the bravest undertook the challenge, from the "pioneers" Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Adam Czerniawski to Danuta Borchardt and Walter Whipple. Unfortunately, there are too many poetical masterpieces by Norwid, not to mention his prose and letters, which have not yet been rendered in English. However, there are a few quite successful translations of the poem addressed to John Brown; I consider Peterkiewicz's version quite adequate. The poem attracted translators' special attention not only because of its international recognition, but also because of the ending lines presenting the poet's creed. Norwid wrote it in 1859 during the hectic efforts undertaken to save John Brown. The Polish author was among the Europeans who, like Victor Hugo, tried to prevent the hanging of the brave man who fought against injustice and the sufferings of the blacks in America, "the land of the free" (Norwid 2000: 33), where John Brown was eventually killed. Without a literal reference, Norwid praises the Promethean deed of the American hero, who gave his life in defence of the equality of people. John Brown, like Prometheus, opposed the ruling "gods" – the owners of Black slaves in the American South. Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in the state of Virginia, the courageous act aimed at the initiation of the liberation movement, was like the blessed crime of the mythical fire-giver. The American abolitionist leader, like Prometheus, wanted to provide helpless humans with weapons against the misery and dangers of life in darkness of slavery. But beside the sacrifice, Norwid alludes to the Promethean ideas dearest to him, to the saving power of art:

> So, till the shadows – Kościuszko and Washington –
> Tremble, accept the start of my song, John –
> Since before song matures man often dies.
> Before song dies, nation must first arise. (Norwid 2000: 33)

Norwid's spiritual grandfather Prometheus sacrificed himself for all men, without differentiating between races; the only division he objected to was the division between the almighty gods and the poor humans left abandoned on earth as prey for frost and wild beasts. Norwid could see much more profoundly into the theme. He saw divisions in society, and injustices and cruelties caused by humankind. The idea of the equality of all human beings as well as of the goal of history is the topic of his poem *Socjalizm* [Socialism], numbered III in the volume *Vade-mecum*:

> Ludzie – choć kształtem ras napiętnowani,
> Z wykrzywianymi różną mową wargi –
> Głoszą, że oto źli już i wybrani,
> Że już hosanna tylko albo skargi…

– Że Pyton-stary zrzucon do otchłani:
Grosz? – ze symbolem już, harmonią?... – targi!
Oh! Nieskończona jeszcze? Dziejów praca –
Jak bryły w górę ciągniecie ramieniem:
Umknij – a już ci znów na piersi wraca,
Przysiądź, a głowę zetrze ci brzemieniem...
– O! nieskończona jeszcze dziejów praca,
Nie-prze-palony jeszcze glob, Sumieniem! (Norwid 2004: 16)

['People – though branded with the shape of races –
Preach with lips distorted by varying lingos –
That the *evil ones* and the *chosen* are in their places,
From now on either hosanna or weeping are their shares,
That the old Python has been sent to limbo
Penny? – just a symbol now, and harmony? ... the fairs!
Oh! History's work has not yet been completed –
It is like hauling up a block of stone with your arm
You slip away – it gets back to your breast to hit it
Sit down, and the load will smash your head and harm...
Oh! History's work has not yet been completed,
The globe has not been burnt with Conscience!']
(Translated by Aleksandra Niemirycz)

In this poem the myth of Prometheus is combined with that of Sisyphus – like in the text by the Polish poet Maria Konopnicka, but the most important phrase of the poem refers not to myths but reflects Norwid's views in relation to Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, congenially developed and sometimes opposed by August Cieszkowski, the Polish philosopher, Norwid's friend and benefactor. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel considered Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God, and his teaching the attainment of the goal of human history; Cieszkowski thought that the incarnation of God in a mortal human, Christ, was just a turning point: God became a man, and the people gained a share in God (see: Cieszkowski 1972: 305).

Cyprian Norwid, *late grandson* of Jan III Sobieski, the famous Polish king, known as a defender of Christianity, believed, like Cieszkowski, in humanity's responsibility for the *work of history* in its continuous course. He would never have agreed with Francis Fukuyama's prophecies contained in *The End of History and the Last Man*, saying that the achievement of the goal of humanity, a fair social system of democratic liberalism, meant the end of wars and political turmoil on Earth. Norwid strongly believed that history – the centuries' work – has not ended yet, because the globe has not yet been

burnt out with conscience. Burning the globe through with conscience refers again to a purely Promethean idea of fire as the indispensable factor enabling the growth of humankind. The one who stole fire for people wanted them to become equal to the gods; fire was a pre-condition for any progress, not only for safety against the cold and wild animals. But fire could also mean destruction. Yet burning through the globe with Conscience, although risky, is a *conditio sine qua non* for the attainment of final salvation, so the labour of ages must continue.

Norwid's Promethean idea goes far beyond that, and beyond the visions of Byron of Shelley. He would not recommend or praise stealing power from the gods or sacrificing oneself for the salvation of humanity – one cannot do more than Christ. His idea is different – he demands that people "cooperate" with the saviour God's mission – people need to save themselves throughout history, in their earthly dimension.

Mickiewicz's famous vision of *Poland – Christ of nations* from *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*] emphasized the Messianic aspect of Poland's suffering; Słowacki found another Promethean symbol, the Swiss hero Winkelried, and so in his *Kordian* Poland is "a Winkelried of nations". Both concepts give Poland a unique place among the nations – as a country which sacrifices itself for others. Norwid considered such ideas false or even blasphemous. Being a faithful Christian, he wanted to follow Christ's teaching, and so he was against such national *hubris* and lack of individual responsibility of everyone. Mickiewicz and Słowacki appealed to the collective identity of the Poles; Norwid put the emphasis on individual effort and struggle for salvation, both in the personal and national dimensions.

So, the Norwidian Prometheus would not fight with the gods to either protect or doom people; he would rather fight with humans against the shortfalls of their nature, against what he referred to as brak, the Polish word meaning a lack, a missing of some part of the whole, of the entirety, a shortfall taking revenge on the individual for his or her inefficiencies. Norwid's Prometheus encourages people to save themselves and their nation through hard creative work, because, as the poet wrote in his poem *Język ojczysty* ('The Native Language'), it is not the sword or the shield which defend the nation's language – its identity – but only masterpieces. To make it short, Norwid thought that Prometheus should be incarnated in every human being, and especially in the artist. Prometheus – not God, not one of the Titans, not the hero suffering for people, but Prometheus – the craftsman, the artist, the one who helps humans become human, to transform idle marionettes into industrious creative beings able to cooperate with Christ their Saviour in the deed of salvation.

Salvation is possible through beauty, which for Keats is tantamount to truth, and for Norwid, *is the shape of love*, and is attainable only through work in the sweat of one's brow. The work must be of the utmost difficulty, must cost the hardest pains – to pave new paths for human existence and its highest expression – art. We are all called to

participate in the beauty of God's plan for humanity, every one of us humans. As we read in *Promethidion*, Norwid's most important poetical treatise on beauty and art,

> Każdy w sobie cień pięknego nosi
> I każdy – każdy z nas – tym piękna pyłem. (Norwid 2011: 106)
>
> ['Every man in him has beauty's shadow / And each—each one of us is beauty's dust'] (translated by Aleksandra Niemirycz)

Arduous work is necessary in the service of beauty and truth to achieve the perfection of the ancient Greeks and of the greatest artists. Those who have suffered most in this struggle for a more complete human being, though never understood by their contemporaries, left us the pattern we need to follow. Beauty and truth are redeeming values and are to be strived for. We find these values materialized in statues carved by Michelangelo, in Chopin's music, in words more durable than those carved in stone – and not only those of poets like Horace or Sapho, but of Roman codes of law, of Egyptian art of engineering, in the highest achievements of different nations. In *Promethidion* Norwid specially addresses his compatriots and their dreaming of Poland's salvation. He believes that his country's revival is possible only through art. Norwid's Promethean idea was far from that proposed by Mickiewicz, who identified the suffering Poland with the crucified Christ, and who offered his homeland the role of a "Christ of nations." Norwidian thought is much more profound – and much more demanding.

We, humans, must grow and mature – like the song-seagull sent to John Brown across the Ocean – to reach *beauty's shadow*, which is inherently associated with our nature – created to be the image of God.

The essence and nature of beauty, the theme so important to Cyprian Norwid, fascinated John Keats, the poet who lived so briefly, but left so much beauty enshrined in his perfect poems. He saw the beauty of nature, believed that opposite to mortal humans, *the poetry of earth is never dead*. Keats, like Norwid, believed in the redeeming power of beauty, and of art. In *Endymion* he expressed his conviction that beauty has a moral value which never disappears:

> A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
> Its loveliness increases; it will never
> Pass into nothingness [...]
> Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
> From our dark spirits" ... (RA 1344)

Keats' words of beauty being truth resound with those of Norwid, for whom beauty constituted *a shape of love*.

Keats, like his friend Shelley, like Norwid, and a few other visionaries of the Romantic and post-Romantic times, fortune-told the future of humankind with a warning that people must change themselves, be more compassionate to others and to the chain of being. Norwid and Shelley came to similar ethical conclusions, despite the major difference concerning religion – Norwid being a Roman Catholic of strong faith, and Shelley declaring himself an atheist. Also, they both – like John Keats with his unforgettable praise of the Grecian urn – believed in the redeeming power of art.

Byron focused on slightly other aspects of Promethean heritage. He evokes the pantheistic feature and loneliness of the rebel Prometheus in the famous scene from *Manfred*. His hero complains upon the cliffs of the mountain of the Jungfrau:

> The spirits I have raised abandon me
> The spells which I have studied baffle me,
> The remedy I recked of tortured me;
> I lean no more on superhuman aid,
> It hath no power upon the past, and for
> The future, till the past be gulfed in darkness,
> It is not of my search. My mother earth,
> And thou fresh-breaking day, and you, ye mountains –
> Why are ye beautiful? I cannot love ye.
> And thou, the bright eye of the universe
> That opens overall, and unto all
> Art a delight – thou shin'st not on my heart. (RA 903)

The idea of the idleness of beauty does not resound with Norwid's thoughts, but Byron's *bright eye of the universe* inevitably makes us think of one of the most beautiful – and most philosophical – of Norwid's poems, the one numbered VI in *Vade-mecum, W Weronie*, in which the artist's – painter's view permeates the image evoked by words:

> W Weronie
> Nad Kapuletich i Montekich domem
> Spłukane deszczem, poruszone gromem
> Łagodne oko błękitu –
> Patrzy na gruzy nieprzyjaznych grodów
> Na rozwalone bramy do ogrodów,
> I gwiazdę zrzuca ze szczytu –
> Cyprysy mówią, że to dla Julietty,

Że dla Romea, ta łza znad planety
Spada, i groby przecieka,
A ludzie mówią i mówią uczenie,
Że to nie łzy są, ale że kamienie,
I – że nikt na nie… nie czeka! (Norwid 2004: 19)

['In Verona
Over the Capulet and the Montague houses
Thunder-shaken, rinsed with rain which douses
Mild eye of the heavenly blue –
Looking at ruins of unfriendly castles
And smashed gates in the gardens' rustle,
Throws from the high a star leaking through
Cypresses say that this heavenly tear
Is for Julliet and Romeo whose tombs are near
That the tear falls to wet their bones
But people say in a scholarly tone
That these are not tears but minerals alone
And – no one awaits these … stones! '] (Translated by Aleksandra Niemirycz)

In this poem Norwid – unlike the Byronic hero – expresses his profound trust in nature. Even if the people lose the feeling of transcendence, or even if they cease to believe in the redeeming power of eternal poetry – Shakespearian heroes are referred to as its representatives – the cypresses, trees of great symbolic meaning, will speak on behalf of human culture, like the evangelical stones which were supposed to praise the glory of the Lord if humans were silent.

Another image gets associated with Norwid's "star thrown by the mild eye of the blue", and of Byron's *bright eye of the universe*. It is T. S. Eliot's eagle from his Choruses from the *Rock* which "soars in the summit of Heaven while the Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit." In Eliot's vision the two orders, the heavenly and the earthly, are separated, and the idea behind it is pessimistic. Eliot, like Norwid, asks fundamental questions associated with our human condition – since we are creatures torn between the safety and dangers of life, between the lie and the truth, between the beauty and the waste, the divine and the profane:

The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness.
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence.

Knowledge of words, but ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to GOD.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? (Eliot 1988: 148)

All these sad statements make us ask the question of whether the risk of ultimate sacrifice – be it that of Prometheus, of Christ, or of an abandoned and suffering artist, misunderstood by his contemporaries – is worth taking if the people remain ungrateful, forgetful, lost in the universe, and sometimes evil.

Norwid gave us his answer. It is a statement and an appeal at the same time, expressed in his poem *Bohater* [Hero], so profoundly understood by the Polish Pope-poet John Paul II, the greatest of Norwid's late grandsons, and the most careful of his readers and interpreters:

Heroizm będzie trwał – dopóki praca,
Praca? – dopóki stworzenie!… (Norwid 2004: 93)
'Heroism will last – until there is work,
Work? – until there is creation!…'

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Street art and protest under pandemic conditions in Colombia: A visual semiotic approach

How does meaning enter the image?
Where does that meaning end? And if it ends
What is beyond?
(Barthes 1986: 30)

Abstract. This article engages in a visual critical semiotic analysis of Medellín street art and its interpretation as political action in the Colombian social mobilisation of 2021. I explore three epistemological turns towards a descriptive and contrastive methodology to contextualize street art and its transformative potential. Firstly, the spatial turn leads us to understand how space and street art function as a framework of life and conflict that challenges viewers socially and politically. Secondly, following Peirce's ideas, I reinterpreted some images. I explain how they function as theoretical objects related to indices, signs and symbols. According to Mitchell's image turn, the image functions as a significant semantic unit. Thirdly, I read the political turn based on Rancière's works in which he equates the political and the aesthetic as an act of visibility, always existing together at a conceptual and substantive level, and with which emancipation is objective. The article does not try to argue whether street art has a transformative power as this has been widely discussed in the literature. The article looks at street art that appeared in the context of the social mobilisation of 2021-2022, and partially in the context of the recent pandemic as a social transformation, the fact of which was proven by the recent elections.

Keywords: aesthetic learning, dissensus, social mobilisation, social transformation, spatial aesthetics.

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The background: Nothing to lose

Because of its duration and amplitude, the armed civil conflict in Colombia continues to affect all sides of life in the country (Giraldo Forero 2005; International Center for Transitional Justice 2009; Gaitán 2002; Restrepo 2005). The fundamental questions of distribution of wealth, social and economic opportunities, access to health services, and questions of the dignity of life, security of life, and development, both collective and personal, are behind the conflict. Any armed conflict is a question of power relations and expands in all dimensions: the State, legal and illegal military, and economic groups. It is not an abstract conflict, though. The most vulnerable social groups are affected socially, politically, economically and materially. The practice of modern states, as Foucault argued, is to "exploit numerous and diverse techniques to subjugate bodies and control the population" (Foucault 1990: 140). The pandemic created extreme conditions that manifested, according to Giorgio Agamben (2020), the growing tendency to use the state of emergency as a standard paradigm of government, enhancing and justifying the structural violence and normalising it. Within these circumstances, Colombia witnessed a major civil protest and its violent oppression in April-May 2021.

The strike was triggered by a controversial tax reform that increased the value-added tax on public services for middle- and upper-income households. Coupled with the health reform proposal, it sent people into the streets on April 28, 2021. Over 80 days, millions of citizens in cities like Medellín, Cali, Bucaramanga, Bogotá, Pasto, and others marched against the reform proposals, social inequalities, the current government – growing together and articulating in solidarity the mechanisms, origins, and expressions of social inequality. Violent oppression became the trigger, the last straw.

Amnesty International (2021) claims that at least 100,000 people were forcibly displaced or confined because of the ongoing conflict, particularly affecting the rights of Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants in Colombia. National Strike 2021 raised the problem of systemic violence again. In the context of the National Strike, there were numerous reports of excessive use of force by the security forces against peaceful protesters, particularly in Cali. Police arbitrarily detained and tortured protesters, and reportedly engaged in sexual and gender-based violence against women and LGBTI people. At least 100 people sustained eye trauma due to the unlawful and excessive use of less lethal weapons by members of the Mobile Anti-Riot Squad (ESMAD). Killings and threats against human rights defenders reached alarming levels, as evidenced by NGOs and observers (e.g., `https://www.temblores.org/`). The protests started as pacific and gradually became better and better organized. This demonstrated significant solidarity among neighbourhoods, social and political organizations, artistic and youth groups: students, peasants, Indigenous people, afro-Colombians, women, and young artists, the

population of the informal sector or unemployed formed the active body of the protests, people with nothing to lose.

The Strike was not an isolated event but another step in the worldwide counter movement to the dominating power, such as the Occupy Movement, for example. The Strike contributed to the spatial symbolic decolonization worldwide with such actions as the demolition of the statue of Jiménez de Quesada on May 7 in the historic centre of Bogotá by the Misak, one of the indigenous peoples of Colombia.

> From Virginia to New Mexico, protests over police brutality have brought hundreds of years of American history bubbling to the surface. [...] The boiling anger that exploded in the days after George Floyd gasped his final breaths is now fuelling a national movement to topple perceived symbols of racism and oppression in the United States, as protests over police brutality against African Americans expand to include demands for a more honest accounting of American history. (Mervosh, Romero, Tompkins 2020: n.p.)

Bourdieu (1997) speaks about the systemic symbolic violence that is more "pernicious" as it is well hidden in our everyday life, social architecture, and material-discursive surroundings. Being able to confront it requires a certain level of sensibility and knowledge. It is challenging to confront also because of "the tacit complicity of those who suffer it and also, often, of those who practice it to the extent that one and the other are not aware of suffering or practicing it" (Bourdieu 1997: 22). Likewise, Didi-Huberman writes:

> To criticize violence, one must describe it (which implies that one must be able to look). To describe it, one must dismantle its artifacts and "describe the relationship," as Benjamin puts it, in which it is constituted (which implies that one has to be able to dismantle and reassemble states of affairs). (Didi-Huberman 2014: 35)

Following this line of thought, I want to focus on artivism, an artistic and socio-political approach that shows new action elements of the new emancipatory processes with their creative wall sentences and cross-border symbology. I argue that it breaks the social-political culture of representation, assuming a new constructive and social-political participatory role with practices such as strikes and barricades among artistic wall paintings, and the creation and recreation of new signs and political symbols in the Colombian strike. I argue that subjectivity works together with images of the public space in citizens' minds, making them more aware of the political reality of socio-political emancipation.

Spatial turn: Street art

Cities are spaces of coexistence of social and political life in a territory; people's ways of living, finding their essential characteristics within a specific habitat (De Certeau 1998; Harvey 1996). Only by walking, looking, and looking again can the urban space and the territory be understood, that is, expanding the sense of reading and interpreting the street artwork. Citizen, time and space come together to allow the understanding of the urban images.

In my university-level semiotics class lab, I take my students to the streets to live the city and understand it as a place of action for everyday experiences. I invite them to read and feel the city as a space that offers all types of knowledge and understanding of reality that is different from the scientific explanation. Contrasting images and counterforces are explored in the discussion, contesting the existing discourses both spoken, written, said and felt. The spatial turn acts as a binder of aesthetic thought, leading it towards reflecting on the visual messages exhibited by the city and its subjective interpretations.

Pedragosa (2014) defines the spatial turn as a fact that is already visible in the forms of current responses to the question of how to inhabit the world, the recovery of subjective experience for the appropriation of space by an aesthetic and emotional experience through images and culture, like a living space. The spatial turn allows images to be integrated from the observation of the field of the urban area, to dominate the landscape of the plural world, where some visions do not invalidate the others; still, between them, they give each image a place in the picture collage of the reality that we want to address. The lived space is a field of representation of reality and consciousness that leads us to the recovery of subjective experiences. In this sense, the multitude of phenomena around spatial perception, awareness of space, and the value of subjective, emotional and personal elements of the experience of each one of us in public space allow the viewers to make their interpretation (Pedragosa 2014: 15).

Based on my walking experience with my students, I can argue that the observant walker can see how the city hides layers of realities artificially constructed by differentiated spaces, divided by signs, signals, and symbols for different human groups in a temporality-determined geographic territory. The town does not refer to a specific reality but to a fact represented differently by many consciences that inhabit it and turn it into a space lived as a reality. If public space is the citizen space of representation and consciousness, one of those layers of constructed realities, full of social, emotional and political meaning, is street art.

Image turn

Understood as a visual expression of feelings and emotions (Goodman 1981), urban art, like any art, can affect, influence, and change individuals and society (Tunali & Erdi

2021). It has a long history of being at the forefront of movements for social justice and political change; by challenging longstanding traditions, it sustains ideas, provokes different perspectives, and turns it into a space lived as the reality that inspires plural understanding.

For Peirce, art as a visual language is full of multiple indices, signals and signs open to interpretation, unlike symbols governed by a rule, convention or agreement between users (1974). Applying street art as a medium, the artists express their ideas by creating visual codes and dialogues in which the triadic relation message-spectator-consciousness works to obtain visibility. In this sense, street art as a social practice is the most local experience of artistic expression to obtain open-air visibility. It stands for the relationship between the tangible and the intangible, and between artworks, citizens and their demands. The coexistence of street art and citizenship enables this artistic approach and an ephemeral artistic practice to become part of visual culture both as form and content – by expressing, enunciating, and/or denouncing local social and political problems, in a word, as a scene.

Rancière's notion of a scene is another useful concept for understanding art's transformative work. A scene is a theoretical entity, a method of equality as it destroys the hierarchies between the levels of reality and discourse and the usual techniques for judging the significant character of phenomena (Rancière 2012). The scene is the direct encounter between the particular and the universal; the complexity of levels of signification is transversal to the layers of discourse.

In a scene, the thought and the image are no longer distinguished (Rancière 2012: 100). Different scholars (Andrzejewski 2017; Bacharach 2015, 2018; Baldini 2018; Bartolomeus 2012) emphasize how street art becomes and simultaneously generates social collective and individual dissensus – "consists in the rejection of every difference that distinguishes between people who 'live' in different spheres of existence, the dismissal of categories of those who are or are not qualified for political life" (Rancière 2015: 77).

Colombian social mobilisation emphasizes how street artists engage in the social dialogue between the discursive elements through displaying controversial images and slogans, and facilitate and sustain it, so becoming the grassroots for critical pedagogical practice. The composition offers an aesthetic-political argument; every line, piece and colour enable visual reasoning to be profoundly and efficiently situated using its strategic location. Street artists use urban commodities as a screen to elevate a graphic scream that would put in motion transformation of the viewer.

This mobilisation questioned symbolic referents on which –supposedly– the society and its system have been built. In this strike, every painted wall works as a graphic scream to rethink democratic values such as justice, freedom, equity, respect and democracy, among other matters. It is a visual that enunciates a socio-political

resignification between the artist, spectators as protagonist readers versus the State normative. One action supports, encourages and explains the other.

Leo, a First Line artist[2], explained how his artistic collective chooses the location for a specific reason: "Visibility, personal reasons or just the strategic location of the place are of major importance." The artistic interventions try to provoke the viewer. Leo and his partners' goals are to create an experience in the spectator's mind, provoking an intellectual or emotional reaction, transforming the space perception and its meanings, to achieve the political message in an aesthetic way to touch the conscious subjectivity that Peirce (1988) defines as tradition and Rancière (2012) the dissensus. According to Peirce (1988), radiation is built with our beliefs and habit working together. What the pattern depends on is when and how it causes us to act. As for the when, every stimulus to action is derived from perception; as for the how, every purpose of an effort is to produce some sensible result.

Considering the above, it is possible to state that aesthetic protests can create dissensus between citizens' common sense and the political to create new understandings and political meanings. For Rancière, a social actor is a multiplicity of social actors, and the critical question is to find out what they can do without a hierarchical principle. This principle of hierarchy is what Rancière (2012) defines as the distribution of the sensible: "the distribution of the sensible refers to the ways of seeing, doing, saying and making visible the existence of a common and the cuts that define the places and the respective parts" (p. 100). This sharing of the sensible decides the degree of the visible or perceptible of the subject on the scene of the world, and it finds who can have or take part in the communal. The most significant aspect of this concept of visibility is the articulation between art as an aesthetic fact and politics. Politics, the philosopher continues,

> [...] happens when those who have no time take the time to present themselves as inhabitants of shared space and to show that their mouth also emits a word that enunciates the common and is not just a voice that talks pain. This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, of the visible and the invisible, noise and speech, constitute what this paper calls the distribution of the sensible. (Rancière 2006: 103)

Politics occurs when a citizen looks into the urban space and evaluates the urban space and contexts where street artworks are exhibited, their content and aesthetic qualities as line, colour, composition, balance, tine and harmony, but also the ways a

2 One of the main actors that emerged during the situation was the so-called first line, a generally youthful popular expression that confronted the public force and the paramilitaries with stones and handmade shields that constantly attacked the mobilized society, thus generating a purpose of care of the population and its community exercises developed in various points of resistance.

street artist or a collective follow their creative processes: inspiration, imagination, idea, sketching, planning, remaking and showing.

Scenes

For this semiotic and hermeneutic route, I will explore the wall painting signs and symbols with Peirce, then with Mitchell's (2009) ekphrastic analysis, and finish by reaching Rancière's notion of dissensus.

Eco (1992) argues that the first thing an artwork says is said through the way it is made. Thus, the scratch on the institutional wall and the stencil on the street seek to connect and relate to the ordinary citizen, enquiring about their feelings, social posture and, finally, overcoming the aesthetic fact, their social and political thoughts. Through social exchanges, we acquire, transmit and perpetuate the knowledge, beliefs and values that allow us to share a common conception of things and others. In this sense, this reconstruction of reality, this representation of reality that takes on a truth value for each of us, is above all social, elaborated according to our characteristics and shared by a group of people who also have them. Representation for Peirce (1996) is an object which stands for another so that an experience of the former affords us a knowledge of the latter.

> There are three essential conditions to which every representation must conform. It must, in the first place, like any other object, have qualities independent of its meaning. It is only through knowledge of these that we acquire any information concerning the object it represents [...] In the second place, representation must have a real causal connection to its object. [...] In the third place, every representation addresses itself to a mind. It is only in as far as it does it that it is a representation. The idea of the representation itself excites in the mind another idea and so that it may do this some principle of association between the two ideas must already be established in that mind. [...] (Peirce 1996: 306)

The condition then is that the sign must be able to connect the words with the things represented; that is, if it is not possible, descriptions and consequent interpretations are not a sign. Continuing with this logic, Mitchell's image turn (2012) explains that there is no essential difference between images and words; moreover, there is no opposition between those languages: art and texts, nor between the relation between an artist (an individual that speaks and sees) and the artistic work (an object that can be seen and is mute). This relation built a meta-imagen between the image and the ekphrasis, linking both symbolic languages and significances, making visible how the aesthetic discourse is interpreted linguistically towards a reflection whose objective is a political reflection in the open urban space.

Language can be used to describe representative figuration and the other way around. Description, narration, exposition and other acts of speaking are not exclusive to a media; they are not specific, and do not belong to a particular medium; both languages can transform a passive image into a textual living creature and vice versa (Mitchell 2012: 144). This notion incorporates the possibilities of work from the transdisciplinary, which does not imply the dissolution of its objects in those of other social disciplines, but the "construction of articulations – mediations and intertextualities – that make its specificity" (Martín Barbero 2002: 217).

In the following section, I will present artivism and dissensus notions, and then discuss the three scenes, developing a possible semiotic interpretation of artworks cases in the social-political Colombian crisis.

Artivism and Dissensus

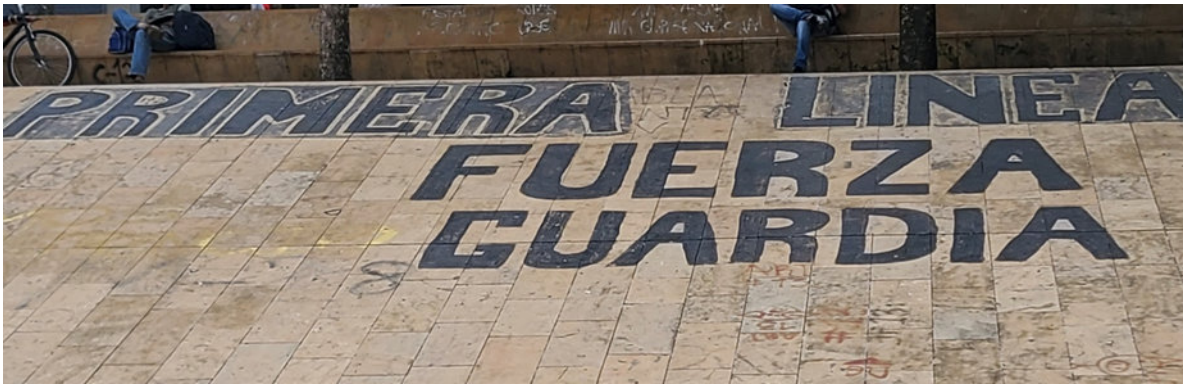
Misak Avenue in the capital city Bogotá, Parque de la Resistencia in Medellín, and Puerto Resistencia in Cali are today the icons of the resignification of those cities that are titled rebel cities, we can say now, cities that belong to rebel countries, according to Harvey (1996), cities that are territories of the second independence.

La Calle Grita [The street screams] collective painted the walls in different Colombian cities in response to the violent oppression hidden by the state and its institutions. The graffiti artists focus on the nodes of social confrontation: they move from privatized spaces of the owned mass media to public areas and streets. The size of graffiti increased significantly – protesters were creating murals, reconfirming those silenced. The roads are huge messages that could be read from the helicopters that permanently surrounded the demonstrations, and harassed, monitored, and attacked people. Here are some examples applying the semiotic analysis to reveal the process of the Rancierian dissensus notion at Resistance Park.

Figure 1. Resistance Park in Medellín, April 2021. At `https://bit.ly/3un1ys5`

Pandemic artivism did not differentiate artists from non-artists. Street art as a plastic expression became a form of logical, political and emotional communication. It is understood as political and aesthetic creation with a social objective: to put the political problem in the eye of the beholder, in short, a call to conscience. Each image, line, letter, and drip of paint expresses the loss of future opportunities, poverty, misery and exclusion through symbolic engagement. Collectives of young artists, students, workers and organizations build a scene of resistance for mobilization encoded and promoted with the murals. Here are some examples:

Figure 2. First line: Strength to the indigenous guard.
Author: unknown. Resistance Park, Medellín.



First line students painted these graffiti at Resistant Park in April 2021 (Figure 2). Figure 3: The Assassin State speaks directly to the state as an institution that itself is criminal, guilty of man slaughter, but goes unpunished. Figure 4, during an intervention made by the president at the Agora convention centre in Corferias, in which, when referring to the current situation in the country, he had a "lapse" and said "because that Colombia with a capital P is the one we need." Polombia? Social networks do not let anything go by, and President Iván Duque is currently the main subject of memes in the country due to his most recent mistake, so the protesters use the error in signifying what many have considered President Duque's incapacity.

Figures 3 and 4 at Resistance Park. Authors: unknown. Medellín

Figures 5 and 6, Resistance Park, Medellín. A murder-state graffito and long-live resistance flyer. Authors: unknown.

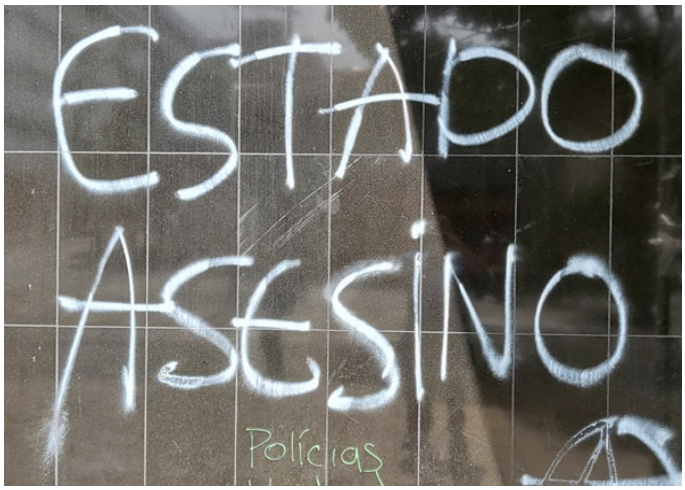


Figure 5, painted with manuscript letters, acts as an emotional testimony in the Assassin state. Figure 6 is a fascinating piece. The stand-up figure represents an indigenous person from Misak wearing traditional costume with open wings that support the mountain ranges; the territory of the graffito closes with the arch made by the slogan "Long live the resistance" that touches the sky, and clouds symbolize eternity. The message is a powerful continuity: from the ancestors to the present to the future.

Scene 1: The National Symbols without Fear

This poster, created by artist Juan Fernando Vélez, mainly circulated on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.

Figure 7. National Strike: Without Fear. Author: Juan Fernando Vélez, 2021. Courtesy @Juanfvelezg

If art seeks to create meanings, the artist puts into circulation one of the signs and symbols of Colombian culture to challenge the established truths and offer a new interpretation of the image as content (Eco 1992). The premise is that a picture can only be understood from a particular perspective: that of the observer.

The image presents three stripes of colours referring the viewer to the colours of the Colombian flag. The tricolor stripes of the image invoke the sense of belonging to a country, to a nation. The flag provokes in the viewer a call to think about the homeland. Each colour stripe represents, symbolizes, synthesizes, and represents key elements of the country's wealth and national identity, which makes us Colombians. Yellow indicates the nation's gold and wealth, blue represents the two seas surrounding Colombia's maritime borders, and red signifies passion and pride as a Colombian citizen.

What is interesting about Velez's work is that the artist proposes the decision made by the front-line protesters to invert the position of the Flag and the national emblem. This decision has a socio-political meaning, reinforcing the idea of rage, tiredness and unease. Starting with the pandemic and through the protests, many households and the protestors used the Flag upside down to symbolize the distress and rage Colombians felt.

Figure 8. Colombian National Emblem

Velez's artwork plays with the spectator's memory and citizen values, implicit within the national symbols, to indicate that something is not right, something is not working in the country, politically, socially, and much less economically. Colombia is upside-down, the State is made wrong.

The scene shows an inverted flag. The red stripe covers the blue line of resources and the yellow bar of gold and prosperity; this inversion of the patriotic symbols, in moments of protest, symbolizes the bloodbath that covers the country, of the murders of social leaders, young students and women, among others; the blood is spilled over the country, evidencing the Error 2021 of the State against the less favoured population in its health and tax reforms.

By invoking the inverted Flag tricolour, the artist confronts the observer with civic, formal and emotional content. He presents a requirement, a call to think and reflect on the homeland, the country. By the time the observer looks at the artwork, the use of the symbol claims, requests and exhorts the viewer first by an act of respect that goes through the body in the presence of institutionality. In this piece, the flag representation comes into play in the semiotic sciences of prosody, understood as the space of personal interaction with the message; kinesics refers to body movements such as the facial expressions, postures and gestures of the viewer when observing the work, and proxemics refers to the concept of personal space and the appropriate distance between work and viewer.

The National Flag, as a patriotic symbol, is used during critical moments of national life, making its presence mandatory; in the same way, the artist summons the citizen to participate in a solemn act. Its powerful symbolic call confronts the observer to immediately think about the notion of homeland. Any Colombian citizen feels summoned; his

emotion is linked to the extended object, awakening innumerable reactions, according to the empathic feeling or not with the symbol, in this case with the situation of the national strike and its demands.

The artistic work presents the words PARO NACIONAL (The National Strike) in the red stripe. The red colour enunciates the seriousness of the matter, and the colour symbolizes the blood spilled by the death of victims of the strike. The fact that it is located in the upper part of the artwork indicates the relevance of this stripe as a solid visual shout containing the work's title. According to the non-governmental organization Temblores (2021), which carried out a verification of complaints and triangulation of information, it was established that between April 28, 2021 and June 26, 2021 at least 4,687 cases of violence by the security forces occurred, not including cases of disappearances, which are still underreported. Among these cases, the organization explained, it was possible to identify 44 homicides whose alleged aggressor was a member of the security forces, 1617 victims of physical violence, 82 victims of ocular aggressions, 228 victims of gunshots, 28 victims of sexual violence, nine victims of gender-based violence, 2005 arbitrary detentions against demonstrators, 784 violent interventions in the framework of peaceful protests, and 35 cases of the use of Venom weapons by Esmad[3]. Alarming figures, considering that protest is a right to which citizens should have access without being exposed to violence.

The artist writes the word RABIA (Anger) in the blue stripe, which evokes a communal feeling. This text clarifies a national emotion, closing the circle about this socio-political situation and clearing the message. The feeling that encompasses the human rights groups that make up the protest shows their indignation and exhaustion with the excesses and abuses of a neoliberal government with pretensions of monarchy.

The yellow stripe contains the words SIN MIEDO (without fear). The artist uses exaggeration with the typographic text as a visual and conceptual resource, thus paradoxically implying that fear no longer exists, that neither the Esmad bullets nor the persecution of the police, and even the fear of dying from COVID 19 amid the pandemic can suppress the indignation and the right to demand justice and equity in a country dominated by a corrupt administration.

Finally, considering the semantics, we find in the centre of the work a hint – the words Error 2021. The artist points out the year of the State's reform proposal as a consecutive numeral and qualifies it as an error with the date because it is not the only one there is. It is an index that adds to the different arbitrariness of the government in power against the working class. From the symbolism of colour and semantics, the work builds a

3 ESMAD is an anti-riot unit that was created in 1999 during the government of Andrés Pastrana in one of the most acute periods of the war in Colombia. It reports to the police and is attached to the Ministry of Defence. Although it was founded under a transitory decree by former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), Duque's political godfather formalized it and created the course that trains the agents of this unit.

network of meanings and questions for the observer, forcing him to watch, think, and then take an ethical position, a political decision that includes agreement or disagreement; it must say that millions of Colombia people agree with the government.

From the pragmatic point of view, the artwork Paro Nacional Rabia sin Miedo, by Juan Fernando Velez, relates the image-text with the spectators by confronting their social, civic and ethical values, inviting them to die for their rights without fear. At the same time, it appeals to the political by summoning expressions of citizen empathy, cooperation and solidarity so that the citizen-observers respond to this image that symbolically denunciates the socio-political malaise of the country, which is what Rancière calls the dissensus.

Scene 2: Street Art, The Killer State

Figure 9. Murder State graffito, Author: Fuerza Graffiti collective , Medellín, 2021. Courtesy by Fuerza Graffiti. See more at `https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/mural-estado-asesino-y-otros-graffitis-que-han-sido-borrados-article`

The graffiti community of Medellín painted the walls of San Juan Avenue in Medellín with the words "Murder State" – ESTADO ASESINO on May 3, during the demonstrations for the National Strike, and police violence was denounced and documented by human rights organizations. The mural lasted less than a week, as it seems that members of the Army erased it in the early morning of May 8. As well as this one, other murals mentioning the security forces were left for memory[4]. The size of the work is impressive, reaching about 800 metres.

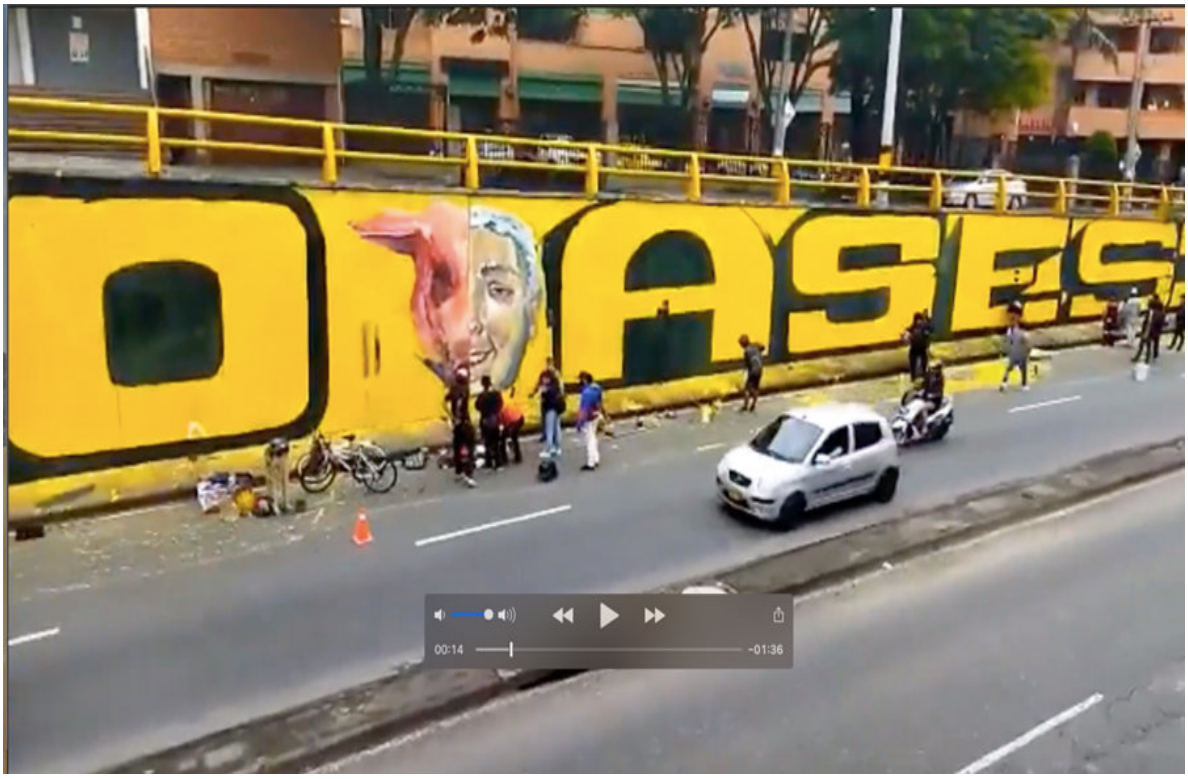
The colour range appeals to those used in patriotic symbols, such as the flag and the nation of Colombia. The blue colour is replaced by black to enhance the volume of the text image and symbolize the dark panorama that the country is going through. As in Velez's work, the colours seek to take hold of the viewer's gaze, no matter whether they are in a car or walking, to urge questioning.

The phrase challenges the passer-by; it forces them to take a socio-political stance; no one is spared to reflect on this statement. First with themselves and then within the political crisis. No doubt, even those who do not feel committed or called, or ignore the vast message made a political, ethical and moral decision by silence, omission, or supporting the strike. This text-image is a micro-story; it represents a country in a state of defencelessness, a people subjected to the power of the corrupt. However, what is beyond this story? There are the stories of those who participate in the political scene, no longer as protagonists but as spectators: women, men, young people, students, boys and girls who observed, listened, felt and interpreted the actions and speeches of the street artwork and who processed their interpretations of the text-image: The Assassin State in the privacy of their mind, homes or offices.

Spectators are ethically responsible, said Arendt (2007). Responsibility must be differentiated from moral guilt because guilt is always personal and non-transferable, while political responsibility is collective. Arendt explains that the spectator as a narrator is someone who observes reality, feels it, and judges it; that is, they interpret it from their experiences, dreams, ambitions and desires, and narrate it to create an opinion and, in some cases an adhesion to specific actions and discourses. They are a narrator acting in the public space. Two conditions must be met for there to be collective responsibility: 1) The spectator embodies desire, oppression and power, 2) The spectator also manifests a critical attitude, conflictive in itself, towards politics understood as narration or discourse (Arendt 2007:152).

4 At https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/mural-estado-asesino-y-otros-graffitis-que-han-sido-borrados-article/

Figure 10. Murder State. Author: Fuerza graffiti collective, 2021. Image from a video. Courtesy of Fuerza Graffiti. See more at https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/mural-estado-asesino-y-otros-graffitis-que-han-sido-borrados-article



The central part of this artwork is the face of the Colombian president Ivan Duque, divided into two parts: the left part, before the word STATE, presents the head of a malicious pig, reminding the reader of the nickname "Porky" that has been given to the president from the beginning of his government, meaning that the murderous State is the pig. The second half, which precedes the ASSESSIN text, is a figurative image of a smiling Iván Duque, signifying his ironic performance as the one directly responsible for the murderous State that this text image denounces. It is interesting how the shadow of the A completes the pig's right ear, configuring the literary murderous pig, among other possible understandings. The pink colour materializes the tone of the message, connoting real pig skin and trying to show the president's weakness.

The aesthetics make visible from an image-text a socio-political reality in the country context. The citizen understanding exercise of all provokes the reaction with different views and opinions, expanding the interpretative and political possibility of the citizen observers and, therefore, the disagreement. The potency of the discourse of this image-text can be interpreted in the speed with which it was erased by the city's military forces and other citizens who were questioned by this graffiti, causing both dissents as the truly political fact proposed by Rancière (2012).

Cali scene: The raised fist

Figure 11. Raised left fist symbol in Puerto Resistencia in Cali.
Authors: Puerto Resistencia community. At `https://bit.ly/3qGjzAE`.

The origin of this symbol or gesture is unclear. Its use in trade unionism, anarchism and the labour movement had begun by the 1910s. The metaphor of a fist means that the hand is something more significant than the sum of its parts. In the United States, a clenched fist was described by the magazine Mother Earth as "symbolical of the social revolution" in 1914. Fist-based iconography can be seen in early propaganda for labour organizations, such as in a famous cartoon of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a revolutionary American union. The general iconic idea was to show how the first mass can confront power. A first-line artist said that the vast huge raised left fist symbolizes our sovereignty as a country and is a symbol of resistance and struggles for a better nation with social justice. The monument, over 10 metres high, was built by protesters of the national strike in the Puerto Rellena sector, now named Puerto Resistencia, in eastern Cali. The figure has been named "Monument to the Resistance" and represents the national support for the protest in Colombia. The statue was made in 17 days by young people who were part of the Front line; however, the boys had the help of engineers and builders.

Unlike the wholly closed fist, this Colombian protest hand has open fingers holding the word resistance over the colours of the Colombian Flag as a message of unity in the feeling of indignation and struggle. People from Cali built the symbolic hand. Still, it also symbolizes that it was made with the support of all the Colombian people, pushing at the same time a heartfelt tribute to the victims of the strike, expressed by a young man named Juan[5], spokesman of the protests in that region of Cali.

Viewers can see over the Colombian fist symbol a series of images of helmets, books that denounce the dream to access study, indigenous faces, and young Afro-Colombians excluded from the labour system. Soccer balls appeal to the right to recreational and sporting spaces; also hanging from the fist are some rocks used by protesters to defend the territory from state forces. All these images refer to the young victims of police violence and others killed during the protest.

Likewise, the raised fist has around it a protective frame of shields, pierced by bullets, of some young people of the front line fallen or disappeared by the government forces in complicity with paramilitary forces. The faces of men, women and young people who have disappeared give life to the raised fist. These images cry out to stop the violence, corruption, and lack of opportunities in health, education and employment suffered by the Colombian people.

This community symbol evidences the dissent as a political fact against the tax and health reform. The logo expresses weariness of the neoliberal policies against people without opportunities, thus the slogan "they messed with the wrong generation," that is to say, with those who have nothing to lose. Dissensus is understood as transformation

5 At https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDol65z7tV0

in the political culture with a new critical generation that hopes for change and believes in it. Finally, the spectators can complete the idea of emancipation by realising what world they are constructing (Rancière 2008).

Conclusions

The article discussed the visible significance of selected artwork in the context of the social mobilisation in Colombia in 2021. While the article mostly focused on visual representations, it is important to remember that they were part of a massive artistic mobilisation and simultaneous with other forms of expression such as musical performances, dance expressions, open-air concerts, theatre groups in the streets, artistic collectives in all modalities, symphonic concerts and neighbourhood concerts performed with the lids of pots by ordinary people expressing solidarity with the protests, the outraged citizens who came out in the silent nights to speak up, that is, the vast majority of ordinary citizens who felt that it was the moment to participate, to become visible in their demands. Art mobilised, summoned, and rescued from the silence produced by fear; an immense majority expressed their discontent as active actors or spectators who acquired a civic conscience.

By reading the artworks, the transient, walking spectators become "an emancipated community, a community of narrators and translators" capable of making the work of art their own and actively tracing the scope of its metaphors (Rancière 2003: 11). A fact that is fulfilled with the strategic use of public spaces by street art, their dimensions, and their call for the national institutional colours that summon the filial sense for the homeland by those who have nothing to lose.

That is why the essential task of critical art will not be to oppose the reality but to provide strong metaphors in a new perception and understanding of the real. A job that must not only be done in the field of an art but with society beyond any frontiers: this is where it is possible to elaborate and propose a polemic common sense that shows other links between words and things (Rancière 2008: 111).

The changes facilitated by artivism produce unrest, disagreement and transformation. New objects and subjects arise, altering the shared sensibility; in this way the spectator is able to experience the transformations between the public (urban art) and the private sensibility (consciousness), allowing the appearance of new rationalities and realities that question the tradition and conventional ways of thinking and being in it, and lead towards emancipation. Colombia was not the exception.

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Missing is not a destination: Bringing the indigenous woman home in MMIW literature

Abstract. This article underscores the relevance of literature within the current Missing and Murdered Indigenous Woman movement, which denounces the high rates of violence suffered by Indigenous women in Canada and the USA. As I argue, MMIW literature is a particularly useful form of activism because it makes the problem more visible as it offers a diversity of images that challenge the settler colonial silencing, dehumanizing and pathologizing of the Indigenous woman. Literary texts examine the multiple layers of the MMIW issue and its settler colonial sexist/racist roots, and simultaneously search for an emotional response that boosts engagement. The article offers a contextualization of literature within the MMIW movement in connection to activism, it reflects on the challenges of approaching the issue from a non-Indigenous perspective, and it engages in a close reading of works by Tanaya Winder and Linda LeGarde Grover to illustrate the most significant features of MMIW poetry and fiction. Both authors challenge the Western narrative of survivorism, moving beyond the passive or guilty victim roles in settler colonial representations, and positing relationality as a key value to refute the silencing and invisibility of Indigenous women.
Keywords: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, settler colonialism, survivorism, artivism, relationality, Marcie Rendon, Tanaya Winder, Linda LeGarde Grover.

The MMIW movement and literature[2]

The present article examines the relevant role of literature within the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) movement[3], a contemporary grassroots

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2 The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (MINECO) and the European Regional Development Fund (DGI/ERDF) (code FFI2017--84258-P); the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (code H03_20R); as well as Prof. John McLeod and the School of English at the University of Leeds.

3 More recently, the movement has expanded to include violence against girls (MMIWG), two-spirit

coalition aimed at raising awareness about the high rates of violence suffered by Indigenous women in Canada and the US[4]. This violence takes many forms, including sexual abuse, murder, trafficking, or forced disappearances. The term "epidemic" is commonly used to refer to the MMIW crisis, but it is also contested since, as Sarah Deer claims, this is not "a contagious disease," but "a crime against humanity" (2015: x). MMIW activists organize marches, compile information, promote legal change, and assist the affected communities. The most representative symbol of the movement is the red handprint across the mouth, which stands for the silence in the face of violence against women and the suppressed voices of those who have gone missing. Frequent catchphrases vindicate presence ("NotInvisible"), resist the missing women's exclusion from history ("You are not forgotten") or focus on the impact of violence on communities ("No More Stolen Sisters"). Artistic creativity plays a fundamental role in supporting MMIW activism, the most representative example being Jaime Black's REDress project, an installation consisting of red dresses hanging in open spaces to symbolize the missing women which started in Winnipeg in 2010 and has since traveled in Canada and the US[5].

As MMIW activists often claim, Indigenous women go missing several times: first and foremost, at the hands of the perpetrators; but also, subsequently, in the media, in data, in the justice system. They are not considered newsworthy (Barker et al. 2022), and "[o]ver 95% of MMIWG are never covered by the mainstream media" (Ficklin et al. 2022: 59). In 2015, the absence of official statistics moved Annita Lucchesi, a member of the Southern Cheyenne Tribe, to create the MMIWG2 Database, hosted by the Sovereign Bodies Institute. As she says, "[f]or too long, data has been about other people telling native people who we are… It's time that we tell the world who we are, and the world [to] actually listen to us" (Bayona-Strauss 2020). As for the lack of justice, problems of jurisdiction due to the tribes' lack of legal sovereignty have been noted in various studies, starting with one by Amnesty International (2007). All in all, missing women are not considered full citizens with basic human rights and are treated as ungrievable, precarious lives (Butler 2004) or "wasted humans" (Bauman 2004).

When Indigenous women are represented by others, their presence is more often than not buried under the prevalent dehumanizing images imposed on them. The

peoples (MMIWG2S), transgender (MMWG2ST), queer, questioning, intersex and asexual people (MMI–WG2SLGBTQQIA). Both this article and the literary representations of violence it examines are focused on Indigenous women, so I will be using MMIW throughout my text.

4 Since the publication of Amnesty International's *Maze of Injustice* in 2007, and the Canadian National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in 2019, most of the texts about the different facets of MMIW start with an account of the outrageous levels of violence that Indigenous women are subjected to. See, as recent examples, Ficklin et al. 2022, Heim 2022, Joseph 2021, Luoma 2021, Mack & Na'puti 2019, Myers 2022, Parsloe & Campbell 2021, or Presley 2020.

5 See `jaimeblackartist.com/exhibitions`. Presley 2020 offers more examples of MMIW art.

stereotype of the promiscuous Indian woman, who is prone to deviance and incapable of controlling her impulses, is determining in the victim-blaming processes that are activated whenever an Indigenous woman goes missing[6]. Furthermore, Indigenous women are all too often pathologized and deprived of agency. In fact, the use of the passive voice is commonly associated with settler colonial accounts of MMIW, a tendency which downplays perpetrator violence and accountability, thus obscuring the responsibility of the state and its institutions (de Bourbon et al. 2022). Needless to say, it is extremely important for Indigenous women to take control of the images concerning them, to represent themselves from their own personal and tribal perspectives. This is relevant because, as Miranda offers, "without a voice, one remains a victim; with a voice, one becomes a survivor. [...] [B]y telling our stories, Native women can move past survival and into the role of healers" (2010: 105). Hence, we can argue that the major objectives of the MMIW movement are twofold: to make the problem of violence against Indigenous women visible, and to make the problem not the only thing that is seen or known about these women, so as to avoid re-victimizing them. This is very efficiently achieved through literature.

By MMIW literature I refer to Indigenous literary works that engage directly and explicitly with the MMIW movement, becoming a way of activism in their visibilization of the problem and their decolonial motivation. In spite of recent contributions to the field, it still deserves more critical attention, especially that produced in the US[7]. As I argue in the next section, approaching MMIW literature from a non-Indigenous perspective is challenging, and there are some ethical considerations to make concerning the risk of simplification and essentialization. For one thing, in order not to fall into further simplification or stereotyping—or, to use Chimamanda Adichie's well-known term (2019), the "single story" of the disappearance of these women—it is essential to offer a diversity of images and stories from Indigenous perspectives. This is the first step in rebelling against the dehumanization brought on by the forces of settler colonialism. Hence, in this article I offer an overview of the main characteristics of MMIW literature by delving into two of its most relevant examples: the poems of Tanaya Winder and the fiction of Linda LeGarde Grover. These authors belong to different traditions—Duckwater Shoshone Nation and Bois Forte Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, respectively—and they resort to a variety of literary genres and forms, but they show a common motivation in their denouncing of the MMIW crisis.

6 See, for example, Morton's analysis (2016) of the billboards warning Indigenous women against hitchhiking in the Highway of Tears, a particularly dangerous region in Canada, and her exposure of the way they are perceived as engaging in risky behavior—therefore, being willing victims and wrongdoers—without analyzing the reasons why they have no other options of mobility.

7 For previous studies of US literature in connection to MMIW, see Bowers 2017, Macklin 2021, Martínez-Falquina 2020 or Heim 2022. A good analysis of Canadian MMIW literature is offered by Hargreaves 2017.

Similarly to other kinds of MMIW artivism (see Presley 2020), literature is capable of offering data—still very much in need of attention—as it aims at provoking an emotional response[8]. Yet, literary language is quite unique in the way it not only reflects reality, but also contributes to shaping it, and this makes it particularly useful to provide a complex and multi-layered vision of the situation. MMIW literature privileges the active voice, offers a diversity of voices and stories, and honors the lives of the missing women, going beyond the victimizing event that took their lives, reclaiming their right to belong as grievable citizens, and vindicating their place both in the community that mourns them and in society at large. Hence, it contributes to the recovery of the voice of the missing and murdered women, offering an outlet for grief and thus a possibility of healing. Furthermore, as Cécile Heim claims, "literature is instrumental in understanding and building resistance to this violence thanks to its capacity to perform Indigenous epistemologies" (2022: 21). As I will argue, the most relevant value that is articulated in these texts and which both connects to Indigenous traditions and challenges settler colonial structures is relationality.

"Don't Tell me you Don't See Indians Here": Approaching MMIW literatures through relationality

On one occasion in 2015, when White Earth Anishinaabe poet, fiction writer, playwright and activist Marcie Rendon was scheduled to speak at a spoken word show at the Loft Literary Center of Minneapolis, she realized that her intention to read all the names from the missing and murdered Indigenous women in the recently published RCMP inquiry was too much for her three-minute slot (Rehagen 2018). After all, "[t]heir names, single spaced, cover 90 pages" (Rendon 2020). Instead, she wrote a poem, "Trigger Warning, or *Genocide is Worse Than Racism*," where each of the seven names that appear represents dozens of stories of women who went missing, were murdered, and did not find justice: "Lacey Feather. 17 years old"; "Tina Michelle Fontaine, 15"; "Angela Poorman, 29-year-old mother of three"; "Brandy Wesaquate, 28"; "Pamela Napoleon, 42" ; "Freda Goodrunning a 35-year-old mom of six"; "Cindy Gladue, 36 years old" (Rendon 2020). The women's identity, age or origin may vary, but they all share a similar, tragic fate: "No arrests have been announced"; "No charges have been laid"; "a jury found Bradley Barton not guilty." Moreover, the number of such deaths "increases daily," it is the same story again and again, and not surprisingly, says the poetic speaker, "*Sometimes, sorrow consumes my soul.*" The poet is grieving, as the world is, and it is through this connection that the grievability of the lost women is vindicated[9]:

8 The combination of data and emotion to connect with readers is exemplified in Ficklin et al.'s 2022 article, which provides a complete and up-to-date account of the reasons, statistics and activist manifestations of MMIW together with the presence of specific women's names and stories.

9 On the politics of grief representation, see Granek 2014.

Sometimes the wind isn't lonely, it's a cover for the bodies on the rise
Call the winds of grief to sing your healing into being
Sometimes the wind isn't lonely, it's a cover for the bodies on the rise

The destiny of all these women is marked by their being Indigenous females living in a settler colonial state. To make this point, the poetic speaker looks her implied reader in the eye and states:

don't tell me you don't see indians here
your only wish
is that we would
silently disappear

By pointing to his/her wish for Native Americans to quietly disappear, the addressee is held accountable and identified with settler colonial institutions, moved by what Patrick Wolfe theorized as the "logic of elimination" (1999, 2006), which "strives to replace indigenous society with that imported by the colonizers" (1999: 27). This wish should also be understood within a larger set of strategies imposed on Indigenous peoples, such as the forced assimilation in boarding schools, the massive adoption of Native children outside their communities or the enforced sterilization of Indigenous women. The prevalence of crimes against Indigenous peoples or the lack of appropriate action on the part of the authorities are reminders that "settler colonialism is an ongoing structure, eschewing periodization" (Mack & Na'puti 2019: 366). This is an idea we should not lose sight of when dealing with the MMIW issue.

Marcie Rendon's poetic lines also warn readers against making the lost women's racial identity invisible or unimportant. Doing so would prevent us from finding a viable solution for the violence, for it would not allow us to see that it has been based on a strategic combination of racism and sexism that has determined Native and non-Native relations ever since Europeans set foot on the American continent. As various critics have convincingly argued, Indigenous women posed a threat for the colonial project insofar as Natives showed alternative ways of structuring gender relations. "Most tribes," Mihesuah states, "were egalitarian, that is, Native women did have religious, political, and economic power—not more than the men, but at least equal to men's" (2003: 42). Hence, the colonial system supplanted "women-centered societies with patriarchal, oppressive structures that condone and thrive on violence as a way to control and oppress members of marginalized communities" (Deer 2015: xiv). Key to this process was the objectification and degradation of Indigenous women, who were not only sexualized and demonized, but also considered inherently violable, just like the lands (Smith 2005: 12; Mihesuah 2003: 59). It is thus no wonder that "sexual violence against Native women

was common after invasion" (Mihesuah 2003: 59), and that it continues as long as Native people live in lands coveted by government or corporate interests (Smith 2005: 107). Very clearly, then, "[w]hen a Native woman suffers abuse, this abuse is an attack on her identity as a woman and an attack on her identity as Native" (Smith 2005: 8). Hence, as Rendon demands, we cannot pretend we "don't see Indians here."

Rendon's lines thus connect to relevant issues to consider when writing about MMIW literatures, or about the MMIW issue in general for that matter. As Mack and Na'putti warn us, "challenging colonial logics is necessary to resist gendered violence in modernity" (2019: 364), which is why they call on us not to appropriate, commodify or extract knowledge from or speak authoritatively about MMIW, but to "radically de-center our voices as critics and center Indigenous knowledge about resisting gender violence in settler colonial nation-states" (365). In turn, Ficklin et al. encourage both Indigenous women and allies to become word warriors and to speak of MMIW with respect, to recognize "the importance of listening to and learning from Indigenous voices" (2022: 72). They remind non-Indigenous people that they do not need saviors, and reclaim

> ownership of efforts for MMIWG and asserting sovereignty of tribal people, rather than adding invisibility. Furthermore, re-centering Native worldviews changes victimization narratives about Native women—restoring the sacred space women originally occupied in many tribal worldviews. Decolonization reclaims disenfranchised outlets for addressing ambiguous grief and loss by creating a sense of ceremony—often through community-based and creative efforts that enhance sustainability of grass-roots movements. Decolonization also repairs rifts in kinship networks, creating a sense of community and strengthening the bonds among Native peoples. (71)

Also significantly, Allison Hargreaves argues that we urgently need a critical analysis of the representation of violence against Indigenous women at a time when violence is "misrepresented in ways that pathologize Indigenous women while normalizing systemic colonial violence in their lives" (2017: 26). We should be aware that it is not the missing women who should be considered lacking or guilty in any way. It is the settler colonial structures that need to be scrutinized and challenged.

In this respect, an analysis of MMIW should attend to the settler colonial idea of survivorism, which is, in the words of Sarah Ropp, "an ideology centered around claiming the identity of survivor through the denial of one's own vulnerability" (2019: 132). This is based on the binary opposition between survival and victimization, where the notion of survival has been constructed ideologically in the highly individualistic culture of the United States "as the positive assertion of personal agency that allows one to overcome the passivity associated to victimhood" (132). According to Ropp, the most destructive aspects of survivorism are "the reliance on a sacrificial victim in order to

assert one's survival and the inability of victim-blaming in order to believe in the myth of 'deserved' suffering (and thus escape the guilt otherwise brought on by inaction against another's suffering)" (132). Ropp suggests that survivorism is "a core habit of whiteness" (134), and offers as an example the compulsive urge to interpret US texts that feature child protagonists, particularly poor, ethnically marked children—like Esperanza, from *The House on Mango Street*, or Esch, from *Salvage the Bones*—within the context of redemptive survival, which "undermines our capacity to fully respond, either affectively or politically, to the suffering of less triumphant members of their communities" (133). In her view, this is connected to a typically American worldview where one should not delve into grief and adversity needs to be overcome. As Ropp offers, a critical awareness of survivorism as an inherited, pervasive ideology "helps the reader learn to honor the one who survives without blaming, depersonifying, or dishonoring the one who does not" (133). This idea is essential for my analysis of MMIW literature, where I intend to bring to the fore the way the texts avoid the destructive aspects of survivorism, resisting the trap of victim-blaming or reliance on a sacrificial victim, and vindicate both survivors and non survivors through the essential value of relationality.

Irrespective of differential tribal traits, Indigenous cultures generally interpret being as being-with, and a relational way of being is "at the heart of what it means to be Indigenous" (Wilson 2008: 80). In fact, as Winona LaDuke put it, it is "our relations to each other" that bind Native cultures together (1999: 2). Such understanding of the self as inextricable from its relations is articulated in direct connection to the land, understood as the environment and all its creatures. People, Glen Coulthard claims, are "an inseparable part of an expansive system of interdependent relations covering the land and animals, past and future generations, as well as other people and communities" (2014: 63). In this view, the land is not only central to material survival and individual and communal identity; it is also "an ontological framework for understanding *relationships*" (60, original emphasis). Coulthard theorizes this as "grounded normativity," an ethical framework provided by the land as a mode of reciprocal relationship, which focuses on egalitarianism, sharing, respect, and the recognition of obligation to others and to the world. The land teaches us how to live "in relation to one another and our surroundings in a respectful, nondominating and nonexploitative way" (60). Not surprisingly, settler colonialism has striven to break Native Americans' relation to the land, to such an extent that the continued dispossession of Indigenous peoples is largely about breaking those connections. This explains why, especially in recent years, the recovery and nurturing of relations as the pervading principle of life is one of the most clearly decolonial strategies of Indigenous writers, artists and activists. As we will see in the following sections, it is by articulating the fundamental value of relationality that MMIW literature rejects the settler colonial view on Indigenous women as wasted and vindicates them as grievable lives and complex, sovereign human beings.

The search for words to heal the missing woman in Tanaya Winder's poetry

Tanaya Winder is an author, poet, singer, songwriter and educator from intertribal lineage—Southern Ute, Pyramid Lake Paiute, Diné and Shoshone—and an enrolled citizen of Duckwater Shoshone Nation. Her heritage also includes African American. Acknowledging where she comes from is important to her, for it establishes her place in a web of relations: "I do this to ground myself but also to respect my ancestors; I believe we carry them, their light, and their love wherever they go" (2018c: 268). Relationality is essential to her work: whenever she visits a school and establishes that relationship with the youth, she states, "I leave with a commitment to that community; I will always be responsible and accountable to them because now we are connected" (268). She claims that "[o]ne of the ways we are related is through shared pain as a result of historical and ancestral trauma" (269), thus pointing to the shared vulnerability of Indigenous peoples under settler colonialism. Living with PTSD—which she re-defines as "Post-Traumatic Settler Disorder" (2020: 188)—"means seeking ways to survive" (188), and there is surely much to be done

> in reclaiming and rebuilding the ruptures brought on by colonialism and capitalism—the trauma from historical genocidal acts committed against us. From relatives being taken away from their homes and families to be forced into boarding school to our women, girls, and two-spirit relatives being stolen, history is inscribed on our bodies. When our women and children go missing, it is our responsibility to seek justice. When the world is silent about our struggles, art can be an act of resisting that silence. (188)

Storying—"excavating our ancestors' stories" (188)—is an act of survivance as well as an exhibition of creative sovereignty. And very importantly, in that act of excavation she finds love, the epitome of relation and the key to understand Winder's work at large: "Our ancestors' love flows through our veins. I imagine it as moments of impact, connection, and a web of light woven through each heart we encounter on our paths" (2018c: 271).

Winder's activist work in support of MMIW includes the co-founding of the Sing Our Rivers Red (SORR) collective of Indigenous artists, poets and activists to raise awareness of the issue. SORR promoted National MMIW Awareness Day—established on May 5th 2017—as well as a traveling exhibit composed of earrings donated by the families of missing or murdered women, which has been presented in various states in the US and Canada (Carr 2017). The original exhibit included 1,181 single earrings, and like Rendon's poem, or like the red dresses hung by Jamie Black, it resorts to beauty and the

emotional impact of art as it focuses on representativeness: each earring stands for a lost Indigenous woman, but it is also one of a pair, the second one missing, thus engaging with the tension of presence and absence.

These ideas also play a relevant role in Winder's poetry, one of the most interesting examples of recent MMIW literature. In "Missing More than a Word" (2018a), she ponders the lack of language to apprehend the statistics:

> Someone once asked me, what are the words I do not yet have—
> …
> …
> …
>
> verbs that will story our bodies into something more
> than missing, more than squaw or lost, beyond statistics:
> *1 in 3 Native women will be raped in their lifetime*. (220)

The sets of three suspension dots indicate ellipses—the lack of words, the missing women, the single story of the Indigenous woman—which, in turn, become patterns on the page, the dots bringing the words together, the silences creating the space for a muted beat. The poetic speaker digs, layer after layer of settler colonial history, laws, injustice:

> […] I dig until mud and earth find home
> underneath my fingernails. I'll plant something new
> in the absence *burn vanish underreport* [.] (220)

Her mission is to reach the place where Indigenous women will not be erased, and this is only found in the deep connection to the land:

> Let us poem a place where you cannot erase us into white space.
> …
> …
> …
> Let us dig to remind ourselves our roots are ancestral
> and there is nothing deeper
> than these sacred, dirt-covered hands. (220)

In "Extraction: Seeking Ways to Survive," the poetic speaker engages in a dialogue with her grandmother, who teaches her to embroider and knit, as well as songs and "words,/ in 'Indian' as she says" (2020: 186). For generations, tongues were pierced with

needles, boarding school is "where people go to die," in a system where the colonizers "saw our bodies as land full of resources / waiting to be extracted and exploited" (186). The women are still looking for words to heal from exploitation:

> Can we un-suicide, un-pipeline, un-disappear our dear ones? There is no word
> for undo but many ways to say return. We never get to go back to before[.] (187)

Disappearance takes many forms: drugs into their veins—"alcoholism is the symptom not the disease" (186)—fathers "evaporating" (187) and mothers "flooding themselves/ into unglobable rivers because their mothers were taken long ago" (187). There is a continuity in the loss, and there is a continuity in the search, which does not stop:

> We are still searching dragging rivers red until we find every body
>
> that ever went missing. For as long as I can remember, we've been stolen:
> from reservation to Industrial boarding schools and today
>
> our girls, women, and two-spirit still go missing and murdered.
> I could find no word for this. (187)

The weaving—of stitches, of words—is the way to healing: "Who taught us/ to sew new memories into old scars, fingers threading needle/ so precise in its recorded pain?" (187). Even when hands fail, the poetic speaker asserts, "my mouth wants to tell the story" (187).

The story recurs, as in "Love Lessons in a Time of Settler Colonialism" (2018b), where strategic enjambment points to fluidity and fragmentation simultaneously:

> [...] as an Indigenous woman silence is deadening. There is danger in being seen, our
> bodies are targets
>
> marked for violence. We carry the Earth's *me too* inside us, a howling
> wind, our mothers & their mothers swallowed these bullets long ago. (221)

The reference to the global MeToo movement points to the connection of the violations on the land and women. Both are the victims of settler colonial violence, and being visible to those shooting eyes is undesirable, for their bodies are what bullets are aimed at:

> The voices ricochet *I wish I were invisible I wish I were invisible*
> *I wish* echoes in my eardrums—we know what it's like to live in fear. (221)

Having an Indigenous body, no Indigenous woman is safe. They live with the constant fear that they may be the next ones to go missing. Statistics prove such high probability of rape that mothers even prepare their daughters for it, as Louise Erdrich famously noted when commenting on her 2012 novel *The Round House*:

> When I found out that Native mothers prepare their daughters to be raped, how to behave when it happens, you know, that it's sometimes considered unavoidable, and that—here's how we're going to behave and respond, it felt like a small devastation of my spirit. (in Tharp 2014: 28)

The poetic speaker of "Love Lessons" also prepares herself, as shown when she says:

> [...] Should
> I go missing: don't stop searching; drag every river until it turns red
> and the waters of our names
>
> stretch a flood so wide it catches everything. And we find each other
> whole and sacred, alive and breathing and breathing and breathing. (2018b: 221)

In "Sonnet MXLCXXXI" (2021), Winder converses with two of the most traditional Western literary forms—the sonnet and the elegy—to honor the missing women while emphasizing the vulnerability of both survivors and victims. The title embodies representativeness once more: 1181 women were taken, and one sonnet should be written for each of those women. The basic knowledge that we would expect to have in order to honor a dead person's life in an elegy is not always available, like that concerning the form of death: "Not when nor where but how, did we lose you,/ in between Last Seen___ the words become elegy/ echoing sidewalks and streets" (25). A strategically situated comma—"how, did we lose you"—creates a caesura that points to disruption, to language interrupted. A similar strategy is used in line 9—"Are we invisible if nobody knows, why?" (25)—which opens various possibilities for questions, all unanswered: Why are we invisible?; Why does nobody know?; or even, Does nobody know why?

As visibilized in the poem, women are denied proper attention on the part of authorities, the police, the justice courts. As a consequence, the missing woman is exposed: pictures are handed out to strangers, posted on bulletin boards, categorized under the M-word—"Missing/ as if it were destination, a place one goes/ to disappear in invisible cities" (25)—which does not let the individual be seen as an individual, for "there's no hero like/ in the movies. No ads, mainstream coverage, or TV shows/ to show our story" (25). The blame falls not on the women, of course, but on society, which has been desensitized, does not see—does not want to see—the problem: "When 1,181 women were

taken, did eyes cease to have vision/ or pay attention to a body being swallowed up?" (25). Answers will not be found within the structures of settler colonialism, but in the ones who are left behind, whose sense of communal mission is replacing that of conventional heroes of the American tradition, becoming

> an endless search of the cities in which we loved
> (and love) you. We will never forget. We demand for you
> action, words, even a poem that ends: your lives matter, too. (25)

The ones who are left behind are the ones who are grieving—an expression which becomes a political act—and they are on a mission to search endlessly and to never forget. Relationality—at the basis of the dialogues between "we" and "you," the past, present and future—is extended to solidarity across racial borders—the last line pointing both to Black Lives Matter, which shares similar issues with MMIW (Myers 2022: 32) and to poems in the African American tradition like Langston Hughes' "I, Too" (1926). All in all, there is nothing that suggests justified or deserved suffering here; survival is not redemptive, there is no direct equivalence between agency and survival vs. passivity of those who are victimized. They all demand a voice, they all vindicate the rehumanization and reindividuation of the missing women, who should not be blamed for what happened to them, but honored as important members of their communities.

Alleviating loss through connection in Linda LeGarde Grover's *In the Night of Memory*[10]

In the Night of Memory (2019) is the most recent novel by Linda LeGarde Grover, an enrolled member of the Bois Forte Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, and professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Set in the fictional Mozhay Point Reservation in Northern Minnesota—familiar to readers of Grover's previous fiction—*In the Night of Memory* is focused on the childhood, adolescence and early adulthood of Rainfall Dawn and Azure Sky, whose mother Loretta Gallette—who had a troubled childhood and adolescence which ended in alcoholism and poverty—was compelled to turn them over to the County and later disappeared. After the traumatic experience of separation and physical and sexual abuse in several foster homes, the two sisters are reclaimed, through the Indian Child Welfare Act, by their Mozhay Point family, who bring them home to raise as their own. The novel examines the dissociative effects of loss and abuse, legitimizes the grief of disenfranchised peoples, and theorizes about the influence of the past in the present, focusing on

10 A preliminary version of some of the ideas in this section were presented at the 2020/2021 Conference of the European Association of American Studies (University of Warsaw) and the 9th International Conference on Language, Literature and Culture (University of Bialystok).

memory as both a traumatic haunting and restorative process. The text also offers relationality and an ethics of care as an antidote to the absence, violence and dispossession imposed on Indigenous peoples by the ongoing structures of settler colonialism.

Grover significantly dedicates her novel "To the missing Native women / and all who grieve them." Moreover, directly connecting the text to MMIW artivism, the author contributed two pieces to the Bring Her Home: Stolen Daughters of Turtle Island exhibition, featured in the Minneapolis All My Relations Gallery from February 14 to June 27, 2019[11]. As specified in the exhibition flyer, Bring Her Home artwork joins the MMIW awareness campaign to stop sexual exploitation, showing visual stories of the affected women and their families. Resonating throughout the artwork is the plea to know where the missing women are and the wish to bring them home. The intended effect is the visibilization of the magnitude of the MMIW problem as well as the honoring of individual women's lives. The specific artwork authored by Linda LeGarde Grover and her late sister Susan LeGarde Menz is titled "Red Ribbons for Loretta #1 and #2," and it features two pictures of a woman in a red plaid jacket in a wooded area, who, turning her back on the viewer, walks alone in an undetermined direction. Each of the two photographs—taken by Susan LeGarde Menz—is surrounded by red ribbons with handwritten text from *In the Night of Memory*. As the exhibit label reads, "Susie and Linda endeavored to communicate a sense of vulnerability and danger in the midst of beauty. 'Weweni, weweni; walk carefully,' we are saying to all Native women. 'Take care; we love you and need you'" (2019). These pieces acknowledge the vulnerability of Indigenous women whilst addressing them directly, thus pointing to inclusivity and relation. Another relevant claim is made by the exhibition curator, Angela Two Stars (Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux), who warns against reducing the issue to a statistic. As she states,

> My story is only one of many… I was nine years old when my Grandma disappeared. I remember how my family searched for her for months. […] I remember when her body was found, and the horrific way in which she died. I don't want that to be the only thing I remember about her… […] I don't want her to lose her identity to the violent act that took her life. ("Bring Her Home" 2019)

The frequency of the MMIW problem is such that it is not unusual for most Indigenous peoples to have been touched by it more or less directly. But as Two Stars claims, in line with the MMIW movement at large, it is important not to let the terrible events of these women's disappearances and/or deaths be the only thing that is known about them.

11 See http://www.allmyrelationsarts.com/portfolio_page/bring-her-home-stolen-daughters-of-turtle-island-2019/ The artwork for the 2020 Bring Her Home exhibition can be found here: http://www.allmyrelationsarts.com/portfolio_page/bring-her-home-sacred-womxn-of-resistance/

Similarly, *In the Night of Memory* weaves several narratives around the disappearance of Loretta, and by transforming absence into presence through writing, the novel functions as an excavation of memories to honor the lost woman, to come to terms with the grief caused by her loss, and to reestablish belongingness for her relations. Individual and family trauma—the grieving for Loretta's disappearance—cannot be disentangled from American Indian unresolved trauma and disenfranchised grief. In this respect, elder Auntie Girlie, one of the characters of the novel, states:

> As Loretta's auntie in the Indian way, I will tell you that there is more to Loretta's story than her disappearance and more to her disappearance than the story. Stories like Loretta's were and are sadly so common that it didn't even merit mention in the news, that an Indian woman who lived a rough life had lost her children to the County and dropped off the face of the earth without anyone even noticing for the longest time. Loretta was one of those women, one of how many we will never know, and just as it was with Loretta it was for them, that the story is more than any individual lost woman's failings, more than speculation about the mystery, surely more than rumor and gossip and any satisfaction that it was her own fault, or that what goes around comes around, that you reap what you sow, that people get what they deserve. It's our history, the loss of land, of course, but there's more to it: the Old Indians, they knew how to live in the good ways but then so much became lost, with everything that was happening—people getting moved all over the place, the Indian schools and the families that lost their children, and then the drinking, the wrecking of lives—it leads directly to all that is Indian Country today, including the disappearance of Indian women, who the Creator intended to be the heart and spirit, the continuity of the people. That includes Loretta. (21)

The novel deals with trauma, but it would not fit a conventional trauma novel structure. In other words, we do not have a sequence of acting-out behavior followed by partial or complete working-through of traumatic symptoms[12]. Instead of a sequential or linear kind of narrative—which, irrespective of the order in which it were presented would provide some sort of initial situation, climactic moment(s) and final resolution—stories are related in multifarious and interactive ways, time is fluid and characterization is decentered and communal. Unity is achieved through the web of characters, the protagonist being a community which is being observed from different angles. The tapestry of this extended family and their relations is visualized in a family tree at the beginning of the novel, which is introduced as follows:

12 On the applicability of trauma theory to Native American literatures, see Martínez-Falquina 2017.

> Gakina Awiya—
> *All Who Are Here*
> bound by blood, by name, by love, by spirit
> to Loretta Gallette and her daughters, Azure Sky and Rainfall Dawn

The web of relations around Loretta and her daughters is organized by place, including "Laforce relatives and friends of Mozhay Point reservation lands," "Other LaForce Family and Friends," "Gallette Relatives and Friends of the Miskwaa River settlement," "Extended Family and Friends in Duluth, Minnesota," and "Friends from Minneapolis, Minnesota." Several first-person narrators—most notably the two girls and other relatives—speak, and Loretta's voice is thus not completely lost but kept alive, remembered and evoked, albeit indirectly. Her daughter Azure laments that she has forgotten her mother's voice but, as she says,

> my mother still whispers to me: when it starts to rain and drops of liquid quench the thirst within the sparse leafiness of the old maple tree in the front yard, the wet patter deepening on saturated leaves, rolling water onto the dryness of exposed roots. She whispers to me in the absence of rain, on days that the wind picks up and scatters dried leaves across a sidewalk; in the braking of a city bus or in the weighty freedom of northern lights in the night sky. (4)

The most resonant symbol in the novel is that of the Northern Lights, part of the memory in the title that refers to a moment before Loretta lost the girls to the Council. This memory accompanies them all their lives, keeping them united:

> "Waawaate," she says. "Waawaate; it's the northern lights." [...] "Biizindan, little sweethearts; shhhh . . . Can you hear them?" Pulled close, closer, our heads lift like our mother's to listen to the low rumble that is the singing wind of Waawaate. Rising, Loretta pulls the edges of the blanket from the floor and wraps them around me and Rain, then turns to face the lights. She sways, and then she is dancing in the style of Ojibwe traditional women, hands on hips and feet kneading the fire escape floor, its boards softened with age and weather, pivoting half-circles left to right, right to left, lifting the invisible Eagle feather fan in her left hand to return the song of prayer that is the Creator-given gift of Waawaateg. (6-8)

The Waawaate/Northern Lights scene points to the dynamic nature of memory, to its connection to storytelling, and to its healing function by integrating past and present. The lost mother becomes a ghost to her daughters, but as she transcends the worlds of

the tangible to become one with the stars, she provides them with the cultural referent of her Ojibwe dancing.

Showing the relational emphasis made by the novel, after Loretta loses the girls to the County, they are separated and moved to various foster homes, a traumatic experience for both of them. Besides suffering from foetal alcohol syndrome, which determines her development and physical traits, Rain's face is permanently marked by a blow administered by a foster mother, who told them "that [they] were blasphemers who were nothing but fodder for hell" (120). Azure, on her part, suffers from sexual abuse from a foster parent at a very young age. Luckily for them, they are eventually placed in a home together, and once they are reunited, they can pretend that they can return to their younger selves again, "wounded and battered but each beginning to brighten a little more every day, reflecting the other's light" (202). In fact, the two sisters' connection—they have become "two halves of one sister" (5)—works as a strategy of survival and as an antidote to their grief. In the eyes of some foster family children, who cannot see the differences between the two girls, they become AzureRain (60), and they embrace this name and the strength it gives them.

Luckily, the girls are not completely lost, and when they are fourteen and almost thirteen, they are told that they are going to another home "because of the Indian Child Welfare Act. [...] Somebody we were related to had requested us" (73) and they are brought back to their Mozhay Point extended family. As is later explained to the girls, this federal law, passed in 1978, gives tribal governments exclusive jurisdiction over tribal children in matters of custody. Still, "[t]he Indian people are in grief for the loss of so many of our children" (91), a result of settler colonialism made manifest in the loss and abuse of children in boarding schools, or the foster adoption system, so that the past still has "an influence on the present and, in fact, never goes away" (23).

Soon after they are settled in with Junior—a Vietnam veteran suffering from PTSD—and his mother Dolly Johnson, the girls are taken to a powwow where they go through an informal symbolic adoption ceremony. Elder Auntie Girlie, a "magical old woman" (111), holds the girls' hands in hers, stands and remains "upright between the warmth and youth of the girls who, found, would link the generations before me to the generations after them" (117). For the community, the recovery of the girls is a way to bring back Loretta, her absence "shift[ing] shape into a love and care showered onto her daughters, Azure Sky and Rainfall Dawn" (150). For the girls, this means the possibility to heal and find a place in the world, as Azure's words show:

> Each time, whether I am dancing or watching from the side, my heart lifts with happiness and gratitude at being a part of this, but I cherish the early memory of the sobriety powwow at the Coppertop church the most dearly. It was there that Auntie Girlie told Rain and me that we look like our mother—her gift to Loretta and to us that acknowledged and

> clarified our right and proper place in the LaForce and Gallette families, and in the world, as surely as the order of women dancers at Grand Entry. (106)

Loss can be alleviated through connection, but Grover refuses to offer a redemptive or conventionally happy ending to the novel. It is made very clear that some people cannot be found or saved, like Loretta, or like Rain, whose degenerative illness—connected to the consequences of historical unresolved grief—makes her move backwards as Azure moves forward. The younger sister wonders,

> What makes one child survive and one not? And at what point in the heaviness of grief did Rain stop moving forward and fall behind as I continued to run? [...] She looks like the child to whose beginnings she is returning in her dementia. This could be her second chance at childhood; not many get to do that, and I hope that the revisit will wipe out some of what surely is left in her soul from the first. Stroking her hair I think that if I absorb her traumas into myself, she will be at peace, that I must have space for them somewhere and will never be at peace myself anyway. (200-201)

Rain's voice is gradually silenced, but Azure does not let her fall into a secondary or victimized position. Both survivors and non-survivors are honored in this novel, the difference being that whereas some have their voices stolen, those who do not take it upon themselves to speak up for those who cannot.

Conclusion

As the works by Tanaya Winder and Linda LeGarde Grover show—albeit with different strategies in correspondence to the poetic and novel genres they each choose to articulate their message in— MMIW literature avoids the most destructive aspects of survivorism, refusing to blame victims or rely on a sacrificial victim to emphasize the triumph of an individual, and thus further developing the Indigenous value of relationality. As Ropp stated, "[s]urvivorism depends on the shutting down of one's access to one's own vulnerability and full affective range" (2019: 145). This costs people their capacity for intimacy, authenticity, and a sense of connection. Hence,

> [i]f there is a "choice," an agency discoverable in the pursuit of survival, it is the choice between asserting survivorism—straightening up and allowing the other to lie prone—and inclining toward one another in a posture of mutual openness and caretaking. (147)

The works analyzed in this article show victims or less triumphant members of the community who are not blamed or silenced but cared for, honored, made ever-present in spite of the gaps in their lives and representations. As a result, there are no

ungrievable or wasted lives here. Both survivors and non-survivors are seen as part of a community who struggle to regain agency and a voice for self-definition. Doing so requires a recognition of vulnerability, which should not be seen as a sign of weakness but of strength, for it is at the basis of relationality, which, we could argue, is not only the most useful quality to live, but the only way to actually live.

On another note, although there is no question that, in order to understand the current MMIW crisis, we need to examine the history of settler colonialism in America, we should never lose sight of the fact that it is the present conditions of sexism and racism that can and should be changed. The work of Indigenous writers and poets is particularly relevant insofar as they engage with the past to dig into the roots of the contemporary situation, at the same time as they offer new ways of looking not only at the problem but at Indigenous women in general, stressing their humanity, vulnerability and resilience, and offering options for a better future. These writers' creative process is inherently political, a form of activism, for unfortunately, what they represent through words is still too solidly based on the real world, which is unequal and unfair. In response to the MMIW crisis, Anishinaabe writer and critic Leanne Simpson articulated her rebellion by emphasizing presence—"I am not murdered. I am not missing" (in Fahs 2020)—and making the decision to honor the missing women, continue their work, and fight for Indigenous nations and a relation with the state "that is no longer based on violence, heteropatriarchy and silence." As she claims, and as the texts analyzed here also prove, "[t]his is co-resistance. This is community."

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Making things happen: Literature as a means of dismantling silence, shame, and stigma

[Review of *#MeToo and Literary Studies. Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture*, edited by Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewett, Bloomsbury 2021, 415 pp.]

This volume comprises twenty-eight chapters grouped in four thematic sections: "Critical Practices," "Re-readings," "Pedagogy: Practices and Methods," and "Pedagogy: Classroom Contexts," thus giving a logically ordered review of the phenomenon of #MeToo and suggesting ways of using it as a discussion point in the domain of literary criticism and education (high schools, colleges, universities). As the editors Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewett (Professors at The State University of New York at New Paltz, USA) point out, this is the first attempt to address the issue comprehensively. The chapters have been written by academic scholars, lecturers and teachers, and provide a fresh perspective on the variety of literary responses to the cultural, social and political ramifications of the organized fight against various forms of sexual abuse. At the same time, as is acknowledged, this monograph is one of many recent publications of a similar kind (see the selected bibliography below). After all, over just a few years, #MeToo has become a dynamically expanding field of critical reflection.

Initially, #MeToo was criticized for focusing almost entirely on the experience of white cis gender women and marginalizing females of color, autochthons, those living in third-

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world countries, the disabled, and the non-heteronormative. As for the racial context, that was, in fact, a most paradoxical situation. #MeToo has double roots, and the earliest protest was published in 2006 on Myspace, the first social network to reach a global audience, by the African American Black activist Tarana Burke. Over ten years later, the actress Alyssa Milano tweeted a now-famous viral request to her followers: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted, write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" (October 15, 2017). Along with accusations against celebrities such as Harvey Weinstein, Roger Ailes, and Bill Cosby, the world has since observed a surge of analogical activist movements or campaigns: #TimesUp in the USA, #NiUnaMenos in Latin America, #KuToo in Japan, and NOW in Australia, to name but a few. Popular culture responded almost immediately with documentaries and TV shows about rape, sexual harassment, and different forms of misogyny: *The Tale* (2018), *Unbelievable* (2019), and *Second Assault* (2019), among others. Simultaneously, #MeToo met with resistance: victims were often publicly shamed, and employers and lawyers contested the credibility of their testimonies.

Why does "literature" feature in the title of this monograph study? #MeToo has become a powerful movement thanks to its application of storytelling, which has structured the voices of victim-survivors, increased publicity, and, consequently, helped dismantle the silence shrouding the problem. Storytelling, the essence of fiction and non-fiction, is also a bonding agent for all communities supporting the sexually abused. Above all, it is a means of making the traumatic experience more comprehensible for the tellers themselves. This curative property of storytelling has already been successfully tested by psychoanalysis.

The introductory essay of *#MeToo and Literary Studies* outlines the long history of sexual violence, mentioning some of its regional variants: the plight of African American women during the time of slavery and Jim Crow, state violence against women in Latin America, "comfort women" in Korea, and "dowry death" in India. It also emphasizes #MeToo's indebtedness to the feminist theories developed in the mid-twentieth century. Each chapter that follows is worth the reader's attention; however, I would like to dwell briefly on four selected ones.

In "Dismissed, trivialized, misread": Re-examining the Reception of Women's Literature through the #MeToo Movement," Janet Badia, a Professor and Director of Women's Studies at Purdue University Fort Wayne, engages with the critical reception of Toni Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Focusing on these two exemplar narratives, Badia takes a historical perspective and looks at how women's writing on sexual violence has been read, most often erroneously, and how its value has been diminished. At issue here is the political dimension of literary interpretations—the strategies for creating valid canons and the functioning of educational institutions as systems of power that perpetuate patriarchal privilege. As noted, "[t]he #MeToo movement has disrupted more than

just male privilege; it has disrupted syllabi and class discussions, … and has the potential to disrupt literary history" (33). According to the testimonies cited, reading African American women's prose in academic (and other) courses may be a liberating experience for individual participants, an important step in healing trauma. It can be argued whether breaking down psychological barriers belongs to the goals of academic education; nevertheless, Badia believes that efforts in this direction should be taken.

Tanya Serisier, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Criminology at Birkbeck College, University of London, in her "Reading Survivor Narratives: Literary Criticism as Feminist Solidarity," stresses the fact that #MeToo has grown out of the feminist-inspired imperative to say things directly, to everyone. Serisier is the author of the term "narrative politics," which recognizes the potential agency of narrativized testimony in the political milieu: "fighting sexual violence through personal testimony draws on long-standing feminist recognition of the cross-pollination of the literary and the political…" (43). Autobiographical narratives are powerful—the victim gains visibility, their story opens the way for others to speak directly about their anguish, and social perceptions of sexual violence change (harmful stereotypes and myths are debunked). Feminism, however, is by no means only an enabling context. As Serisier notes, it "authorized the telling of the stories" but, at the same time, set "limits on what stories can be told" (48). What is told and by whom still matters, and the statistics leave no doubt about it: "[s]urvivor narratives are predominantly stories of stranger rape told by white, educated, heterosexual, able-bodied, cis women" (49). Language itself is an obstacle, too. How to name the event precisely? "Rape," for example, is a conventionalized, general term that can dilute the particularity of what happened to the victim. On the other hand, it is easily understood. Finding a compromise between uniqueness and commonality remains a challenge indeed.

In "The Limits of #MeToo in India," Nidhi Shrivastava, a PhD candidate at the University of Western Ontario, Canada, re-reads Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* (1991) along with its film adaptation, *Earth* (1998), directed by Deepa Mehta, to demonstrate that speaking out about the experience of violence does not always improve the situation and safety of victims. Shrivastava points to a different, typically Indian embodiment of the #MeToo movement. A case of gang rape in Dehli in 2012 sparked violent protests on the streets and online. As a result, #PinjraTod and #WhyLoiter were launched in 2014. Indian authorities effectively gagged wronged women's mouths, which was nothing new. In 1947, during the so-called Partition, 3 million people were killed in a fratricidal genocide, and 75,000 women were abducted and raped. The public ignorance of the atrocities lasted until 1984. As argued, Metha's film failed to bring the memory of that pivotal event into the mainstream media. In fact, "[t]the [whole] film industry was … complicit with India's cultural silence about Partition" (177).

Sarah Goldbort, a PhD candidate at the University of Buffalo, draws attention to the experience of a queer person in "'Teach as if you aren't afraid of getting fired': A Queer Survivor's Use of Restorative Justice Circles to Embrace Vulnerability in the Classroom." This article is a very personal confession. As the author, a teacher, asserts, LGBTQ+ students and those affected by trauma unerringly sense in what environment they can feel safe. A school in which controversial topics such as rape or nonheteronormative sexuality are forbidden or avoided by teachers is a suppressive institution. "In 2012," Goldbort recalls, "I realized the value of queer visibility when one of my students revealed in class that he was gay; I knew the risk he was taking, and I supported his vulnerability by replying: 'me too.' This was the first time I had disclosed my sexuality to anyone …" (289). A revolution in their thinking about fear and shame led to the organization of "restorative justice circles," which centered on female literature about sexual assault. The idea of "circles" comes from indigenous traditions, which emphasize the importance of ties connecting all living beings. The circle brings participants together, teaches mutual respect, and heals them—an excellent and original environment for discussing literature and authentic experiences.

The articles gathered and edited by Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewett have been written by acclaimed, experienced researchers and fledgling scholars. The inclusion of the latter is an asset of the project as the book has become a significant platform for discussion about a relatively newly-addressed problem seen through the eyes of the young. The analyses encompass numerous aspects of the connections between #MeToo and literature, balancing the number of analyses devoted to canonical and marginalized texts and widening the spectrum of contexts: from linguistic to racial to sexual to national to political. And all of them are permeated by the profound belief in the literature that can make things happen.

#MeToo and Literary Studies. Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture is an exercise in cultural, social, political, and, most of all, literary heuristics, evidencing the awareness of the editors that the complexity of the #MeToo phenomenon still requires exploration. Therefore, the question "what remains to be done?" concluding the introductory essay is so valid. "A lot" is the briefest answer. Assisted by all the contributors to this impressive volume, we feel critically well-equipped to face the task.

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