Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226

Vol. XXI-No. 23 November 2023 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-213

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Inclusive Artistic and Literary Narratives in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Abstract I: Questo articolo propone nuovi aspetti dell'interpretazione del personaggio di Richard in *Metà di un sole giallo* di Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Analizzando le narrazioni letterarie di Richard – rappresentate dalle idee per il suo libro e non solo – e la sua narrazione artistica di un antico manufatto Igbo, cercherò di sostenere che vengono messi in discussione presupposti sia coloniali che culturali. In un secondo momento, verrà anche esaminata e commentata l'inclusività delle sue narrazioni plurali, contenenti un complesso intreccio di diverse forme artistiche.

Abstract II: This paper aims to break new ground in the interpretation of the character of Richard in *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. By analysing Richard's literary narratives – in the forms of the ideas for his book, among others – and his artistic narrative of the roped pot, I will demonstrate that he challenges both colonial and cultural assumptions. By showing the intricate connection of different artistic forms in his multi-layered narratives, the inclusivity they reflect will be also examined and discussed.

Keywords: inclusivity, narrative, art, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Introduction

In 2008, while discussing *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Mabura pointed out that the novels "have so far generated hardly any significant criticism" (2008: 206). As for *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it can be safely stated that since then many thought-provoking contributions have been written. Nonetheless, Adichie's novel is so multi-layered that it keeps offering intriguing opportunities for academic enquiry. In this paper, I will try to break new ground in the interpretation of the character of Richard, Kainene's lover. However, I will not dwell on his identity, albeit complex and fascinating, since extensive and exhaustive analyses have already been provided by Strehle (2011: 664-665) and Cooper (2008: 146-147). Rather, I will try to tease out the deconstructive aspects of Richard's narratives in the novel by examining the literary and artistic spheres they hinge upon.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Richard and Ugwu are by no means the only characters that engage in forms of narrative. Okeoma is most noticeable because his poems are interwoven in the story and add new layers of meaning: Adichie admitted that the poet was inspired by

Christopher Okigbo (Adichie 2008: 51). In spite of the strong presence of narratives in the novel, our attention is drawn to the precariousness and uncertainty of narrative gestures, which are eventually destroyed by the trauma and violence of the Biafran war. By the end of the novel, Okeoma's poems have disappeared after his death, Ugwu's copy of Frederick Douglass's memoir has been partly torn by a young soldier and Richard's manuscript has been buried in the garden by his servant, who is then unable to find it again. Even Odenigbo's research papers – which cannot be considered a fully fledged narrative, but certainly are an example of written testimony and a way of leaving a trace – are retrieved from his house completely charred because some Nigerian soldiers set them on fire.

In the novel, the concept of authorship is as fragile as that of narrative. Much critical attention has been dedicated to the unidentified author of *The World Was Silent When We Died*, whose chapters are reported in the novel in an interesting metanarrative twist. Whilst some critics reckon that the author is Ugwu (Strehle 2011: 665; Lecznar 2016: 125; Coffey 2014: 76; Cooper 2008: 143), Ganapathy maintains that both Richard and Ugwu are the likely authors, but adds that readers inferentially "identify Richard as the *most likely author*" [italics in the original] (2016: 95, 96), which is the viewpoint I am inclined to believe. The noticeable references to the third person pronoun 'he' in the chapters are particularly interesting; given that it is highly unlikely that Ugwu would address himself in the third person, it can be reasonably surmised that someone else is writing about him. Furthermore, Richard may be the author of the chapters in a postmodern way that further complicates the idea of narrative and authorship. As a matter of fact, it might be perfectly possible that Ugwu has written a book entitled *The World Was Silent When We Died*, but that the chapters are not taken from it. Indeed, they look rather schematic and take on the tone of a summary, as if someone were concisely jotting down the main points touched upon by Ugwu in each chapter. At the end of the novel, readers are informed that Richard decides to remain in Nigeria and join the Institute for African Studies. It is in the light of the research he is doing, in my opinion, that the riddle of the chapters should be framed and thus solved.

Even leaving narrative and authorship aside, contrasting opinions have arisen around the character of Richard, who has been defined as "both quasi Igbo and also a typical white racist" (Cooper 2008: 146) as well as "one of the achievements of this work" (Nnolim 2009: 150). Strehle strikingly observed that the narrative "manages to know without knowing" as Richard witnesses events without understanding from a position of diasporic uncertainty (2011: 664), which is an interesting claim I aim to assess. Indeed, in this paper I will adopt a two-pronged mode of analysis in order to show how his literary and artistic narratives deconstruct colonial and cultural assumptions, thus reaching a wider understanding and hinting at inclusivity. The first section will examine his literary narratives – intended not as *The World Was Silent When We Died*, but as the failed projects he had dallied with before *The Basket of Hands* and *In the Time of Roped Pots*. The second section will revolve around his artistic narrative of the roped pot.

Literary Deconstructive Narratives of Colonial and Cultural Assumptions

Richard's three discarded ideas for his book are intriguing narrative cues. While reflecting on his inability to find a fit subject for his work, he confesses that "he had written a sketch about

an archaeologist and then discarded it, written a love story between an Englishman and an African woman and discarded it, and had started writing about life in a small Nigerian town" (Adichie 2017: 75). This string of apparently meaningless narratives will be analysed so as to demonstrate how they problematise tenets of colonial logic that are then debunked by reality.

As for the first idea, in another passage in the novel Richard elaborates on it and adds some details: "Perhaps a speculative novel where the main character is an archaeologist digging for bronzes who is then transported to an idyllic past?" (Adichie 2017: 72). Representing a variation on the "colonial fair land/black coast dichotomy" (Deckard 2010: 108) and paradisiacal view of Africa, the first idea presents a mythologised and idealised conception of Nigeria, seen in idyllic scenarios and endowed with a bucolic past. Even the language used by Richard's brother in a letter concerning his stay in Nigeria is rife with colonial implications. Indeed, he enthusiastically writes: "*Is 'going native' still used? I always knew you would!*" [italics in the original] (Adichie 2017: 137). Interestingly, the same expression can be found in *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh, where the expression 'going native' is imbued with particularly negative connotations that lead an English pilot to thus warn the second mate of the Ibis: "Mind your Oordoo and Hindee doesn't sound too good: don't want the world to think you've gone native" (Ghosh 2009: 51). In line with the idyllic perception of Nigeria, Richard then decides to write about ordinary life in a Nigerian village – thus going back to the third idea. Needless to say, Richard's romanticised image of Nigeria is shattered by the harsh reality of the Biafran war, which undermines his idealising fantasies.

By extension, the Nigerian land comes to be embodied by Kainene. In her allegorical reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Coffey contends that Kainene is an allegory for Biafra and Olanna a representative of Northern Nigeria (2014: 71). However, Richard's inability to clearly distinguish his lover from the much-admired roped pot is also noteworthy, thus pointing to Richard's conflation of Kainene and the idealised Igbo culture. He himself relates to Count Von Rosen that he fell for her after falling in love with the Igbo-Ukwu art. After his lover's mysterious disappearance, Richard's inability to extricate the woman from the artefact aggravates to the extent that often, when asking people if they have seen her, "in his rush, he pulled out the picture of the roped pot instead" (Adichie 2017: 407). To signal his double failure, by the end of the novel Richard has found neither the roped pot nor the woman he loves.

It is precisely his relationship with Kainene that informs the second narrative idea – 'a love story between an Englishman and an African woman' – and contributes to the collapse of another colonial assumption. The asymmetrical relationship between a white man and a local woman is often a colonial trope in literature. Various literary examples come to mind, ranging from Kurtz and the "wild-eyed and magnificent" Congolese queen (Conrad 2007: 76) to characters in more recent works such as *Desertion* by Abdulrazak Gurnah. In Gurnah's novel, the Englishman Martin Pearce leaves an indelible mark of shame on the life and offspring of Rehana, a local woman: "Martin and Rehana lived openly together, for a while, until he left to return home" (Gurnah 2005b: 119). In an interview, Gurnah specifically talked about the trope of colonial romance by underlining that when the narrator of Martin and Rehana's love story realises that the only way of writing it is as a

"popular imperial romance about a European man and a native woman" he refrains from narrating any further (Gurnah 2005a: 39-40).

Outside the pages of literature, Frantz Fanon exhaustively shed light on asymmetrical relationships between white men and black women, where the latter long for white lovers, who will never marry them (Fanon 2021: 31). This situation is perfectly illustrated by Igoni Barrett in *Blackass*. "[M]issing the white man to give her entry into the mixed-race babies club" (Barrett 2015: 253) of her friends who all married Europeans, Syreeta, a young Lagosian woman, consents to host a white man in her house in order to marry him and secure a safe future for herself. In the end, Syreeta is talked by her lover into aborting their child in exchange for marriage, but is nonetheless abandoned by the man. One of the characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* abruptly evokes the specter of asymmetrical colonial-like relationships. However, as he explains, these bonds usually shackle just poor women, not those from wealthy families like Kainene's:

> 'You know, what I am saying is that our women who follow white men are a certain type, a poor family and the kind of bodies that white men like […]. The white men will poke and poke and poke the women in the dark but they will never marry them. How can! They will never even take them out to a good place in public. But the women will continue to disgrace themselves and struggle for the men so they will get chicken-feed money and nonsense tea in a fancy tin' (Adichie 2017: 80-81).

Nevertheless, Richard and Kainene's relationship dramatically upends these assumptions, adding a curious reversal. Their love story is indeed riven with asymmetry, but it bends towards Kainene's side, rather than Richard's – he is "dominated by Kainene" (Nnolim 2009: 146). He soon realises that his lover's life is extremely busy and that it would go on unperturbed if he suddenly walked away. Rather than self-confident, Richard is constantly anxious and keeps fretting about potential rivals in love such as Madu or Inatimi. When Kainene discovers that he has cheated on her with her sister Olanna, he even feels 'transparent,' thus literally fading in front of her strong personality and anger.

Leaving behind Richard's ideas and taking a step further, it is paramount to catch the implications of a peculiar, possibly intertextual episode in his narrative of Nigeria, which defies a double assumption, both colonial and cultural. Achebe's influence over Adichie is evident; reading *Things Fall Apart* was a "glorious shock of discovery" (Adichie 2008: 42). Although it was highlighted that Adichie often alludes to Achebe in her non-fiction (Tunca 2018: 114), connections to Achebe's masterpiece are to be found in her short story 'The Headstrong Historian' (VanZanten 2015: 90), which is not the only text that presents Achebean intertextual references. In Wenske's opinion, *Half of a Yellow Sun* measures how Achebe's novels are still relevant in current times (2016: 73), whereas Lecznar pointed out that Richard is redolent of the district commissioner in *Things Fall Apart* when he admits that writing the history of Biafra is not within his purview (2016: 126). While I think that this connection is interesting, I argue that there are many more intertextual allusions to Achebe in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. For instance, in *No Longer at Ease*, Obi's thought that the members of Umuofia Progressive Union did not realise "that, having laboured in sweat and tears to

enrol their kinsman among the shining élite, they had to keep him there" (Achebe 2010b: 78) is extended and completed by Odenigbo's considerations: "'The real tragedy of our postcolonial world is […] that the majority have not been given the tools to *negotiate* this new world'" [italics in the original] (Adichie 2017: 101). Furthermore, Richard's participation in the *ori-okpa* festival might evoke *Things Fall Apart* and the confrontation between the priest Mr Smith and the masked spirits who reduce his church to "a pile of earth and ashes" (Achebe 2010a: 181).

However, I argue that the most interesting reference to Achebe is linked to Richard and concerns *Arrow of God*. Given the frequency with which comparisons between Achebe and Adichie are made, Tunca suggests close readings of their texts as a solid basis to make the point for specific similarities (2018: 116), which is what I intend to do. When visiting the village where ancient artefacts have been retrieved, Richard falls into conversation with a man and mentions the fact that a burial chamber was unearthed too.

> 'Do you think it was used by the king?' Pa Anozie gave Richard a long, pained look and mumbled something for a while, looking grieved. Emeka laughed before he translated. 'Papa said he thought you were among the white people who know something. He said the people of Igboland do not know what a king is. We have priests and elders. […] It is because the white man gave us warrant chiefs that foolish men are calling themselves kings today' (Adichie 2017: 71).

In this excerpt, there may be a double deconstructive process at work. On the one hand, Richard seems a newborn Captain Winterbottom, the district officer who similarly misunderstood Igbo culture and thought that the priest Ezeulu was a king fit to be appointed Paramount Chief for Umuaro: "The prefix *eze* in Ibo means king. So the man is a kind of priest-king" [italics in the original] (Achebe 2010c: 108). Much later, an Igbo man again rejects those colonial assumptions that ignored local customs and superimposed European conceptions of power over the locals'.

On the other hand, this passage could be more fine-grained in its relevance than it might appear at first sight. Indeed, after being reprimanded for his ignorance of Igbo customs, Richard protests that "[h]e did know that the Igbo were said to have been a republican tribe for thousands of years, but one of the articles about the Igbo-Ukwu findings had suggested that perhaps they once had kings and later deposed them" (Adichie 2017: 71-72). After demolishing a colonial assumption, his narrative defies the conception of local culture as fixed and monolithic – which could be also an inclusive way of deconstructing the idea of the cultural incompatibility between Africa and the West, which Pucherová says that Adichie is trying to break down in her writing (2022: 115). While Pa Anozie promptly identifies kings as alien to Igbos, it might not always have been the case. Culture is always in flux and, here and elsewhere, Adichie underlines that "there is not a 'single story' of the Igbo past" (Ejikeme 2017: 309), which goes for any culture. Moving to Mexico, Newns highlights that, in a work by Gloria Andalzúa, an irrigation system – whose loss to industrialised irrigation is criticised – was the product of Spanish colonisation (2022: 10, 12). Indeed, flexibility not only characterises culture, but also other concepts, such as that of cultural discovery. At the

very beginning, Odenigbo explains to Ugwu that the River Niger was not discovered by Mungo Park but by the Igbo people, who fished there long before his arrival. The colonial context is therefore picked up and its pristine conception of the colonised land dismantled, for "[a]ny 'newness' […] is simply the perception of the Imperialist mind" (Bullock 2000: 100). Therefore, while undermining colonial assumptions about power, Richard's narrative unmasks the tendency to arbitrarily select a portion of history and forge it into a static idea of culture.

The Artistic Narrative of the Roped Pot and the Calabash

> Here is the girl's head like an exhumed gourd.
> […]
> Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible
> Beheaded girl, outstaring axe
> And beatification, outstaring
> What had begun to feel like reverence
> (Heaney 2001: 32).

The roped pot is certainly a key element in Richard's narrative of Nigeria. As with the literary, this artistic narrative also transcends its immediate referent so as to reveal a double perspective that is inclusive precisely because of the different viewpoints it presents. Indeed, the artistic narrative may open up a circular route that moves from the beauty of the ancient artefact – the pot – to its sudden transformation into a horrifying testimony of the destruction of the Biafran war – a calabash containing the head of a dead child inside it. The image of the calabash – which is an emptied gourd – strikingly resonates with the poem 'Strange Fruit' by Seamus Heaney and its comparison of a girl's head with a gourd, as quoted in the epigraph. Yet, this Nigerian example of "the marvellous as well as […] the murderous" (Heaney 1995) might be also entwined with other intriguing literary references, which will be explored.

Interestingly embedded in a scene in which Richard is getting to know Kainene, the first description of the roped pot focuses on the charm exerted by the piece of handiwork over him, who saw it for the first time in a magazine: "The roped pot stood out immediately; he ran a finger over the picture and ached to touch the delicately cast metal itself. He wanted to try explaining how deeply stirred he had been by the pot but decided not to" (Adichie 2017: 62). Associated again with Kainene, the pot takes on idyllic traits for Richard and seems to undergo a process of abstraction and transformation into a representative emblem of an idyllic Nigeria. However, the roped pot could be strikingly associated with another, gorier kind of vessel, a calabash.

After the massacre of the Igbo, Olanna miraculously manages to leave Kano thanks to the help of her Hausa ex-fiancée. When she is on a train back home packed with other refugees, her attention is caught by a woman who keeps caressing a calabash and suddenly invites her and the other passengers to peer in it. Under the lid, there is the head of the woman's dead child, who was probably murdered in the massacre. Two perspectives are

provided on this scene, one in *The World Was Silent When We Died* and the other recounted by Olanna herself. In the first version, the artistic, refined carvings on the calabash are emphasised, thus transforming the vessel into an equivalent of the roped pot:

> Olanna tells him this story and he notes the details. […] She describes the carved designs on the woman's calabash, slanting lines crisscrossing each other, and she describes the child's head inside: scruffy plaits falling across the dark-brown face, eyes completely white, eerily open, a mouth in a small surprised O (Adichie 2017: 82).

Decorated exactly like the pot, the calabash possesses a "material sensuality" (Cooper 2008: 140) that echoes the details of the pot that attract Richard's gaze and prompt him to run his finger over its picture. Antithetical to the pot but linked to it in its irreducible aesthetic and materiality, the calabash exemplifies the horror of the war; it is as if the elegant roped pot had suddenly morphed into an emblem of death.

The connection between the roped pot and the calabash is further solidified by a potential intertextual reference to the fifth story in the fourth day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, namely that of Lisabetta and the pot of basil – with due emphasis on the word 'pot.' Aside from being one of the most famous stories in Boccaccio's masterpiece, the story inspired a painting by the pre-Raphaelite John William Waterhouse and a poem by Keats. Therefore, Richard's narrative may involve a network of different forms of art, namely prose, painting and poetry. Seemingly a "specific unmarked reference" in Mason's terminology (2019: 82) – since it alludes to a specific narrative which is not marked by title (2019: 82) – the description of the calabash may not be the sole intertextual allusion to Boccaccio's *Decameron*. After being approached by a woman who wanted to sleep with a white man out of curiosity, Richard remarks that it is as if people wanted to "grab all they could before the war robbed them of choices" (Adichie 2017: 172). In Boccaccio's *Decameron* a similar behaviour is portrayed, since some people react to the threat of the plague by indulging in pleasures and drinking heavily: "[P]eople behaved as though their days were numbered, and treated their belongings and their own persons with equal abandon" (Boccaccio 2003: 7). If truth be told, though, this might not be a wholly intertextual matter, since other literary sources describe similar tendencies. Indeed, in *Lessons* by Ian McEwan, the main character is induced to sleep with his piano teacher because he fears that a nuclear bomb might be soon released due to the Cuban Missile Crisis. When the crisis ends, he almost feels cheated: "The world would go on, he would remain unvaporised. He needn't have done a thing" (McEwan 2022: 143). Be it Boccaccio's 14th-century Florence, Adichie's 1960s Nigeria or McEwan's 1960s England, human reactions to crises thus prove to repeat in patterns.

Back to intertextuality, Boccaccio's story is concerned with a woman whose lover Lorenzo is murdered by her outraged brothers and buried in a forest. Once she has found the tomb of her beloved, Lisabetta cuts off his head, then "she wrapped the head in a piece of rich cloth, and laid it in a large and elegant pot […]. She next covered it with soil, in which she planted several sprigs of the finest Salernitan basil" (Boccaccio 2003: 328-329). Eventually, her brothers discover the head in the pot and leave town. Deprived of her basil, Lisabetta pines away until she dies. There are several similarities between the calabash and

the story from the *Decameron*. Exactly like the Nigerian mother, Lisabetta "would dearly have wished" (Boccaccio 2003: 328) to bring Lorenzo's whole body away with her. Becoming a centre of trauma, the basil pot is constantly tear-watered and tended to by Lisabetta, whereas the Nigerian mother obsessively asks people to look inside the calabash and realise the undescribable horror of war. Camboni stated that the pot is Lorenzo's grave (2017: 438), but it may become much more than a burial place. Concilio exhaustively investigated the meanings of metamorphosis into trees in wide-ranging and various literary texts (2021); in my opinion, a vegetal metamorphosis is at work in Boccaccio's story and in Adichie's novel too. Indeed, Ruggiero contends that Lorenzo's head "gives birth to a flourishing basil plant" (2014: 1185), which I fully subscribe to. While Lorenzo nurtures the earth, Lisabetta waters it with her tears: the basil becomes, de facto, the child they could not have in life. As in the story – where the imagined child is transformed into a plant and made visible –, the head of the Nigerian woman's child is kept in a natural vessel and shown to people. Furthermore, in Boccaccio's story, emphasis is placed on Lorenzo's "riccioli" (Boccaccio 2014: 345) – his curls, the only element through which Lisabetta's brothers recognise his decomposed head. In 'Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil' Keats even wrote: "She calmed its wild hair with a golden comb" (2006: 251). Harrowingly, the Nigerian mother reminiscences about her child's braids: "'Do you know […] it took me so long to plait this hair? She had such thick hair'" (Adichie 2017: 149). While Lisabetta's mourning for her lover has romantic connotations, the Nigerian mother's grief is maternal. Although their modalities of grieving process are related to life and to different kinds of love, in both cases accepting the death of loved ones proves impossible and makes mourning fraught with trauma.

The calabash-pot and Boccaccio's story both investigate and deepen our understanding of grief, tragedies and human emotions. The image of the calabash could be a sound way of "turning facts into truth" (Adichie 2012). The second consequence is an artistic interaction that brings into the picture other forms of art than the aforementioned prose and painting, and might add new meanings to the calabash-pot of Adichie's novel. At the end of Boccaccio's story, Filomena – its narrator – informs her peers that Lisabetta's tragedy inspired a popular song which "they had heard […] on a number of occasions without ever succeeding, for all their inquiries, in discovering why it had been written" (Boccaccio 2003: 330). In addition, unbeknownst to Boccaccio, his story inspired another artwork, namely Keats's poem 'Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil'. This artistic transformation is remarked upon by Keats: "There is no other crime, no mad assail/To make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet:/But it is done – succeed the verse or fail –/To honour thee, and thy gone spirit greet" (2006: 244). Thus, song and poetry germinate from Lisabetta's story.

In a way akin to this, the image of the calabash-pot may be forged into an emblem of endurance and transposed into another artistic form, namely poetry. One of Okeoma's poems reads: "*Clay pots fired in zeal, they will cool our feet as we climb"* [italics in the original] (Adichie 2017: 175). In Okeoma's intention, the poem salutes the freedom of Biafra – and it is thus interpreted by people – but, again, this form of poetic narrative that noticeably includes pots might harbour another hidden meaning that becomes explicit much later and deals with the Biafran war. Indeed, Okeoma's lines are echoed at the end of the novel, when

Olanna is at the mortuary in search of Kainene's body. Surrounded by people who have lost their loved ones in the war, Olanna evokes his lines and, suddenly, the reference to pots is made conspicuous and sinister, as if it hinted at all those who have been murdered in the war, at all the heads put in calabashes: "[S]omething about placing clay pot on top of clay pot to form a ladder to the sky" (Adichie 2017: 411). In this context, the pot might be circularly picked up again in a closure which assigns it values of resilience and strength in the face of suffering, and at the same time underscores the connection with the calabash, thus making it an image of the terrible toll that war has taken on people.

Conclusion

After writing the present novel, in *Americanah* (2013) Adichie went on to describe the condition of Nigerian immigrants who go abroad – where they "negotiate interstitial spaces" (Uwakweh 2023: 73) – and then return home. With due differences to acknowledge, both Richard and the returnees "back home with an extra gleaming layer" (Adichie 2013: 502) share a condition of liminality, which becomes an occasion for inclusivity for Richard. At first sight, the character can be considered 'inclusive' because of his desire to fit in Nigeria and be accepted by Nigerians. However, the real inclusivity lies in his two-pronged literary and artistic narratives, which may also throw forth references to poetry, prose and painting – thus being doubly inclusive. Far from undermining inclusivity, his multifaceted narratives foster a real understanding of Nigeria, which is seen in a balanced way. Only by knowing all the true sides of a story can we avoid the "danger of a single story" (Adichie 2009) and easy partiality. Inclusivity is the product of the knowledge of reality and its acceptance as it is, without sugar-coating or demonising it. The sharpness of Richard's narratives and the open-ended questions they spur proves that it is indeed true that, whilst Richard witnesses in uncertainty, "the narrative itself manages to know without knowing" (Strehle 2011: 664).

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