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POETICHE / POETICS

ARTICOLI / ARTICLES

RECENSIONI / REVIEWS

INTERVISTE / INTERVIEWS

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Alan Wildeman

Poems*

It Takes Two Dreams

I dreamed last night I was you
It's a dream that keeps coming in twos
It takes living to know about life
It takes two dreams to walk in your shoes

One dream was of traveling the world
The cobblestone, the cafés, the nights
Then I had that old dream about falling
With arms like stringless kites

A siren is coming near
The debt is coming due
Two dreams last night about martyrs
I dreamed last night I was you
There's a light in the hollow tree
I'm going to go and get me some
Just need a little shine for our road
I don't care where it's from
I dreamed last night I was you.

From the album "Unsheltered" c2020

Contemporary

Turn up the heat, let me take off my hood
There's no more need for a flint and some wood
Flip that switch, throw some light
Edison made sure I'll see you tonight

* These poems are the lyrics of the songs appearing in the two albums *The Apologist* (2016) and *Unsheltered* (2020).

It's all so easy, let's crack some champagne
No more drinking water, from puddles of rain
It's good to be with you with no bags to carry
We've checked ourselves in, we're contemporary

There's a reason they call me the modern man
I get contemporary just as fast as I can
I love you now with every chance I get
But I might get more contemporary yet

No need to worry, take trust for a start
I've Googled commitment, there's a picture of my heart
Let me turn on the taps, and run you a bath
The good Lord giveth what the good Lord hath

Can I lather your back, and maybe sing you some hymns?
It's what a modern guy does when his confidence brims
It's nice to be with you with no bags to carry
We're doing the old contemporary

There's a reason they call me the modern man
I get contemporary, just as fast as I can
I love you now with every chance I get
But I might get more contemporary yet.

From the album "The Apologist" c2016

A Cowboy Never Falls

There you go again, you're hiding your heart
Inside your house, the doors won't part
You breathe a sigh, in the morning light
You've gotten through, through another night
Can't see you now, this fog is like a ghost
In the mist you're doing, what you love the most
You're holding your face, against your cold stone walls
A cowboy staggers, but a cowboy never falls
The Prince of Peace, had no family tree
His holy house, was his legacy
You picked a meadow, took a hammer and a nail
You built your own, though there's houses for sale

All the curtains are drawn, the shades are down
I heard you're training, to be a clown

I know it was hard, maybe too much
To offer everything, to everyone that you touch
You'd open your heart, to anyone who came
They'd take what they want, you'd do the same
Love is a game, where a tie is a win
You hide your loss behind a painted grin

No one knows what's going on inside
You broke a lot of broncos, for your mail order brides
Again you found a bargain, and again it disappoints
There were no fireworks, no dovetail joints
Was it you, was it them, that you were trying to pin
With your stories of the burdens you carried within

Your horses are ready, to ride for the boss
The mailbox empty, a casino of loss
The postman arrived, with empty hands
He left with boxes full of your plans
Plans for a clown in a rodeo show
Making them laugh, everywhere you go

You were seen, walking in the night
Your shadow cast by the immortal moonlight
Into the graveyard, where the oak tree bends
Where lives the danger of ancient friends
No right or wrong, no in between
No saddlebags, on the black limousine

You're holding your face, against your cold stone walls
A cowboy staggers, but a cowboy never falls.

From the album "Unsheltered" c2020

The Apologist

Well I'm finally, I'm here at your door.
I'm nervous, I'm sore.
This takes a man's bravery, yes it's true.
But a good man knows it's the only thing to do.

So let me in, let me take a chair.
it took me all day, all day to prepare.
You said where are you? I'm here with the answer.
I'm here to apologize for my infidelity and my cancer.

Yes I met a lady, she paints with her hair.
She dips it in reds and blues
and colours my shoulders and more,
when she kisses me from up there.
And gravity draws her brush to my waiting skin.
She makes me forget the despair that I'm in.
Remember me saying that I had a dream.
I've carried it with me since you and I met at thirteen.
I dream I am a rainbow, my wish has been answered.
I'm here to apologize for my infidelity and my cancer.

Her hands so gently go to the little pots of gold
that legend says anchor the base
of those colourful arcs.
And when she peaks on me
her joyful hairy shudders, they leave marks
of abstract traces, abstract traces.
She knows what it takes for what a man faces.
Well I tease her that my canvas,
my canvas is her masterpiece.
We polaroid sections of my body,
and sell them to unsuspecting galleries
as works, as works by some new master.
I'm here to apologize for my infidelity and my cancer.

We hit paydirt, we hit paydirt, with last night's frescoes.
I drank my best wine, you know how the rest goes.
We sold them close-up studies of Monet gardens,
of Picassos and Rembrandts
and lava before it hardens.
I was transformed by a night of passion.
Her creations are never out of fashion.
I did it, I'm sorry, I'm not a liar or a dancer
I'm here to apologize for my infidelity and my cancer.

She waits, she waits until she's sure I'm free,
in a room where I sat waiting
for what grows inside of me.

Portraits, and nature scenes, she's done them all.
I apologize, you don't deserve this call.
Her brush will soon be found on another apologist,
and my dreams will be lost
somewhere in the morning mist,
where eyes once danced and shone for you
when I was still so healthy and so whole
and I loved you true.

I've lost the rhyme, but the rhythm won't part.
There's a little boy's foot still tapping inside my heart.
Like those bunnies camouflaged as dust,
I'm beneath that bed where I earned your trust.
Now I'm the scattered leaves along your lane.
I'm your breath that fogs on a chilly window pane.
I'm the smell of spring and the morning dew.
I'm the twig that snaps beneath your shoe.

Well I'm finally, I'm here at your door.
I'm nervous, I'm sore.
I'm here where I crowned you the queen of the damned,
where I gave you a wish and you wished for my hand.
I'm now blades of grass on your welcome mat.
I'm the fingerprints on the brim of that hat.
You said where are you? and I'm here with the answer.
I'm here to apologize for my infidelity and my cancer.

From the album "The Apologist" c2016

Misplaced Roses

There's that old cobweb on the wall, it's trapping misplaced roses
It floats upon my 7-up and smothers all the bubbles
Fastens all the memories down with all its master's weaving
Trapping misplaced roses and trapping misplaced troubles

Well I knew that it was tricky and I knew there's seldom pity
On a man who's finally sure that it is true what he supposes
I opened up the windows and the cobwebs now are blowing
And the birds sing out the warning - there'll be no more misplaced roses

There'll be no more misplaced troubles, take me to a place above
There'll be no more misplaced roses my love

At least a million roses were scattered every evening
Who knows how many eyes have seen the thorn but not the bloom
I walked into a place and held my face against the window
I saw the misplaced roses inside that misplaced room

Hans and Sophie, Alexander, Christoph, Kurt and Willi
In a tangled world of sorrow, in a tangled web of woes
In rooms controlled by spiders who spin their webs like madmen
Every hope is smothered, every voice a misplaced rose

Awake from sleep and lift the veil, so reads the manifesto
The time has come for all good men to fear a nation's goal
In Stadelheim in Munich town the guillotine had bartered
A country's misplaced roses for a nation's misplaced soul

There's a million men and women who are lying in the forest
Where the goblins prance and the fairies dance on history's nightshade blooms
I walked into a place and held my face against the doorway
There's a million misplaced roses, there's a million misplaced rooms

There are rooms behind the hedges where the flower beds are empty
Where the last touch of the children was their little fingertips and noses
So we'll open up the window and the cobwebs will be blowing
And the birds sing out the warning - there'll be no more misplaced roses

There'll be no more misplaced troubles, take me to a place above
There'll be no more misplaced roses my love.

From the album "The Apologist" c2016

Alan Wildeman, PhD, is President Emeritus of the University of Windsor in Canada. His academic degrees in biology are from the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Guelph. His research career focused on molecular genetics and biotechnology, and in addition to Canada he has worked in research institutes in France and Germany. He has released two albums of original songs, *The Apologist* in 2016 and *Unsheltered* in 2020, both available on all major streaming outlets. The albums have been described as prairie surrealism.
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Shirley Maria Batista

The Calling

I can hear them.
I'm four. I'm climbing the little gigantic guava tree with my brother. Food and playground. The sugar canes in the back of the house are whispering. It's about our little secret: they will never tell father. I asked them and they promised. He hasn't said anything yet. He'll never know.

I'm five. Mommy doesn't want to cry in front of me. I'm crying. I told father that she was sad because of his bottles and asked him to stop or he would not be my daddy anymore. I felt tall, like one of those big bamboos back at grandpa's. But father taught me a lesson and now I'm here, with urine still running down my legs. It's ok. Mommy's here, my bay tree. She takes my pain away. She's strong, she knows things and she tells me that she loves me. I'm six, seven, eight. I'm free. We are free. The scent of the red earth is stronger here and the sound of the river can be heard from everywhere. The boys are looking for birds' nests but I'm busy talking to the inga tree. She's calling me: the ingas are sweeter this season and she wants me to have the first taste.

I'm nine. I cannot remember what mommy told me this morning before leaving for school: will she be home? Or should I go to auntie's? I look around: the trees on the sidewalk are busy: too many people going up and down. The cemetery's big tree is waving at me. She's a wise one, I'll ask her.

I'm ten, eleven, twelve. So many things changed. At least I have my mango tree. I build my first home here. My brother prefers the sugar-apple tree, but he fell down and broke his arm while trying to jump from a branch to another. He wasn't listening carefully. The big old mango tree in the back keeps telling me to climb up there; she has things to show me.

I'm thirteen. I've changed. I don't hear them anymore. Did they stop talking?

I'm fourteen. I am going away, far away across the ocean. I feel like I have sailed these waters before. Never-ending echoes propagate from down below. Familiar sounds. Everything has changed. I've reached an old land, that is what they say. Aren't all lands old? Green, yellow fields where plants are lined up like soldiers awaiting some kind of order. Fragile red flowers pop up like fireflies in the dark. Cypresses stand like bridges between worlds. Seasons have different faces; the naked aspens make me shiver: why are they so static? Do those geometrical lines chain their roots?

Fig. 1. Elisa Ponta, *Trees* (2020).

I'm eighteen, nineteen, twenty … I keep hearing something but I don't know what it is. Everywhere I go, I stop and look at the trees that I find on my way. I feel the urge to touch their trunks, feel the hardness of their barks, dip my hands in their leaves, read them as if there is some kind of message left there for me. What I find is an ancient code that I'm not able to decipher.

I'm twenty-six. I'm crossing the ocean again. The echoes are still there. What I hear is the kiskadee welcoming me back to the red earth. Then I look up and see them: of different sizes, different shapes, dancing, connecting as if they were singing together. As soon as I see a mango tree, I climb up the trunk and sit on one of the lower branches. I look for an old feeling but it struggles to emerge. I hug the acacia and close my eyes imagining the golden clusters that I will not see – I arrived a season later. I look for an *urukum* tree, the wellspring of the red treasure of wiser peoples. I try to make new memories while holding strong on the old ones. Everything has changed, even the trees.

I'm twenty seven. I'm planting my roots while interlacing them with others that I've lived with for ten years now. We become one.

I'm twenty-eight. I'm having bad seasons. What if my roots are not strong enough? What if this soil is not the right one for me? Which is the right one? Is this my trunk? Why are my leaves falling down? They've taken a piece of my bark away, a precaution, before it turns into something bad, they say. No flowers, no fruits, no seeds. I'm in the shadows. No sunlight can reach me. I feel as if I'm decomposing. I'm losing balance and falling down.

I'm twenty-nine. I'm about to hit the ground when I sense it: one little seed. My roots pull me back and hold me tight. I feel all the power of the universe pervading my whole being. The seed of rebirth sprouts: life explosion.

I'm thirty. I have a little tree to take care of.

Can she hear them?

She is four months. She receives a young holm oak as a gift for her birth.

She is eight months. She touches the leaves of her tree on her own for the first time.

She is nine months. She turns the pages of a book bigger than her as if she's done it for a life time. Her favourite corner of the house is our bookshelf.

She is ten months and wants to see the trees: "(tr)eee", "(tr)eee", "(tr)eee!". At the park she just wants to stay near the trees, touching them, touching the leaves.

She is one and all she wants are books, leaves and trees.

She is a year and a half. She watches me while I'm studying, highlighting book passages with a marker. She does the same: she lays on her stomach on the floor and draws worlds on empty pages. At the park, she wants to play hide and seek behind the trees. We start drawing together and the first thing I draw with her is a tree. Every day she wants to draw trees: "mamma, t(r)ee!". Then we start painting, and she wants to paint trees.

She is two. Now she draws faces. She asks me to draw trees and she draws faces on trees. They are calling.

I'm thirty-one. I've started the metamorphosis.

I've learned about worlds crossing the ocean on ships.

I've learned about languages constructing worlds.
I've learned about a child being a teacher to a man trying to find himself again.

I've learned about peoples living in complete communion with nature.

I've learned about finding reality through dreams and imagination.

I've learned about the language of trees.

I've learned about trees talking to each other.

I've learned about trees talking to humans who can listen.

I'm thirty-two. I'm ready.

I am a tree. A young holm oak is my teacher.

Can you hear them?

Shirley Maria Batista is a postgraduate student at the University of Udine, where she completed her Bachelor's Degree in Interlingual and Intercultural Mediation. Being a Brazilian Portuguese native speaker and having acquired Italian as her second language, she has developed a passion for languages, cultures, literatures and words. Her recent interests are Ecolinguistics, Partnership Studies and Ecocriticism and she is working on her thesis on the environmental 'disasters' of Mariana and Brumadinho in Minas Gerais (Brazil).
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Jaydeep Sarangi

Poems

Playing 'Home'

It's difficult it is to leave
the home, once it is primed to
your name, your roles, your bed.

All small and big things are
remembered, and stored
in the heart's mystery.

A slow act of withdrawal, renewing
itself each day's end the same way
as on the previous day, you move on.

The choice is difficult
when mind is amorphous
spaces are not defined.

It's an open game you play
like seasons and rivers flowing
deep in uncertain hearts.

You play 'Home', 'home'
your kids imitate you
life grows on trees, green faces.

A Sense of Place

If you write my name I shall remove your wrist
I shall cry in my native tongue, odd and uncouth.
If I trace anything out of the line
I'll break the pen with which you write.
I have the state and the media in my both hands
I need just twenty minutes to swallow you.

When you are anonymous, nobody knows you
Nobody reads your poems, nobody prints your poems.
If you allow me to speak, let me say,
No one is anonymous. People run after his name.
All are busy with painting their houses.
My home town, its green monsoons
Red soils, ancient temples and fellow bards
Near the banks of Dulung I hear the owl's late cry
In the bare earth my ancestors rest in peace.
I choose a place, call it native
You are my brother. I am your river
Of life flowing downstream. Carrying history
Of our land, your land and my people.

Someone is Following Me

A silent order of alphabets
in a progression beat by beat
is returning to the spirit
from yesterday to tomorrow.
Today is just a stop gap
welcoming all elements on board.
The fear of the dark tomorrows is mixed with
the smell of the newly bought paint.
Black hands are out of joints.
Not to even the tycoons of Time.

There is no time to lose
painting my old dismantled self.
There's always someone else in my ways
behind me, flowing in her ways.
Time's pauses.

Jaydeep Sarangi is a widely anthologised bilingual poet, Professor of English and principal at New Alipore College, Kolkata. He is the President of Guild of Indian English Writers Editors and Critics (GIEWEC) and among his recent awards are the Setu Award of Excellence 2019 (Petersburg, USA) and Sufi Literary Award 2020. He is editorial board member of *Mascara Literary Review*, *Transnational Literature*, (Australia) and *Teesta*, *WEC* (India). He has published eight collections of poetry in English, his latest being *Heart Raining the Light* (2020). With Amelia Walker, he has guest edited a special issue for the Australian journal *TEXT* (2020).
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Francesco Benozzo

La *Terra dei Morti* di Thomas Kinsella come spazio primordiale di un nuovo immaginario

Abstract I: Tra le numerose opere poetiche di Thomas Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, del 1973, appare quella più legata agli elementi del paesaggio fisico. In questo saggio si provano a percorrere alcune strategie cognitive e percettive che consentono al poeta irlandese di farsi interprete, attraverso di esso, di un immaginario per la rifondazione poetica del mondo, all'interno di quella che ho recentemente definito come *world poetry*.

Abstract II: Among the various poetic works by Thomas Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (1973) appears the one which is more concerned with the elements of physical landscape. This article aims to point out a few cognitive and perceptive strategies, which consent the Irish poet to become an interpreter of a new imagination able to re-found the world in poetical terms, in the frame of what I have recently defined as *world poetry*.

Keywords: Thomas Kinsella, *world poetry*, tradizioni irlandesi, rifondazione poetica del mondo, nuovo immaginario.

In un recente saggio ho cercato di teorizzare e definire una *world poetry*, in opposizione a una *world literature* concepita da sempre, direi senza eccezioni, come romanzo-centrica (Benozzo 2021c). Ritengo indispensabile riassumere qui i punti cruciali del mio ragionamento, poiché è precisamente in questo contesto che va a mio parere collocata l'opera poetica di Thomas Kinsella.

Partendo dall'idea di *world philology* teorizzata da Pollok (2015) – per il quale la "filologia del mondo" non è riducibile a una filologia comparata che schiera i metodi delle filologie nazionali e li applica alle diverse letterature, ma è una filologia del linguaggio della letteratura concepito come sistema autonomo e molteplice di segni, forme, strategie narrative – credo che si possa pensare a una *world poetry* come a un insieme di testi che utilizzano i versi all'interno di un riconoscibile sistema comunicativo-espressivo, e che sono caratterizzati non tanto da uno stile o da alcune tematiche, ma da un fondale comune e riconoscibile. In questo senso, mi pare produttivo addentrarsi nell'immagine dell'arcipelago: come le isole di uno stesso arcipelago appartengono a un sistema complesso ma distinguibile, a un paesaggio variegato ma unitario, così si può tentare di comprendere la *world poetry* come un sistema cognitivo-espressivo utilizzato per raccontare e decifrare la realtà nelle sue più articolate sfaccettature. Non tutta la poesia può rientrare in questo canone, così come non tutte le isole

fanno parte di uno stesso arcipelago. Per cartografare questo arcipelago possibile e giungere a una sua descrizione organica, si possono affrontare diversi ordini di problemi, per i quali rimando al mio saggio citato all'inizio: in questa sede mi soffermo brevemente sul problema dalla forma e su quello delle tematiche.

In ambito poetico l'aspetto formale è più che mai legato all'idea di canone. La cosa risulta evidente se pensiamo al Medioevo, dove è dimostrabile come proprio la metrica inaugurata dai trovatori occitani (secoli XII-XIII) – poeti-cantautori a loro modo "globali" (Benozzo 2009) – sia stata il primo veicolo di tematiche, concezioni e riflessioni che hanno portato ad esempio alla nascita, in Italia, dell'endecasillabo e delle strutture strofiche ad esso associate. La traducibilità, e dunque la diffusione, di un testo poetico ha sempre il primo ostacolo della forma e della sua "viscosità perdurante" (Vegliante 2018). Ogni tradizione poetica è caratterizzata da precisi vincoli formali, e qui si pone una prima domanda sostanziale: si deve pensare a una specifica qualità formale quando si cerca di definire cosa sia la *world poetry*?

Per fare un esempio contemporaneo, possiamo comparare gli effetti di una traduzione in diverse lingue di uno scrittore come Cormac McCarthy e di un poeta come Derek Walcott. La traduzione dei romanzi di McCarthy agisce prevalentemente sui contenuti, i quali in questo modo entrano a fare parte dell'immaginario di altri scrittori (celeberrimo il caso de *La strada* – *The Road* – del 2006, che ha dato vita, anche in Italia, a una vena distopica e post-apocalittica di qualità non sempre altissima), mentre la traduzione di Walcott costringe a un ripensamento del concetto di verso nei diversi contesti linguistici, andando al di là – o ponendosi a monte – dei cosiddetti contenuti: l'epica contemporanea del poeta santaluciano è infatti, prima ancora che una questione di storie, una faccenda legata al recupero del verso narrativo orale tipico della poesia arcaica. Un caso emblematico è rappresentato dal suo *Omeros* del 1990 (Puggioni 2016), che ha ancora poche corrispondenze nell'occidente europeo (Andreotti *et al*. 2019).

Pensiamo a molta della poesia italiana post-montaliana: una tradizione nella quale la forma è diventata un elemento ossessivo, caratterizzante, peculiare, veicolo di un'idea di letteratura imperniata sull'intertestualità, sul citazionismo, sul sovrasenso svelato da impliciti e quasi sempre criptici ipotesti. Si deve affermare che la sua prima essenza è l'intraducibilità.

Idealmente, al contrario, si potrebbe definire la *world poetry* come *una poesia traducibile in qualsiasi lingua, senza che se ne perdano le caratteristiche formali-tematiche*. Le isole che compongono l'arcipelago della *world poetry*, cioè, non sono identificabili in base al semplice fatto di essere note, ignote o poco note, ma sono necessariamente caratterizzate da una forma che resta riconoscibile per i lettori che vi si imbattono giungendo da tradizioni linguistiche e culturali diverse. La complessità formale della poesia, cioè, non costituisce un ostacolo ma un viatico, che eccede ogni idioma e ogni discorso.

Riflettendo sulle tematiche, la domanda da porsi è: esistono dei contenuti che possano essere indicati allo scopo di individuare le caratteristiche dell'arcipelago della *world poetry*? Questa domanda è tutt'altro che oziosa, se si pensa che per definire il concetto di *world literature* si è di recente proposto di considerare tale, ad esempio, la letteratura che si occupa di temi globali quali il cambiamento climatico (Wenzel 2019). È insomma necessario pensare

a tematiche globali (quali l'Antropocene, le migrazioni, il terrorismo internazionale, le vere o presunte pandemie planetarie) per parlare di *world poetry*?

Poiché la poesia, anche in virtù di quanto detto in precedenza, non si caratterizza come forma espressiva in quanto connotata da specifici ambiti contenutistici, sembrerebbe riduttivo costringerla in una gabbia semantica di qualche tipo. Le trasformazioni sociali, anche quelle su scala globale, si evolvono e mutano di continuo per definizione, e una poesia che si concentri su di esse entrandovi in una forma di dialogo strutturale corre sempre il rischio di diventare a sua volta datata, di perdere la sua qualità che ho definito de-sclerotizzante. Lo chiarisce bene un grande poeta come Les Murray, che in un'intervista del 2009 così risponde alla domanda "Senti il bisogno di qualcosa che risponda alle condizioni sociali che ci sono adesso rispetto a quelle, per dire, del 1980? O del 1972?":

> "Adesso" sarà obsoleto tra vent'anni. Non puoi farne a meno. Poi cerchi di raggiungere un posto fuori dal tempo, ma ce la fai solo poche volte. Ora mi guardo indietro e dico: quello sembrerà datato per un bel po', ma se ci sopravvive potrebbe anche andare bene. Altre poesie che pensi siano episodiche ti potrebbero invece sorprendere e dimostrare che non erano così limitate al loro tempo (Murray 2009).

In un intervento a una tavola rotonda su *La poesia nella società mediatica*, Giancarlo Pontiggia ha ricordato opportunamente, sempre in questa prospettiva, che

> la grande poesia, pur nella differenza dei generi, dei fini e dei contesti storici, ha sempre sentito, radicalmente, drammaticamente, l'esigenza di un tempo più nascosto, protetto, assoluto nel senso etimologico del termine, e cioè libero dai pesi della piccola cronaca, dai lamenti dell'io che non sa vedere altro che le proprie miserie, dai luoghi comuni che ogni collettività, inevitabilmente, elabora e impone. Per dire una parola di verità, devi innanzi tutto operare una resistenza nei confronti del reale, delle sue immediate evidenze; trovare un punto che non è esilio dal mondo e dalla storia, ma riparo dalla pressione (oppressione, talvolta) degli eventi, dalla loro insignificanza: un tempo in cui ogni parola sembri scolpita per sempre, sospesa in una sua pronuncia indistruttibile (Pontiggia 2007: 28).

In questa linea di resistenza/dissidenza poetica, vale probabilmente la pena di citare il poeta iraniano Ahmad Shamlou, che si è fatto patrocinatore di una *she ʿr-e jahān* ('poesia del mondo'), partendo dalla considerazione che "Éluard e Lorca, Desnos e Neruda, Hikmet e Hughes, Senghor e Michaux" diedero di fatto luogo "a una *world poetry* intesa come patto di impegno dei poeti" per resistere alle conseguenze invasive dei processi messi in atto dalle grandi ideologie politiche prima, e successivamente dalla Guerra Fredda e dalla globalizzazione (Shamlu 1995: 15). Merita una menzione, per il suo slancio verso la leggibilità e la fruizione condivisa, la cosiddetta ecopoesia, per la quale si può citare il *Manifesto dell'ecopoesia* della biologa e poetessa Maria Ivana Trevisani Bach (2019), dove viene introdotto l'acronimo *GRACE*, da intendersi come *Global, Reparative and Communicative Eco-poetry*. La prima caratteristica dell'ecopoesia è di proporsi come poesia globale:

> Nel tempo della comunicazione globale, anche la poesia deve saper comunicare globalmente, deve essere accessibile a tutti, deve essere aperta alle differenti realtà culturali del mondo e condividere e diffondere i valori del suo tempo. L'Ecopoesia si libera dall'isolamento delle chiuse culture letterarie erudite, dalle vecchie mode sibilline delle avanguardie e dalle tradizioni poetiche locali e utilizza una comunicazione poetica semplice e chiara, comprensibile a tutte le culture – quindi anche facilmente traducibile – per diffondersi tra un pubblico sempre più allargato come richiesto dall'UNESCO nel messaggio della Giornata Mondiale della Poesia (*ibid*.).

Con fondamenti epistemologici diversi, nello stesso solco si situano le proposte della Geopoetica (Benozzo & Meschiari 1994; Benozzo, Losi & Meschiari 1996), tra le quali includerei anche quelle del geografo Augustin Berque, quando parla – approfondendo spunti di Glissant (1998) – di "poesia del mondo" (*poesie du monde*) intendendo il dispiegarsi della realtà eco-simbolica dell'abitare umano sulla terra, "che possiamo leggere in parte e consapevolmente nel paesaggio, ma che al contempo si recita a nostra insaputa nel profondo del nostro corpo e nella biosfera" (Berque 2000: 242-243). Berque ha qui in mente un doppio significato: quello di *poiesis* (l'atto del fare) e quello di *poiema* (l'opera fatta). Per usare la terminologia di Heidegger (1976), il territorio dell'essere-nel-mondo è parte della "poesia del mondo" appunto perché è sempre "già qui" (*poiema*) nel suo farsi (*poiesis*). Si tratta, in definitiva, di tentativi di dare forma e voce a quella che si deve considerare la preminenza (antropologica, cognitiva, evolutiva) dello spazio sul tempo (Benozzo 2021a: 64-76).

Di fronte a queste premesse resta tuttavia un dubbio: può la poesia trasformarsi nell'esecuzione di uno spartito di cui si conoscono già le parole, le melodie e soprattutto l'esito? Questa vocazione alla trattazione di tematiche globali non implica anche un livellamento delle voci, trasformandole in megafoni versificati di un pensiero già noto e svelato? (Benozzo 2020).

La *world poetry*, per come la intendo, assomiglia forse di più a una poesia universale che a una poesia globale. In questa prospettiva trovo illuminanti le parole di Derek Walcott sul canone hemingwayano, perché mostrano dall'interno che il canone stesso è sottoposto al proprio decadimento e che nel mondo in rapido cambiamento resteranno le voci universali e non quelle che seguono o si adeguano al cambiamento:

> è in corso un disorientamento che sminuisce tantissima letteratura. Poiché l'indigeno, l'esotico, la vittima, il buon selvaggio osserva a sua volta, ricambia lo sguardo, usando un linguaggio in cui le definizioni, i nomi stessi, sono reversibili, a sopravvivere saranno solo i capolavori assoluti della compassione. Se si adotta questo termine di misura, sono pochi i grandi scrittori: solo quelli la cui autorevolezza è universale restano inestimabili. Gli altri, la storia li consegnerà alle proprie ironie (Walcott 2013: 126).

Possiamo arrivare a dire, credo, che il contesto della *world poetry* intesa in una prospettiva arcipelagica non è un contesto già dato, connotato da argomenti e tematiche riconoscibili, ma un contesto sempre in via di definizione, che ricrea e ri-tradiziona costantemente i cosiddetti contenuti.

E arrivo all'opera di Kinsella – poeta che considero come un rappresentante esemplare di questa poesia del mondo – in particolare soffermandomi su *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, del 1973, tradotta in lingua italiana da Chiara De Luca nel 2009 col titolo *Appunti dalla terra dei morti*. L'interesse che questo testo (che io considero un poema unitario e non una raccolta di poesie) ha sempre suscitato in me risiede nel fatto che esso rappresenta ai miei occhi una piccola cosmogonia sospesa tra visione e esplorazione dei luoghi fisici.

Mi soffermo qui su alcune immagini del testo, che propongo di percepire come vere e proprie strategie di inoltramento nello spazio che disvela la stratigrafia del cosmo. La prima è quella del proemio: un serpente uscito dal vuoto che si muove nella bocca del poeta, ne succhia le "triplicate oscurità", staccando da esse alcuni "volti antichi", che incominciano a girare e danno forma e vita a un "liquido materno" che cambia le cose continuamente, "affiorando da Dio sa quale fossa":

> A snake out of the void moves in my mouth, sucks
> a triple darkness. A few ancient faces
> detach and begin to circle. Deeper still,
> delicate distinct tissue begins to form,
> hesitate, cease to exist, glitter again,
> dither in and out of a mother liquid
> on the turn, welling up from God knows what hole
> (Kinsella 2009: 13-14).

Mi pare non causale che un conoscitore e studioso di folklore gaelico come Kinsella utilizzi l'immagine del serpente nel proemio di un poema dedicato alla *Terra dei Morti*. Se seguiamo lo schema proposto da Condren (1989), la simbologia del serpente in Irlanda si disloca sulle tre epoche di Eva (sconfitta poi dalla dea Macha, della quale il serpente è un simbolo cruciale), di Brigit e della Vergine Maria: tre epoche rappresentative di una stratigrafia mitologica matriarcale precisa, che ha a che fare con la morte-rinascita di diverse visioni del mondo, perennemente soppiantate – direi meglio predate (nel senso di Benozzo 2014b) – da visioni del mondo successive e in continuo divenire. Di questa ciclica morte e rinascita il serpente è l'incarnazione demiurgica, in modo non troppo diverso da quanto si osserva nelle tradizioni aborigene dell'Australia. Il serpente rimescola gli strati del mondo, fa coincidere le forze telluriche con quelle dell'aria, si aggira sulle soglie invisibili di spazio e tempo.

Come scrive John (1989: 74), parlando, per il serpente di Kinsella, di "archetipo junghiano",

> the uroboric snake is a recurrent presence, reinforced in the limited edition of the latter by Anne Yeats's fine drawings, and imaging circularity and appetite. It appears, in turn, in ancient Irish coils and spirals, Bronze Age passage-graves, or gold artifacts, or early Christian Irish manuscripts, and possesses both distinctively Irish and universal relevance. Such recurrence we might expect, since the coiling snake emerges from the unconscious, our land of the dead, ruled in turn by matriarchal figures.

L'universo che il serpente porta con sé, insomma, è quello arcaico, pre-neolitico, matriarcale della Terra d'Irlanda, di cui esso diventa appunto un'epifania poetica. Si può dire che l'inconscio poetico di Kinsella, in questo senso, è un'ipostasi, palesata da chiare reminiscenze folkloriche, del mondo dei Túatha Dé Danann, il popolo della dea Danu/Donu che abitava l'isola prima dell'arrivo dei Gaeli (Dexter 1990).

L'osservazione non è di poco conto, perché contribuisce a spiegare la presenza, nella seconda parte del poema, della misteriosa Donna Gallina (*Hen Woman*), una creatura che appare al poeta, in una tipica scena di manifestazione dell'animale-guida (Donà 2003), fissandolo intensamente, con qualche reminiscenza – mi pare – dello sguardo di Medusa della Beatrice dantesca, a sua volta intriso di reminiscenze sciamaniche (Benozzo 2010):

> it fixed me with its pebble eyes
> (seeing what mad blur?).
> A white egg showed in the sphincter;
> mouth and beak opened together
> and time stood still.
> Nothing moved: bird or woman,
> fumbled or fumbling – locked there
> (as I must have been) gaping
> (Kinsella 2009: 26, 28).

Senza dimenticare che la Gallina Rossa è un personaggio tipico delle fiabe irlandesi (Redmond 1899), va qui notato che un centinaio di versi più oltre Kinsella dedica una sezione del poema all'Antenata (*Ancestor*) – inverando l'idea che la presenza femminile del poema è quella primordiale e pre-neolitica della Dea, successivamente relegata, come noto, al ruolo di anziana progenitrice (Alinei 1988) – e la descrive, dando a questo punto per scontata la descrizione precedente della Donna Gallina, con le fattezze di un uccello, "appollaiato" con un "cuore nero":

> I was going up to say something
> and stopped. Her profile against the curtains
> was old, and dark like a hunting bird's.
> It was the way she perched on the high stool,
> staring into herself, with one fist
> gripping the side of the barrier around her desk
> – or her head held by something, from inside.
>
> […]
>
> Ancestor … among sweet- and fruit-boxes.
> her black heart … was that a sigh?
> (Kinsella 2009: 52).

E, ancora, nella parte finale del poema, come ultima metamorfosi della Dea, compare la Strega (*Hag*), "accovacciata sull'acqua / col muso proteso verso il nulla": la creatura psicopompa che conduce il poeta-sciamano al di là del crepuscolo, tra "esili voci nella valle" che si dissolvono nel sangue:

> There was a great rock in the sea, where we went down
> – the Hag: squatting on the water,
> her muzzle staring up at nothing.
> A final struggle up rocks and heather,
> heart and lungs aching,
> and thin voices in the valley
> faintly calling, and dissolving one
> by one in the blood
> (Kinsella 2009: 86, 88).

È per via della creatura totemica-antenata che il poeta può finalmente comprendere la propria via: "devo ricordare, e riuscire un giorno a spiegare". Il suo mondo è diventato un groviglio di artigli, capelli, appassimento. Egli ridiventa natura, tornando a essere nudo, riappropriandosi delle prerogative dell'*Homo poeta* (Benozzo 2014a), inoltrandosi in una dimensione primordiale che coincide alla fine con una proposta poetica: l'annientamento di sé stessi, o la propria sublimazione, perdendosi nell'intrico degli elementi del paesaggio:

> I must remember
> and be able some time to explain.
> There is nothing here for sustenance.
> Unbroken sleep were best.
> Hair. Claws. Grey.
> Naked. Wretch. Wither
> (Kinsella 2009: 88).

È in questo inoltramento nello spazio fisico e onirico di ciò che lo circonda che Kinsella si manifesta, ai miei occhi, come uno dei pochi autentici "poeti del mondo". E non è nemmeno un caso che la *world poetry* di cui è portavoce inconsapevole, il "mondo" che egli attraversa e racconta in versi, coincida con un mondo dei morti. Il termine "mondo" indicava infatti in origine la soglia che circondava lo spazio sotterraneo abitato dai morti. Al momento della fondazione di Roma, secondo la leggenda, Romolo scavò un'apertura (latino *mundus*) che metteva in comunicazione il mondo dei vivi con quello dei defunti:

> La città antica si fonda sul "mondo" perché gli uomini dimorano nell'apertura che unisce la terra celeste e quella sotterranea, il mondo dei vivi e quello dei morti, il presente e il passato (Agamben 2020).

Nella concezione arcaica è proprio la frontiera tra questi due spazi che orienta le azioni degli uomini, il cui "mondo" e il cui orizzonte confinano con i recessi di Ctonia.

Se l'uomo è dunque, etimologicamente, in quanto abitatore del "mondo", una creatura della soglia, un essere del profondo, la "poesia del mondo" (*world poetry*) può forse essere intesa anche come la parola che esplora e racconta questa dimensione necessaria, che dimora all'intersezione di un principio e di una fine, e che riscatta la rimozione, avvenuta nella modernità, della nostra relazione fondativa con la sfera ctonia e con il suo mistero.

Ho pochi dubbi, in questa prospettiva, che *Notes from the Land of the Dead* sia un poema che vada ascoltato e letto anzitutto come la cartografia di uno spazio primordiale, e che il suo esito più evidente sia la creazione di un nuovo immaginario, il tentativo di una rifondazione poetica del mondo in cui, non certo per caso (Benozzo 2021b), giocano un ruolo cruciale le tradizioni arcaiche con le loro inesauribili possibilità mitopoietiche.

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"At the Speed of Trees": Richard Powers' *The Overstory*

Abstract I: Questo saggio utilizza il modello bioculturale di dominio-partnership di Riane Eisler come rilevante testimonianza del modo in cui un approccio transdisciplinare per lo studio della letteratura può ampliare la nostra visione critica, la nostra metodologia e comprensione nell'analisi di testi di diverse tipologie. Questa metodologia olistica di ampio spettro include diversi ambiti della conoscenza e dell'indagine critica, fra i quali la fisica quantistica, la biologia e la scienza sistemica, l'ecosofia, l'eco-letteratura, e gli studi contemporanei sulla vita delle piante. Fulcro del saggio è l'analisi del romanzo *The Overstory* (2018) di Richard Powers che si configura come denuncia veemente della visione del mondo di dominio, distruttiva e violenta, che vede la Terra come luogo da controllare e sfruttare, e al tempo stesso dà ampio spazio e rafforza le idee fondanti del paradigma culturale di *partnership*, di amore e cura di sé e del mondo.

Abstract II: This essay applies Riane Eisler's biocultural partnership-dominator model as a relevant testimony of how transdisciplinary approaches to literature can broaden our critical scope, methodology and understanding when examining different types of texts. This comprehensive methodology for the study of literature draws upon different fields of knowledge and scientific investigation, such as quantum physics, biology and systemic science, ecosophy, ecoliteracy and contemporary studies on plant life. With the aim of rekindling the fundamental relationship between humans and nature, Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* (2018) is analysed as a powerful denunciation of the current dominator, destructive, violent world-view pervading our planet. If the Earth and its inhabitants are portrayed as being controlled and exploited, the novel also unmistakably reinforces the fundamental values of the partnership cultural paradigm, which focuses on the caring potential of human love and reciprocity.

Keywords: Powers' *The Overstory*, biocultural partnership model, systemic science, plant life, myth, ecoliteracy.

1. Nature as our Partner

This essay is the result of research pursued by the Partnership Studies Group of Udine University[1] on Riane Eisler's biocultural partnership-dominator model (1987, 1995, Eisler & Fry 2019) as a relevant testimony of how transdisciplinary approaches to literature can broaden our critical scope, methodology and understanding when examining different types of 'texts'. I apply this holistic and comprehensive methodology for the study of literature, which draws upon different fields of knowledge and scientific investigation, such as quantum physics, biology and systemic science (Capra 1982, 1987, with Vikram 2018, with Luisi 2016), Panikkar's theories on *ecosophy* and *inter-independence* (Phan & Young 2018: 193, 273)[2], and contemporary studies on plant life (Mancuso 2017a-b, 2018, 2019; Gagliano *et al*. 2017; Gagliano 2018) and ecoliteracy (Garrard 2004). Due to globalisation, exploitation and technological control exerted by multinationals, humanity has increasingly grown detached and alienated from nature, both in the sense of human nature and of the natural world.

With the aim of rekindling this fundamental relationship between humans and nature, I intend to analyse Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* (2018), winner of the Pulitzer prize in 2019 and the Von Rezzori prize in 2020, an epic Ovidian novel full of arboreal metamorphoses representing a powerful denunciation of the current dominator, destructive, violent world-view pervading our planet. At the same time, the book unmistakably reinforces the fundamental values of the *partnership* cultural paradigm, which focuses on the caring potential of human love and reciprocity. Under the lens of ecocriticism, my essay studies "the relationship between literature and the physical environment"[3] (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xviii-xix), because in this novel nature, trees in particular, is a significant presence and *agency*, revealing "the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and environment in all areas of cultural production" (Garrard 2004: i). *The Overstory* creatively discusses and promotes a deep pre-patriarchal (or pre-dominator) partnership relationship with life and Nature, imaginatively inviting us to awaken and manifest our utmost potential, remembering and reactivating our innate, *native* and sacred wisdom as beings interconnected with the cosmos:

> We are about to destroy each other and the world, because of profound mistakes made in Bronze Age patriarchal [*dominator*] ontology – mistakes about the nature

[1] https://partnershipstudiesgroup.uniud.it/ (consulted on 9/03/2021).

[2] See http://www.raimon-panikkar.org/english/gloss-ecosofi.html (consulted on 9/03/2021).

[3] "What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xviii-xix). Indeed, Powers's novel well responds to Lawrence Buell's list of elements that can define an environmental work: "1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. 2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. 3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the texts' ethical orientation. 4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text" (1995: 7-8).

> of being, about the nature of human being in the world. Evolution itself is a time-process, seemingly a relentless linear unfolding. But biology also dreams, and in its dreams and waking visions it outleaps time, as well as space. It experiences prevision, clairvoyance, telepathy, synchronicity. Thus we have what has been called a magical capacity built into our genes. It is built into the physical universe. Synchronicity is a quantum phenomenon. The tachyon is consciousness, which can move faster than light. So, built into our biological-physical selves evolving linearly through time and space, is an authentically magical capacity to move spirally, synchronously, multisensorially, simultaneously back and forth, up and down, in and out through all time and space. In our DNA is a genetic memory going back through time to the first cell, and beyond; back through space to the big bang (the cosmic egg), and before that. To evolve then – to save ourselves from species extinction – we can activate our genetic capacity for magic. We can go back in time to our prepatriarchal [*partnership*] consciousness of human oneness with the earth. This memory is in our genes, *we have lived it*, it is ours (Sjöö & Mor 1991: 422).

In investigating his characters' deep relationship with trees, Powers' novel indicates that – through their fruitful and creative *inter-independence* (Panikkar, in Phan & Young 2018: 193) – humans and plants (and all other forms of life, including minerals) need to join forces to overcome the globalising, aggressive, exploitative dominator model ruling the planet and our lives. This to re-create a harmonious, systemic, ecosophical relationship among each other and the Earth: "through fungal synapses linked up in a network the size of the planet" (499). Our brain synapsises work and are analogous to the functioning of the fungi, as an interconnected network of information and messages that form our world-view and lives. Plants are the living manifestation of flexibility and solidity, of a cooperative inner design, a diffused and 'democratic' system of control, with no specific 'centre'. Plants are able to reproduce themselves with simplicity, to adjust with ease and velocity to environmental changes (Mancuso 2017a), to respond with resilience to natural and human made disasters: "Trees and other kinds of vegetation have proven to be remarkably resilient to the intense radiation around the [Chernobyl] nuclear disaster zone"[4].

Like trees and plants' roots, which we do not see as they go deeper into the soil and widely spread inside the Earth, human beings are invisibly interconnected and inter-independent as inhabitants of the planet, who should know well that "there's always as much belowground as above" (Powers 2018: 3)[5]. If we "*tune down to the lowest frequencies*" (3, italics in the original), we all can remember and feel a silent universal, intimate spiritual language, where trees are "*saying things, in words before words*" (3, italics in the original). What trees are whispering in their vibrational language can save the planet from destruction. This is what *The Overstory* intimates to the reader, intertwining the tendrils of human life with

[4] https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190701-why-plants-survived-chernobyls-deadly-radiation (consulted on 9/03/2021); https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/forests-around-chernobyl-arent-decaying-properly-180950075/ (consulted on 7/03/2021); https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19525043/ (consulted on 7/03/2021).

[5] All subsequent citations are taken from this edition.

the ancestral ones of trees. As Benozzo says, we always need to revive our relationship with the Sacred Wood, the forest, as archetypal foundation of our profound sense of the sacred:

> When we get out from known streets and paths to enter into the deep thicket, we decide to interrupt the chain of our habitual emotions and gestures to find again a resonance with the elements from which we germinated. In this sense, to lose oneself in the forest is a poetic act, a rejuvenation of sclerotised perceptions, a perpetuation of that naming of the world which gave birth to our language and our oneiric projections (Benozzo 2021: 50, my translation).

The Overstory stems from this experience of entering symbolically and physically into the ancestral forest we abandoned to become 'civilised', thus progressively deracinating our humanity from our common roots and harmony with the planet. It shows how this *inter-independence* with Mother Earth and all Her children is necessary for our psychic and spiritual health. The health of our bodies is certainly important but not to the prize of our dehumanisation, isolation and psychological sickness. Our bodies are always in transition from one form to another; our cells are in constant living transformation and are part of a greater inclusive and interlaced process, of a wondrous whole. Our *dis-ease* stems from the loss of our co-identity with the planet and all other creatures. Our society and world are dis-eased because we need to re-establish interconnectedness with all things – *easefully*, with levity, passion, enthusiasm and joy. Rather than falling into a more and more devastating and absurd idea of needing to control everything through technology, for the safety of our *true* lives we need to recognise "the voice and song that had accompanied us and that we had lost, the multitudes of lives that inhabited us" (Benozzo 2021: 51, my translation).

2. Tree … he watching you

The Overstory shows some interesting analogies with most literature and storytelling from Aboriginal/Native peoples worldwide, who have a deep environmental sensitivity and awareness of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge calls "The One Life" (1983: 101). The quotations in the novel's epigraph create a network of wisdom going beyond time, space, and form, connecting authors from different backgrounds and epochs, who are all conscious of the foundational importance of our relationship with the planet, and of the planet with us. In the first quotation of the epigraph, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the XIXth century Transcendalist poet-philosopher suggests that there is "an occult relation between man and vegetable" that gives him "the greatest delight". Delight is an expression often used by Coleridge in his poetry to express a sense of oneness with all life in nature and with God (Riem 2005: 84, 120). The second quotation in the epigraph is from the contemporary scientist and environmentalist James Lovelock, who thinks of the Earth as Gaia (1972; Lovelock & Margulis 1974; Tyrrell 2013), which is "alive like a tree. A tree that quietly exists, never moving except to sway in the wind, yet endlessly conversing with the sunlight and the soil". This endless conversation seems to be quite lost while we are in the grip of technology which, while pretending to ease our 'cares', in reality aims at controlling and pre-conditioning our choices and lives. The third quotation is from the Australian Aboriginal writer and playwright Bill Neidje, the last

speaker of his indigenous language, Gaagudju, from the Kakadu region, which gave the name to the Kakadu National Park[6]. In his grandiose book *Story about Feeling* (1989), Bill Neidjie, describes his profound feelings of interconnection with all life and the land. Here is the passage from Neidjie that Powers quotes to describe the ongoing pulsating life of trees and all natural life, even while we sleep:

> Tree … he watching you. You look at tree, he listens to you. He got no finger, he can't speak. But that leaf … pumping, growing, growing in the night. While you sleeping you dream something. Tree and grass same thing (epigraph).

This awareness of plants being 'alive' and pulsating is also present in the most recent studies of the neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso (2017a: 7-11) and others (Gagliano *et al.* 2017; Gagliano 2018). Mancuso and Capra also focus on the systemic and complex organisational networks and structures that describe the planet as an interconnected self-regulated living system (Capra & Mancuso 2019: 14-15).

Neidjie's reference to dreams of course is connected to the Aboriginal concept of the unbroken interconnection of humans, nature and ancestral life, expressed in the primordial sacred energy of the *Djang* in Neidjie's language, translated in English as *Dreaming*, or sometimes the *Law*. The Dreaming has different names according to different Aboriginal languages, such as, for example, *Jukurpa* for the Ngarrkico language groups, *Tjukurpa* for the Western desert peoples, *Aaltyerre* for the Aranda groups. What is known as Chief Seathl 1852 "oration" about the importance and sacredness of all life gives voice to very similar poetic expressions in North American indigenous discourse:

> Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people.
>
> We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat of a pony, and man, all belong to the same family.
>
> The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you our land, you must remember that it is sacred. […]
>
> Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our Mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the sons of the earth. This we know: the

[6] Bill Neidjie (c. 1920 - 23 May 2002) https://trove.nla.gov.au/people/572859 (consulted on 9/03/2021). On the topic of 'lost' Australian Aboriginal languages, please see the impressive work done by Professor Ghil'ad Zuckermann, Chair of Linguistics and Endangered Languages at the University of Adelaide, Australia, who, since 2017, has been a chief investigator in an NHMRC research project assessing language revival and mental health: http://www.zuckermann.org/ (consulted on 19/04/2020).

> earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand of it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself […].
>
> This earth is precious to us. It is also precious to you. One thing we know: There is only one God. No man, be he Red Man or White Man, can be apart. We are all brothers (Noah Seathl, Chief of the Suwamisu Tribe. Seattle, U.S.A.)[7].

Significantly, Noah Seathl anticipates by about 150 years Capra's idea of the "web of life" (1997), and the latest discoveries related to quantum physics; or rather, they both give voice to the ancient wisdom that sees Life as One, as found in the Tao, in *Advaita Vedānta* (Pelissero 2004: 283-293), and in many other ancient world spiritual traditions that have gone amiss, because of a "brief forgetting":

> We must remember the chemical connections between our cells and the stars, between the beginning and now. We must remember and reactivate the primal consciousness of oneness between all living things. We must return to that time, in our genetic memory, in our dreams, when we were one species born to live together on earth, as her magic children. These are things human beings have known for most of our time on earth. For at least 500,000 years of human time we have known them; for about 5 billion years of earth time we have known them; for a good 13 billion years of galactic time we have known them – and, no doubt, longer than that. Set against this long galactic, terrestrial, and human time of knowing our oneness, the past four thousand years of patriarchy's institutional and doctrinal denial of our oneness, once we see it for what it was, will appear a mere aberration. Just a brief forgetting (Sjöö & Mor 1991: 424).

Even if Noah Seathl's oratory has many versions and its origin is somewhat controversial, as it seems there are no recorded documents attesting to it, the sentiments at its core are definitely familiar to those who have a sense of harmony in this "long galactic time of knowing our oneness" and are conscientious and caring about the environment. We also know that 'documented history' is recorded in narratives created by those who have 'won', dominated and overpowered the peoples they colonised, especially the Native 'Other'. From the 1970s, Seathl's text became an environmental wake-up call, warning the world, like Powers does, that we need to change direction, transforming our exploitative Western dominator approach and reverting back to the partnership model of networking with all Life.

3. The Understory: Human Protagonists

The very structure of *The Overstory* in its four main sections explicitly names the different elements composing the life-cycle of trees: *Roots*, *Trunk*, *Crown*, *Seeds*, starting from the foundations reaching down in the soil and then moving up towards the sky and finally exploding and diffusing through seeds which will give birth to other plants. The novel itself

[7] http://www.csun.edu/~vcpsy00h/seattle.htm; https://suquamish.nsn.us/home/about-us/chief-seattle-speech/ (consulted on 23/04/2021).

aspires to keep the narration going on in the readers' minds, creating echoes and further meditations, as a poetic appeal towards an active engagement, caution and care about the seeds and fruits of our actions upon the planet.

At the *Roots* of the story, in the nine specific sections devoted to them, there are the nine main characters, who are in one way or the other deeply tied and engaged with at least one specific tree species. Many of these characters come together as engaged and passionate eco-activists; their separate stories progressively come to intersect as their attention and care towards the ecosystem increases in their conscious attempts at actual partnership. They are also 'different', because either they come from immigrant families or they do, say and feel 'strange' things. In one way or another they are outsiders form ordinary society, which aspires mainly to subservient, obedient and compliant 'subjects', who conform to the imposed norms without any critical and independent thinking.

Nicholas Hoel, descendent of Jørgen Hoel, a Norwegian immigrant in Brooklyn, in the long line of his family saga, is tied to the big red chestnut planted in their farm by his ancestor. It became a hereditary habit for the Hoel men to photograph the tree regularly to capture its growth and change, as a pregnant symbol of the family's progressive grounding and 'growth' in their 'new' land.

Mimi Ma, the bright and successful daughter of a Chinese engineer, is connected to a mulberry, his father's 'inheritance' and pride, which is also the site where he commits suicide; she's also related to the pine whispering secrets to her at the opening and ending of the novel.

Adam Appich, grows up in a dysfunctional family: his father was abusive and his older sister Leigh disappeared when Adam was a child. Adam is solitary and decides to study psychology, possibly to solve his own personal problems; later in his life he becomes a respected psychology professor. He is tied with the maple his father planted when he was born, as was the case of his siblings who all have a special personal tree.

Ray Brinkman is a property attorney and his future wife, Dorothy Cazaly, a stenographer. They meet while acting *Macbeth* at a community theatre production where Ray plays Macduff (66); this creates a tie with the oak. Dorothy Cazaly is connected to the linden tree she hits while driving; it is "a radical tree", different from the oak "as a woman to man". As the "bee tree, the tree of peace whose tonics and tears can cure every kind of tension and anxiety" (72), in the same way she will forever cure and be close to Ray. Ray and Dorothy do not get together with the other activists, for the poetical focus here is the loving partnership, even if always inspired and connected to trees.

Douglas Pavlicekis is a Vietnam War veteran who participates to the Stanford Prison Experiments (1971)[8], one of the many examples in the novel of the dominator system's desire to humiliate, control and debase human 'natural' feelings for each other. This happens in all dictatorships, where sadly, like in the Holocaust and other world atrocities, the dominator narrative is easily imposed or coerced by those in power. He is connected with the Banyan tree that saves his life in the Vietnam War (82), and the Douglas Firs he plants once he

[8] https://www.britannica.com/event/Stanford-Prison-Experiment (consulted on 22/04/2021).

discovers immense hidden clearings in the National forests while driving in Idaho (88-89); because of this his nickname is "Doug-fir"; he later meets, helps and falls in love with Mia.

Neelay Metha, who belongs to an Indian migrant family, is a Silicon Valley-based computer genius, paralysed after he fell from an oak, which becomes his totem tree; as an activist he will take the name of Watchman. He has a revealing encounter with the trees in Stanford gardens, where he is studying computer science and this inspires him to invent a very successful epic game of worlds that makes him rich.

Patricia Westford, a scientist, is probably inspired by the real-life ecologist Suzanne Simard[9] and may have connections to the work of the German forester Peter Wohlleben (2016); her tree is the beech.

Olivia Vandergriff, later named Maidenhair, is allied with the giant redwood trees. She is a former a student who, after an accidental electrocution and a near-death experience 'comes back' and feels in touch with a spiritual voice inspiring her to get involved in the eco-movement against the destruction of the giant redwood trees. It is in this activist context that most of the human characters of the novel will find each other and fight side by side.

The plot of the novel is intertwined like the roots and foliage of the trees which may seem (and possibly are) the real protagonists of the story. In the novel the humans seem to be simply the *understory*, as most of them become entangled within a web of activism and find each other together (at least for a brief time) to 'save' trees, because they feel and understand trees are fellow breathing beings, which are being systematically destroyed because of 'progress'.

They are all people who have unique relationships with trees, in whatever ways these relationships are expressed, but they are actually side characters, 'outsiders', insignificant and powerless, unless they unite and harmonise with the rhythmical comings and goings of life, with its moments of hope and exaltation and moments of deep sadness and dis-ease. The difference, according to Eisler's dominator-partnership paradigm, is made by the conscious choice that each of us can and must make. *The Overstory* shows how the characters flourish in their spiritual awareness of partnership and oneness only when they open to the deeper awareness of a greater 'cosmic' frame, where every step they make (or do not make), every little or big choices – all have an impact on themselves, the trees they are tied to (in more than one sense) and the planet. The systematic destruction of forests and trees is "grievable" (Hess 2019: 191-192) and the great poet Gerald Manley Hopkins certainly knew the terrible feeling of loss and inner devastation (Riem 2020) when trees are sacrified for 'progress', as intensely expressed in "Binsley Poplars":

> My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
> Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
> All felled, felled, are all felled;
> Of a fresh and following folded rank
> Not spared, not one
> (ll. 1-5, Hopkins 1992: 206).

[9] See: https://forestry.ubc.ca/faculty-profile/suzanne-simard/ (consulted on 19/04/2021).

4. *The Overstory*: Symbolism of the Trees

It would be interesting to have an expert ethnobotanist, or a traditional herbalist and midwife, who knows the therapeutic function and mystical symbolism of plants. Someone with a passion for literature too, in order to study the symbolisms of some of the main trees/characters in the novel and their intertwined connections with each other and their human 'relations'. With the help of Cattabiani's (1996), Taraglio's (1997) and Hageneder's (2019) texts on tree and plant symbolism and ancient traditional herbal medicine, I will now engage in a partnership dialogue on this topic. In Partnership Studies, the mythological dimension, connected to how humans narrate their world in order to make sense of their realities, is a fundamental critical perspective. The study of myths, symbols, archetypes can express the depth of life in a more nuanced and poetic way, opening towards a deeper understanding of ourselves and our lives.

Chestnuts, dedicated to Zeus by the Greeks, in Christian symbolism represent goodness and chastity; they are long-lived and drought-resistant trees like Nicholas Hoel. Nick is a casual artist who is unsure about his artistic qualities, but his life changes when he meets Olivia and falls in love with her. After Olivia dies in their attempt at arson, meant to block the destruction of the red giants forests, Nick wanders as a nomadic and continues to write his artistic and provocative messages in nature. He is never caught by the authorities and, at the end of the novel, his "Tree art" will bloom into fuller meaning, when he creates the word "Still" in gigantic letters made of tree trunks and only visible from space. It is a stillness, an apparent quiet, which swarms with life and motion, even if apparently immobile for our human time: "Already, this word is greening. Already, the mosses surge over, the beetles and lichen and fungi turning the logs to soil" (502). It is a continuous metamorphosis: seed into tree, tree into soil that will feed another seed, in a spiralling motion of Life-Death-Regeneration.

The beech of Patricia Westford, Patty the Plant, has an ancient sacred history and was present in various Celtic ceremonies (McSkimming 1992). A sacred beech grove, at Tusculum, was dedicated to Diana, the goddess of the wild woods, certainly in tune with Patricia's passion for and profound understanding of the life of plants. Germanic tribes used to write runic symbols on beech wooden sticks or tiny clay artefacts, as a sort of magical alphabet manifesting the spiritual voices of Nature, as an instrument for inspiration and divination. The beech seems thus to bring together the sacred images of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. Indeed, after Patricia loses her academic position (Tree of Knowledge) and starts living a solitary life as a park ranger, she can be seen as a solitary Diana who loves the vibrant forests (Tree of Life) she protects and overseers.

Mimi Ma's mulberry was used for more than 5,000 years in China (and also later in Italy) as food and home for the silkworm, which produced its soft and elegant threads. In ancient Chinese cosmology, we find the hollow mulberry, the world axial tree, root and centre of the universe: "It is a hermaphrodite, because it dates back to before the separation of yin and yang, male and female, and it represents the Tao, or the all-encompassing cosmic order" (Hageneder 2019: 236). In this sense, it well embodies the capacity of Mimi to balance her feminine and masculine qualities in order to reach her goals. She is smart,

determined and can be severe. Towards the end of the novel, she creates a new form of psychotherapy where she and her client are completely silent and this produces a holistic cathartic healing in both of them. This capacity for silence enables her to hear the 'signals' of trees, both at the beginning and end of the novel, in a circular motion. In the final pages, we find Mimi Ma sitting in a public park, near a pine tree. She hears the pine "*saying things, in words before words*" (3, italics in the original) and this 'silent' speech is similar to Mimi's experimental psychotherapy. In many traditions the pine is sacred and has manifold uses. The Blackfoot use it to create "story sticks": each notch in the stick indicates a traditional story the elders give to the children of the tribe. The Hopi use some pine resin as a protection from evil magic. The Navajo use it as a ceremonial medicine. In China, Taoist hermits and monks eat pine nuts, which bring longevity. The pine's opening 'silent' speech contains a long list of 16 plant-names and is meant, I believe, to give the right perspective to our reading. It is trees that matter, they are central, focal, important, resilient, eternal: "*Listen. There's something you need to hear*" (4, italics in the original). It is the *Overstory*, it moves at the speed of trees.

5. Conclusion: At the *Speed* of Trees

Human grief and the physical pain connected to loss is something all characters in the novel experience, in one way or the other, as elements of the *understory* of the forest to which they belong. They manifest and express their partnership and dialogic interconnections, and their attempt at transforming the dominator world that engenders those losses and pain into a partnership caring harmony with all things. In human terms, most of the characters fail to achieve their goals, because they believed their goal was to 'save' the trees and forest; they are accused of terrorism, tracked and persecuted, event tortured. Some die, some are imprisoned, some try to return to 'normal', and some remain 'lost', but also finally some find their truest Self. They were all, in a sense, mistaken, because they reasoned (we reason) according to our short human linear time. The trees move at their own "speed", in their own time, which seems tremendously slow to us, almost to the point of appearing non-existent. However, their slow movement is real, trees and plants live on, whisper their truths over and over, sinking their roots deep into that which we destroy – with bombs, cement, intensive farming, greed and exploitation. They spread their sacred seeds, sprout flowers, a tiny shoot, a little trunk, then a gigantic tree. They live on, in partnership with all life, including us human beings, constantly reminding us of our mutual inter-independence within an ecosophical dimension:

> A certain habitual ecological attitude must be overcome in order to go much deeper, seeking a new equilibrium between matter and spirit (Panikkar 1994).
>
> Beyond a simple ecology, ecosophy is a wisdom-spirituality of the earth. 'The new equilibrium' is not so much between man and the earth, as between matter and spirit, between spatio-temporality and consciousness. Ecosophy is neither a mere 'science of the earth' (ecology) nor even 'wisdom about the earth', but rather a

> 'wisdom of the earth herself' that is made manifest to man when he knows how to listen to her with love[10].

By bringing Eisler's domination-partnership model into 'dialogical dialogue' with this ambitious and multi-faceted novel, with its special focus on myths and symbols as positive and active energies and instruments to achieve cultural transformation, I demonstrate the relevance of Partnership Studies as applied to environmentally conscious texts such as *The Overstory*.

There are significant and numerous instances in the novel where characters creatively harmonise with the cyclical life of Trees, offering their symbolic and regenerative poetic actions in order to illumine themselves and their world. Apocalyptic visions are replaced with visions of fluid regeneration, new seeds are planted, seeds of a new conscious humanity. For example, Patricia Westerford metaphorically flings green liquid over her audience as an invitation to see, feel and become 'green'. Neelay Metha creates an ecological computer game showing how a different and visionary approach to technology can inspire alternative and positive solutions for our lives. Nick Hoel's aspires to a greening organic world created in partnership with and in Nature. He composes the word "STILL" with natural elements, trees in particular, a mythical message visible from outer space, maybe as a signal and a poetic 'call' to other cosmic dimensions. These are all 'signals' that one can transform things, even with small and apparently insignificant actions. Mimi Ma hears 'signals' at the close of the novel:

> The signals say*: A good answer is worth reinventing from scratch, again and again.*
> They say: *The air is the mix we must keep making.*
> They say: *There's as much belowground as above.*
> They tell her: *Do not hope or despair or predict or be caught surprised. Never capitulate, but divide, multiply, transform, conjoin, do, and endure as you have all the long day of life.*
> *There are seeds that need fire. Seeds that need freezing. Seeds that need to be swallowed, etched by digestive acid, expelled as waste. Seeds that must be smashed open before they'll germinate.*
> *A thing can travel everywhere, just by holding still* (500, italics in the original).

Mimi has now no more expectations or plans, she knows how to achieve a final arboreal metamorphosis, she is completely "Still", because "This will never end" (502). These closing words emphasise the novel's partnership message about the necessary conditions for the survival of our ecosystem, involving active human resolution, endurance, gratitude and responsibility, and bearing witness to the interconnectedness of all life forms. Mimi has learnt to listen with love to the wisdom of Mother Earth, she is now one of Her children. Her small body contains all the other seeds her friends were, burnt with fire, expelled as waste, swallowed, frozen, smashed open, dead and reborn, forever anew, like a little robin appearing on the balcony, then swiftly and elegantly flying away.

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[10] See: http://www.raimon-panikkar.org/english/gloss-ecosofi.html and https://www.avvenire.it/ agora/pagine/ecosofia-teilhard-a-panikkar (consulted on 9/03/2021).

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Theatre as a Platform for Ecological Critique: A Focus on *Gặp nhau cuối năm*

Abstract I: Due sono gli obiettivi perseguiti da questo studio sull'ecoteatro con un focus sul Vietnam. In primo luogo, discute di come il teatro possa affrontare preoccupazioni ecologiche, utilizzando antiche fonti culturali. In secondo luogo, si concentra su come queste preoccupazioni sono drammatizzate nella commedia satirica *Gặp nhau cuối năm* (*Raduno di fine anno*) trasmessa per la prima volta dalla televisione vietnamita nel 2003. La principale questione teorica è come e se il teatro, e in particolare il teatro televisivo, possa aumentare la consapevolezza della crisi climatica e generare un cambiamento culturale. Mentre affronta la crisi, il teatro non mira necessariamente a rompere le convenzioni. Può giocare con strategie retoriche per trasmettere la complessità delle interazioni tra umano e natura. Può stimolare fattori internalisti e motivazioni intrinseche che portano all'azione sociale e politica individuale o collettiva. *Gặp nhau cuối năm* è una riscrittura della leggenda dei tre Dei della Cucina che supervisionano ogni famiglia e presentano il loro rapporto all'Imperatore di Giada, il sovrano del mondo. Usando la satira e la parodia per trasmettere elogi e critiche, lo spettacolo stimola la riflessione sulla crisi sociale e ambientale e l'occasionale indifferenza degli Dei. Considerando l'impatto che la TV ha sull'opinione pubblica in Vietnam e la popolarità raggiunta da *Gặp nhau cuối năm*, si comprende come il teatro possa unire intrattenimento e critica sociale per rispondere alle questioni ambientali, stimolare il pensiero ecologico e generare un cambiamento.

Abstract II: This article on ecotheatre with a focus on Vietnam pursues two goals. Firstly, it discusses how theatre can address ecological concerns, utilising ancient cultural sources. Secondly, it focuses on how these concerns are dramatised in the satirical comedy *Gặp nhau cuối năm* (*Year-End Gathering*), first broadcast on Vietnamese television in 2003. The main theoretical question is how and whether theatre, and specifically television theatre, can raise awareness of the climate crisis and generate a cultural shift. While addressing the crisis, theatre does not necessarily aim at breaking conventions. It can play with rhetorical strategies to convey the complexity of the interactions between humans and nature. It can stimulate internalist factors and intrinsic motivations leading to individual or collective social and political action. *Gặp nhau cuối năm* is a rewriting of the legend of the three Kitchen Gods who supervise every household and present their report to the Jade Emperor, the ruler of the world. Using satire and parody to convey praise and critique, the play stimulates

reflection on the social and environmental crisis and occasional indifference of the Gods. Considering the impact that the TV has on public opinion in Vietnam and the popularity reached by *Gặp nhau cuối năm*, it becomes clear that theatre encapsulating entertainment and critique can respond to environmental concerns, stimulate ecological thought and generate change.

Keywords: Environmental crisis, theatre, *Gặp nhau cuối năm*, entertainment, commitment, public awareness.

Theatre for the Environment

Environmental impacts are the aggregate of actions of individuals (Ehrlich & Holdren 1971). Recent enquiries into the communication of ecology have shown that the arts can deliver a powerful call to environmental action. They can enhance knowledge of and empathy towards nature and stimulate change of behaviour for sustainable consumption (Curtis *et al.* 2014). The stage is being employed as a platform for ecological discourse and contemporary theatre can be envisioned as a form of ecological doing, because in contemporary practice and theory, "[it] is seen as a predominantly performative medium, […] with the result that the fundamental concern of scholars is no longer to decipher what the theatre text means but rather to focus on what the theatre medium 'does'" (Lavery 2016: 230). Ecotheatre is similar to the traditional theatre, as it employs its constitutive features and does not necessarily aim at breaking with theatrical conventions. It plays with all the devices to convey the complexity of the interactions between humans and nature.

Theatre can respond to the environmental crisis by revisiting ancient legends, myths, and folklore, which are already familiar to people of all ages. The popular satirical comedy *Year-End Gathering* streamed on every Lunar New Year's Eve exemplifies the revival of traditional legends in Vietnamese theatre. The show attracted a large number of viewers and in 2003 it proved to be a great success as it borrowed the legend of *The Kitchen Gods* to discuss the most prominent social problems of the year, among which ecological concerns. Its popularity raises the question as to whether a Vietnamese theatre show based on an ancient legend can raise ecological awareness and willingness to act, considering that in Southeast Asian countries people are not inclined to practice the 3Rs – Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle.

Asian Theatre and Ecological Critique

'Asian theatre' is a wide term, especially because it depends on the definition of Asia and on how the Middle East relates to South, East, and Southeast Asia (Liu 2016). A number of countries in South, East, and especially Southeast Asia, where Vietnam is located, share certain similarities with each other, especially with the Indian theatre (Chaitanya 2013; Tài 2014). Chaitanya highlights similar basic dramatic principles and conventions in Far East countries like China or Japan and India, explains that high stylisation creates an aesthetic distance between the performers and the audience comparable to the *Verfremdungseffekt*, and indicates the features of the traditional Asian theatre:

- Elements such as dances, music, poetry, and the stage installation contribute to the plays' theme and aesthetic.
- The script is not as important as the harmony between sung words and gestures.
- Unlike the linear plot of Western dramas, each part of an Asian drama can be performed as a separate play.
- Religion is at the root of Asian theatre.
- Gestures and appearance such as masks or make-up define groups of characters.
- Unlike the popular chronological order and switches of location in Western dramas, the conventional act division in Asian dramas depends more on thoughts or moods.
- Shifting of space might be more metaphysical than physical. A trip might only happen in the mind.
- Speech is conventional, poetic and musical.
- Most Asian plays are temple plays and thus most likely comedies, with elements of sentimentality and irony (Chaitanya 2013).

Verbal play, the most popular form of performance in modern Asian theatre, shows similarities with Western versions (Wetmore *et al.* 2014), especially in countries colonised by Western countries, such as Indochina (Tài 2014). Many Asian stages now also perform Western plays, including verbal and Broadway musical plays in their own language (Wetmore *et al.* 2014).

Throughout history, Vietnamese culture has developed more than one form of traditional theatre performances. Besides verbal theatre plays, other forms that incorporate acting, singing, dancing, and folk music performances are well known to Vietnamese people. Not only do these forms of art often tell stories based on folklore and legends, but they have also benefited from people's strong belief in them. A celebration held from the 11th to the 13th of August in the Lunar calendar honours the ancestor of theatre (Đặng 2018), which attracts a large number of artists. However, at the turn of the century, theatre seemed to involve traditional culture less frequently. Plays focused on new themes such as individuals in the new society after the Vietnam war, or the war itself. Folklores and legends remained popular in plays for young audiences. Ecotheatre is a new concept and besides exhibitions, art installations, short movies about the environment (Vũ 2020), only few projects have focused on ecotheatre (Thu 2015; Lê 2018).

21st-century Vietnam

At the beginning of the 21st century, Vietnam had fully recovered from the war and was trying to catch up as a late starter in the fast-paced development. After the initiation of Đổi Mới in 1986, the national reform with the goal of establishing a socialist-oriented economy, Vietnam rapidly became a member of ASEAN in 1995, of APEC in 1998, and then WTO in 2006. The country has opened its door to foreign investors and encouraged private sectors to take part in the economy. The result is clearly shown in the high GDP growth rate over a decade (6.5-7%), and the priority placed in manufacturing, mining, services, and agriculture sectors (Bùi & Bùi 2017). While the life of the Vietnamese people has improved significantly compared to the period right after the war, urbanisation has caused deforestation, pollution, social crimes. People flock to big cities in search of job

opportunities, leading to serious air pollution; factories dump waste into water and pollute rivers and the sea; tourism has devised strategies to attract tourists, but also posing threats to culture and the environment.

To tackle these problems, the government has tried to involve organisations and individuals. Among the attempts to raise awareness and encourage people to take action, theatre seems to play a promising role. From 2003 to 2019, *Gặp Nhau Cuối Năm* (*Year-End Gathering*), better known as *Táo Quân* (*The Kitchen Gods*) was broadcasted on Vietnam Television (VTV) every Lunar New Year's Eve. Rooted in the legend of the Kitchen Gods who every year visit the Jade Emperor to present their report, the show effectively mentioned important events, illustrated problems, and sometimes proposed solutions. The satirical humour of the show attracted large audiences: while small children simply enjoyed the enthusiasm of the cast and their parody songs, elder viewers were encouraged to reflect. Throughout their seventeen years of streaming, many social problems were dramatised, allowing the show to provide entertainment as well as serious reflection. Its success suggests an opportunity for theatre to become more deeply involved with social issues and shows that the arts can stimulate social awareness.

Vietnamese people do celebrate the Western New Year, but the most important festival is Têt, which is New Year according to the lunar calendar. The preparation may start about one month before the Lunar New Year's Eve and during the last lunar month of the old year, the 23rd of December is an important date. On this day, three spiritual figures known as Táo Quân – the Kitchen Gods ride their carps to heaven and meet the Jade Emperor. They must report to his majesty everything that has happened in the mortal world during the year. The legend of the Kitchen Gods is told not only in Vietnam but also in China and Korea and varies from country to country, yet the one thing in common is that the Gods all have one duty, that is to answer to the ruler of the world. The story of the Kitchen God(s) from China and Vietnam shares more cultural similarities than the one from Korea. While many Koreans believe that their Kitchen God is a female deity named Jowanggaksi or Jowanghalmae (Kendall 1987; The Korean Foundation 2017), Buddhists worship a couple or a male god. Jowanggaksi takes the form of a white bowl of water that is placed in the kitchen. In China, however, the popular version of the Kitchen God tale is of a man named Zhang who neglected his wife (Chang 2000; Winter 2016). After having been blind and poor as a consequence of karma for this bad deed, he re-encountered his wife, who treated him nicely. Feeling ashamed for what he did, Zhang jumped into the stove and died. The Jade Emperor then made him the Kitchen God. Every lunar year on the 23rd of December, every household takes his paper figure down from the kitchen shelf, put some sugar or molasses in his mouth to encourage sweet words when he reports to the Jade Emperor, and then burns this figure as a ritual to send him off (Lufkin 2016; Zhao 2015; Wong *et al.* 2012). In Vietnam, legend has it that the Kitchen God used to be a mortal man named Trọng Cao:

> Once upon a time, there was a couple named Trọng Cao and Thị Nhi. They often quarrelled over domestic affairs. One day the husband beat his wife. Thị Nhi ran away from home and became homeless. Eventually, she met a man named Phạm Lang and married him. In the meantime, Trọng Cao lost his fortune and became a

> beggar. One day he came to beg at the house of Phạm Lang. The lady of the house recognized him as her former husband and gave him food and drink. While they were talking over old times, Phạm Lang returned from a hunting trip. Afraid that Phạm Lang would misunderstand, Thị Nhi hid her former husband in the haystack. Phạm Lang had brought back some game meats and burned the haystack to roast them. He unwittingly burned Trọng Cao before Thị Nhi could explain the situation. Thị Nhi realized her mistake and jumped into the burning haystack to die with her former husband. Because he loved his wife, Phạm Lang also leapt into the flames to be with her. Thus, all three died in the fire (Trần 2018: 99).

As told in Nguyễn Đổng Chi's *Kho Tàng Truyện Cổ Tích Việt Nam* (*Collection of Vietnamese Fairy Tales*, 2000), another popular version of this legend tells the story of a poor couple. When the husband decided to seek fortune away, he told his wife to wait three years and then get married to someone else. Three years later, he went back and found that his wife had remarried, as promised. He immediately wanted to go away, while the new husband wanted her to leave him and go back to her previous husband. Thus, the ex-husband hung himself to end the suffering and when the wife heard the news, she drowned herself in the pond, and the new husband took some poison and died. When they went to the Underworld, Diêm Vương (Yama), the supervisor of all dead souls, asked for the reason, was moved by the story, and turned them into Kitchen Gods who would always stay in the kitchen. In both versions, the three Gods are described as three legs of the stove that cannot be separated. Other variants of the legend involve a servant in the house of the new husband. He either tried to help the new husband save the other two and ended up getting caught in the fire or felt guilty for setting fire to the haystack and followed his master. The servant is transformed into a ball of clay to keep the fire burning in the stove, fulfilling his role as a helper to the three Gods (Nguyễn 2000).

Also in his book, Trần explains that these three people then were assigned by Ngọc Hoàng (the Jade Emperor) to be "the three-in-one Kitchen God but each with a different responsibility: Phạm Lang was to be Thổ Công (Duke of the Soil), caring for the kitchen; Trọng Cao was to be Thổ Địa (Earth Deity), caring for the home; and Thị Nhi was to be Thổ Kỳ (local guard), caring for the household transaction" (Trần 2018: 99). In some other sources, for example the *Encyclopaedia of New Year's Holiday Worldwide*, the Kitchen Gods are addressed as three separate figures (Crump 2016). Here the plural form will be adopted to avoid confusion, especially in the following part about their figures in the television play.

The Kitchen Gods supervise all households and protect them from harmful spirits. While the Chinese smear sweets on the Kitchen Gods' mouths, the Vietnamese buy paper carp or real carp for the Gods because this type of fish is their means of transport. To help the Gods reach the Jade Emperor in time, they burn the paper carp and release the real carp into rivers. The similarity between Chinese and Vietnamese culture is the feast they organise during that day as a tribute to the Gods who then fly to the sky and report to the Jade Emperor what each household has done in that year. This ancient feast during the Lunar New Year in both countries should not be considered as an enticement but an expression of gratitude to the Gods for having supported their household for the whole year. Đinh Hồng

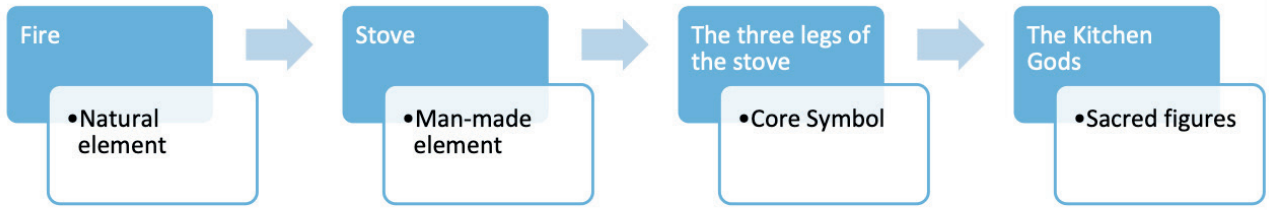

Fig. 1. The connection between natural, human, and sacred elements in the legend of the Kitchen Gods (Đinh Hồng Hải 2015).

Hải observes that all the variants of the legend in Vietnam share a love triangle that results in the death of all three people involved, and then salvation from a higher deity, who turns them into supernatural beings. He illustrates the connection between natural, human, and sacred elements [Figure 1], and explains that the religious figures gradually originate from many cultures and undergo slow changes, which in recent years they have created new cultural elements, one of which is theatre adaption (Dinh 2015: 87).

The Adaption of the Kitchen Gods in Vietnamese Theatre

Táo Quân (*The Kitchen Gods*) introduced Nam Tào (Southern Star Deity) and Bắc Đẩu (Nothern Star Deity), two deities who always wait upon Jade Emperor and help him supervise the mortals. They are able to grant good luck to the good people and punish the bad people. Southern Star Deity keeps the book of the living and Northern Star Deity keeps the book of death, so they can decide who will be born and who will die (Lương 2016). They were only supporting characters in the premiere show but became protagonists later on. In 2003 the Jade Emperor was portrayed as a more energetic and less solemn person, while from 2004 onwards, when another actor was cast for the role, Jade Emperor became calmer and more serious, at times amusing and satirical.

The first show had three Kitchen Gods, one of whom was a male and the other two females. The male Kitchen God appeared first, and then the females appeared on stage together, claiming to be twins cloned from the male god. The male Kitchen God was not in charge of anything specifically, while one female god presided over the nation's culture and the other over the arts. In the following years the Kitchen Gods multiplied and represented a specific domain, such as transportation, education, healthcare, economy, society, and culture [Table 1]. Other fields varied from one year to another, depending on the striking problems that year had.

The God of Economy showed up most frequently, indicating the level of concern about this sector in Vietnam. The topic of the report ranged from good news like the growth of GDP and export rate to bad news like high prices of goods, bribery, corruption, and economic crisis. The God of Economy often met the Jade Emperor with confidence until he received troubling questions he tried to ignore. Throughout the seventeen years of the show, whether a God took part in the show would depend on the events of the year.

	Education	Economy	Healthcare	Society	Culture	Transportation
2003					√	
2004	√		√			√
2005	√		√		√	√
2006	√	√	√			
2007	√	√	√		√	√
2008		√	√	√		√
2009		√	√	√		√
2010	√	√		√		√
2011		√		√		√
2012	√	√	√			√
2013		√		√	√	√
2014	√	√	√		√	√
2015						
2016	√	√		√	√	
2017	√	√				
2018		√	√	√		
2019	√	√		√		√

Tab. 1. The most popular Kitchen Gods and their frequency of appearance in the show.

Recently, as the environmental problems have become severe in Vietnam and people have grown concerned, the God of Environment joined the group. In spite of the commitment by the Vietnamese government, the environment has been severely affected during the process of development (O'Rouke 2002): construction sites keep rising, mostly in big cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the number of cars continues to increase as a consequence of better incomes, and deforestation and sea pollution have not been tackled.

In 2017 and 2018 the God of Environment was a new entry. In 2017 he had to answer to the Southern star deity about sea pollution caused by factory waste from Formosa Company, which in turn has affected the life and economy of the whole country, especially of four central provinces on the coastline (Hoàng 2017). The destruction of natural landscape and the construction of skyscrapers that year also led to serious flooding in Ho Chi Minh City, which the God tried to cover clumsily by saying that the sea crisis was over, and floods were not a new problem, but no matter how hard he tried, the Southern star deity insisted he should learn his lesson of environmental and economic management, saying that Heaven would not sacrifice the environment for developmental goals. In 2018, the topic of river pollution caused by factory waste was brought up. The case of Bisuco Company and River Kon was listed as one of the ten most notable environmental events of the year 2018 by the National Committee of Clean Water and Environment. The river produced foul smell, affecting daily-life activities of residents along the bank, and although ten kilometres were polluted, the

God of Environment tried to excuse herself by saying it was only a small part of the river. Having heard the Jade Emperor's confirmation that developments were not prioritised over the environment, the God of Environment raised her voice to encourage joint action for environmental protection, only to be criticised for being cliché by the Northern star deity.

While the cast's acting skills were the core of the show, musical parody captured the audience. In 2017, the performance of the God of Environment included folk music with new lyrics praising the beauty of the ocean. Vũ Tự Long, the actor who played the God of Environment in 2017, is a performer of Chèo, a Vietnamese form of folk and satirical musical theatre. Since his phenomenal parodic performance as part of the God of Drainage's report in 2008, Vũ's performances were one of the most anticipated parts of the show and his 2017 performance included a pop song about the flood in Ho Chi Minh City. The original song *Thành Phố Trẻ* (*Young City*) describes life in the city where enthusiastic young people work and enjoy simple moments, while the parody *Lụt Ca* (*Song of the Flood*) talks of the great flood several months prior to the show and portrays the false happiness of the people who carried on with their lives as they suffered from the flood [Table 2]:

Hôm nay mưa rào một tí tẹo thôi,	Today it rained just a little
Thế mà nước ngập	But the flood came
Sao mà vui quá lại được nhảy cầu	We happily jump from bridges
Giao thông trên đường, thùng xốp chậu thau	On the street we row
Ta cùng bơi sải	Together we swim
Ôm cả cây chuối, lại được chèo thuyền	Banana trunks our lifebuoys, buckets our boats
[…]	[…]
Dân ta bây giờ lụt đã thành quen	Now we are used to flooding
Không lụt sẽ buồn	We feel sad at its absence
Côn cào mong nhớ, chờ đội được lụt	We long for the next flood.

Tab. 2. Lyrics of the parodic song *Lụt Ca* (*Song of the Flood*).

Many other significant performances included parodies of different songs: *Hôm Qua Em Tới Trường* (*Yesterday I Went to School*) in 2011 was about school bullying, *Cô Gái Vót Chông* (*The Girl Who Makes Bamboo Lances*) in 2012 about bribery, *Em Là Bông Hồng Nhỏ* (*I am a Little Rose*) in 2016 about the innovation in high school graduation and university entrance evaluation, *Ngõ Vắng Xôn Xao* (*Beloved Quiet Alley*) in 2016 about the false moral excellence of officials, *Thật Bất Ngờ* (*Such a Surprise*) in 2018 about the overuse of social media (Trung Ngân 2015; Linh Chi 2019).

Satire was also delivered to the audience through appearance and language. The Northern star deity was portrayed as a man in a suit with an earring and a high-pitched voice in the first show, from the second show onwards the character appeared more feminine every year, wearing a wig and make up, showing feminine gestures and at times being addressed as a miss instead of mister (Mộc 2018). The role of the sharp-tongued Northern star deity was to express strong opinions, sometimes being judgemental, about the Kitchen Gods. Nguyên quoted music critic Nguyễn Quang Long's explanation for the success of the show:

> This show is both traditional and contemporary. The Kitchen Gods's annual trip to Heaven to report to the Jade Emperor is originated from folk beliefs, and VTV has creatively entwined modern issues when mentioning problems of each year. It reminds us of the traditional role of the jester in folk art, because back then only he could tell the truth without being punished by the King (Nguyên 2019).

The three gods in the legend are sacred figures who maintain a certain distance from the humans. In the plays, being leaders of sectors in the society, they give orders, issue regulations, receive bribery, and among all, live among the people. The show took the audience far away from the legend, surprised them, and brought them back to the normal activities of the society they live in. It told the story of a world where deities joined the mortals in their daily life, casually introducing old traditions and customs in modern society to point out that the problems of the mortals are their problems.

As a comedy show, *The Kitchen Gods* used humour and satire to address social and environmental problems. Being streamed on New Year's Eve, it could be watched by everyone. The elderly appreciated the show as a cultural performance that promoted traditional values, the children were captured because they could recognise children's songs, only with new lyrics. Teenagers and young adults enjoyed *The Kitchen Gods* the most thanks to familiar song parodies and catchphrases featured in the show. On the other hand, there were complaints that *The Kitchen Gods* was repetitive, starting with each Kitchen God's report, during which the Northern and Southern star deities would interrupt and ask difficult questions or reveal the issue that the gods were hiding. The Jade Emperor would always give a lecture to the gods at the end of the show. Additionally, at one point, the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy, and Environment and ICS Centre criticised the iconic LGBTQ figure of the show, the Northern star deity, for overemphasising their sexual orientation, and the show for introducing discriminating lines about the deity (An 2018). Their movement triggered a debate among the audience, with many comments of approval to the two organisations' reactions to the show. After years of spectacularisation, during which costumes and stage decoration grew more and more lavish, and music or dance performances were added, the effect faded. The audience started to wonder if social critique was still an important part, or the producer only aimed for a standard comedy that attracted the audience through songs and dances. With such macro issues, the crew had to think how to avoid going overboard and making the whole show appear insensitive. The whole cast became attached to their roles, and when new actors were introduced, a part of the audience was not completely satisfied.

End and Beginning

In November 2019, after seventeen years, the Vietnamese Television announced that *Year-End Gathering* would still be streamed on New Year's Eve, but the plot would change. The first reaction from the audience was nostalgia, as *The Kitchen Gods* had not only become a symbol of Lunar New Year's Eve but also "the only entertainment show in Vietnam's territory that has the guts to make serious national problems hilarious" (Ngọc 2017).

On 2020 New Year's Eve, the new edition of *Year-End Gathering* finally premiered. The plot was significantly different, but the satirical purpose and the mixture of Vietnamese

literature and popular culture were still the main features of the show. Topics such as vain social media users trying to grab attention with their '3S' slogan (shocking, sensitive, and shabby news), frauds from online shops, or the growth of traditional homestay service in every corner, were displayed to the audience. The climax was reached with the story of a young man who went back to his village after many years and with his newlywed tried to create a new tourist attraction, threatening the environment, heritage, and cultural identity. After envisioning the future, the villagers decided to keep it as it was as they did not want to destroy their birthplace. The villagers' realisation is another confirmation of the point made in 2017 and 2018 that preserving the environment and heritage is of the same importance as pursuing developmental goals.

With both similarities and differences from *The Kitchen Gods*, the 2020 *Year-End Gathering* was still contentious. The acclaim was the same, but disapproval concerned new problems: the sensitive jokes, the description of violent actions, and the overwhelming and irrelevant performances (Kỳ 2020). A simple Google search highlights more articles expressing criticism than previous years as well as the audience's negative attitudes towards the obvious sensationalism of the show. Some opponents said it was just another comedy show that could not be as special as *The Kitchen Gods* (Vi 2020). Significantly, some neglected the show because it was no different from the 1977 Vlog (An 2020).

What Future for the Theatre as a Form of Environmental Critique?

Theatre indeed has the potential to encourage critical thinking and sense of responsibility. *The Kitchen Gods* has raised the people's awareness of the serious environmental issues affecting the country. Never before has a show about popular culture been able to achieve this goal. Nguyễn Xuân Bắc, the actor who played the Southern star deity, proposes his own theory about the audience's loss of interest in the show being caused by the cast that remains the same while the awareness of the audience gets better every year (Nguyên 2019). If this is the case, the show has made its contribution to ecological doing by stimulating viewers to watch yearly and express their views on social and environmental topics.

McAllister and Luckman suggest that making fun of very human actions and attitudes of the Gods allows the audience to "grapple with these issues and possibly come to term with them through laughter" (McAllister & Luckman 2015: 124). However, they also recommend that the show should not "point fingers […], but the humour is pointed enough for it to be clear to the audience" (McAllister & Luckman 2015: 125). Theatre should also be careful about the government's censorship when producing a play. In Vietnam, the visual arts and journalism must apply for permission from the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. The content of the arts might be altered after the censorship, mostly because of their political sensitivity (Cain 2013). Vietnamese censorship has a blurred perimeter as the country is torn among Confucian-based values, the Communist party, and a Western market economy (Libby 2011). This may lead to severe consequences regarding how the arts are perceived and enjoyed because Vietnamese people tend to think there should be a 'right' way of doing so.

Another question inviting inspection is whether awareness and concern about social and environmental problems were formed before or after watching *Year-End Gathering*. The

audience may consist of two groups: those who have already gained knowledge of the issues in their daily life, and those who became aware of the issues after watching the shows. In the second group, there were people who simply considered the show as entertainment and had no critical thought after watching, while others would have wanted to read more about what they had watched. This points to the hypothesis that the impact of *Year-End Gathering* in particular and ecotheatre in general varies significantly across groups of audience.

Differences in the reception by television viewers and theatre spectators should also be assessed. *Year-End Gathering* was streamed on television, which means it was for free to watch and the audience could multi-task when they watched it. Theatre, however, requires that the audience spends money on tickets to watch the shows on site. An average theatre ticket in Vietnam often costs double or triple the price of a standard cinema ticket, which is 100,000 VND (approximately $4.5). Even though the price is not high compared to other countries, the Vietnamese audience tends to spend money on a movie. They are unable to do anything else while watching the show at the theatre, but these are minor disadvantages since the venue brings a vibrant atmosphere different from the television show.

One of our goals is to unveil the discourse and the devices that fuel the popular narrative attributing the environmental crisis to unstoppable forces. The arts and the humanities are agents of change, of course, only when we decide to act. To understand whether a new form of committed theatre, especially television theatre, delving into ecological topics can generate willingness to act may require more than *Year-End Gathering*. One thing we learn from the show is that humour and satire are two strong assets that stimulate intergenerational reflection and debate. With a better understanding of the environmental crisis through theatre, we will be one step closer to sustainability.

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The Aquatic Turn in Afrofuturism: Women and Other Critters in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) and Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* (2010)*

Abstract I: Il recente profluvio di narrazioni e opere artistiche divenute oggetto di studio di Blue Humanities (Mentz 2009), Critical Ocean Studies (DeLoughrey 2019), Hydro-Criticism (Winkiel 2019) o New Thalassology (Horden & Purcell 2006) testimoniano una svolta culturale che dalla terra sposta lo sguardo verso il mare. Nel presente articolo l'idrosfera è analizzata in due opere afrofuturiste – il romanzo *Lagoon* (2014) di Nnedi Okorafor e il cortometraggio *Pumzi* (2010) di Wanuri Kahiu – con l'intento di affrontare il globale ordine capitalista e immaginare un'estetica acquafuturista multispecie nata dalla contromemoria del Middle Passage con i suoi miti sottomarini.

Abstract II: The recent efflorescence of fictional writings and artistic works examined under the rubrics of Blue Humanities (Mentz 2009), Critical Ocean Studies (DeLoughrey 2019), Hydro-Criticism (Winkiel 2019), or New Thalassology (Horden and Purcell 2006), testify a recent cultural shift from the land to the sea. In this article, the hydrosphere is analysed in two female Afrofuturist works – Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) and Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* (2010) – to address the global capitalist order and to imagine an aquafuturist multispecies aesthetics that springs from the countermemory of the Middle Passage and its undersea myths.

Keywords: Blue humanities, Afrofuturism, gendered water imagination, multispecies, humanArboreal.

The exploration of the ocean, which we are invited to consider not as a "blank space or *aqua nullius*" but rather as a "viscous, ontological, and deeply material place, a dynamic force, and unfathomable more-than-human world" (DeLoughrey & Flores 2020: 133), is at the core of a new efflorescence of fictional writings and artistic works that prove a shift in attention from the land to the sea, from the soil to the water. This shift has been theorised under the rubrics of Blue Humanities (Mentz 2009), Critical Ocean Studies (DeLoughrey 2019), Hydro-Criticism (Winkiel 2019), or New Thalassology (Horden & Purcell 2006) and invests several disciplines simultaneously. In this article I will concentrate on the fortunate encounter of

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Environmental Humanities and Afrofuturism through the analysis of two projects that "think with water" (Chen, MacLeod & Neimanis 2013). Oceanic imaginaries and aquatopian futures intersect posthuman feminism in Nnedi Okorafor's petronovel *Lagoon* (2014) and Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* (2010) to address the global capitalist order and to imagine an aquafuturist multispecies aesthetics that springs from the countermemory of the Middle Passage and its undersea myths.

On the one hand, the oceanic expanse has been crucial in the process of mercantile expansion with its circulation of goods and capital (slaves and oil included), so that the sea is "discursively constituted by sociopolitical systems of capitalist regimes" (Opperman 2019: 445). On the other hand, despite the pervasive mediation and endless production and diffusion of images in our culture, the deep sea is still conceived as an inscrutable, unfathomable abyss (Konior 2019); within this mysterious, dark void, oceanic degradation and plastic pollution, the rising of waters, and species extinction remain unseen, so much that the sea is often compared to outer space, crowded with alien creatures (Helmreich 2009). As Bogna M. Konior asserts: "The oceans are not only blue – they are also *black* and as such non-perceptible both in their figuration of the colonial-capitalist history of slavery as well as in the blackness and invisibility of their depths" (Konior 2019: 57, emphasis in the text). What I call "the aquatic turn" in Afrofuturism thus reflects a critical shift in the perception of the ocean and a serious attempt at probing both its material and metaphorical blackness. As a form of environmental speculative fiction, it participates in the challenge to replace dominant human perspectives with an alternative field of vision where interconnected networks of multiple subjectivities exhibit what Rosi Braidotti calls "multiple transversal alliances across communities", which may recompose the human and contemplate "new ways of becoming-world together" (Braidotti 2017: 41).

The first significant signs of this new interest in the ocean from an Afrofuturist perspective dates back to the late Nineties, when a visionary Detroit-based house band named Drexciya imagined an underwater world to provide an origin to people of color who had been deprived both of their own history and of a possible future. The elegiac tale of this mythic population relates to the African voyage towards the Americas and gives voice to aquatic spirits (the slaves that were tossed in the Atlantic waters when ill or somehow undesirable) and to urban ghosts (their descendants, the invisible people of problematic areas in Detroit). Legend has it that some pregnant black women who jumped or were thrown overboard gave birth to amphibian critters in the abyss, a liquid environment that soon became the arena of a new mutant species. This was, in short, the beginning of an underwater epic aimed at recuperating both the drowned history of African women and the cosmogonic myth of the water of life, here articulated according to indigenous paradigms.

B(l)ack to the Future: From Slaveships to Spaceships and to Water Again

A new wave of black speculative thought has spread as a cultural tendency of historical reclamation that invests the future by allowing Afrodescendant and Afrodiasporic communities to re-invent space and time dimensions. By problematizing the relation between identity, culture, and technology, one that rejects dominant Western paradigms, these

narratives explore innovative expressions in all fields: literature, music, fashion, cinema, design, photography. Even in children and young adult literature a new racial imagery seems to have surged. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas argues that the outset of a new corpus of texts and mediascapes finally resists what she calls a "dark fantastic" (Thomas 2019a), where black girl characters are usually ensnared in roles that portray them as "*monstrous*, *invisible*, and *always dying*" (Thomas 2019b: 283, emphasis in the text) thus repeating, over and over again, the same old story. But the danger of a single story, argues Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is that it "creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie 2009).

When in 1994 Mark Dery coined the term "Afrofuturism"[1], the one single story that had been reiterated up to that moment was that science fiction was a "A White Guy Thing" (Dery 2008: 6) despite the fact that "[…] African-American voices have *other* stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come" (Dery 1994: 182, emphasis added). Through the blending of different cultures and traditions, Afrofuturism works on the hybridization of different genres – speculative fiction, fantasy, horror, gothic, magic realism – and combines traditional tropes of sci-fi with non-Western spirituality, ancestral myths and beliefs, so that old African signifiers are englobed in future scenarios. By entwining multiple temporalities, these narrations also reverberate old native prophecies, indigenous voodoo practices, and folklore elements, thus "creating […] bridges from Africa to America to space" through the use of technology practices used as "a time machine to bring the past into the present" (Gipson 2019: 84-85). In this sense, as Michelle Reid argues, the ideals of expansion and colonisation typical of science fiction are counterbalanced by a great potential to imagine and represent alternative ways of being that encompass postcolonial approaches. Yet, she also advocates to expand the possibilities for figuring otherness *beyond* the strictly postcolonial and engage in a deeper examination of "what makes science fiction so strongly identified as a literature of empire and expansion" (Reid 2005). One enduring trope of these stories is the alien Other (or the extraterrestrial) here recast in neocolonial terms.

Even before the inception of Afrofuturism, first contact and invasion narratives from outer space were the craze and outer space itself, with its intergalactic blank zones and interstices, reproduced a geographical map whose empty spots were to be filled through the same colonial patterns of its terrestrial counterparts. However, the technologically superior aliens in their encounters with the white man rarely attempted to overcome the binary logic of the coloniser/colonised and when they did, they often contributed to naturalise it. Several scholars (Rieder 2008; Lathers 2010; Adejunmobi 2016) have analysed the relation between the experience of colonialism, its related plot strategy of abduction and the slave trade, showing how the process of metaphorising race normally generates endless iterations of white privilege and color-blind futures (Lavender 2007). In addition, while much literature

[1] Dery defines Afrofuturism as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (Dery 1994: 180).

of the scattered diaspora has concentrated on repairing the image of the black body from persistent dehumanization, Afrofuturist speculative fiction uses the other-worldly as a way to reclaim traumatic histories experienced in the Middle Passage. These traumas, according to Kodwo Eshun, still persist in our contemporary era, but the ethical "practice of countermemory" in Afrofuturism reorients the "Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective" (Eshun 2003: 289). These countermemories, while contesting "the colonial archive" (288) and "recovering histories of counter-futures" (289) also explore the conjunction of race, gender and sexuality to reconsider a whole set of dichotomies and delineate a new trajectory of female-centered texts. In short, the critique to racialist discourses extends to white heteronormativity, false gender equivalence, and reactionary forms of alterity.

To embrace greater diversity and creative approaches to the unknown, some Afrofuturist artists problematise feminist stories by expanding to water and oceanic forces of nonhumanness. In Allison Mackey's view, these narratives, located at the intersection of environmental and postcolonial science fiction, can "serve as antidotes to complacency in light to the uneven planetary distribution of resources or despair in the face of environmental devastation" (Mackey 2018: 530). Moreover, as we will see in the analysis of Okorafor's novel and Kahiu's short movie, environmental fatalism and necrofuturism are here substituted by the prospect of a systemic change necessary not to merely re-configure the human, but rather to explore multispecies alternatives and encourage ecological engagement with the maritime nonhuman other.

Lagoon (2014) by Nnedi Okorafor

In her 2017 TED talk, Nigerian American author Nnedi Okorafor states that

> Science fiction is one of the greatest and most effective forms of political writing. It's all about the question, "What if?" Still, not all science fiction has the same ancestral bloodline, that line being Western-rooted science fiction, which is mostly white and male (Okorafor 2017).

Relying on both African and Black American oral accounts, myths, and folklore, Okorafor focuses on modes of storytelling that draw heavily on magic realism and animism where the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman are muddled. Since Afrofuturism has been originally produced and distributed within American culture, she challenges the term and coins the expression "Africanfuturism" (Okorafor 2019) that opens up to black futures where hybrid archetypal figures reflect the Igbo heritage underpinning many of her stories. In "Organic Fantasy" (Okorafor 2009), moreover, she claims that being the world "a magical place" (276) to her, she often explores the messy material sites of the environment by bringing home fragments of nature to observe, for instance "pond water and use my microscope to gaze at the tiny water insects and protozoa" (277). In short, what she writes is "something organic. This type of fantasy grows out of its own soil" (277).

Using the conventional science fiction trope of alien invasion, the first generation of Afrofuturist women writers expressed a lively concern with issues related to race, science,

technology, society, and futurity. In their writings, they imagined new worlds where a more egalitarian future was granted to black or indigenous women at the intersection of cross-temporal colonisation with cultural and technological practices, or through supernatural powers. But *what if* the aliens arrived from the Ocean instead of the space and "invaded" a non-Western city, for a change? *What if* they decided to settle in the ocean abysses of Lagos, Nigeria, a country with a high rate of corruption and criminality, but at the same time one of the most technologised places in the world? *What if* the aliens did not want to "rule, colonize, conquer or take" (220) as in the most conventional tradition of the Empire, but simply "want a home?" (220).

Dedicated to "the diverse and dynamic people of Lagos, Nigeria – animals, plant and spirit", *Lagoon* embeds multispecies agency to epitomise entangled networks that engage plural life forms beyond the human. Within this reassessment of the boundaries of subjectivity, the alterations of humanness contemplate fluid forms of hybridity that involve more capacious temporalities and aesthetics as an alternative to capitalistic culture. This is visible from the very first scene and in the opening of each of the three sections of the book introduced by a different nonhuman animal: "Welcome" (where the marine aliens make contact with the humans in Lagos), "Awakening" (which concentrates on a wave of violence in the city), and "Symbiosis" (an ideal communal form of co-existence aiming to repair what has been destroyed).

The book's prologue features a female swordfish narrator, who is "on a mission" and rages against those humans who brought "the noise and made the world bleed black ooze that left poison rainbows on the water's surface" (3). These are "*[h]er* waters," her birthplace, now *invaded* by "the bittersweet-tasting poison" of the "black blood" (4). Her attack to the pipeline reveals the complexities of the environment violated by the "dirty" energy of the abyss, adding to the intricacies of this mixed liquid world where the organic and the polluted share the same space of alterity. It is the presence of the oil that marks Lagos' future by sanctioning its material wealth and all its consequent socio-environmental costs and injustices that demand radical change. The hybrid submerged world reflects the relentless intermingling of the surface, where species, races, languages, views constantly transform, because Lagos "is energy. It never stops" (40).

Ecological reparation and socio-political renewal come with the extraterrestrial species that defines itself as "the change". Their mission on earth focuses on fulfilling everybody's desires (the swordfish included, who increases her size), cleaning the ocean of the spilled oil, and freeing Lagos of pervasive past and present imperialistic dynamics (both colonial vestiges and neoliberal capitalistic greediness) with their undergirding violence: "WE COME TO BRING YOU TOGETHER AND *REFUEL* YOUR FUTURE" (113, capitalization in the text, emphasis added), thus hinting at the need to both dismantle addictive petroculture and revitalise Africa with the same dynamic spirit of the protean waters.

Ayodele is the aliens' ambassador, who makes contact with three human beings with special powers gathered on Bar Beach – Adaora, a marine biologist who can breathe underwater due to her amphibian nature; Antony, a Ghanaian rapper who can use rhythm to communicate and heal; and Agu, a soldier with supernatural strength – who are suddenly sucked into the ocean by a tsunami preceded by a violent "sonic boom" (10). Since "human

beings have a hard time relating to that which does not resemble them" (67), Ayodele decides to be assimilated in the human world by shifting her shape at will and thus using an alien technology. In the first encounter with the three characters "the strange woman creature" appears in the familiar shape of "Mami Wata" (13), the half-human, half-sea creature of the Nigerian cosmogony, a water goddess who protects the ocean and its marine inhabitants. Only when Adaora takes her to her lab and analyses a skin sample under her microscope, does she find out that her body is not made of cells, but of "tiny tiny tiny metal-like balls" (25). In her study of the novel, Melody Jue argues that the scientist's curious attitude toward the alien places *Lagoon* in a position that is quite far from other science fictions that traditionally posit the ocean as an "unknowable alterity". On the contrary, Ayodele's people are characterised in "familiar terms" and are composed of many "'conscious particles' that also form larger bodies" (Jue 2017: 174) similar to coral reef, eventually showing that these aliens are "ontologically amphibious" (Ten Bos 2009: 74, cit. in Jue 2017: 174). This "storied sea" thus results from the concoction of its own "physicality detailed in scientific research" and "the vast domain of imagination" (Opperman 2019: 446, 452) that both Adaora and Ayodele reflect in the end of the novel.

Soon after her husband Chris attacks her in an outburst of masculine violence, Adaora finds out that she can transform into a mermaid – "I am a marine witch" (280) – eventually concluding that terrestrial and aquatic critters are knotted by invisible genealogies and multiple possibilities of co-evolutionary symbiotic becoming. After the awakening that involves the whole population of Lagos, her adamant desire is to respond to the aliens' "call for change" (122) and with the help of science recast her birthplace as the center of a new futurity that eschews new subjugating forms of colonialism disguised as autonomous progress. *Lagoon* thus articulates "a mode of returning to the people of Lagos their own alienating experience: a recovering of the impossibility of their own history, and of themselves as historical agents" (O'Connell 2016: 310) that also requires, as Ayodele suggests, a help from "within": "I will go within", she says before shifting into a white mist that everybody inhales, "You'll all be a bit … alien" (268). The change, coming from the sea, eventually materialises in fresh air that Africa can finally breathe.

***Pumzi* (2009) by Wanuri Kahiu**

The water crisis has been particularly prominent in recent speculative fiction and cli-fi narratives that typically focus on the hydroform of floods, "the dominant literary strategy for locating climate change" (Trexler 2015: 82). Research on water scarcity and water wars, instead, is still scant in spite of a new crop of novels that may be seen as "harbingers of a world to come" (Boast 2020: 1). Similarly, visual narratives have contributed to the general discussion on hydropolitics and conflicts over water, especially in countries located in the global South and thus more likely to be affected by issues like water rights, water privatization, and corporate surveillance[2]. Since water is the most searing example of a life-or-death matter, the subject of water inequalities evocates global anxieties around access to water

[2] Take, for instance, Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2008), Icíar Bollain's *Even the Rain* (2010), and George Miller's blockbuster *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015).

while emphasising geographical disparities and revealing the neocolonial profit dynamics of late capitalism. A jarring depiction of future hydropolitical scenarios is offered by *Pumzi* (2009), Kenia's first science fiction movie by film director and producer Wanuri Kahiu[3]. In an interview, however, Kahiu explains that her story about "a girl in the future" included both science fiction and fantasy conventions, and that only at the time of the shooting was she prompted to make a choice between the two genres. And yet, she states that

> science fiction has been a genre in Africa that has been used a lot for a long period of time […]. If we think of science fiction as something that is fictitiously science or speculative fiction within a story, then we've always used it. Because we've used botany; we've used etymology; the idea of the study of animals to tell stories or the idea of insects to tell stories or the idea of natural sciences using trees. That's all science fiction (Kahiu 2013).

These African stories have been used to communicate "morality, tradition and a code of conduct", which emphasise the ethical and ecological purposes of Afrocentric narratives that intermingle nature and culture, the past and the future, black human (female) subjectivities and nonhuman creatures.

Pumzi is set thirty-five years after World War III (also known as "The Water Wars") and whose consequent devastation – provoked by radiological weapons combined with climate change effects – have made the Earth uninhabitable. The first scene, set in the Virtual Natural History Museum of the base, is crucial not only to determine the characters' past and present historical frames, but also to buttress the anthropogenic nature of the environmental destruction that Kahiu amplifies through a bird's eye shot of the compound (resembling a spaceship) encapsulated in a barren desert landscape. She also shows two newspaper articles whose titles – "The greenhouse effect. The Earth is changing" and "Whole day journey in search of water" – interlace lack of water and human accountability. Also exhibited is one desiccated root, whose shape reminds of an embryo, together with the skull of an extinct animal and a "MAITU (Mother) seed" whose label offers the noun's etymology: "Kikuyu language. 1. Noun – Mother. Origin: Kikuyu language from MAA (Truth) and ITU (Ours). OUR TRUTH". The only *false* truth here is that futurity, or the post-Anthropocene era, is a dimension denying alternatives to life extinction.

The few survivors to the catastrophe live in an underground compound and are governed by the Maitu Council whose impositions include forced labor to produce kinetic electricity by exercising on machines and the suppression of dreams through special pills that inhibit both memories of traumatic experiences and nostalgic images of a luxuriant lost world. Water is so scarce that they have to recycle their own fluids (they drink their own filtered and purified urine and sweat) and it is commonly used as some sort of currency.

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[3] Wanuri Kahiu (b. Nairobi 1980) is one of the most vibrant contemporary Kenyan artists whose stories and films have received international acclaim. She is co-founder of "AfroBubbleGum", a collective of African artists that promotes "fun, fierce and fantastical African art" (Kahiu 2017), a lighthearted artistic expression with the aim to dissipate the dominant idea that in Africa only dramatic things happen: "war, poverty, devastation, Aids". *Pumzi* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2010.

Kahiu seems to ponder on what Astrida Neimanis calls a "more-than-human aqueous ecology", mainly "an ecology in which humans and other bodies of water (animal, vegetable, meteorological, geophysical) are always already implicated, as lively agents, in one another's well-being" (Neimanis 2014: 6), while offering an African posthumanist perspective that intends to overcome the anthropocentrism of the spread discourse on human rights to water. This paradigm generally presupposes a strong commitment to social justice (water as an indisputable right), but what is overlooked here is the wrong hypothesis that water is a resource for human prosperity exclusively, rather than an element needed by all living creatures, which also hosts entire colonies thriving on it. This means to deny "the interconnections between human and more-than-human bodies of water, all bound together in a complexly balanced hydrocommons" (Neimanis 2014: 8). It is this ecological interconnectedness that *Pumzi* evokes by reclaiming water's agency and decentering human prerogative, while offering a critique to "necrofuturism", mainly "the sense of impending and unavoidable disaster that permeates all our contemporary visions of the future" (Canavan 2014: 9), here replaced by multiple alternative "futureS" (Assa 2017).

The main character Asha (interpreted by Kudzani Moswela), a visionary scientist and the curator of the Museum, is awakened from a dream of a living tree and ordered by an automated voice to take her dream suppressant. In the following scene, Asha is depicted while using the restroom, where a female janitor is cleaning the premise. Although no dialogue is ever exchanged between the two women, their binding solidarity is evident: Asha leaves some water for her as a sort of tip, while the janitor will later reciprocate by assuming a key role in the denouement of the story. This is set in motion by the materialization on her desk of a mysterious white box containing a soil sample and GPS coordinates. A quick test reveals that the soil contains great amount of water and no radioactivity, and when she brings some of this soil to her lips, Asha is plunged into another watery vision that also evokes the image of the tree again, thus hinting at the liquid root system of plants and convincing her that life is not completely extinct. A proof of this comes from the budding "mother seed" that Asha plants in the soil and wets with some drops of water. Willing to investigate further, she requests permission to do some research outside of the base, but the Council denies her the exit visa and commands her to get rid of it"[4] (7: 07) since "the outside is dead" (7: 51). Upon her insistence, she is ordered to evacuate and after the Museum is destroyed, Asha finds her way out through the garbage chute, which becomes her portal to a future of symbiosis with the nonhuman: watery and arboreal alike. Walking through a polluted desert where plastic and nuclear radioactivity seem to be the only legacy from a past world, Asha searches for the source of the soil amid stomps of dead trees, eventually deciding to plant her germinated seed, water it with her bodily fluids and protect it with her scarf from the hot sun.

Most critics have interpreted the last scene as the compassionate sacrifice of a human individual for the sake of a nonhuman Other (Durkin 2016; Assa 2017; Rico 2017; Mackey 2018). This reading, however, reframes the whole discourse on water and extinction in anthropocentric terms, completely neglecting the fact that nature does not need human

[4] *Pumzi*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IlR7l_B86Fc (consulted on 29/05/2021).

intervention to be "saved", and that both the hydrosphere and the arboreal worlds have intricate lively communal behaviors even when they appear dead to human eyes. As a matter of fact, in the contemplation of imperiled biomes and multiple entanglements, the encounter of humans and nonhumans corresponds to the intersection of completely different life-forms, scales, and temporalities, although this gap may dwindle when recognising water, animality, and traces of the inorganic world in human beings, even in their clandestine existences. What has been interpreted as Asha's death responds to Claire Colebrook's search for another "mode of reading the world, and its anthropogenic scars, that frees itself from folding the earth's surface around human survival" (Colebrook 2014: 23). What humans are requested to do is to imagine a post-Anthropocene world, whose narratives cannot be "human-all-too-human" (Colebrook 2014: 25). After all, *Pumzi* is an exercise in imagination, the hypothesis of a post-Anthropocene, and if Astrida Neimanis demonstrates that we are all "bodies of water", also "humanArboreal perspectives" are deemed possible (Concilio & Fargione 2021). As a consequence, human beings need to start contemplating that

> In the era of extinction, we can go beyond a self-willing self-annihilation in which consciousness destroys itself to leave nothing but its own pure non-being; we can begin to imagine imaging for other inhuman worlds. That is to say: rather than thinking of the posthuman, where we destroy all our own self-fixities and become pure process, we can look positively to the inhuman and other imaging or reading processes (Colebrook 2014: 27-28).

In the last scene, the critter laying on the ground and ready to sprout in its woman-water-tree configuration proves how *Pumzi* has embraced this route, rooted as it is in material and cultural histories with their submerged memories and traumas, systemic violence on the black body[5], elemental experiences, and discursive figurations of aquatic life.

Conclusion

By overlapping the theoretical frames of environmental humanities and feminist posthumanities, Afrofuturist writer Nnedi Okorafor and artist Wanuri Kahiu contribute with their works to the current debate on water as a conceptual, material, ethical and political subject. Instead of considering the ocean as a blank ("aqua nullius") and black (in its double meaning of "unfathomable" and "racially marked") space, their works erode the dichotomic thinking that separates humans from other living creatures, eventually proving human embeddedness (and responsibility) within a larger multispecies aquatic system whose aesthetics and temporalities differ from other spaces (namely terrestrial and interstellar).

In a recent article, Astrida Neimanis reaffirms the vital relation of humans and nonhumans with water: "We are the watery world – metonymically, temporarily, partially, and particularly. Water irrigates us, sustains us, comprises the bulk of our soupy flesh"

[5] "Pumzi" means "breath" in Swahili, thus evoking George Floyd's and other victims' cry "I can't breathe!" and recalling *Lagoon*'s final scene.

(2021: 27). Yet, she also argues, "[…] it isn't easy to begin with a 'we'", since that 'we' not only encompasses nonhuman creatures, but also "hydrophobic substances" (27), such as oil, that cannot be flippantly assimilated in a too general pronoun. As we have seen, human dependence to petroculture as one consequence of a capitalist order, is at the core of Okorafor's Lagoon whose shape-shifting invaders coming from "the alien ocean" (Helmreich 2009) represent "the change" as much as tradition. In short, Okorafor's oceanic Afrofuturism, through a "material-semiotic characterization of the alien" (Jue 2017: 175) incorporates elements of the African folklore, indigenous practices and cosmologies, while recuperating the drowned histories and muted stories of the transoceanic slave trade. At the same time, the novel posits Nigeria as an unusually powerful locus for fictional speculations about possible post-petroleum futures.

On the other hand, Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* acquires special value in the current debate on oceanic degradation, climate-induced unsustainability and water shortage. While confronting the impending extinction and the spread anxiety about the finitude of the planet, *Pumzi* offers alternatives to a common passive stance through the action of politically situated female humans embedded in a very complex system of multiple entangled ecologies. Moreover, it also contributes to bridging the science/technology-arts divide by opening up to a transformative theorising that implies accountability, social justice, and more equitable forms of human and nonhuman hydrocommons. In this way, Kahiu's African posthumanist perspective finally overcomes various forms of anthropocentrism and the postulate that "the outside is [already] dead" (7: 51)[6].

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[6] *Pumzi*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IlR7l_B86Fc (consulted on 29/05/2021).

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Ecofeminism from a Māori Perspective: *Mana Wāhine* and Contemporary Women's Poetry in Aotearoa New Zealand

Abstract I: Il movimento *mana wāhine* può essere letto come una versione māori di ecofemminismo. Questa definizione, però, ne limita la portata e il significato profondo, che possono essere compresi solo alla luce di un diverso paradigma culturale. La silloge poetica *Tātai Whetū*, in māori e inglese, confluita poi nel volume *Matariki, sciame di stelle,* con annessa traduzione italiana, costituisce un esempio di poesia scritta nella tradizione *mana wāhine*, ovvero un genere letterario che declina attivismo politico, ambientalismo, femminismo e uno stretto legame con le radici culturali māori.

Abstract II: The *mana wāhine* movement can be seen as a Māori version of ecofeminism. This definition, however, limits its valence and profound meaning, which can be understood only in the light of a different cultural paradigm. The poetry collection *Tātai Whetū*, in Māori and English, translated into Italian in the volume *Matariki, sciame di stelle*, exemplifies writing in the tradition of *mana wāhine*, that is, a literary genre that inflects political activism, environmentalism, feminism and a deep bond with Māori cultural roots.

Keywords: Māori poetry, ecofeminism, *mana wāhine*, *Tātai Whetū*, *Matariki*, *sciame di stelle.*

Decolonising Indigenous Ecofeminism: *Mana Wāhine*[1]

In 2018 the New Zealand publisher Seraph Press issued a bilingual collection of poetry, in English and Māori, edited by Maraea Rakuraku and Vana Manasiadis: *Tātai Whetū: Seven Māori Women Poets in Translation*. The anthology was later translated from English into Italian by Antonella Sarti Evans, in collaboration with Francesca Benocci and Eleonora Bello. The new volume with English-Italian parallel text (and the Māori version of some poems) came out in 2020 under the title *Matariki, sciame di stelle*[2] and also includes the works of other contemporary Māori poetesses. Both collections are a good example of Māori women's writing in the tradition of *mana wāhine*, a specifically Māori form of ecofeminism that, since its beginning in the 1980s, has conjugated an ecologically conscious attitude together with gender issues and political activism for Māori rights. In this article I will demonstrate how

[1] The movement's name is also written *mana wahine* (without macron on 'a') in some texts.

[2] *Matariki* is the indigenous term for New Year's day, corresponding to the apparition of the Pleiades (called *Matariki* in Māori) in the austral sky.

feminism, ecocriticism and activism converge in *mana wāhine* writings in a form that is only apparently tied to their Western equivalents but finds its purpose and meaning in a deeply-rooted cultural dimension, that is, *mātauranga* Māori[3].

The 1980s are the culmination of the Māori Renaissance. The movement started in the 1960s and aimed at obtaining full citizenship for the indigenous population of Aotearoa New Zealand[4]. Many important political goals were achieved such as the restitution of ancestral land to some tribes, the recognition of Māori as the second official language in the country, and the establishment of schools with a Māori curriculum. More generally, it was a period which saw the flourishing of Māori arts and culture, and a growing influence of the Māori view on the political agenda of the country, as regards to civil rights and environmental issues. Women took an important part in that movement as leaders in activist groups. One for all, elderly Whina Cooper, who led the Land March in 1975 from Te Hāpua, in the far north of the country, to the parliament in Wellington "to dramatise a national Māori determination not to lose any further land to Pākehā[5] ownership", in King's words (King 2001: 107). In his poem "Rain-maker's Song for Whina", acclaimed poet Hone Tuwhare celebrates the Māori *Pasionaria*'s rhetoric by reporting one of her speeches, in which she defined the march as "Sacred".

> *No more lollies! We been sucking the pākehā lolly*
> *for one hundred and fifty years.*
> *Look at what's happened. Look at what we got left.*
> *Only two million acres. Yes, that's right. Two million*
> *acres out of sixty six million acres. […]*
>
> *So you listen, now. This is a Sacred March. We are*
> *marching because we want to hold on to what is left.*
> *You must understand this. And you must think of your*
> *tūpuna*[6]*. They are marching beside you* (Tuwhare 1987: 18).

The poem highlights two crucial aspects. First, the importance of the land not just as material property or a political issue but as an identity constituent carrying a religious meaning. Second, the centrality of ancestry and genealogy in Māori culture. The ancestors (*tūpuna*) are marching with the people and they are blessing their enterprise.

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[3] *Mātauranga* means wisdom, knowledge, understanding. See: https://maoridictionary.co.nz/search?idiom=&phrase=&proverb=&loan=&histLoanWords=&keywords=Matauranga (consulted on 26/9/2021).

[4] The double name of the country, Māori and English, dates back to that time. Aotearoa means "the land of the long white cloud", which is a reference to what the first Polynesian explorers saw from their canoes when they arrived, presumably in the late 13th century. See King 2001: 16 and *Te Ara: the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*: https://teara.govt.nz/en/history/page-1. AD (consulted on 26/9/2021).

[5] The term *Pākehā* is used for New-Zealanders of European descent. Originally, it meant "the alien, the foreigner" in Māori.

[6] *Tūpuna*: ancestors.

Whina Cooper supported many causes until her death at the age of 98 and is a typical example of *mana wahine*. According to the *Reed Concise Māori Dictionary*, *mana* means "authority, influence, power, prestige" (Reed 2001: 41). The *Te Ara Online Māori Dictionary* confirms this definition and completes the meaning by adding: "spiritual power, charisma – *mana* is a supernatural force in a person, place or object. *Mana* goes hand in hand with *tapu* [sacred], one affecting the other"[7]. *Wahine* (plural *wāhine*) means "wife, woman, female, bride" (Reed 2001: 90). The movement of *mana wāhine,* therefore, represents the enterprises of charismatic women, whose battles are not just merely political but also endowed with cultural and spiritual valences. Defending the earth is one of them.

The bond between women and the land in Māori culture is evident in the word *whenua*, which means "land" and "placenta". Both the land and women carry the principles of life-giving and nurturing. Moreover, in Māori cosmology a fundamental role is given to Papatūānuku (the earth mother), progenitor together with Rangi (the sky father) of all the living creatures and natural elements of the universe, that is, all things which are animate and inanimate. Originally, Papa and Rangi were embraced so tightly that their offspring could not see the light and grow. It was one of their children, Tāne (god of trees, birds and insects, and also of man), who separated them by pushing hard, head-down, with his feet against the sky father. In the open environment, all living things, included the ancestors of humans, could therefore flourish. The idea of the universe as an extended family is implicit in the Māori vision, as Boyes underlines:

> Māori have a fundamental belief that humans are part of a broader understanding of family that incorporates the environment and humanity, where all things are interconnected. This is clearly seen in the Māori legend of creation where there is belief in the oneness of environment, ancestors and people (Boyes 2010: 3).

The foundational role of Papatūānuku can be evinced in the name itself, as explained by Margaret Orbell:

> Papa, the first woman, is the earth. She is also a personification: the word papa can be used for anything broad and hard, such as a flat rock or the floor of a house, and it can mean 'foundation', either literally or figuratively, so that her name is best translated as Foundation (quoted in Wood 2007: 113).

Wood pinpoints that the word *papa* also occurs in the term *whakapapa* (genealogy), which can be transliterated as "to turn towards Papa", thus indicating "the way Papatūānuku's role has come to be located as central or fundamental to identity in Aotearoa New Zealand" (Wood 2007: 113). Being able to recite one's *whakapapa* is crucial in order to explore the complexities of cultural identity, to locate oneself as part of a community and to define the bond and interdependence with the natural world. *Whakapapa* is also a literary genre in

[7] https://maoridictionary.co.nz/search?idiom=&phrase=&proverb=&loan=&histLoanWords=&keywords=mana (consulted on 26/9/2021).

Māori traditional oral literature, where history and myth overlap. The narrative of Māori cosmogony, for example, is formulated as a *whakapapa*.

Furthermore, the word *wahine* (woman) includes *hine*, which is the term used for 'girl' and is found in the names of two goddesses and ancestresses, Hine-ahu-one and Hine-nui-te-pō, who are central figures in Māori mythology. The former is described by Jahnke as "a woman earth-formed by Tāne from the body of Papatūānuku and endowed by Tāne with the ira tangata – the life principle" (quoted in Wood 2007: 109). Basically, she is the first daughter of the mother-earth and progenitor of all women. The latter is the goddess of night and death, sometimes seen as a mature manifestation of Hine-ahu-one. The relevance of female figures in Māori myth is shown by these two ancestresses, whose roles define the life-cycle of humankind, from birth to death.

The role and function of the movement *mana wāhine* cannot thus be contained in the usual formulas of Western feminism, ecofeminism or ecocriticism, nor can it simply be seen as a reaction to Western knowledge. *Mana wāhine* must first be interpreted within an indigenous conceptual framework grounded in Māori knowledge and guided by *Kaupapa Māori* (purpose). As Simmonds underlines:

> Mana wahine, as art, as theory, as method, and as practice […] enables the exploration of diverse Māori realities from a position of power rather than having to talk or write 'back'. […] It extends Kaupapa Māori theory by explicitly exploring the intersection of being Māori and female and all of the diverse and complex things being located in this intersecting space can mean (Simmonds 2011: 11).

The ecologically conscious attitude of Māori women writers and activists – for these two roles often coincide – stems from their obligation towards an ancestor, Papatūānuku, who represents the primeval female principle. Even an apparently convergent objective between Western ecofeminism and *mana wāhine*, that is to say the will to overcome male-female dualism that has led to gendered hierarchy throughout time – is formulated in a different way.

Huia Jahnke has written of *mana wāhine* as a movement restoring balance between gendered hierarchies in Māori life. Indeed, customs did not perceive relations between sexes in terms of male dominance over women:

> An understanding of a Māori orientation to the world, provides significant insights into a world view that customarily did not perceive relations between men and women in terms of gendered hierarchies of power that privileged men over women. The cosmological narratives as a starting point provide such insights along with strong messages about the position, status and role women held prior to colonisation (Jahnke 2019: 184).

Jahnke explains that women were highly regarded in society, as demonstrated in *whakataukī* (proverbs), another traditional genre of Māori oral literature, and in *te reo* (Māori language). In the proverb "*Ko te whenua te wai-u mō ngā uri whakatipu*", the land is "likened

to a woman who sustains her young with milk from her breast", while "*He wahine, he whenua ka ngaro ai te tangata*" can be literally translated as "humanity is lost without women and land" (Jahnke 2019: 185). The nurturing role of women, associated with procreation and sustenance, and the equivalence with the land, make women essential to the wellbeing of humankind. To prove her argument, Jahnke underlines the non-sexist nature of Māori language, the importance of descendance and kinship in determining status for both men and women, the right of women to inherit property and land, which allowed them to gain economic power, and the basic complementarity and interdependence between the sexes:

> It is significant that there are no demeaning terms for 'woman'. Kinship terms denote a person's status or endearment. For example, a wife or husband, is known by the phrase *taku hoa rangatira*, 'my executive partner'. Pronouns like 'he/she' and 'his/her' are non-gendered terms, *ia* and *tana/tōna*. The term *tuahine* refers to a revered relationship extended by men to their sisters or female cousins […]. After marriage women retained their independence, identity and social power. They kept their own name and all their inherited rights to land and property […] which gave them economic power. "With the exception of slaves (male and female), the women were never regarded as chattels or possessions" (Pere 1988: 9). Indeed, power relations between women and men emphasised principles of complementarity and interdependence that were necessary for survival. Survival included the means to procreate (Jahnke 2019: 186).

The *mana wāhine* principles illustrated above cannot be ascribed to Western ecofeminism or considered a reaction to it, as will be explained in the next section.

Western Ecofeminism: A Brief History

Ecofeminism has its conceptual origin in Western feminist theory. In 1952, Simon de Beauvoir highlighted the equivalence between women and nature as "other" in the logic of patriarchy. In 1974 Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term "l'eco-féminisme" to argue that the phallic order was the source of a double threat to human beings: overpopulation and the depletion of natural resources. The exploitation of female reproductive power caused an excess of births; the exploitation of nature due to over-production was threatening the survival of the earth (Glazebrook 2002: 12). In the same years the bond between feminism and ecology was also being elaborated in North America. In 1974 Sandra Marburg and Lisa Watson hosted a conference at Berkeley entitled "Women and the Environment" and in 1980 Carolyn Merchant published *The Death of Nature,* a landmark in ecofeminism.

Historically, the emergence of ecofeminism is also linked to "deep ecology", a term coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess to describe an approach in ecology whose aim is to go deep into the conceptual roots of the environmental crisis, investigating underlying problematic assumptions, concepts, values and beliefs (Naess 1972). Both deep ecology and ecofeminism criticise the canonical Western philosophy's dualism, grounded in the culture/nature divide, that is, its anthropocentric (human-centred) view. Ecofeminism, however, goes further by highlighting that, in actual fact, anthropocentrism has always equated with

a male-dominated society. The link between deep ecology and ecofeminism, therefore, was later contested by ecofeminist thinkers that charged deep ecology with androcentrism (male-centred thinking) and sexism (Glazebrook 2002: 15).

Among early ecofeminist writings, *The Death of Nature* well illustrates the preoccupations of ecofeminism while offering an exhaustive and critical investigation into the bases of modern Western thinking. Merchant emphasises the importance of gender in the historiography of modern science and philosophy, and the need to look at the founding fathers of modern science – Bacon, Harvey, Descartes, Hobbes and Newton – in a different light. The "mechanical order" (Merchant 1983: 192) imposed by the Scientific Revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries, backed by Western empiricism and rationalism in philosophy, led to the development of capitalism and the rise of a market-oriented culture in early modern Europe. Merchant consequently investigates the connection between the environmental crisis and "the formation of a world view and a science that, by reconceptualising reality as a machine instead of a living organism, sanctioned the domination of nature and women" (Merchant 1983: xxi). The same *modus operandi* is thus identified in nature and society.

Interestingly, in the "Introduction" Merchant recognises how women's history and the history of the environment are connected by "the ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother" (Merchant 1983: xx) and how this cosmology was undermined by the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. However, she wants to make it clear that:

> It is not the purpose of this analysis to reinstate nature as the mother of humankind not to advocate that women reassume the role of nurturer dictated by that historical identity. Both need to be liberated from the anthropomorphic and stereotypic labels that degrade the serious underlying issues (Merchant 1983: xxi).

Despite the ground-breaking impact of the book, Merchant's view is deeply ingrained in Western feminism, in the women's liberation movement of the 1970s and, indirectly, in a rationalist perspective.

Western ecofeminism has had many different inflections (liberal, social, socialist, cultural) based on the common denominator of improving the human/nature relationship and attacking the patriarchal society, built on the domination over nature and women. Each declension has developed a different type of approach. Liberal ecofeminism aims at altering human relations with nature by reforming existing regulations and laws from within the system of governance. When women are given the same opportunities (educational, social, political) as men, they will be able to contribute to the construction of an eco-sustainable society. Social and socialist ecofeminism focuses on a thorough analysis and critique of capitalist patriarchy, underlining the exploitation of women and nature in market's economy (Merchant 1992: 184). Cultural ecofeminism, on the other hand, is "a response to the perception that women and nature have been mutually associated and devalued in Western culture" (Merchant 1992: 190). It tends to assign positive value to some specific feminine attributes that women seemingly develop thanks to their closeness to nature (for example, through pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and menstruation cycles), leading to "intuition, an ethic of caring and web-like human-nature relationships" (Merchant 1992: 191).

Probably, a figure that has been trying to find a constructive synthesis of all the threads and concerns of ecofeminism is Karen Warren, with her *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (2000). Warren argues for a "transformative feminism" and replies to some of the critiques ecofeminism received. As Glazebrook summarises:

> Warren's ecofeminism matters because it uncovers how all issues of oppression and domination are interconnected and cannot be resolved in isolation, because it attends to the empirical data in order to raise questions about the global impact of poor environmental practice on women's lives, because it shows how ecofeminist spiritualities are a source of empowerment rather than a reinscription of negative gender categories, and because it challenges philosophy to give up restrictive conceptions of reason in favour of an innovative thinking-in-progress in order to find successful ways to deal with contemporary political and environmental crises (Glazebrook 2002: 24).

Glazebrook recognises Warren's effort to mediate between a rational/empirical approach to the environment and the valorisation of a spiritual relationship with nature, in order to overcome ancient dualisms and find a renovated perspective in Western thought.

This brief history shows how ecofeminism stems from the Western episteme and has developed through an internal oppositional dialectics. *Mana wāhine*, on the other hand, applies to a different episteme and ontology and must be understood within that paradigm. This change of perspective applies to Māori culture in general, as Thompson well explains:

> Maori respect for the environment meshes with the ethics of the emergent green movement. Maori respect for the integrity of others, good or bad, makes sense in terms of Christian ideals. Maori 'work ideals', which involve cooperative attitudes, consensual decision-making, and respect for both labor and product, fit in a Marxist context. And Maori spiritualism has an odd kind of kinship with the various 'Orientalized' religious movements that are associated in the West with a reaction against materialism. But […] the similarities are largely superficial. The deep structure of Maori values, their metaphysical underpinnings, are radically at variance with the Pakeha world view. To take merely one example, Maori respect for the environment stems from a genealogical view of the connections between mankind and the physical world. Looking after the natural world is not a matter of pragmatism, therefore, but one of obligation (Thompson 1994: 185)[8].

Māori Women's Poetry in the *Mana Wāhine* Tradition

Tātai means "line of descent" and "recite genealogy" (Reed 2001: 76), while *whetū* means "star" (101). The title of the original collection can also be translated as "constellation, cluster

[8] In this article the words Māori and Pākehā have been written without the macron on the long vowel 'a'. This is frequent in past sources, which did not follow proper orthography.

of stars"[9]. *Tātai Whetū* thus defines its poetesses as descendants of the stars, including them in the vast and sacred dimension of the universe. They are parts of a whole (the universe and the collection) and equal members of a family. The anthology can also be read as a constellation of poems. The title of the Italian translation also refers to a constellation: the Pleiades, called *Matariki* in Māori.

Matariki, sciame di stelle (the volume from which all references to the poems are taken) includes a wide range of themes: feminist and ecological issues, claims in defence of Māori rights and ancestral land, racism, personal reflections and mythical narratives. The perception of being part of a chain (a genealogy with mythical/natural origins) and the obligations towards ancestors (tūpuna) and descendants (mokopuna) remain a constant. The images of women as nurturing mothers and their identification with the land are also frequent.

The book opens with Mary Maringikura Campbell's poems, described by Apirana Taylor as *whaka* (canoes) sailing an ocean whose underwater currents are soul-searching, pathos, love, frustration, anger and the quest for mental sanity (quoted from Sarti Evans 2021: 12). In "Consider This", Campbell defines herself in terms of natural elements, human categories and relations: she is a "fertile plain", a "mother", "her Tūpuna" (ancestors), a sacred entity, a member of an extended family made of human and non-human relatives (pets and wild animals), and a natural time cycle. She also exhorts the addressee – a certain "Mr Psychiatrist" – to consider all of this, when he is prescribing drugs, since she is not just a physical brain:

> Consider this
> before you pump me with drugs
> I am more than a brain
> a beating heart
> I am skin and bones
> a fertile plain
> I am my Tūpuna
> an ariki[10]
> I am yesterday
> today and tomorrow
> I have a soul […]
> I am tapu
> inside me is God
> my God
> the best of me
> I am a mother
> a daughter
> a sister

[9] https://maoridictionary.co.nz/search?idiom=&phrase=&proverb=&loan=&histLoanWords=&keywords=tatai+whetu (consulted on 26/9/2021).

[10] *Ariki*: high chief.

an auntie
a grandmother
I have two dogs and a cat
and wild birds circling (Sarti Evans 2020: 30-33).

Two of Campbell's poems, "Rā, the Sun" and "Tangaroa", convey a total identification with the natural landscape. In the former, Campbell talks to the god representing the sun in Māori mythology, describing the sunset in human terms:

Tonight my sons and I
watched you disappear
into your bed of sea
and gracefully
you stretched out your arms
and with your fingertips
you pulled the waves
over your head
and went to
sleep … (36-37).

In "Tangaroa" the point of view moves to Rā himself, while rising from a stormy sea (the god Tangaroa) and complaining about Tangaroa's bad manners for splashing him:

Early this morning
he rolled in his sleep
Ripples blanched my body
Bubbles went up
my nostrils
Washed my face
Left me cold
Shaken
"Tangaroa", I said,
"you have no manners,
especially
in bed!" (38-39).

Both are expressed in a colloquial way, as if the gods were relatives and the two scenes belonged to everyday routine.

Michelle Ngamoki's poem "Tai Pari Tai Ope", (the untranslated title means: "incoming tide, forceful tide") is an alarm cry about the flooding of many low islands and atolls in the Pacific, due to the sea-level rise caused by global warming. This topical issue has been denounced by environmental activists and the politicians of the island states at risk (for example, Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands), who are trying to defend those territories from being submerged and prevent the mass migration of their inhabitants. Here

the impending catastrophe is conduced to a mythical frame. Will the eternal memory of the earth mother last, when the island is under water? The island, which is being kidnapped from the earth mother, is a member of the world family and is addressed as a sister by the poetess, who investigates her predicament. The pronouns referring to the island and the earth (both feminine) are always capitalised:

> Sister, will the land still remember You?
> That She held You for a while,
> Above the rising tide.
>
> Sister, will She still hear Your songs,
> beneath the drumming of the waves.
>
> Sister, will She shiver with her shame,
> as her pandanus cloak is pulled aside (62-63).

Alice Te Punga Somerville's "Rākau" (tree) reminds us of the life spirit inside a tree, which can narrate its story to the carver. A tree thus speaks to the carver demanding attention for what lies inside itself and needs to be expressed:

> We both know a language is waiting inside my tongue.
>
> Please put down the adze, the skillsaw, the file:
> Speak gently to me so I can recognise what's there. […]
>
> The wood you're trying to carve is still a tree (92-93).

In her poem "In search of mana wahine" Anahera Gildea tells about the importance of ancestry and connection with the female origins in order to be a strong Māori woman of the present. She heard the *karanga* (call) of the *atua wahine* (ancestresses) when she was "Slung on the rigging between worlds". By re-tracing the connection with the first muscular woman, Hine-ahu-one, born from the earth and progenitor of humankind, she regains her strength.

> I heard their *karanga*, the dawn voice
> centuries of women rising up […]
> reciting the first woman,
> muscled beneath the sand
> came the cataclysmic tearing
> the first bleeding.
>
> In the beginning there were no people. […]
> Just the monstrous arc of her grief.
> Just she alone (56-58).

"The Yearning to Have you Back", by Dayle Takitimu, evokes an ancient incantation to bring the spirit of her cousin, lying in a coma, back to physical life. According to Māori tradition, she occupies the space between the living realm and that of their ancestors[11]. These intense lines convey the author's belief in the interconnection of animate and inanimate worlds and in the nurturing function of women (likened to gardens and gardeners), the sacredness attached to the female role and the uniqueness attributed to the individual. The poignant poem ends with an actual invocation to the goddesses Hine and Papatūānuku:

> My sister, come close again amongst us
> In love; […]
> Bring with you your garden to nurture
> To be nurtured, to be grown, to be formed
> A guiding shoot for those who need hope, who need substance
> That is you, who are of my heart
> That is you, who holds the pulse of our ancestral homeland within you
> Of our mothers before us
> Of our sacred gardens
> That is you, who nurtures the seeds that have been brought here to flourish […]
> To you, Hine
> Throw open (and keep open) the sacred veil of your people's house of learning,
> of ancestral knowledge
> To your Enchantress – Papatūānuku
> Directly descending through an unbroken line of women
> To us, to us gathered here
> To us delving deep; it is you –
> We beckon you, be renewed in all that you know
> Return to us […]
>
> You are me
> I am you
> We are each other, one being (88-90).

Dayle Takitimu is a key figure in this context, because she indeed exemplifies the role of *mana wahine*, conjugating militant activism and writing. She is an indigenous rights and environmental lawyer as well as climate campaigner, well known for her battle in 2012 against explorative oil drilling in the Raukumara basin, off the East coast, on behalf of her *iwi* (tribe), Te Whānau-a-Apanuia. The New Zealand government had granted Brazilian

[11] https://www.flash-frontier.com/2019/03/07/tatai-whetu/ (consulted on 26/9/2021).

oil giant Petrobras permits for deep-sea oil and gas exploration. The *iwi* exercised their customary rights in the area and organised a 40-day flotilla protest supported by Greenpeace. Eventually the permits were handed back[12].

Takitimu has presented at environmental forums locally and internationally, promoting a future that moves away from dependence on fossil fuels. She has pointed out indigenous people's ability to practise renewable energy and advocated a leading role for them in this field. In an interview to a TV network she underlined that a cultural change must soon take place. Humans should quit a "master-of-the-universe attitude" and be an integral part of the environment. She concluded by saying: "This living in competition with Papatūānuku has to stop and we have to get back to living in harmony with our environment"[13].

As shown in the last remark, women of *mana wāhine* draw on their cultural background not only for inspiration in literature, but also for guidance in important political issues and environmental battles. The holistic Māori view encompasses their life and conduct, in private experience and public discourse, where an ecologically conscious attitude intertwines with a female perspective deeply rooted in *Kaupapa* Māori.

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[13] https://www.teaomaori.news/were-addicted-oil-dayle-takitimu (consulted on 26/9/2021).

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Carmen Concilio

The 'Cockroach': Waste and Wasted Life in World Literatures in English

Abstract I: In questo saggio intendo proporre una lettura in chiave comparatistica di tre romanzi postcoloniali – in relazione intertestuale e contro-canonica rispetto a *La metamorfosi* (1915) di Franz Kafka – che affrontano l'etica, ma anche l'estetica, dell'interconnessione umano-animale. In questo modo, e con il supporto di un apparato critico su Kafka, in particolare il contributo di Deleuze e Guattari (1986), su cui s'impernia il presente studio, intendo esplorare il nesso fra letteratura e ambiente, con particolare enfasi sui rifiuti, nell'accezione anche della necro-politica (Mbembe 2003) e dell'*écart* (Jullien 2012). *La maledizione di Kafka* del sudafricano Achmat Dangor (2006), *Il ladro del silenzio* (2011) del canadese-libanese Rawi Hage e *Culo nero* (2016) del nigeriano Igoni Barrett saranno qui oggetto di disamina.

Abstract II: In this essay I intend to pursue a comparative reading of three postcolonial texts – in their intertextual and counter-canonical relationship with Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) – that deal with the ethics, but also the aesthetics, of the relationship between humans and animals. By doing so, and with the help of the Kafkian critical apparatuses, particularly Deleuze and Guattari's critical contribution (1986), which will be the core of this study, I will also examine the nexus between literature and the environment, with particular emphasis on waste, also taking into consideration the paradigms of necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) and of *écart* (Jullien 2012). *Kafka's Curse* (1997), by South African writer Achmat Dangor, *Cockroach* (2008) by Canadian-Lebanese Rawi Hage, and *Blackass* (2015) by Nigerian Igoni Barrett will be here analysed and scrutinised.

Keywords: World Literatures in English, animals, waste, necropolitics, *écart*.

In this essay, I would like to concentrate on three narratives in which an individual – through a Kafka-esque metamorphic process – is eventually equated to waste. Franz Kafka (1883-1924) is certainly a starting point, in order to discuss this specific narrative representation of biopolitics and necropolitics (Mbembe 2003). Moreover, the purpose of this essay is to analyse and demonstrate how Kafka's texts undergo a process of regeneration and re-naturalisation; of intertextual re-birth in other cultures, languages, literatures, and nationalities, particularly within the field of Anglophone postcolonial literature[1]. Achmat

[1] A different version of the article here expanded was published in German (Concilio 2020). I am particularly

Dangor's South African *Kafka's Curse* (1997), Rawi Hage's Canadian-Lebanese *Cockroach* (2009), and Igoni Barrett's Nigerian *Blackass* (2015), all show strong analogies with Kafka's text by placing the metamorphosis at the centre of an identity crisis based on the dichotomy black/white, ethnic minority/domineering majority, inclusion/exclusion, typical of postcolonial narratives.

In this context, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) will be the pivotal reference. It introduces a new mythologem in what can be considered Kafka's idiosyncratic inauguration of modern mythology[2]: the insect (Germ. *das Ungeziefer*, *der Mistkäfer*; Engl. "bug", "beetle", "cockroach")[3]. It is "the insect" that becomes the "index to the significance straddling two texts" (Riffaterre 1980: 638).

Moreover, Paul Gilroy claims that some of the most interesting answers to debates on racism, slavery, and migration are to be found in discussions of Kafka's works, who "more than any other writer, placed the human, the infrahuman, and the animal in disturbing relation in order to establish a variety of modernism 'far away from the continent of Man'"(Arendt 1967: 157). Furthermore, in his introduction to the essay *The Infrahuman. Animality in Modern Jewish Literature* (2018), Noam Pines writes:

> Instead of depicting a struggle to emancipation, the literature of the infrahuman […] instead of the prospect of integration, acculturation, or assimilation, […] offers an experience of abandonment and degradation (Pines 2018: xxix).

If the insect can be elevated to the status of absolute 'otherness', of discrimination, segregation, abandonment and degradation, another critical paradigm has definitely opened the doors to Kafka's texts and characters unto postcolonial discourses: Deleuze's and Guattari's theory of Kafka as representative of minor literature, which "does not come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. The first characteristic of a minor literature is that in it the language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 16).

Deleuze and Guattari also suggest that Kafka's use of the German language by a Czech Jew is similar to the African American writers' use of the English language in the States (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 17), thus reinforcing the parallel among minorities, or communities which suffered forms of racial and cultural discrimination and political persecution[4].

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thankful to Dr. David C. Assmann, who organised the Environmental Studies Conference on "Narrative der Deponie" in 2019, or narratives of waste, with both Germanists and Anglicists, and to the lively discussion that emerged during the debate, for the inspiring sparks that enriched that former version of the article.

[2] "Kafka is to modernity what classical myth was to traditional society" (Bensmaïa 1986: xi).

[3] "He wakes up to find that he's become a near-human-sized beetle (probably of the scarab family, if his household's charwoman is to be believed)" (Cronenberg 2014: 9).

[4] "This book represents a watershed and is invaluable for the modern reader of Kafka" […] "By proposing the concept of 'minor literature' – a concept that opens so many new avenues of research in Europe and the United States – Deleuze and Guattari give the modern reader a means by which to enter into Kafka's work without being weighed down by the old categories of genres, types, modes, and style […]" (Bensmaïa 1986: xiii, xv).

These interpretive and critical assessments determined Kafka's fortune in postcolonial studies and literary discourses (Dahab 2018: 215), likewise encouraging new writers to a whole range of more or less conscious or unconscious intertextual quotations, allusions, borrowings, echoes, and even parodic cross-references to Kafka's *Ur*-text. This rich machinery of citations is undoubtedly better classified through the well-established narratological tools of intertextuality, as theorised by Julia Kristeva, Michael Riffaterre, Gerard Genette, and Linda Hutcheon, among others. And yet, here, Kafka's *Ur*-text, "Die Verwandlung/ The Metamorphosis", will be treated as "storied matter", that is literary material that is "holder of stories" (Cohen 2014: ix), that had once been thrown into the collective European literary conscience, and is now re-born overseas, naturalised in other countries, acquiring and describing new kinds of citizenships.

Kafka's *Ur*-text: "Die Verwandlung/The Metamorphosis"

Kafka's character Gregor Samsa is a man who finds himself transformed into a disgusting insect. All through the process of what Deleuze and Guattari call "becoming-animal", Gregor Samsa does not lose his human reasoning and concerns. His voice changes into that of an animal, while his body metamorphosises, too – "a becoming-animal, a becoming-inhuman, since it is actually through voice and through sound, and through a style that one becomes an animal" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 7) – and his taste for food also changes, rather to the point of reaching total refusal. When his family give up any hope for normality, they remove all the pieces of furniture from his room. Finally, after everyone seems to have accepted his animal-like, or infrahuman qualities, Gregor transforms himself from animal into rubbish, particularly when his room, too, has become a dumping ground for discarded and unwanted objects. Paradoxically, it is the cleaning lady who dumps dirty things into Gregor's room, and when she finally comes to sweep him away, she acts more like an undertaker than like a cleaner:

> Man hatte sich angewöhnt, Dinge, die man anderswo nicht unterbringen konnte, in dieses Zimmer hineinzustellen, und solcher Dinge gab es nun viele, […].
> Aus diesem Grunde waren viele Dinge überflüssig geworden, die zwar nicht verkäuflich waren, die man aber auch nicht wegwerfen wollte. Alle diese wanderten in Gregors Zimmer. Ebenso auch die Aschenkiste und die Abfallkiste aus der Küche. Was nur im Augenblick unbrauchbar war, schleuderte die Bedienerin, […] einfach in Gregors Zimmer (Kafka 1994: 180-181).

> Everyone had gotten the habit of using his room to store things there was no space for in other parts of the apartment, and now there were many such things, […].
> Many things had become superfluous, things that could not be sold but were still too valuable to throw out. All of this found its way into Gregor's room. As did the ash box and the garbage pail from the kitchen. The charwoman, always in a great hurry, would simply fling any unserviceable item into Gregor's room (Kafka 2014: 96).

In order to provide an immediate example of how this particular detail of the kitchen garbage bin resurfaces almost literally in one of the texts under scrutiny here, it is worth anticipating a quotation from Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* (2009), which might call to the mind of the reader reminiscences of Kafka:

> The smell of food from the kitchen brought me back to the land of forests and snow. And all I wished was to crawl under the swinging door and hide under the stove, licking the mildew, the dripping juice from the roast lamb, even the hardened yogurt drops on the side of the garbage bin. With my pointy teeth, I thought, I could scrape the white drips all the way under the floor (Hage 2009: 67).

While "kitchen" and "garbage bin" are precise lexical and semantic markers in both quoted passages, a third element, "teeth", too, is present in Kafka's *Ur*-text, towards the end of the same paragraph, when Gregor regrets not having proper teeth[5]:

> Als ob damit Gregor gezeigt werden sollte, daß man Zähne brauche, um zu essen, und daß man auch mit den schönsten zahnlosen Kiefern nichts ausrichten könne (Kafka 1994: 183).

> As if to demonstrate to Gregor that a person needs teeth to eat and even the most splendid jaws, if toothless, can accomplish nothing at all (Kafka 2014: 98).

This particular and limited example anticipates how Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* places itself in an oblique, agonic relation of "recurrence" and "sameness" to the *Ur*-text, with which it establishes an ambiguous, if possible, filiation, which will be analysed in depth in the central part of this essay, where the three novels will be introduced[6]. The novel also creates an intertext, for it "complements" various texts by Kafka, and almost "comments" on them, providing new meanings to the metamorphosis and not limiting itself to imitation, allusion, or literal quotation (Riffaterre 1980: 627).

It is worth noting that among the reviewers of Rawi Hage's novel, there are those who believe that to compare him to Kafka means to belittle and diminish his work:

> I don't mean to suggest that everyone who has responded to Hage's work has done so insincerely. But when I see it being compared to Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Genet, Rimbaud and Burroughs – I can't imagine that anyone with a mind believes that. In making such overblown comparisons, these "admiring" critics have respected Rawi Hage far less than I have (Gaitskill 2009).

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[5] "To speak, and above all to write, is to fast. Kafka manifests a permanent obsession with food, and with that form of food *par excellence*, in other words, the animal or meat – an obsession with the mouth and with teeth and with large, unhealthy, or gold-capped teeth" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 20).

[6] The author refuses with irritation the comparison to Kafka: "It's not about Kafka", he insisted grumbling about the journalists who've already brought up the most obvious literary reference (Donnelly 2008).

> Kafka obviously comes to mind here, but the handling of the idea, often dazzling in its own way, is notably un-Kafkaesque. Where Kafka writes Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis as a passion play of Christ-like suffering and forbearance, Hage works the subject for something much more caustic and defiant (Lasdun 2009).

I think this is not the case. It just means to highlight one – among many – layer of meanings and this is a practice only great works of art allow for. Moreover, in the case of postcolonial re-writings, "'writing back', 'counter discourse', 'oppositional literature', 'contexts', is a strategy for contesting the authority of the canon of English literature" (Thieme 2001: 1). Yet, Tiffin "claims that such texts do not simply 'write back' to an English canonical text, but to the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continue to operate in postcolonial worlds" (Tiffin 1987: 23). In Kafka's text, Gregor progressively becomes as untidy and dirty as his own room:

> war auch er ganz staubbedeckt; Fäden, Haare, Speiseüberreste schleppte er auf seinem Rücken und an den Seiten mit sich herum (Kafka 1994: 184).

> he too was covered in dust; he dragged around threads, hair and food scraps clinging to his back and sides (Kafka 2014: 100).

The final and inevitable step of this metamorphosis is obviously death, as Deleuze and Guattari claim: "Gregor's metamorphosis was the story of a re-Oedipalization that leads him into death, that turns his becoming-animal into a becoming-dead. […] all the animals oscillate between a schizo Eros and an Oedipal Thanatos" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 36). Thus, what also characterises Gregor's destiny, as well as the destiny of Kafka's "Hunger artist" (1922) – and of Kafka's himself – is exactly the equation between a human "wasted life" – or, the body – and waste. This reading is offered – for instance – by Hanif Kureishi, who writes:

> In 'Metamorphosis', […] Gregor Samsa, wakes up one morning to find he has become transformed […] into an insect, a bug, or a large dung beetle, depending on the translation. And in 'A Hunger Artist' the protagonist, a determined self-famisher, exhibits himself publicly in a cage, where, eventually, he starves himself to death as a form of public entertainment. Like Gregor Samsa in 'Metamorphosis', at the conclusion of the story he is swept away, having also become 'nothing', a pile of rubbish or human excrement that everyone has become tired of (Kureishi 2015: 6).

Whereas David Cronenberg reminds us:

> Is Gregor's transformation a death sentence or, in some way, a fatal diagnosis? Why does the beetle Gregor not survive? Is it his human brain, depressed and sad and melancholy, that betrays the insect's basic sturdiness? Is it the brain that defeats the bug's urge to survive, even to eat? What's wrong with the beetle? […] Well, we learn that Gregor has bad lungs – they are "none too reliable" – and so the Gregor beetle has bad lungs as well, or at least the insect equivalent, and perhaps that really is his

> fatal diagnosis; or perhaps it's his growing inability to eat that kills him, as it did Kafka, who ultimately coughed up blood and died of starvation caused by laryngeal tuberculosis at the age of forty (Cronenberg 2014: 11-12).

Therefore, as a way to close these introductory reflections, I would claim that it is very difficult to distinguish between Gregor Samsa the character and Franz Kafka the writer, if we have to follow Baioni, when he argues that thanks to a Kabbalistic shift the number of letters composing the two surnames is the same, while the vowel "a" of the surname occurs in the same position and the consonant "s" perfectly substitutes the "k" in the same position (Baioni 1962: 85).

One last example of how Kafka's text is literally translated into an evocative intertext and at the same time it is reused and transformed is provided once again by Rawi Hage's novel, in the portrait of a group of nervous, frustrated male migrants, smoking and thus transforming themselves into animal-like creatures, almost like dragons puffing smoke clouds into the air, who are very similar to Kafka's three tenants:

> Fresh immigrants [with] tobacco-stained fingers summoning the waiters, their matches, like Indian signals, ablaze under hairy noses, and their stupefied faces exhaling cigarette fumes with the intensity of Spanish bulls on a last charge towards a dancing red cloth (Hage 2008: 7).

> Besonders die Art, wie sie alle aus Nase und Mund den Rauch ihrer Zigarren in die Höhe bliesen, ließ auf große Nervosität schließen (Kafka 1994: 185).

> Particularly the way in which all of them were blowing the smoke of their cigars high into the air from their noses and mouths suggested extreme agitation (Kafka 2014: 100-101).

Kafka/Samsa abroad

> *Benjamin showed that Kafka could well have adopted Montaigne's phrase: "Mon livre et moi ne faisons qu'un"*
> (Bensmaïa 1986: xii).

Bodies thrown away like waste, expelled, rejected, unloved: this is how Kafka has marked his characters with "superfluity" and "expendability" (Mbembe 2008: 38). It is easy, therefore, to understand why Kafka appeals to postcolonial writers. To begin with, the South African novelist of Indian, Muslim descent, Achmat Dangor, imagined a character affected by Kafka's curse – and this syndrome becomes the novel's title and leitmotif: *Kafka's Curse* (1997)[7]. Besides, the Lebanese-Canadian writer Rawi Hage produced a novel entitled *Cockroach* (2008), which allusively re-naturalises Kafka, bringing to life a Middle Eastern migrant and outsider in Montreal. Last but not least, the Nigerian writer Igoni Barrett

[7] On its publication, the novel won the *Charles Bosman Award* in South Africa.

created a metamorphic character who 'plays white', in his novel *Blackass* (2015), whose epigraph is borrowed from Kafka's *The Metamorphosis:* "'And now?' Gregor asked himself, looking around in the darkness"(Kafka 2014)[8]. The three texts might be considered classics of postcolonial discourse on the 'other', almost in the Fanonian terms of black skin behind white masks, as far as genre is concerned. Only *Cockroach* is narrated in the first person, while the remaining two novels use the omniscient third person narrative.

Before analysing the three texts, I would like to mention another critical category that also has to do with rubbish and waste: *l'écart*. The Italian word *scarto* that translates the English term "waste", or "rubbish", and the German term *Müll* or *Abfall*, has a second meaning if used as a verb. *Scartare* in Italian indicates a sudden lateral movement and subsequent forward projection, typical of an animal (Zaccuri 2016: 6). In English it can be translated into the verb "to swerve", while in German it might be translated as "plötzlich abweichen". But the term is also normally used in rhetoric with the 'figurative meaning' of what diverges, swerves, and takes over the 'normative' or 'proper meaning'. This is to say that what Kafka disseminated in his narrative production in terms of new mythologems has now been bent and swerves in order to serve ever new purposes. Finally, the French philosopher Francois Jullien proposed the concept of *l'écart* to substitute the concept of *difference*, particularly if referred to cultural difference. In his opinion, l'*écart* is the open space between cultures, that can be filled by a reflexivity between self and other, and can be bridged by relational rather than essentialist discourses:

> l'écart ne porte pas à s'arroger une position de surplomb à partir de laquelle il y aurait à ranger des différences. Mais, par la distance ouverte, il permet un dévisagement réciproque de l'un par l'autre: où l'un se découvre lui-même en regard de l'autre, à partir de l'autre (Jullien 2012: 7).

Bearing this definition of *l'écart* in mind, I would like now to approach the three literary texts here under scrutiny, for they engage with Kafka's alterity in a transformative dialogue, where Kafka-the-writer, his texts and his fictional characters have been naturalised in other continents, have been both deterritorialised and reterritorialised in other literatures, languages, and literary *personae*; more specifically, gaining South African, Canadian and Nigerian citizenships:

> Stories of magical transformation […] prompt us to wonder if transformation into another living creature would be a proof of the possibility of reincarnation and some sort of afterlife and is thus, however hideous or disastrous the narrative, a religious and hopeful concept (Cronenberg 2014: 15).

Where Cronenberg speaks of reincarnation, I would say that Kafka/Samsa's new citizenship is also a metempsychosis, a rebirth like that of the mythical phoenix, out of its own ashes, whereas Dahab speaks of "transmutative" devolution (2018: 216). Indeed, the

[8] Cf. "'Und jetzt?' fragte sich Gregor und sah sich im Dunkeln um" (Kafka 1994: 187).

three main protagonists might be said to interpret that open space of *l'écart* as the space between blackness and whiteness, that transforms them not really into someone else, but rather into something else.

To begin with the comparative analysis, one of the paradigms singled out by Deleuze and Guattari in Kafka's narratives is the *geopolitical triangle*: Germans, Czechs, Jews. Such triangle corresponds to the triangle of Kafka's linguistic choices: German, Czech, Yiddish and Hebrew[9].

This has to do with Kafka being a representative of the German speaking minority of Czech Jews in Prague and to his father being an Eastern/rural Jew who has now renounced his roots in order to assimilate to Western/urban culture.

In the postcolonial texts here analysed we find similar triangles:

KAFKA	Gregor Samsa	German, Czech, Yiddish
Czechoslovakia, Prague	Identity	White Jew > Black insect
DANGOR	Omar/Oscar	Afrikaans, Yiddish, English
South Africa, Johannesburg	Identity	Oriental Black Muslim > White (European) Jew
HAGE	Unnamed	Lebanese, English/French
Canada, Quebec, Montreal	Identity	Black Arab migrant > in white Montreal
BARRETT	Furo Wariboko/Franc Whyte	Yoruba, English
Nigeria, Lagos	Identity	Black Nigerian > White Nigerian

All the Kafka-esque characters speak more than one language: sometimes they do not speak one of the languages of the country, and the language they speak makes them more or less authentic in their metamorphosis, and determines their loyalty towards one specific 'sovereignty'.

Another paradigm selected by Deleuze and Guattari is the *becoming-infra-human or becoming-animal*, as a line of flight, a line of escape, as an alternative to remaining obedient, with a lowered head, remaining a bureaucrat, an inspector, a judge, a culprit. *Becoming-animal* is an absolute deterritorialization (see Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 12).

In the three Anglophone novels, the characters metamorphose into a different ethnic/racial, religious and/or linguistic subject. This *becoming-other*, although allusively referred to as a *becoming-cockroach* – at least in two of the three novels –, implies a real deterritorialization, for the three protagonists are literally expelled and exiled from the family circle, the house, the city, the country.

[9] "Kafka's situation is analogous to that of Indian writers who must choose between their regional, Indian tongues, and a pan-Indian, bureaucratic English, or African writers who must decide whether to communicate widely through the coloniser's tongue or reach a more limited audience to a specific tribal language. And Kafka's deterritoralization of German represents a particular strategy for dealing with this widespread postcolonial linguistic dilemma" (Bogue 1997: 105).

KAFKA	Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt. Er lag auf seinem panzerartig harten Rücken und sah, wenn er den Kopf ein wenig hob, seinen gewölbten, braunen, von bogenförmigen Versteifungen geteilten Bauch, auf dessen Höhe sich die Bettdecke, zum gänzlichen Niedergleiten bereit, kaum noch erhalten konnte. Seine vielen, im Vergleich zu seinem sonstigen Umfang kläglich dünnen Beine flimmerten ihm hilflos vor den Augen (Kafka 1994: 115). When Gregor Samsa woke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed right there in his bed into some sort of monstrous insect. He was lying on his back – which was hard, like a carapace – and when he raised his head a little he saw his curved brown belly segmented by rigid arches atop which the blanket, already slipping, was just barely managing to cling. His many legs, pitifully thin compared to the rest of him, waved helplessly before his eyes (Kafka 2014: 21).
HAGE	I lay in bed and let the smoke enter me undiluted. I let it grow me wings and many legs. Soon I stood barefoot, looking for my six pairs of slippers. I looked in the mirror, and I searched again for my slippers. In the mirror I saw my face, my long jaw, my whiskers slicing through the smoke around me. I saw many naked feet moving (2008: 19).
BARRETT	Furo Wariboko awoke this morning to find that dreams can lose their way and turn up on the wrong side of sleep. He was lying nude in bed, and when he raised his head a fraction he could see his alabaster belly, and his pale legs beyond, […] He stared at his hands, the pink life lines in his palms, the shell-fish coloured cuticles, the network of blue veins […] His hands were not black but white … same as his legs, his belly, all of him (2015: 3).

All three texts include a crucial metamorphosis, although what becomes important here is the skin colour. Two characters, the South African Omar and the Nigerian Furo, 'play white', that is to say, they want to pass for whites, and therefore to escape from the racial discrimination that black people suffer for. Differently, Hage's character is a Middle Eastern man in Canada where he identifies with the other migrants, exiles, refugees, who live a separate life from the white majority of Canadians. Dangor chooses irony to define Oscar's choice of becoming a Jew, in order to be assimilated to white people in South Africa, where Blacks and Coloureds/Asiatics were discriminated under apartheid. Actually, both Oscar and Furo undergo a double metamorphosis[10]. After changing his name and becoming a Jew, Oscar dies and transforms himself into a tree, thus opting for *becoming-vegetal*. Furo, instead, after obtaining a first passport with a new picture as a white man, would like to obtain a second one, with also a new name and surname: he wants to be known as a successful businessman, as Franc Whyte.

[10] "What happens when you update a classic story by a century, shifting continents along the way? Furo Wariboko, the Nigerian everyman at the centre of Igoni Barrett's first novel, *Blackass*, is plunged into such a situation when he awakes, Gregor Samsa-style, to find he has changed dramatically overnight. In Furo's case, he has not transformed into an insect but into a white man" (Carroll 2016).

Oscar repudiates his Muslim family, his religion, his proper name and moves from the township to the gentrified suburbs. The unnamed protagonist of Hage's novel migrates from an unnamed country, easily identifiable as Lebanon, to Montreal, abandoning his family and his previous life and language[11]. Barrett's protagonist leaves his family, changes identity and moves to another area of Lagos. Geographically, they are displaced or diasporic people, socially they are all outsiders; physically and psychically they are all hybrids. After all, the *becoming-animal* of Kafka's characters is not a way out of humanity but a way of remaining co-substantial to both human being and animal (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 14).

If the *becoming-animal* is seen as a line of flight by the two French philosophers, a way for Gregor to subtract himself from patriarchal, juridical, economic and social laws of submission as a middle-class man, son, employee, the metamorphosis grants a better job and upper social mobility to both Oscar and Furo in Africa. For all three characters the metamorphosis allows for the breaking of family bonds, of affective obligations, and allows them a temporary flight. Hage's character, on the contrary, from outsider becomes outlaw, thus excluding himself from society altogether.

Another paradigm that seems to be respected in these Kafka-esque stories is the one regarding the Oedipus complex that includes the sister, what Deleuze and Guattari call the schizo-Oedipus. Moreover, the two philosophers see *the sisters* as a machine or a machination that is opposed to the one of *the prostitutes*, as a series of constant presences in Kafka's texts[12].

KAFKA	**Gregor's Sister**: er wollte ihr dann anvertrauen, daß er die feste Absicht gehabt habe, sie auf das Konservatorium zu schicken, und daß er dies, wenn nicht das Unglück dazwischen gekommen wäre, vergangene Weihnachten – Weihnachten war doch wohl schon vorüber? – allen gesagt hätte, ohne sich um irgendwelche Widerreden zu kümmern. Nach dieser Erklärung würde die Schwester in Tränen der Rührung ausbrechen, und Gregor würde sich bis zu ihrer Achsel erheben und ihren Hals küssen, den sie, seitdem sie ins Geschäft ging, frei ohne Band oder Kragen trug (Kafka 1994: 186). He would confess to her that he'd had the firm intention of sending her to the Conservatory and that if the disaster had not disrupted his plans, he would have made a general announcement last Christmas – Christmas had passed now, hadn't it? – without letting himself be swayed by objections of any sort. After this declaration, his sister would be moved to the point of tears, and Gregor would raise himself to the height of her armpit and kiss her throat, which, now that she went to the office every day, she wore free of ribbon or collar (Kafka 2014: 101-102).

[11] Rawi Hage claims: "*Cockroach* is about displacement. It's also a reflection on people like me. We are not quite immigrants. We are not quite rooted in this culture. That's why this helplessness comes across in the book" (Donnelly 2008).

[12] "*The Trial* and *The Castle* multiply these women who in various ways reunite the qualities of sister, maid, and whore" (Deleuse & Guattari 1986: 65).

DANGOR	**The sister (Anna and Martin)**: Anna saw the quick emergence of the ancient photograph behind her eyes […] Martin much younger, Martin monstrous, Martin pained, Martin doubled up with agony, Martin naked, Martin remorseful, Martin bloated and huge, exploding in the air (2000: 21). **The psychiatrist:** Perhaps it was a mistake to accept you as my therapist. Funny profession, psychotherapy. A kind of prostitution, getting paid to listen (2000: 59). **The prostitutes**: The occasional prostitute, the cleanest on offer, I made certain of this, […] I had to reassure many a nervous young woman (2000: 47).
HAGE	**The sister**: Come my sister said to me. Let's play. And she lifted her skirt, laid the back of my head between her legs, raised her heels in the air, and swayed her legs over me slowly. Look, open your eyes, she said, and she touched me. This is your face, those are your teeth, and my legs are your long, long whiskers. We laughed, and crawled below the sheets. […] Let's play underground (2008: 6). **The psychiatrist:** Perhaps it is time to see my therapist again. […] I put my hand on her knee while she was sitting across from me (2008: 3). **The lover/prostitute**: I am in love with Shohreh. But I don't trust my emotions anymore (2008: 3).
BARRETT	**The sister**: 09.10 | Pls help RT. This is my missing bro Furo Wariboko in the pic. He left home Monday morn & no news of him since. pic.twitter.com/0J9xt5WaW. (2015: 79). **The Lover/prostitute**: Furo knew the reason Syreeta had picked him up on that second day of his awakening. […] She was tough enough to endure the moral itches and emotional blows of her fancy prostitution, her Tuesdays-only concubinage (2015: 253).

Gregor's wish to kiss his sister's unveiled neck has been read by Deleuze and Guattari as a schizo-Oedipus. Meanwhile, the father's intervention, throwing apples at Gregor and finally causing his death, is read as a re-oedipisation of family relations. In all three texts the male protagonists are representative of a certain masculine, if not machist drive, as opposed to their moral weakness, for they are liars and imposters, and as opposed to their being always hungry and very skinny, for they are broke, they live alone and hardly ever eat. They are sexually active and show a certain degree of misogyny. In all the texts, the sister, or a sister, is a most relevant presence. In both Hage's and Barrett's novels, the protagonists are very fond of their sisters. In Hage, there are very explicit undertones, alluding to a half innocent, half incestuous playfulness between brother and sister. However, the plot becomes more dramatic when the protagonist confesses to his therapist that he was not able to save his sister's life from a violent husband: when he confronted him with a gun in his hands, he was not able to shoot him.

In Montreal he has a lover, Shohreh, a Persian young woman, who shares with him the condition of being a migrant, gravitating around a small community of Middle Eastern men. In the end, when Shohreh is certain to have seen her former persecutor and rapist in Montreal, the protagonist shoots him, thus taking revenge for her and his own sister.

In Dangor's novel, Anna is the protagonist's white wife. Her mysterious sorrow depends on her having been molested by her own brother, Martin, who is affected by a psychosis that victimises even his own daughters. Here the incestuous relationship between brother and sister is explicit, but does not involve the protagonist himself.

In Barrett, the sister is a beloved presence. She immediately activates herself when her brother disappears, by posting a picture of him on Twitter and asking for help. In this case the introduction of Twitter's posts in the novel serves to update a Kafka-esque situation to our contemporary digital age and digital literature, thus providing the sister with agency and a prominent role in the narrative.

As far as prostitutes are concerned, sometimes they are explicit presences, sometimes the psychotherapist assumes a borderline, if not incestuous role, particularly in Hage and Dangor. In Hage and Barrett the beloved women, Shohreh and Syreeta, are ambiguously portrayed as potential prostitutes but they are also brotherly loved by the protagonists, who find shelter and protection (also food) from them. The Oedipal triangle is reproduced in all these novels, too, for some male characters intervene in order to stop or hinder the relationship between the protagonists and their lovers/prostitutes.

As far as the ending of the novels is concerned, apparently only one inherits Kafka's scatological ending, where the dead body of the insect is swept away like rubbish. In this respect, Dangor's novel is the closest to Kafka's text[13].

Of Oscar Kahn's corpse we know that "there wasn't much left of the body to bury. It was as if it had crumbled to dust" (Dangor 2000: 27). His brother "Malik gathered the claylike remains of his brother Omar into the stained and yellowed sheet in which Omar had died" (Dangor 2000: 63), he only found "This body, this blerry body, of which there remained only some matter, a powdery matter that crumbled at the lightest touch" (Dangor 2000: 65). And yet, instead of the body now a tree has appeared, a metamorphosis has been accomplished: "In what had once been the main bedroom, a tree had thrust up through the floor. Flowers sprouted in a profusion of colours from the dark, disinterred earth, green moss covered the walls" (Dangor 2000: 28).

Thus, half Kafka-esque, half Ovidian, Dangor's narrative "swerves" from its original model. Oscar's transformation into a tree, which inevitably provides a touch of magic realism or shamanism to the plot, is also a reference to an eastern fairy tale Omar used to tell, about a gardener, Majnoen, and a Princess, Leila, who fall in love, but their love is forbidden. They decide to flee together, but Leila is caught and Majnoen waits for her so long that he becomes a tree of the forest that was their meeting point. Similarly, Oscar is bed-ridden and waits for Anna who will not come back. Majnoen is also the name of a madness, a syndrome: "An insanity that strikes those who dare to stray from their 'life's station'" (Dangor 2000: 31).

Majnoen is another name for Kafka's curse. After Oscar's death, his psychiatrist says that he suffered from

[13] "In Oscar's shocking metamorphosis there is a nod to Kafka – and also an echo of an old Arabian fairy tale about a poor gardener who fell in love with a princess, and paid for his temerity much as Oscar does. But his symptoms are normal. In South Africa, what was laughably called 'reality' was always effortlessly stranger than fairy tales. And every bit as odd as Kafka" (Hope 1999).

> anxiety and severe paranoia. Got worse when his wife left him. Thought he was degenerating. Returning to vegetable matter. No, it was not a case of a man thinking he was a carrot. He was wasting away. Refused to eat, or could not eat, though doctors could find nothing physically wrong with him, except for some peculiar problem with his breathing (Dangor 2000: 209).

Both Omar/Oscar's father and grandfather had suicidal drives and both died under strange circumstances. Yet, the police are questioning Amina Mandelstam, the psychiatrist, because strangely enough all the male figures who come across her die mysteriously.

Thus, in terms of genre, Dangor's novel can be considered a rewriting of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*; a magical realist tale; a medical case of Alzheimer's disease and lungs disease (an echo of Kafka/Samsa's lungs weakness), dementia or severe psychosis; a crime fiction with a seductive psychiatrist, probably a serial killer under cover.

In Rawi Hage's case, the protagonist is a potential suicide and therefore he is treated in a psychiatric clinic. He is an impoverished migrant with no roots, a petty criminal, both a drugs addict and a thief, who finds a job as a waiter in a Persian restaurant, but in the end kills a man who comes from the turbulent past history of the Middle East, a history of violence, civil wars, dictatorships that ends up chasing these migrants even in their host land. Thus, in the final pages of the novel he turns into a killer, an outlaw. His exit from the scene is described as a surreal withdrawal of a cockroach in the sewage:

> Then I crawled and swam above the water, and when I saw a leaf carried along by the stream of soap and water as if it were a gondola in Venice, I climbed onto it and shook like a dancing gypsy, and I steered it with my glittering wings towards the underground (Hage 2008: 305).

Here, Hage's character too seems to become rubbish among rubbish, for ever excluded from the humanity that has never allowed him real access, hospitality, acknowledgment of his presence and needs. No matter if we believe that the killing is real or only hallucinatory or imagined, as a projection of his wish for action and revenge, with no real capacity to do so, the plot acquires a twist towards a crime fiction with Gothic elements.

Igoni Barrett opts for an ending that foresees a reconciliation between his protagonist and his family, facilitated by the fictional writer, who substitutes the psychiatrist here ("as his confessor, I made no judgements, I only listened to absolve", 2015: 260). Named Igoni, too, he is portrayed as a person undergoing a gender transition from man into a woman. The writer, like a detective, has studied the Twitter-posts in order to see if he could discover anything about the man he had met in a café in a big Mall of Lagos. Clearly, he connects the picture of the black man with Furo's new identity and organises the encounter between him and his family. Yet, the novel ends in the same way as it begins, and in the same way as Kafka's short story begins, with the mother knocking on the son's door. And we are not sure whether he will open the door onto his changed status[14].

[14] "Barrett says the family elements were crucial: he rereads *The Metamorphosis* every year, and is fascinated

The ending of the novel, however, also involves his by now ex-fiancé. Syreeta has become pregnant. In the end she is about to obtain what she wanted, a white child who could give her access to "mixed-race baby club" (Barrett 2015: 253), for she is actually befriended to a circle of Lagos women who have married white Europeans and have mulatto children. Furo knows, however, that he is a black man and their child would be a black Nigerian. He imposes an abortion to Syreeta, and thus here, too, the theme of biopolitics and necropolitics meet, for the foetus is disposed of, like rubbish, because of its blackness.

In Hage's novel, too, Shohreh confesses that she had an abortion. In this foreign land, when she arrived in Quebec, she was alone and her only friend was another migrant like her, an acquaintance of her uncle, a victim of the regime's persecutions. Both these traumatised characters hang on each other, yet none of them is really able to sustain and support the other. Now, she only remembers her loneliness at the clinic (Hage 2009: 191-192). Her own abortion is an attempt at disposing of history, not too differently from Syreeta, whose obsession with whiteness is but a legacy of colonial history.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that these are examples of how Kafka's mythologems are precisely the "storied matter" that has been picked up, in bits and pieces, and morsels, that has been collected, treasured and transformed by contemporary Anglophone writers. Particularly, Kafka's insect has become the emblem of a condition of absolute otherness[15], and the metamorphosis has become a line of flight and a stratagem to survive racism. More than one critic has claimed how "In his use of animals as protagonists, Kafka finds the opportunity to explore the tension between human and non-human, the same tension that exists between self and other" (Powell 2008: 130). Powell insists: "By playing off this tension between human and non-human, between what is 'the self' and what is 'not the self', Kafka is able to explore the ontology of otherness that clarifies the space between self and other" (2008: 131). Powell sees the "ontology of otherness" in Kafka's adherence to the grotesque genre.

Another critic, Richard Barney, contemplates "What, then, is the link between colonialism and animals?" and suggests

> I come close to the view of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari that in this story, as in much of Kafka's work, Red Peter embodies a radical critique of Western subjectivity, in the form of what they call an "absolute deterritorialization of the cogito". Kafka's many stories involving human characters' transformation into or intimate affiliation with animals, they argue, constitute his aim to dismantle completely – to deterritorialize, to level the psychic field, as it were – what seemed to him the prison-house of rationalist Western identity at least since the philosophy of Descartes (2004: 19).

Thus, not only the cockroach, but also Red Peter, the monkey, is yet another humanised animal, with his own rational logic and anti-colonial or even de-colonial attitude. But

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by the way Gregor 'allowed his family to break him'. Barrett sought to invert this dynamic, creating instead a family in which love and forgiveness were paramount" (Carroll 2016).

[15] David Cronenberg sees Gregor Samsa's condition as emblem of a sudden disability comparable, for instance, to sudden ageing (Cronenberg 2014: 9).

in Kafka's shorter proses there is also a dog ("Investigations of a Dog" 1922), a sort of philosopher, who is content to eat crumbs falling from the table (Ulrich 2018: 211-226). Similarly, Hage's character launches himself on an invective against white Canadians, who only leave crumbs to the migrants:

> Talking about crumbs, a nice sandwich would do me fine, I thought. Perhaps I could go to a restaurant nearby, enter it, and sweep up the little pieces of bread and other leftovers on the tablecloth, and then follow the trail of crumbs to the counter next to the kitchen and help myself to some of the warmth released from the toaster. But I know how hard it is to steal food in restaurants (Hage 2009: 56).

The reference to crumbs, that occurs around ten times all through the novel, might be a biblical quotation of the parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" (Luke 16: 20-23) but this sharing of bread as in Eucharist is actually negated to migrants, and what characterises the protagonist's mood is an on-going *j'accuse* from the margins and on behalf of the marginalised. "Like many of Kafka's characters, Hage's protagonist gives us a minority or marginal perspective on society" (Dahab 2018: 215).

All the three texts here analysed practice a policy that has to do with *l'écart*. They eliminate and discard what is not needed, they keep something of Kafka's textuality. They swerve; they diverge, keep a distance from the original, thus creating a space for the dialogic reflexivity François Jullien speaks about (Jullien 2012: 7). An open space between cultures, languages and even cultural traditions. Here, in this space, the mythologem of modernist and surrealist narrative, Kafka's metamorphic insect, germinates in a variety of new ways, but always as an answer to racism, migration, and asymmetrical power relations. It is of course extremely relevant that all these texts are from both African and Middle Eastern writers, all the Kafka-esque characters have a dark complexion or "play white"[16]. They find themselves stigmatised, excluded, marginalised in big urban environments of our contemporary world: Johannesburg, Montreal, Lagos. "Dirty Arabs like you" (Hage 2008: 15) is one definition attached onto Hage's character, while he defines himself as follows "But it is I! I, and the likes of me, who will be eating nature's refuse under dying trees" (2008: 21). Similarly, Omar describes himself as follows: "he was a mixture, Javanese and Dutch and Indian and God knows what else […] he was a lovely hybrid […] all brown, bread and honey!" (Dangor 2000: 15); "he is not one of us", claim the white relatives of his white wife" (2000: 15). To Furo, a food street seller asks: "Abeg, no vex, but you be albino?", "I'm not an albino", Furo answers (Barrett 2015: 31). He is also described as a white man "oyibo", speaking Nigerian, or with a true Nigerian accent. Significantly, Hanif Kureishi claims that Kafka is a "philosopher of the abject, of humiliation, degradation and death-in-life" (2015: 11) and in all three texts, the protagonist turns into a racialised subject.

[16] "Coloured people under apartheid who were light enough to 'pass for white' and did so, for obvious reasons of social and material advantage" (Jacobs 2016: 90).

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Brewer and Flagg's Insect Choirs: Psalmic and Wordsworthian Ecology

Abstract I: La seconda metà del diciannovesimo secolo vide due diverse spiegazioni, in parte antagoniste e in parte sovrapposte, degli intricati rapporti tra organismi e ambiente. Partendo dalla teologia naturale di William Paley e dal concetto di ecologia di Ernst Haeckel, e dal confluire di questi due filoni nell'approccio ecologico di Papa Francesco che ha le sue basi sia nella teleologia che nell'idea di natura di Wordsworth, questo saggio analizza come due popolari scrittori naturalisti, Cobham Brewer in Inghilterra e Wilson Flagg in America, esprimono la loro fascinazione per la 'musica' prodotta dai cori di insetti attraverso le loro rispettive idee religiose ed ecologiche.

Abstract II: The second half of the nineteenth century saw two partly competing, partly overlapping explanations for the intricate relations of organisms to the environment. Starting from William Paley's idea of Natural Theology and Ernst Haeckel's concept of ecology, and how these two strands of looking at nature come together in Pope Francis's both teleological and Wordsworthian ecological approach in *Laudato si'*, this essay concentrates on the way two successful naturalist writers, Cobham Brewer in England and Wilson Flagg in America, express their enchantment with the 'music' produced by insect choirs through their respective religious and ecological ideas of nature.

Keywords: Cobham Brewer, Wilson Flagg, insects, sound, Wordsworthian ecology.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw two partly competing, partly overlapping explanations for the intricate relations of different organisms, both amongst themselves, and to their environment. Before Darwin's *Origin of Species*, a widespread approach was that of Natural Theology, which aimed to reveal evidence of design and purpose in creation. The study of the intricate order and beauty of the natural world served above all to prove the existence and sagacity of God. It represented a way of looking at nature that went all the way back to the ancient Greeks, but which had been given a fresh impetus at the very beginning of the nineteenth century by William Paley's *Natural Theology; or, Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1802). The principle of natural selection, which lay behind Darwin's idea of evolution, provided a different explanation of these intricate relations. Following in Darwin's footsteps, the German biologist Ernst Haeckel coined in 1866 the word *Œcologie*, giving his much-quoted definition: "Unter Œcologie verstehen wir die gesammte Wissenschaft von den Beziehungen des Organismus zur umgebenden

Aussenwelt, wohin wir im weiteren Sinne alle 'Existenz-Beziehungen' rechnen können" (Haeckel 1866: 2.286)[1]. However, the word "ecology" did not come into the English language until translations of Haeckel's later works started to come out. The word "œcology" first appeared in a translation of Haeckel's *History of Creation* (1873), while in his controversial book *The Evolution of Man* (1879) Haeckel's translators preferred the spelling "Œkology" (Haeckel 1883: 1.xiv). The passage in which the word is used in this last work is rarely quoted, which is to be regretted as it seems to indicate that theological deductions and naturalistic justifications for the existence of what we call today ecosystems are two mutually exclusive explanations:

> All the various relations of animals and plants, to one another and to the outer world, with which the Oekology of organisms has to do […] all admit of simple and natural explanation only by the Doctrine of Adaptation and Heredity. While it was formerly usual to marvel at the beneficent plans of an omniscient and benevolent Creator, exhibited especially in these phenomena, we now find in them excellent support for the Theory of Descent (Haeckel 1883: 1.114).

But "Haeckelismus", as a reviewer in *Science* put it, did not convince all his readers. What also irked some of them was that "Haeckel is such a proselytizer, such a scoffer and fighter of those who differ with him" (V. L. K. 1910: 629). Many of the devout preferred to stick to the words of the Psalmist, who, in William Brown's phrase, "as the choirmaster of praise" applauds God's creation. Indeed, metaphors of both cosmic choirs and insect choirs have often expressed the full scale of the intricacies of God's creation, from the immense vastness of the heavens to minute creatures such as insects, all singing together in harmony. Thus, commenting on the author of the Psalms, John Paul II can write that "The believer, in a sense, is 'the shepherd of being', that is, the one who leads all beings to God, inviting them to sing an 'alleluia' of praise. The Psalm brings us into a sort of cosmic church, whose apse is the heavens and whose aisles are the regions of the world, in which the choir of God's creatures sings his praise"[2]. But ultimately the distinction between the choirmaster and the scientist is less formidable than it might seem: speaking of Darwin's concluding lines in *Origin of Species*, Brown rightly notes that "Both the psalmist and the biologist are awestruck by the sheer diversity of life" (Brown 2010: 151).

In an influential article published in 1967 Lynn White blamed "Christian arrogance" for our present "ecological crisis". He concluded that "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny". To do so he thought that "The profoundly religious, but heretical, sense of the primitive Franciscans for the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direction". Therefore, he proposed "Francis as a patron saint for ecologists" (White 1967: 1207). Little could White dream that half a century

[1] "By ecology, we mean the whole science of the relations of the organism to the environment including, in the broad sense, all the 'conditions of existence'" (Stauffer 1957: 140).

[2] Papal General Audience of 17 January 2001, 1.

later a pope would assume the name of Francis and publish an encyclical letter "on care for our common home" in which he laments environmental degradation.

Although, perhaps, (inevitably) still mainly anthropocentric in approach, Pope Francis's *Laudato si'* (2015) evokes a concept of Creation that is both teleological and ecological. He states that the fact that "each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own *purpose*", but that we also need "to grasp the *variety* of things in their *multiple relationships*" (Pope Francis 2015: 84-86; my italics).

This article looks at how two popular mid-nineteenth nature writers, Cobham Brewer (1810-1897) and Wilson Flagg (1805-1884), engaged with the subject as they were led to contemplate the transcendent message one can draw from the music of insect choirs. In 1854 Brewer wrote about the sounds produced by insects in *Sound and Its Phenomena*, while Flagg published the following year in his *Studies in Field and Forest* a piece entitled "Music of Insects". The two authors assumed positions that occupy the two sides of Pope Francis's argument. While Brewer reflects the more traditional sentiment pervading Natural Theology which Pope Francis summarises in one of his opening statements, namely that "Saint Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness" (12), Flagg resorts to a more Wordsworthian influence of nature, which Pope Francis also makes his own in a following passage: "Anyone who has grown up in the hills, or who, as a child, used to sit by the spring to drink, or played outdoors in the neighbourhood square, will feel called upon to recover something of their true selves when going back to these places" (84)[3]. The Wordsworthian ecological stance is irresistible to both theologian and scientist. Even the renowned zoologist Ray Lankester, who translated Haeckel's *History of Creation*, added an unauthorised motto to the book which included the lines from "Tintern Abbey" that introduce the well-known passage on a "sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused".

Cobham Brewer

Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, a Cambridge educated Anglican clergyman, took priest's orders but decided to devote his life to literature rather than to the cloth. He is best known today for his *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (1870), a work of reference explaining the origins of literary allusions for those who had not had a university education. Similarly, his *Sound and Its Phenomena* (1854) was aimed at a general reading public, popularising the current knowledge in the field of acoustic studies. It was marketed as a companion volume to his first great literary success: *A Guide to the Scientific Knowledge of Things Familiar* (1838).

Brewer's *Guide* was a tremendously popular book. Its immediate popularity was such that in 1851 an English-text edition was published in Milan "with Italian notes"[4]. Bernard

[3] The translation is mine, as the official English translation issued by the Vatican does not reflect the Pope's meaning adequately (Cf. the original Latin version of article 84: "Qui in montibus adolevit, vel puer prope rivum sedebat potaturus, vel in sui suburbii platea ludebat, cum ad ea loca redit, animadvertit ad propriam reciperandam identitatem se vocari").

[4] A full Italian translation appeared a few years later by Achille Batelli: *La Chiave della Scienza o i Fenomini di tutti i giorni* (1856).

Lightman estimates that "The print runs for Brewer's *Guide* are among the highest of any scientific book published in the second half of the nineteenth century". As a matter of fact, the preface to the 1849 edition of the *Guide* proudly mentioned the "almost unparalleled success of this little volume, of which 10,000 copies have been printed since 1848". The preface was reprinted verbatim in later editions, only updating the number of sold copies, which, as reported by the author, amounted to 25,000 in 1852, 49,000 in 1853, 81,000 in 1858, 105,000 in 1863, and 113,000 in 1872. According to Lightman's calculations of the print runs, however, Brewer actually underestimated the total volume of sales the book had reached by 1872. Although the preface to the 1894 edition, which mentions 300,000 copies sold, might be an exaggeration of the book's sales, Lightman's calculations still indicate 195,000 copies printed for 1892 (Lightman 2007: 66).

The *Guide* contained, in catechist fashion, over 2000 short questions and answers to scientific phenomena. Brewer wanted to make sure that his readers perceived his work as scientifically sound and underlines in the preface that "In order to secure the strictest accuracy in the answers, the most approved modern authors have been consulted". Even some nineteenth-century process of peer-reviewing was involved as "each edition has been submitted to the revision of gentlemen of acknowledged reputation for scientific attainments". For use in schools, he also reassured teachers that "every question has been again and again submitted to a most rigid investigation" (Brewer 1858: v-vi). Yet many of his explanations of natural phenomena were given in the religious context of divine design. This was most obvious in a number of questions that started with "Show the wisdom of God in …". Brewer vindicated the appropriateness of such teleological explanations by pointing at the growing number of sales, which he thought was "incontrovertible proof of its acceptance". The very catechism structure for the explanation of natural phenomena transferred a religious quality to the scientific discourse.

After the enormous success of the *Guide*, Brewer decided to write a companion volume, which concentrated on the production of sound only. But *Sound and Its Phenomena* (1854) was decidedly less successful, perhaps because it was a very different book from its precursor. The catechism style was abandoned for a more matter-of-fact investigation into the nature of sound and the over-all teleological argument that loomed so large in the *Guide* mostly disappears in *Sound and Its Phenomena*. Much of the description of how sounds are produced is factual without religious comment.

A work written by Brewer a few years later sheds light on his idea of natural theology. In *Theology in Science […] For the Use of Schools and of Private Readers* (1860) he proclaims that his object is "to show how Science is the handmaid of Religion, and confirms what Scripture has revealed". As such he sees his approach as different from Paley's *Natural Theology*. If Paley mainly argues for "the adaptation of certain *organs* and *functions* to the work they have to perform" (Brewer 1860: vi), Brewer wants to show the wisdom of the creator by stressing the successful working of everything in nature. Whereas Paley argued logically from the complexity of adaptation to the creator (designer), Brewer often reasoned the other way round from an a-priori existence of the wisdom of the creator to an explanation of natural phenomena. It was a view that was clearly reassuring to many Victorians. In the immediate aftermath of *Origin of Species*, Brewer realised that Paley's emphasis on

adaptation might play right into Darwin's hands, while a priori emphasis on the attributes of God firmly led the debate back to religion. Brewer's view of Natural Theology agreed with Henry Fish's, who read in 1840 a lecture in which he countered Lord Brougham's view of it: "Natural Theology is more indebted to divine revelation, than divine revelation to it. Divine revelation stands upon its own basis" (Fish 1840: 11-12). Indeed, Brewer made it clear in his works that the theory of evolution had not taken the validity of natural theology away (Lightman 2007: 65). This approach was clearly successful with the Victorian reading-public as his books far outsold Darwin's.

Sound and Its Phenomena, however, was a pre-Darwinian publication, and had perhaps little need for constant reiterations of God's wisdom. Brewer sets out with the assertion that "all bodies from which sound is proceeding experience at the time a physical disturbance wholly the result of physical force" (Brewer 1854: 3). The emphasis is on Secondary Causes rather than First Causes, and the book proceeds along these lines for the first 370 pages until we come to the part where the sounds of insects are described. It is here, after a technical explanation of the humming of the bee, the song of the cicada, the chirp of the grasshopper, the hearth-song of the cricket, and the trumpet of the gnat, that Brewer interrupts his scientific discourse to make space for unanticipated praise for the beauty and perfection of God's creation: "So wonderful, so complex, so curious, so diversified, are all the works of God!" His praise is firmly grounded on the discernment of "a universal voice, rising like incense from every corner of the universe, and quiring, in one vast accord" (370). The quire (choir) Brewer refers to is that of insects singing. Thus the diversified works of God's infinite ingenuity can be heard not only in the "vast and mighty, but also in the insignificant and minute", whose voice is "[n]ow roaring in the hurly burly of a volcano, and anon humming from the thorax of a bee, or buzzing in the stigmata of a fly" (370-371). Brewer's quire is lifted straight from James Thomson's *Seasons*:

> Thy Works themselves would raise a general voice,
> E'en in the depth of solitary woods
> By human foot untrod; proclaim thy power,
> And to the quire celestial Thee resound,
> The eternal cause, support, and end of all!
> (Summer 187-191).

Eighteenth-century pastoral, as well as later nineteenth-century Romantic poetry, linked the sounds of insects to the essence of a mood that celebrated nature: "Just as the insect song blends in harmony with any chorus of nature, so, as music at the theater, it interprets the mood or heightens the effect of any drama. The poet has already shown how well insect music fits into any pastoral scene" (Eddy 1931: 68). Thus in Thomson's *Seasons* the awaking insect tribes, "the little noisy summer-race", celebrate the coming of the warmer season, epitomising, through periphrasis, man's fullness of life, but not without a stern reminder of its transience when the insect's "animating fire" becomes a "shriller sound [that] declare[s] extreme distress". Such events must make man pause and meditate on the larger state of being:

> Resounds the living surface of the ground:
> Nor undelightful is the ceaseless hum,
> To him who muses through the woods at noon;
> Or drowsy shepherd, as he lies reclined,
> With half-shut eyes, beneath the floating shade
> Of willows grey, close crowding o'er the brook.
> Gradual, from these what numerous kinds descend,
> Evading e'en the microscopic eye?
> Full Nature swarms with life; one wondrous mass
> Of animals, or atoms organized,
> Waiting the vital breath, when parent Heaven
> Shall bid his spirit blow.
> (Summer 281-292)

In his biography of ecology Donald Worster sees two traditions emerging in the late eighteenth century. One is the Arcadian stance to nature in which a peaceful co-existence with other organisms is encouraged. He sees this tradition epitomised in Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* (1789). This tradition, however, was mainly overshadowed by what he calls the empire of reason in which man actively tries to control nature as much as possible (through science) and which went hand in hand with a Christian mechanistic view of nature "fashioned according to a wholly rational, intelligible design that is imposed on chaos" (Worster 1994: 29). Although Brewer is clearly part of Worster's imperial tradition, which reflected God's benevolence by celebrating a utilitarian fitness (use and purpose) of nature for the existence of all organisms (Worster 1994: 44), his contemporary Wilson Flagg embraced the Arcadian tradition.

Wilson Flagg

William Gardner Barton, a Massachusetts nature poet, warned against the limitations of Natural Theology (or, as he calls it, Natural Religion) in writings of nature:

> Let us cultivate a love for nature by communing with those who love her; but let us not mistake poetic emotion or artistic feeling for religion, or think a high degree of culture attained if our moral sense or our neighbor have been ignored. Perhaps the benevolent affirmations of Nature outweigh her malevolent negations; but natural religion alone is thin diet. These walkers in the field teach us great things. But we should not be in haste to deny that a walker in Judaean fields teaches us the greatest things (Barton 1885: 80).

Surprisingly, this passage comes from a lecture Barton gave in 1885 on Brewer's American contemporary Wilson Flagg, a naturalist writer without a teleological agenda. Flagg trained as a doctor at Harvard, but he did not practice. His *Studies in the Field and Forest* (1857) revealed an enthusiastic writer of nature. He was a shrewd observer – "perfectly correct in all the science of his subject" – who, "open to all the refining and elevating influences of nature" (Flagg's Field and Forest 1857: 267), decided to write "from the heart rather than

the head" (Wilson Flagg 1884: 3). Barton put Flagg on an equal footing with Henry David Thoreau and John Burroughs[5].

Flagg identified his enraptured feelings for nature not with religious sentiments but with the imagination and the poetic. In the introduction to *Field and Forest* he stressed that "the object of this work is to foster in the public mind a *taste* for the observation of natural objects and to cultivate that *sentiment* which is usually designated as the *love* of nature […]. All our pleasures, including those derived from the survey of nature, must be exalted by some *poetic* sentiment, or they will soon become tiresome and insipid" (Flagg 1857: 1; my italics). And he added that "[t]his is the gift of those who have passed beyond the ordinary plodding of mental culture, and who have learned to associate with almost every object in nature some image derived from the imagination" (Flagg 1857: 2). How close he comes to the early Wordsworth of "Tintern Abbey" is evident in the following passage from the same introduction:

> Later in life, flowers would fail to yield us any pleasure, did we not associate them with certain agreeable fancies; with the remembrance perhaps of the pleasures they afforded us in childhood, and of their connection with many simple and interesting adventures; with the offices of friendship and love, and their association with numerous poetic and romantic images (Flagg 1857: 3).

In 1853 Flagg became an assiduous contributor to the *Magazine of Horticulture*. In March 1855 he started 10 monthly instalments of a series he called *Studies in the Field and Forest*. Each study was headed by a description of the month in verse. These mainly lyrical pieces were collected (with numerous other contributions) in book-form two years later, although the poetic inceptions were dropped. Many of the *Studies in the Field and Forest* reveal that Flagg is an attentive listener to the sounds of nature. Apart from the obvious melodies produced by birds, he is also perceptive of the more subtle presence of sounds:

> There are gentle flutterings of winds that nestle in the foliage; mysterious whisperings of zephyrs and humming of nocturnal insects, that hover around us like spirits, and seem to interrogate us about the reason of our presence at this unseasonable hour. We catch the floatings of distant sounds, mellowed into harmony by the softened effect of distance, hardly to be distinguished from the noise made by a dropping leaf, as it comes rustling down through the small branches (Flagg 1857: 163).

And again, such perception is repeatedly cast in the Wordsworthian perspective of powerful feelings and emotions recollected in tranquillity:

> But when, at this later time of life, I chance to hear a repetition of their notes, the whole bright page of youthful adventure is placed suddenly before my mind. It is only at

[5] Barton actually thought that "Flagg was in some respects inferior to both of the other authors; but if I could own the books of only one of the three, they should be Flagg's" (1885: 57). For a discussion of why Barton should think so, see Buckley (2010).

> such times that we feel the full influence of certain sounds in nature in hallowing the period of manhood with a recollection of early pleasures and a renewal of those feelings, that come upon the soul like a fresh breeze and the sound of gurgling waters to the weary and thirsty traveller (Flagg 1857: 157).

Flagg appropriates the Wordsworthian link between the beauty of nature and the "recollection of early pleasures and a renewal of those feelings [of youth]" (Flagg 1857: 157), but he ultimately does not approve of Wordsworth's poetic theory. In an article he wrote in 1845 for *The World We Live In* he explains why. Although he thinks Wordsworth's poetry is redeemed by the "sympathy with all kind feelings of the human heart, with what may be termed the beautiful in morals", his language is "neither melodious, nor as poetical language ought to be – suggestive". Flagg cannot forgive Wordsworth's disdain for poetic diction, which impedes the association of nature with the poetic. As the language of nature needs elevated poetic language, he prefers Thomson to Wordsworth: "Thomson was a poet of nature. He described common things and common scenes. He described feelings and sentiments which every good man feels and can appreciate […]. Yet he is far from using the language of common life, and deviates farther from simplicity of diction than any other writer of equal genius who can be named" (Flagg 1845: 3).

The September 1854 issue of *The Magazine of Horticulture* featured Flagg's "Music of Insects", his seventh article in the *Field and Forest* series. About midsummer, he writes in his opening lines, as the majority of singing birds have become silent, "new hosts of musicians […] take up the chorus". These are the insects, who are, "in their respective species, the harpist, the violinist, and the drummer" (Flagg 1857: 228). Casting insects as musicians was, of course, a literary commonplace. Brewer, as we have seen above, used the same metaphor. It was also powerfully deployed by Brewer's and Flagg's contemporary Louise M. Budgen, who was the author of the popular three-volume *Episodes of Insect Life* (1849-1851), whose chapters closed with spirited vignettes of anthropomorphic insects. The tailpiece of the chapter "Insect Minstrelsy" portrays a cicada plucking a harp, a beetle bowing a cello and a grasshopper beating a drum. And the text places this stalwart ensemble in the Psalmist's tradition:

> Insects may be the last in the scale of animated beings capable of making music to their Maker's praise, and the strains of some of them may be the lowest in the scale of sounds perceptible to us. But […] can we refuse to reckon as music the softest vibration of the tiniest insect's wing, because it is an audible token of happy existence, and, as such, a hymn of gratitude to the Giver of the boon of life? (Budgen 1851: 227).

Budgen's *Episodes* went through various editions on both sides of the Atlantic and both Brewer and Flagg might well have known it.

After describing insects as musicians, Flagg moves to the human recipient of the sounds of insects. He stresses that all sounds in nature become by habit "pleasing and assimilated to music". And thus insects too evoke "poetical sounds" that "awaken many pleasing thoughts and images": they "seem appointed by nature to take up their little lyre

and drum, after the birds have laid aside their more musical pipe and flute". It is the very fact that nature through sound shows it is alive that provides musical quality. Without it, the world's "dead silence, […] would otherwise render this earth a dreary and melancholy abode" (Flagg 1857: 229).

There a streak of anthropocentrism in Flagg's expressions. Above all insects affect human moods: he approaches his subject from the premise that "we are so formed" that insect sounds have such a "soothing and tranquillizing influence", that "no man can be indifferent to the sounds and music of insects" (Flagg 1857: 229). There are, he repeats, but "few persons who are not affected, by these sounds, with a remarkable sensation of subdued but cheerful melancholy". Therefore insect sounds are to Flagg, "highly musical and expressive" and "worthy of being consecrated to poetry" (Flagg 1857: 232). At times insects even out-perform human players: "The most skilful musician could not perform a more delightful crescendo and diminuendo" (Flagg 1857: 231).

Conclusion

Like Brewer, Flagg ultimately expresses his admiration for the sounds of insects in terms of a choir:

> The whole myriad choir were singing in perfect harmony; their key being about F natural, and their time about three notes to a second, which is very rapid. During this high temperature, the shriller toned insects, as the diurnal grasshoppers and the black crickets, sing in unison with the August pipers, varying their tone in the same manner with the variations of temperature (Flagg 1857: 233-234).

But unlike Brewer, his choir is nature's rather than God's. The closest Flagg comes to attributing such music to the divinity is a half-joking anecdotal account of an "ingenious" shoemaker who heard in the song of the Red-Thrush the following words: "Look up look up, – Glory to God, glory to God, – Hallelujah, Amen, Videlicet" (Flagg 1881b: 129). Rather than singing praise for the Creator in the fashion of the Psalmist, Flagg repeats over and over again that the attractions of nature are a poetic experience and are "felt only by individuals of a poetic temperament" (Flagg 1881b: 7). There might seem to be in this a strong anthropocentric propensity for the picturesque, in which the beholder comes before the object one beholds. However, similar to the Wordsworthian ecopoetics that Jonathan Bate describes in *The Song of the Earth*, it is rather "an exploration of the inter-relatedness of perception and creation, a meditation on the *networks* which link mental and environmental space" (Bate 2000: 148).

Flagg's idea of nature is ultimately ecological rather than religious. If the formulation "we are so formed" seems to bring him for a moment very close to Brewer's teleological praise of man's sensory organs, it should be remembered that Flagg does not resort to the kind of argument of design Brewer, or St Francis, uses to lead us to the conclusion of God's perfection. Flagg's emphasis is on the intricacies of nature itself: "Nature is exhaustless in the means by which she may effect the same end; and birds, insects, and reptiles are each provided with different but equally effective instruments for producing sounds".

Respect is for nature, not for the creator. Therefore Flagg never refers to St Francis, though his anthropocentric view of nature foreshadows Pope Francis's Wordsworthian idea that ecological awareness leads people back to their past and that thus they will be called upon "to recover something of their true selves" (Pope Francis 2015: 84).

The step from a Wordworthian poetic view to a fuller ecological awareness of the fragility of the ecosystem is a relatively small one. In an illuminating article called "Insecurity of Our Forests" Flagg makes a case for special legislation to institute forest reserves. His premise is the erroneous supposition that woods "were of no importance further than they subserve the present wants of the community" and that men "are either reckless or ignorant of their indispensable uses in the economy of nature". He further warns prophetically that:

> The science of vegetable meteorology deserves more consideration than it has yet received from our professors of learning. This, if fully explained, would teach men some of the fearful consequences that would ensue if a country were entirely disrobed of its forests, and their relations to birds, insects, and quadrupeds would explain the impossibility of ever restoring them. [… In] his senseless grasp for immediate advantages, he [man] may disqualify the earth for a human abode (Flagg 1881a: 63-64).

As Brewer is entrenched in notions of purpose and psalmic praise for the creator, he never reaches an evolutionary or Wordsworthian view of nature, and therefore cannot make the final step to the ecological awareness that we find in Flagg.

From the point of view of modern ecocriticism it is easy to dismiss aesthetic sentiments in nature writing as hopelessly anthropocentric. Timothy Morton would, no doubt, link psalmic celebration of God's perfection to "a possessive, predatory grasp of the world" of which he cynically remarks that it is merely the externalization of "The beautiful soul" in a "sermon of 'beautiful Nature'" (Morton 2007: 138-139). Yet the aesthetic stance is not entirely without ecological importance. Nor are Brewer's and Flagg's rhetorical devices without value beyond the linguistic performance itself. "Need such foregrounding of language and rhetorical technique in this kind of non-fiction always be liable to seem consumerist, blunting its ethical challenge?", Timothy Clark wonders (Clark 2011: 41). Laura Walls, too, aptly makes a case in favour of the practitioners of natural history: "The spring is just as silent to one who sleeps oblivious to that chorus; one will neither protect nor miss what one cannot hear, see, or name. The lesson is blunt: without natural history, there is no human history either" (Walls 2017: 188). Interestingly, philosopher Ronald Sandler in his textbook on environmental ethics has very little to say about aesthetics and advocates throughout a strict "evidence- and reason-based approach", even in theological approaches to ecology (Sandler 2018: 34). Yet he cannot refrain from opening his book with rhetoric that would have sounded familiar to both Brewer and Flagg: "The natural world is magnificent. It is filled with unique and amazing forms of life that constitute astoundingly complex and varied ecological systems. It is comprised of awesome landscapes and wonderful seascapes" (Sandler 2018: xix).

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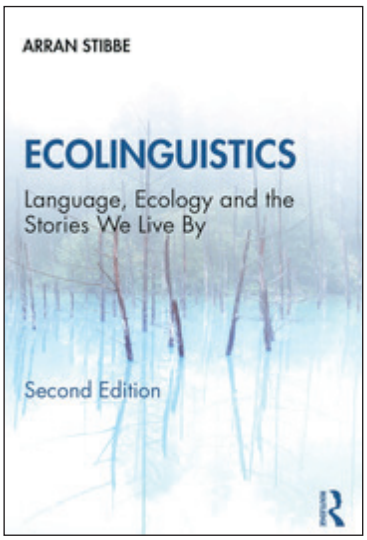
Ecolinguistics. Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By

Arran Stibbe. 2021 (2nd ed.). Ecolinguistics. Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By. London-New York: Routledge, 260 pp., £ 27.99, ISBN 9780367428419



https://www.routledge.com/Ecolinguistics-Language-Ecology-and-the-Stories-We-Live-By/Stibbe/p/book/9780367428419

"*Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By* is a ground-breaking book which reveals the stories that underpin unequal and unsustainable societies and searches for inspirational forms of language that can help rebuild a kinder, more ecological world". The quote is taken from the back cover of the second edition of the book by Arran Stibbe and it is a cogent summary of this remarkable text. The task is accomplished with scholarly knowledge, generosity and clarity and the result a must-read for specialists and non-specialists who want to understand how language impacts on and informs our behaviour towards the environment. In this book, verbal communication in context is viewed as an integral part of the ecosystem, rather than just a way of representing it. Thus, as Stibbe writes, 'ecology' is taken in its literal sense rather than just its metaphorical sense; and ecolinguistics focuses on the ecosystem life depends on and the communication that informs it.

The first edition of this book by Arran Stibbe (Professor of Ecological Linguistics at the University of Gloucestershire, UK) was published in 2015 and changed for many of us the way we view the relation between language and the environment. The first edition has had an extraordinary success thanks to Arran Stibbe's ability to communicate complex ideas about urgent matters such as the safeguard of the environment, in a reader-caring way. The second edition (2021) coherently follows suit with the commitment of pursuing clarity in scholarly writing; with this new edition he also confirms his involvement in generously disseminating ideas, research studies, and materials for teaching and learning. In fact, the second edition of the book *Ecolinguistics* can be seen as the text at the core of a series of resources published and initiatives carried out by Arran Stibbe in the last two decades: open access digital resources, connection with ecolinguists around the world through published research and the International Ecolinguistics Association (http://ecolinguistics-association.org), open access online course and webinar (http://storiesweliveby.org.uk), the journal *Language and Ecology* (http://www.ecoling.net), etc. The book *Ecolinguistics* is relevant for scholars, students and readers in a variety of fields: linguistics and applied linguistics, language as discourse, language and the media, language policy, language teaching and learning, sociology, economics, politics, scientific subjects, etc. And it also addresses readers interested in activism, human rights, policy making, advocacy, among others.

The new edition of the book builds on the strengths of the very successful first edition (2015), it is extensively updated and it includes one additional new chapter (Narratives). These changes make the new edition an even more crucial publication for whoever has an interest in ecolinguistics, environmental studies, ecoliteracy studies, ecocriticism. The second edition establishes further explicit logical links between theoretical aspects of ecolinguistics (within an updated and wide-ranging state-of-the-art literature), a detailed presentation of the ecosophy of the book, and how research results can act upon reality, choices, beliefs and values through awareness raising and action-taking. The new edition was finished during the first year of the pandemic (2020); it includes engaging reflections and examples of how this major global event revealed the impossibility to maintain previous stories, habits and beliefs: their problematic outcomes have become even more evident since the pandemic started spreading around the globe.

In each chapter Stibbe investigates one wide-ranging discourse area through the ecological lens: Ideologies, Framing, Metaphors, Evaluations, Identities, Convictions, Erasure, Salience and Narratives. He presents and discusses a variety of examples and case-studies to examine in-depth the impact language has on our behaviour and how we conceive ourselves and the ecosystem (including what we call 'life' and what we think of as 'inanimate'). Language is part of the ecology and the environment because humans through it create identities, narrate, exploit, but also creatively deal with situations, solve problems, and heal ourselves and the ecosystem.

In the book, our tendency towards an anthropocentric vision of the world shows its limitations and dangers; the dominant story of affluent, industrialised societies presents humans as unique and exceptional in nature. Conceptually this view justifies dominance and injustice; these discourses instantiating inequality and exploitation are analysed,

denounced and challenged by Stibbe. In the introductory chapter he explains how and why *stories we live by* are powerful; we do not perceive them as 'possible versions' of reality representation, but as normalised and uncontroversial 'reality', the way we are and things are. Ideology in stories we live by is hard to detect because it tends to be 'naturalised', become social habit and perceived as inevitable and objective, rather than an ideologically-based social-construct.

Throughout the book, Stibbe creates a web of analyses, reflections, relations and discussions that first are expanded and explored in-depth, and then are woven together in a tapestry of thought-provoking concepts, examples and applications. The book is a memorable reading experience to reflect on the stories which influence the ecosystems that life depends on, and a journey to reflect on our place in it.

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Valentina Rapetti

Per terra e per mare. Poesie per chi è in cerca di rifugio

Per terra e per mare. Poesie per chi è in cerca di rifugio. 2020. Kathleen Bell e altri (a cura di). Traduzione e postfazione di Pietro Deandrea. CivicLeicester, 148 pp., € 11.58, ISBN 978-19-164-5934-2

https://www.giuntialpunto.it/product/191645934x/libri-terra-e-mare-poesie-chi-cerca-di-rifugio-bell-kathleen

In un articolo del 2018, Daniela Salusso formulava una serie di interrogativi sul rapporto tra letteratura e migrazione: "quale lingua possiamo usare per dire l'indicibile, nominare l'innominabile e raccontare storie tralasciate? Di quali mezzi disponiamo per sensibilizzare l'opinione pubblica su una questione di cui si discute molto, ma che viene al tempo stesso sottovalutata?". E ancora: "come possiamo rendere il linguaggio un luogo ospitale, nell'attesa che siano le nostre nazioni a diventarlo?" (Salusso 2018: 103). Nella congiuntura storica attuale, in cui una pandemia globale ha modificato l'assetto del dibattito pubblico, spostando l'attenzione collettiva dalla cosiddetta 'crisi dei rifugiati' a una crisi sanitaria, dal corpo migrante a un virus ubiquo, questi interrogativi sono ancora più urgenti. Vivere, seppur in modo transitorio e privilegiato, la condizione di confinamento spaziale e di sospensione temporale imposta in modo sistemico e protratto a rifugiati e richiedenti

asilo non solo non ha favorito processi di identificazione empatica, ma ha accresciuto l'invisibilità di queste "creature d'ombra" (52), sospingendole ai margini dell'immaginario e dell'agenda politica europea.

Pubblicato nel 2020, quando la sperimentazione sui vaccini iniziava a suscitare speranze circa la possibilità di arginare il nuovo coronavirus, il volume *Per terra e per mare. Poesie per chi è in cerca di rifugio* (2020) rappresenta un antidoto all'amnesia collettiva relativa ai recenti fenomeni migratori verso l'Europa e ci ricorda che la letteratura può contrastare l'effetto tossico o anestetizzante delle narrazioni stereotipate veicolate dai mezzi di comunicazione di massa.

La genesi del volume risale alla primavera del 2017 quando Pietro Deandrea, in cerca di materiali per un seminario facoltativo nell'ambito del suo corso di Letteratura inglese per la laurea magistrale in Traduzione presso il Dipartimento di Lingue dell'Università di Torino, si imbatte in *Over Land, Over Sea: Poems for Those Seeking Refuge* (2015), antologia di poesie nata da un'iniziativa promossa dall'attivista żimbabwese Ambrose Musiyiwa che ha visto coinvolti 80 scrittori residenti nelle Midlands orientali, alcuni dei quali, come le iraniane Jasmine Heydari, Ziba Karbassi e Nasrin Parvaz, o gli iracheni Malka al-Haddad e Amar Bin Hatim, conservano nella propria memoria individuale o familiare l'esperienza della migrazione forzata. Deandrea aderisce al progetto di traduzione internazionale *Journeys in Translation*, finalizzato a tradurre in più lingue possibili alcune poesie della raccolta allo scopo di sollecitare e diffondere riflessioni sulle questioni legate ai rifugiati. Il lavoro di traduzione in lingua italiana si sviluppa dapprima attorno a un nucleo ristretto di poesie insieme ai 92 studenti coinvolti nei seminari del 2017 e del 2019. In seguito, Deandrea completa una traduzione pressoché integrale di *Over Land, Over Sea*, che raccoglie nel volume edito da CivicLeicester 93 delle 102 poesie comparse nell'antologia inglese, e ospita 78 degli 80 scrittori che hanno contribuito al progetto, di cui 41 donne.

Per terra e per mare riflette una precisa visione della ricerca accademica in ambito umanistico e letterario, intesa da Deandrea come produttrice non solo di commenti critici, ma anche di testi primari attraverso una pratica di traduzione che in questa raccolta coniuga consapevolezza teorica, rigore metodologico, capacità creativa e una sensibilità interpretativa sostenuta da anni di studi sulle nuove forme di schiavitù nella Gran Bretagna globalizzata, già confluiti nella monografia *New Slaveries in Contemporary British Literature and Visual Arts: The Ghost and the Camp* (2015). E proprio il fantasma e il campo di concentramento, tropi ricorrenti e pervasivi della letteratura sui migranti, compaiono in molte delle poesie della raccolta, accanto ad alcuni dei temi sui quali l'interesse critico di Deandrea si è spesso appuntato: le radici coloniali della globalizzazione e della migrazione, la segregazione spaziale, il divario economico e discorsivo tra Settentrione e Meridione, i rapporti di potere, la relazione tra egemonia e controcultura.

Colpisce, anche visivamente, la varietà dei generi e delle forme che attraversano l'antologia, dalla prosa poetica di Rory Waterman (50), Anne Holloway (56), Kathleen Bell (57) e Swan (88) alla poesia concreta di James Bell (37), Carmina Masoliver (78) e Rod Duncan (111); dal sonetto spezzato di David Belbin (106) al singolo verso, o alla terzina isolata, di Helen Buckingham (76, 38). L'eterogeneità stilistica lascia emergere un arcipelago

tematico che affiora sulla superficie testuale attraverso una serie di immagini ricorrenti (gli uccelli, il cielo, le nubi, i corpi celesti) e di metafore estese (la famiglia, la casa, il viaggio, il commercio) che compongono un panorama coerente, ancorché variegato, di riferimenti visivi e concettuali.

Leggendo la raccolta si intuiscono alcuni degli ostacoli incontrati per riprodurre, ad esempio, i complessi schemi rimici di *Backscatter Song* (8), *Così tanti in cammino* (58) e *Giù alla spiaggia* (62), l'acrostico di *Cosa c'è in un nome?* (5), o l'esatta configurazione di poesie grafiche come *poco prima dell'alba* (37), *La nave affonda* (78) e *un unico paese* (111). Un'edizione con testo originale a fronte, unica mancanza di questo volume, avrebbe consentito di apprezzare con maggiore consapevolezza le efficaci soluzioni adottate durante il processo di traduzione oltre a favorire, mediante un esercizio reiterato di spostamento dello sguardo dal testo italiano a quello inglese, quel cambiamento di prospettiva sui fenomeni migratori sollecitato da poesie con struttura a specchio come *La nave affonda* (78) e *un unico paese* (111), in cui tanto la forma quanto il contenuto invitano il lettore a confrontare il punto di vista di chi, in cerca di rifugio, si scontra "contro un muro chiamato 'Europa'" (4), con quello di donne e uomini "liberi di andare e venire" (79) in virtù della propria cittadinanza e del possesso di un passaporto forte.

In un momento in cui i cittadini del Settentrione e dell'Occidente del mondo globalizzato sentono minacciato il proprio diritto al viaggio e, dunque, non "si parla così tanto / di sciami nei tunnel / orde sulle barche / masse all'assalto di confini / [e] sussidi agli scarafaggi" (10), questa raccolta offre l'opportunità di riflettere, "prima che i media rinuncino / alla corruzione delle loro parole" (59), sul ruolo del linguaggio nella percezione dei fenomeni migratori e di tutti coloro che ne sono coinvolti: rifugiati e richiedenti asilo, ma anche chi, al di là di confini e barriere, si trova nella condizione privilegiata di poter offrire ascolto e aiuto. Attraverso una pratica accademica che rifiuta consapevolmente di interpretare la traduzione come mero esercizio di trasposizione linguistica, e che nell'arte scorge una possibilità di attivismo, Deandrea riconosce nell'insurrezione della poesia un'alternativa letteraria alle costruzioni discorsive xenofobiche, al sensazionalismo e al sentimentalismo della comunicazione giornalistica, e ricrea in lingua italiana versi che "dalle ossa di generazioni mutilate / fanno crescere germogli di resurrezione" (31), ricordandoci che "[q]uando gli uomini rinunciano al privilegio del pensiero / l'ultima ombra di libertà scompare all'orizzonte" (87).

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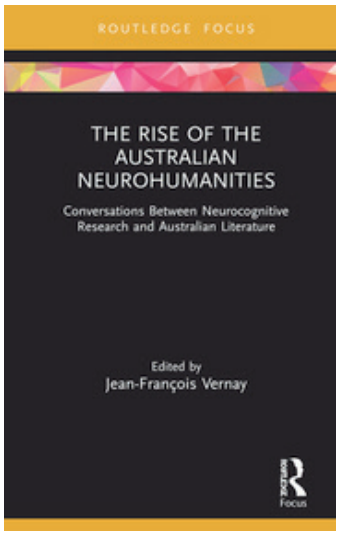
The Rise of the Australian Neurohumanities

Jean-François Vernay (ed.). 2021. The Rise of the Australian Neurohumanities. New York: Routledge, 142 pp., £ 44.99, ISBN 9780367751944



https://www.routledge.com/The-Rise-of-the-Australian-Neurohumanities-Conversations-Between-Neurocognitive/Vernay/p/book/9780367751944

At a time when in Australia the humanities are becoming less important to the benefit of STEM education, the cognitive approach to the study of literature is acquiring symbolic and political significance. It could be seen as a promising area of reconciliation of the sciences with the humanities, in which literature is redefined as a rich cognitive artefact and a kind of ever-expanding archive which, among other things, embodies the extension of the cognitive capacities of our brain. All of this probably helps to explain why Australian cognitive and neurohumanist literary studies seem to be multiplying and gaining more and more visibility in the global academic scene, with a growing number of theoretical works mixing scientific approaches and literary critical practice. A survey of such an emerging research field was attempted in the volume *The Rise of Australian Neurohumanities* edited by Jean-François Vernay (2021).

After opening the volume by stating that "The brain-based economy, in which the fast-moving field of neuro-science is playing an important part, is gradually making its mark on academia and is likely to supersede the idea of a knowledge-based economy" (xv) the editor, focusing on cognitive literary studies (which he discusses as one of the main areas of neurosciences – and the most successful in Australian Humanities), states that they could be summarised "as a cluster of various literary criticism-related disciplines forming a broad-based trend which draws on the findings of cognitive science to sharpen their psychological understanding of literature by exploring the mental processes at work in the creative minds of writers and readers" (2).

The editor then lists the five main epistemologically related strains that contribute to this area of research: cognitive literary history; evolutionary literary criticism; "neuro lit crit" (a neurologising approach to literature, tied to neuroesthetics); cognitively informed preexisting theories (which in Vernay's definition encompass cognitive poetics, cognitive rhetoric, cognitive narratology, cognitive stylistics, cognitive ecocriticism, cognitive queer studies, cognitive postcolonial studies, etc.); and affective literary theory. In Vernay's opinion, the latter seems to be the most dynamic approach in the *Terra Australis* (3). Finally, the editor goes on to sketch a historical perspective on cognitive literary studies in Australia.

While the state of Australian literary criticism in general resists easy synthesis, it could be argued that Australian literary cognitive studies somehow share the interdisciplinary and methodological approaches of cultural studies. At the start of the 21st century, within some universities, like Macquarie in Sydney, or Deakin and Swinburne in Melbourne, forms of Australian cognitive literary studies began to emerge, but without establishing a true Center for NeuroHumanities, like the one you will find at Purdue University in the United States. Therefore, it could be argued that due to this lack of a tightly knit academic community, Australian Literary Cognitive Studies is only slowly progressing into a strong and established field (4).

Another important aspect is that in Australia cognitive influences should be sought in criticism rather than in creative writing, because in terms of the so-called 'neuronovel' only Sue Woolfe and Colleen McCullough could be considered as equivalent to American writers such as Jonathan Lethem and Richard Powers. So we have a small number of neuroscientists versus a growing number of neurocritics. From this perspective, many contemporary Australian novels, if on the one hand cannot be considered as true neuro-novels, on the other hand are conductive to research in cognitive literary studies.

Vernay maintains that cognitive literary studies are particularly apt to reveal the invisible, that is to say, not so much what is in the subtext, as what is happening in the brain of the reader or the writer. It makes sense, then, that much of the Australian research has focused on how neuroscience can explain creativity, which includes both the writing and reading processes. Unsurprisingly, the biggest contributors to the field are writers engaged in both creative writing and scholarship, such as Maria Takolander, Kevin Brophy, Sue Woolfe, and Julia Prendergast (7).

The chapters of the book seem to follow at least in part the fivefold structure with which the editor frames neurocognitive literary studies in Australia, with a particular

interest in the "affective" articulations of the latter. To begin with, what do they have in common is that they do not seek a neurophenomenological model of narrative that charts the direct correlations between our lived, embodied experiences as tellers and followers of stories, and the neurobiological processes that underlie and constrain these interactions. They rather act on a level which is a few steps further from such basic neurological research. In this book you will not find basic neurological assumptions, or "raw" neurological researches used as a foundation for literary discussion. Rather, in the "neuroscientific" side of research sources, you will find cognitive studies which have already mediated the basic neuroscientific knowledge into cognitivist humanist knowledge, such as that tied to affect theory.

I would like to discuss this by highlighting some of the more interesting themes of the book. In particular, the task of elucidating samples of affective literary theory seems to be up to Victoria Reeve and Francesca Di Blasio. In her chapter (27-40), using critical tools drawn from affect theory, Victoria Reeve reviews Charlotte Wood's novel *The Weekend*. In doing so, she argues that the mystery of emotion, as a question of involvement, derives from emotion as a form of reasoning, brought within the parameters of thought as an affectual process. Experience is something that recursively moves through bodily apprehensions, affective expressions and the understanding of such in cultural contexts. It is this chemistry that transforms emotion into the recognisable result of a given experience. The main character, Jude, is visiting the place of a dead friend, ahead of sale. The novel also talks about Jude's "thoughts on her thoughts". Jude takes a position vis-à-vis herself, which operates shifts in perspective, revealing oscillations between constructions of subjective and objective self-evaluations. Reeve then goes on to discuss the interpretive potentials of emotion as an organisational concept.

In some perspectives of affect theory, emotions are mixed products of biology and culture that are best viewed as variable, internally heterogenous populations, rather than logical categories or universal classes with fixed neuro-biological foundations. From this perspective, language and narrative can be seen as biocultural hybrids, each the product of varying but limited interactions between brain, body and the world; and the non-universal counterparts to the logical structures of the mind. In Reeve's approach to affect theory, certain "meaning-making" processes may be consistent with *literary genre* theory. Emotions as categories have a specific purpose, organising these interactions in terms of culturally recognisable emotional states and their associated actions and affects.

Reeve views emotion as a semantic category, rather than something that happens in a specific region of the brain. It is an interpretive position taken *vis-à-vis* bodily feelings and thoughts, in a given context. Emotions form a semiotic system based on embodied experiences. They are shaped by cultural values and are the means by which we select and organise a range of internal feelings and sensations into states of being, in a range of contexts. In conclusion, Reeve was affected in her reading of *The Weekend*, through the organising effects of reading and emotion, the latter being caused, or at least exacerbated, by frustrations similar to those expressed by Wood, frustrations which Reeve too experienced in her own life, and which deal mainly with gender inequality.

Francesca Di Blasio's chapter (41-53) deals in particular with Kim Scott's most recent novel, *Taboo* (2017), a text of great intensity that offers a lucid vision of Australian reality. In her original and creative analysis of Scott's work, Di Blasio neither rigidly applies "cognitive theory" nor "affect theory", but these critical orientations will offer interpretive clues, as they are prompted to interact with each other. Like Reeve, Di Blasio focuses on the empathic dimension of literature, viewed in terms of affect theory. She asserts that by representing reality transfigured by imaginative power, literary discourse is able not only to stimulate the critical function, but also to activate an empathic response. Literary worlds may be provisional or "insubstantial", but their composite effects on readers are substantial, in large part because of the empathy they can elicit. Literary, cognitive and emotional worlds at the same time also trigger ethical, inter-relational and intercultural knowledge. The story revolves around a group of Noongars who travel to the small town of Kepalup in Western Australia, for the opening of Peace Park, a memorial site designed by the local community to commemorate a historic episode in which many Noongar were massacred by white landowners. The area had been considered taboo since the massacre and no Noongar had returned there for a long time. On the occasion of the opening of the park, and throughout the narration, the many characters of the novel gather and visit the territory, thus breaking the taboo, and embarking on a journey of self-discovery and reciprocity. In terms of *genre*, Di Blasio considers this novel to be a mixture, containing a bit of Fairy Tale, a touch of Gothic, some Social Realism and a flavour of Creation Story. *Taboo* combines individual and collective cultural memory with the materiality of space and place, and with the earth and its "objects". In doing so, it activates a dynamic of interaction, at the intra and extra-textual level, of an emotional type. The physicality of places and objects participates in the emotional dimension, and is filled with it. The use of narrative objects and places thus becomes a repository of cultural memory. And from such dynamic point of view, cultural memory is shared, or at least made shareable. Objects and places are therefore not coldly material, or opposed to humans, but become emotional, cognitive and participatory devices. For such an "interactional" approach to affect theory, Di Blasio relies mainly on the understanding of emotions developed by three thinkers: the ethical and collective role of emotions from literature in Martha Nussbaum's vision; emotion as a subjective experience, and at the same time as a relational "motor" in the cognitive perspective of Patrick Hogan; and the "bodily" characteristics of Brian Massumi's theory of affect, which places emotional responses in the space of a relationship, in the physical world rather than in subjective consciousness.

Hogan in particular focuses on the role of storytelling and plot in triggering emotional responses. Massumi's perspective draws on Deleuze and Guattari to propose a model of emotional interaction in which "affect" is opposed to "emotion", the latter being consistent with individual interiority. Affect, on the other hand, is placed in the physical space of interaction, and can be seen as a "zone of indistinction" between thought and action. Drawing on such influences, Di Blasio in her analysis claims the central role of emotional interaction (a relational approach). In accordance with the revolutionary intuition of affect theory, she turns the traditional individualistic explanation of human behavior on its head, emphasising the relational rather than the atomistic basis of all things. But this interconnection should

not be understood as hierarchical. In this sense, the Deleuzian "rhizomatic" approach is non-hierarchical, multiple, heterogeneous, creative and planar. As such, it is the perfect theoretical counterpart to the hierarchical idea of interacting subjectivities. Nussbaum's perspective brings us back to the importance of stories and the fact that emotions, unlike many of our beliefs, are not taught to us directly through propositional statements about the world. They are taught, above all, through stories.

From Di Blasio's point of view, this seems to be the case with Scott's novel, which preserves and transmits individual memory (understood as the cultural memory of a certain subject, but also of a certain moment), but in doing so, the novel contributes to the creation of a collective memory and, ultimately, an emotional sense of collective identity, which is based on interaction.

The study of embodied relationships is also central to Dorothee Klein's contribution (94-107) on Aboriginal writing and its attention to the connection between body, mind and environment. This connection, argues the author, is also central in second-generation cognitive science. The author draws on recent approaches to embodiment to explore the different ways in which contemporary Aboriginal narratives convey the idea of feeling the land through embodied simulation. Using different textual cues to evoke bodily reactions, these works shape an understanding of the earth into which the boundary between the body and the physical world becomes indistinct.

Several recent studies, Klein Claims, show how knowledge from cognitive science provides a better understanding of the different forms of environmental imagination that stories convey, discuss and construct. A careful analysis of textual strategies through the lens of 4E cognition (*embodied, embedded, extended* and *enactive*) helps explain how reading can constitute what Erin James, in her ecocritical cognitive analysis of postcolonial narratives, defines as a virtual form of environmental experience.

By paying attention to the literary forms used to encode the environmental sense, the author seeks to show how Aboriginal fiction involves the reader's body to convey the vitality of the land and possibly provoke moments of physical inter-connection. Klein first gives a brief description of the significance of embodiment as an approach to understand narrative. She then examines the poetics and politics of relationships embodied in indigenous fiction, using two sets of examples that illustrate different textual strategies to stimulate a sense of embodied participation. While Scott's *Benang* (1999) and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) mention visceral functions such as breathing and heartbeats, the other two examples, Scott's *Taboo* (already analysed by Di Blasio) and June Winch's *The Yield* (2019), discuss the bodily dimension of indigenous languages. Finally, the author explains how indigenous fiction, emphasising the feeling of the land, contrasts with recent discourses on the relationship between mankind and the natural environment, and emphasises the need to recognise our interdependence.

The survey presented in the book suggests that in today's Australia instead of "NeuroHumanities" we should talk of "Cognitive Humanities". In fact, studies on human neural architecture and functions are not directly used to deconstruct traditional literary knowledge, but rather the new trends in neurosciences are applied to literary studies in

forms mediated by humanist theories such as affect theory and various applied cognitive theories. Furthermore, the editor himself seems to admit that the cognitive approach to literary studies in Australia is still more a project than a historical fact. However, he insists on the need to develop such studies and highlights the potential benefits that such development could bring. First, under the influence of cognitivism, Australian literary criticism would show a new direction to encourage Australianists to use scientific concepts and an extensive knowledge of human anatomy and physiology in their work. All this would also open new perspectives on Australian literature, intended both as an archive and as a practice. Second main advantage: the continuing pressure from Australian universities on the need for interdisciplinarity, could find an important asset in NeuroHumanities, as it could enlarge student cohorts and expand audiences, giving graduates greater versatility in their profiles. What could quickly be dismissed as yet another interdisciplinary approach could also be key to helping Australian critics to stay at the forefront of their research field. There is no doubt that adapting literary criticism to scientific concepts would open unexpected approaches and renew the arsenal of critical tools, which would in its turn reinvigorate Australian literary studies.

Australian cognitive literary studies, (similarly to cultural studies, which also emerged at a time of crisis in the humanities and was later disparaged), could be lauded as a fertile extension of Australian criticism, bringing in more leeway and flexibility. Finally, neurocognitive readings of Australian literature could enable researchers to create new heuristic constellations, by discussing overlooked aspects of literature, (such as the effects of narrative on the reader) that classic literary readings can only speculate about.

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Elisabetta Marino

La televisione dell'Ottocento: i vittoriani sullo schermo italiano

Saverio Tomaiuolo. 2021. La televisione dell'Ottocento: i vittoriani sullo schermo italiano. Sesto San Giovanni (Milano): Mimesis Edizioni, Collana: DeGenere, n. 22, 292 pp., € 24.00, ISBN 978-88-5757-267-3

https://www.mimesisedizioni.it/libro/9788857572673

Il volume di Saverio Tomaiuolo si propone di guidare lettori e lettrici in un viaggio affascinante nell'universo della traduzione audiovisiva, concentrandosi sulle trasposizioni televisive dei grandi romanzi ottocenteschi realizzate principalmente tra gli anni '60 e '80 del Novecento, con qualche incursione significativa in epoche a noi più vicine. Coniugando una prospettiva sincronica e diacronica, evidenziando il carattere "intrinsecamente processuale" (11) degli adattamenti filmici, l'autore si sofferma sulle complessità del processo traduttivo, reso ancor più problematico dal passaggio da un sistema semiotico all'altro, operazione che, di necessità, è foriera di riflessioni inedite sul tema nodale della fedeltà al testo di partenza.

Tomaiuolo chiarisce che la ragione che l'ha spinto a optare per le trasposizioni televisive, piuttosto che cinematografiche, risiede nella struttura stessa del romanzo vittoriano: la sua architettura elaborata prevedeva, infatti, la presenza di numerosi intrecci secondari, ai quali la scansione in episodi tipica dello sceneggiato ha consentito un più adeguato respiro. Quanto all'arco temporale preso in esame, la scelta si è posata su decenni fondamentali nella storia sociale del nostro paese, anni in cui la RAI, seguendo le orme della BBC e imitandone i modelli consolidati dalla tradizione, ha assolto una importante funzione educativa, oltre che d'intrattenimento. Come l'autore mette bene in rilievo, le ricadute culturali sono state molteplici: sicuramente si è incoraggiata l'adozione di uno spirito cosmopolita e più aperto alle diversità; in un adattamento quasi darwiniano al clima nuovo e alle mutate circostanze, "lo sguardo dell'altro" (31) ha poi portato a considerare sé stessi e le problematiche presenti sotto una luce inconsueta, tanto che la storia delle trasposizioni audiovisive dei classici vittoriani in Italia può essere osservata come fosse uno specchio, che ci restituisce l'immagine di un paese in profonda trasformazione, capace di interrogarsi persino sulla propria identità.

Nei quattro capitoli di cui il corpo del testo si compone, Tomaiuolo approfondisce alcuni casi specifici e particolarmente degni di nota, rinunciando esplicitamente a ogni pretesa di esaustività. Tendenze opposte si registrano nelle trasposizioni di due tra i più celebri romanzi di Dickens che, per loro natura, paiono quasi preconizzare tecniche cinematografiche. Il *David Copperfield* (1965) di Anton Giulio Majano conforta una rievocazione rasserenante e nostalgica del passato, in un momento in cui l'Italia stava affrontando cambiamenti severi; di segno diametralmente opposto è il *Circolo Pickwick* di Ugo Gregoretti, prodotto a distanza di soli tre anni, ma con tratti a dir poco rivoluzionari. Il secondo capitolo è occupato da quelle "declinazioni del femminile" (89) in cui riecheggiano le istanze per l'emancipazione proprie degli anni '60 e '70. Majano questa volta propone una *Vanity Fair* (1967) densa di provocazioni, in cui arrivismo e assenza di scrupoli (le note distintive di una delle protagoniste principali dell'opera di Thackeray) si tramutano in assertività e determinazione, in armonia con una visione innovativa del cosiddetto sesso debole. *La donna in bianco* di Mario Morini (da *The Woman in White* di Wilkie Collins), sceneggiato di più di dieci anni dopo, affronta invece il tema della discriminazione legale nei confronti delle donne e l'ostracismo insidioso verso chi è riconosciuto come socialmente 'deviante'. Nel terzo capitolo la materia si fa politica e *L'agente segreto* e *Con gli occhi dell'Occidente* di Joseph Conrad divengono simulacri in cui adombrare le tensioni degli anni di piombo. *Dottor Jekyll e Mister Hyde* del Quartetto Cetra, oggetto di indagine del quarto capitolo assieme alla "deriva" (23) del mito stevensoniano, nasconde dietro una leggerezza solo apparente le inquietudini legate a una domesticità tutt'altro che rassicurante; al contrario, *Jekyll*, la rilettura di Albertazzi del 1969, si concentra sul tema doloroso della memoria, in una cornice quasi futuristica che risente delle atmosfere suggerite dalla contemporanea missione americana sulla Luna.

In conclusione, leggere *La televisione dell'Ottocento* vuol dire immergersi al contempo in due mondi e coglierne sfaccettature intuibili solo attraverso l'acume raffinato e la precisione analitica di Saverio Tomaiuolo.

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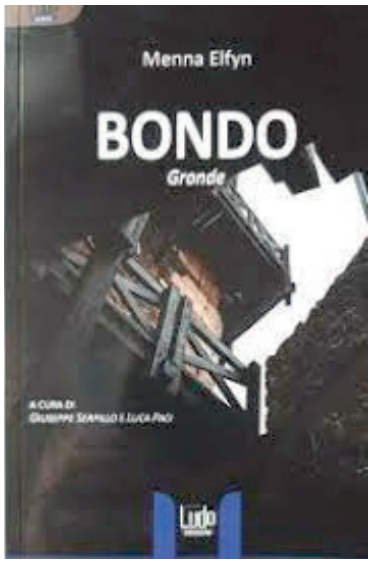
Bondo/Gronde

Menna Elfyn. 2020. Bondo/Gronde. Giuseppe Serpillo (a cura di). Traduzione di Giuseppe Serpillo e Luca Paci. Sassari: Ludo Edizioni, 125 pp., € 10.00, ISBN 978-88-31918-32-9



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Bondo is the title of Menna Elfyn's second bilingual (Welsh and English) poetry collection from 2017, selected and republished in 2020 as *Bondo/Gronde* with *en face* translations by Giuseppe Serpillo and Luca Paci (the former Emeritus Professor of English and Irish and a translator; the latter a poet, a translator and an academic). Born near Swansea in 1951, Elfyn is an awarded writer 'in love with words', known primarily for her poetry, although she has also authored novels, plays, and libretti, as well as editing some Welsh poetry collections. She teaches creative writing and works as a newspaper columnist and a documentary maker. Involved with the Welsh Language Society, she has long been a minority language activist, who took part in civil disobediences for the rights of the Welsh language and against apartheid in the 1960s. A peace campaigner, she was arrested at the US army base in Brawdy

in the Eighties. Today she is President of Wales PEN Cymru and an advocate of children's rights (in 2002 she was appointed Poet Laureate for the Children of Wales).

Bondo/Gronde is one of several volumes of poetry translations, the third in the Italian language (following *Autobiografia in versi* in 2005, and *Impronte. Poesia gallese contemporanea* in 2007). It features 26 poems, divided in two sections – *Benedizione delle gronde* (Benedicion of Eaves), and *Poesie dello svelamento* (Songs of Unravelling) – translated into Italian "directly from the original" because the English version proved to be unfaithful to its source in terms of "imagery, rhythm, style and form". 'Gronde' (*eaves* in English) is one of three possible meanings for the polysemic *bondo*. It refers to that part of the house that protects it from the rain and where birds make their nests or find a refuge; it is the name of an Indian ethnic group whose mother tongue, like Welsh, is an endangered minority language. Thirdly, as Luca Paci writes in the introduction to section I of the collection, *bondo* is a Welsh slang word for the English 'bond' (there is a clear assonance between the two terms). 'Bondo' thus embraces the concepts of tie and affiliation, nurture, and protection, all of which are central to these poems as well as to their Italian translations. One aspect is of special importance, and that is the bond with the past. The theme runs through the entire collection and appears to be crucial to Elfyn's work as a creative writer; it is key to her conception of poetry as a site for memory, a place where the present meets the past, or else it goes searching for it. Thus viewed, poetry is the place where the present can negotiate its boundaries – there it negotiates its *bondo*. Writing therefore becomes an act of memory – of both remembering and forgetting, which are inseparable, to the point that one makes the other since: "Remembering is possible only on the basis of forgetting" (Ricoeur 2004: 442). Elfyn's plea for memory – "Remember me" – is a plea *not to forget*; like a beautiful flower – *nontiscordardimé*, forget-me-not – her poetry cannot and will not forget; it will seek its way to a past, which is being forgotten ('in un mondo che se ne sta scordando l'esistenza', *Marwnad …*).

Writing is remembering, as noted, and similarly, translating and reading function as acts of memory. This is evident in *Bondo/Gronde* and in the way memory is used among its pages. To begin with, the entire collection and some of the poems were written *in memoriam* – of Nigel Jenkins, the Welsh "poet, patriot and wanderer", who passed away in 2004; of John Rowlands, the Welsh novelist, and former Professor of Welsh literature at Aberystwyth University, who died in 2015 (*Il Samaritano*, "The Samaritan"); of Hedd Wyn, a Welsh poet-soldier who died in WWI (*Verità contro i ferri di cicatrice*, "The truth against needles"; and *Hedd Wyn*); of Michael Hartnett, the Irish poet who "said goodbye to English" (*Marwnad …*). The duty to remember is also a duty not to forget on the part of the poet, who dedicates some among her most powerful lines to "all the despots at the Hague" (*Prontuario per una tenera tortura*). Citations and intertextual references are used to recall and acknowledge the place of eminent voices from the past in the poet's present – among them Italo Calvino, John Berger, Seamus Heaney, and Emmanuel Lévinas. Memory manifests itself also as *alétheia* (ἀλήθεια), a Greek term that means unravelling, 'lo svelamento', and which indicates poetry's capacity to unveil and reveal. Both acts of unravelling are acts of memory; both entail remembering and forgetting (*lète*, oblivion, is the root word for *alétheia*) and conceive of them as necessary

to attaining the truth (truth is another word for ἀλήθεια, intended as objective truth, *vis à vis* opinion, *doxa*).

By engaging with memory, the poems question and investigate memory in their demand for truth, against opinion and alternative facts, that is against false, illusory, and biased truth. People, places, feelings, nature are thus unravelled, or else they become a repository to memory and help the poet recall things past – they make poetry create and maintain a *bondo* with the past. Hence "the birds", for instance, which "remember their old songs" (*Scuola di canto per storni*, "Singing School for Starlings"); "dolore e morte" (pain and death), which are "un inchiostro invisibile", an invisible ink, nonetheless an ink that leaves its indelible and (therefore) unforgettable mark (*Il Samaritano*). "G. F." is commemorated "for his dedication to peace" (*In bici per amore*, "Love Rides High"), while "le minoranze sparse", marginalised people around the world are recalled in 'Neb-Ach' ('nobody's language'). And "language", before the immutable silence begins, prevents loss and reminds us that "origliamo ai bastioni del cuore" (we […] should eavesdrop at the ramparts of the heart, *Marwnad* …). The concept of loss is bound to the concept of memory; it is itself part of the memory process – indeed letting go of something or loosing something are a kind of happy forgetfulness that occurs by choice or by necessity. Loss, in such a case, enables reconciliation and forgiveness; it is healthy, given that 'to remember everything is a form of madness', as Brian Friel writes in *Translations* (1980), a play which is thematically consonant with Elfyn's aesthetics. Thus, it is not fortuitous her reference to Michael Hartnett (1941-1999) and to that Irish poet's decision to let go of the enemy's language, lamenting for Gaelic, a lost language, to which he re-turned. Loss, here, becomes a question of *nostos*, a homecoming proper to a people and its culture, a remembering effected through losing/letting loose of the English language.

The work of memory, whether private or collective, can re-create or strengthen the bond between an individual and his/her culture, land, people, and roots. This is what happens in the Aberfan sequence, which is dedicated to the memory of a disaster occurred in Aberfan, a small mining town in south Wales. On October 21, 1966, a massive avalanche of coal waste slid downhill killing 144 people 116 of whom were school children. Remembering that tragedy – one of UK's worst mining disasters considered to be completely avoidable – is a way of articulating, understanding, and coming to terms with loss. It is a way of dealing with its traces: "imprigionato sotto cumuli di scorie", trapped under the debris, this kind of loss can never leave and be forgotten (*La scuola*, "The School"). And yet the media forgot, in 2016: "Non l'hanno ricordato […] lo scorso anno". How come? How could that happen? – the poem and the poetess ask as they plead for truth and justice. Memory, here, helps connect people who suffer or have suffered; memory, here, creates bonds. In *Omelia* ("Homily") a father speaks from the pulpit, the Sunday after his son's death: "Solo per poco siamo separati" ("We are only parted for a little time"). The will to remember prompts Menna's writing and its Italian translation: "Non lo dimenticheranno il suo SERMON". Thus, poetry negotiates between oblivion and pain; it transmutes into a healing process that forgives the past (letting go of it) and learns to be present to the present (*Mystery Tour*). This sort of happy forgetting allows for peace to be found, in the end – and "pace" (*peace*)

is significantly the last word in the volume. The poem that ends this collection is entitled *Il cancello* ("The Gate"), in which "closed" gates are associated with death and suffering, whereas life is about *living with* and accepting "bolts" and "wounds" The process of acceptance signifies resilience and it occurs by way of remembering (of the dead husband, of the grandmother, and of mother); it is achieved through poetry and translation. Both keep the gates unbolted, both remain open to infinite worlds and help attain peace (of the mind and of the heart). *Bondo/Gronde* ends with a double translation of *The Gate*, a choice that is profoundly indicative of Elfyn's aesthetics and of the politics of her Italian translators in terms of the infinite power of the creative word.

Traumas, however, may not always be negotiated. Wounds remain, and the pain, sometimes, is unbearable. The past is grafted onto the collective olfactory memory, and it has become unforgettable: "il pane avrebbe *per sempre* avuto il sapore di carbone" ("bread would *forever* taste like coal", *Getta il tuo pane sulle acque*, "Cast thy Bread"). In *Misure* ("Measurement") memory is "still", to the point that the dead "remain the same size", they cannot and will not change ("hanno sempre la stessa statura"). Aberfan is a one-word song that clutches your throat, it is absolute stillness, "totale infermità" (*Och*). These are instances of a memory that is 'literal' in Tzvetan Todorov's understanding of it, a memory that is not constructive and locks you down, it turns censorious and thus betrays the living and the dead so that no one is to blame: "ci si assicurava che nessuno venisse incolpato" (*Deo gratias*, "Air & Grace"). Faith is lost to empty words, words of 'truth', in the Welsh sense of the term, *i.e.* "falsehood, blandishment, nonsense, rigmarole" ("Truth versus *Truth*"). There is a fascinating echo of *alétheia* here, and of the apparent ambivalence of that Greek term, which means truth and falsehood at the same time, one being complementary to the other, both being indispensable to knowledge (Paris 2002). Truth is inextricably linked to memory, a memory that in this case is non-negotiable. Hence *bondo*, the necessity of it and for it, which is the place of poetry – of writing poetry, of translating poetry, of reading, and therefore of sharing poetry.

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Matteo Venier

Pierluigi Cappello. Un poeta sulla pista della luce

Pierluigi Cappello. Un poeta sulla pista della luce. 2019. Franco Fabbro, Antonella Riem Natale & Marco D'Agostini (a cura di). Udine: Forum ("Associazione laureate/i in lingue e letterature straniere", 24), 138 pp., € 15.00, ISBN 978-88-3283-089-7

https://forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/pierluigi-cappello-un-poeta-sulla-pista-della-luce

> Come si onora un poeta? È sufficiente illustrarne la vita, le opere, seguirne la traccia visibile lasciata sulle strade del mondo? Oppure non si può andare al di là della lettura, per cui è soltanto onore cedere le armi alla stupefazione e al sentimento? Sono queste infatti le due grandi strade, le strade maestre consentite al lettore che non voglia prevaricare e sottrarre al poeta il suo posto […]. In realtà l'opera di un poeta resta – anche per il lettore più avveduto, per il critico meglio armato – qualche cosa di sacro, di cui ci possiamo illudere di cogliere tutti gli aspetti, la rete delle voci, la trama dei sottintesi, ma di cui alla fine riusciamo a cogliere solo in minima parte il colore […].

Queste appena citate sono parole con le quali, nel lontano 1964, Carlo Bo introduceva l'antologia *Il non tempo del mare* di Biagio Marin (Bo 1964: 11). E piace di qui cominciare per più motivi: anzitutto perché Marin è autore a Pierluigi Cappello congiunto da un tenue ma significativo filo, che si dipana dal mare gradese alle lontane montagne di Chiusaforte – lontananza esplicitata così in *Ombre*: "non conosco la prospettiva senza dimensione del mare" (Cappello 2018: 242-243).

Pure, a fronte di tale distanza, la sensibilità artistica dei due muove da esigenze prossime, a designare un intreccio, a connotare una parentela, che c'è di fatto, pur non esplicitata e (forse) inconsapevole (De Simone 2009: 18, 79, 141-143). In quell'*incipit* retoricamente intonato, Carlo Bo delinea inoltre il concetto a Cappello assai caro, e di matrice ungarettiana, per il quale la poesia è espressione stupefacente e sacra, tale da non poter essere ricondotta in tutto e per tutto a geometrica coerenza. E infatti, proprio citando Ungaretti, Cappello osserva: "*e ci vendemmia il sole*: io razionalmente non saprei spiegare il significato di questo verso, però lo sento con tutte le fibre e so che cosa vuole esprimere, non che cosa vuol dire" (Cappello cit. in Fabbro *et al*. 2019: 62-63).

L'incipitaria considerazione ha poi un valore assoluto, e riesce utile sempre, quando si voglia "onorare un poeta". Curatori e autori del libro – di formazione culturale e professionale diversa, tra essi essendovi rappresentanti del mondo della scuola, dell'università, dell'editoria, del giornalismo, del cinema e dell'arte – tutti hanno praticato infatti le due vie lì indicate, contribuendo a fornire un ritratto dell'uomo e della sua vicenda esistenziale; proponendo un'esegesi dell'opera, secondo direttrici necessarie nel tentativo di carpirne i significati riposti; fornendo un quadro vivido dell'eredità che la sua figura lascia nella nostra contemporanea cultura. Ma tutto questo consapevoli che al di là di ogni lecito sforzo interpretativo, e di ogni ricostruzione critica, ciò che resta è l'insondabile stupore della poesia[1]; e consapevoli del monito, per cui ogni nostra razionale ricostruzione mai deve prevaricare e sottrarre al poeta la sua voce.

Accortamente è stato perciò collocato ad apertura di libro il discorso tenuto da Cappello in occasione del conferimento della Laurea *honoris causa* in Scienze della formazione primaria, il 27 settembre 2013: *La voce nuda. Le ragioni di un percorso poetico*. A fondamento della sua opera il poeta indica qui l'esigenza del ricercare: ricercare, anzitutto, la "nitidezza fonica", nella persuasione che la parola è entità plasmabile; ricercare quindi per precisare il senso di immagini, azioni, oppure oggetti: cioè di esperienze apparentemente consuete, ma la cui più attenta considerazione apre alla nostra esistenza prospettive inattese; ricercare, infine, per comprendere ragioni e senso dell'errore – etimologicamente inteso come "vagare" –, il quale anch'esso "schiude" inattese realtà. Da questo percorso origina un mondo poetico, che trova senso e compimento solo nel darsi all'atto di lettura: confortando così un'idea già espressa da Pasolini, e che aveva già avuto sistemazione teorica da parte di critici e filologi, tra cui Jauss, per il quale la ricezione è atto creativo (*katharsis*). Ma si aggiunge in Cappello un'istanza che è più originale e che non sempre è condivisa dagli altri scrittori: quella di un

[1] "Cappello […] la figura più enigmatica. Ancora oggi non ho del tutto chiare le sue posizioni esistenziali, filosofiche e spirituali", riconosce con intelligente onestà Franco Fabbro, fin dal principio del suo contributo (Fabbro *et al*. 2019: 94).

orizzonte di condivisione amicale, il quale anche in questo discorso è chiamato in causa: "Tra il pubblico – dice il poeta nell'occasione – ci sono numerosi miei amici che appartengono al mondo della letteratura, e anche estranei ad essa. A loro va un mio speciale ringraziamento, uno per uno, idealmente" (19).

Alla voce del poeta è riservata parte preminente anche nel contributo di Marco D'Agostini (*Pierluigi Cappello, educare alla libertà*, 57-72), il quale con Franco Fabbro ha avuto l'opportunità di intervistare Cappello nel novembre del 2013. Le considerazioni fatte nell'occasione ben si riconnettono alla *lectio magistralis*: l'idea soprattutto della ricerca incessante, che è lavoro ed è "studio feroce" (61), finalizzato ad acquisire una originale capacità di espressione, a cominciare da una più consapevole conoscenza della tecnica poetica – quanto importante in Cappello, come nel contemporaneo romanziere friulano Carlo Sgorlon, l'idea che la scrittura è anzitutto mestiere da apprendere e da esercitare pazientemente: "Per scrivere poesie ho dovuto dedicarmi a un profondo studio della metrica italiana. Per me, che venivo da una scuola tecnica, ha assunto quasi le dimensioni di una iniziazione. È stato uno studio feroce". La "bottega del far poesia" (per citare il titolo del bel contributo di Aldo Colonnello) è inaugurata nella lingua italiana, ma ha una svolta determinante nella scoperta che la lingua friulana – cioè per il poeta la *marilenghe* – è anche una lingua poetica:

> il talian al è simpri stât la lenghe uficiâl, ancje a lis mediis, cuant che o ai tacât a lei l'*Iliade*, l'*Odissea*, e dopo Pirandello, Svevo, Ungaretti, Montale. Ducj a jerin stampâts par talian. Cuant che o soi rivât par la prime volte a viodi che a jerin poesiis scritis par furlan di un cert Pier Pauli Pasolini […] Par furlan! La mê lenghe! Isal pussibl? Alore e je une robe impuartante viodile stampade neri su blanc achì. Però no savevi come che si doprave cheste lenghe. Chest al jere un segn di estraneitât, cuasi di esili di te stes. Cuant che tu scuvierzis che la tô e je une lenghe parcè che tu le cjatis stampade sui libris cul caratar da la uficialitât […] parcè che un libri, soredut pai voi ancjemò nets di un fantaçut, al è di par se une istituzion (Fabbro *et al.* 2019: 59-60).

Se ogni rivelazione è per sé fascinosa, questa – osserva Gian Mario Villalta (*Parola data. La poesia di Pierluigi Cappello*, 27-33) – siccome rivelazione della propria lingua madre, ha un ruolo peculiare nel dinamico itinerario creativo dell'autore. L'esperienza della scrittura in friulano è occasione, anche, di meditare sulla propria stessa poesia e sul suo significato: *Il me Donzèl*, *Amôrs*, *Dittico*; tappe della poesia in friulano che portano con sé, a loro volta, un'evoluzione. Rispetto alla prima produzione italiana, la poesia friulana si dota di "un *altro* simbolico speculare, destinatario di una parola che solo lui può ascoltare": il *donzel*, la *domine* (in merito anche Villalta 2018: 69). Quella scelta, fecondissima sotto il profilo espressivo – perché c'è di mezzo una lingua che, rispetto all'italiano, ha alle radici una tradizione letteraria rarefatta, e perciò spazi di creatività linguistica ampi –, non si apre tuttavia al dialogo con la realtà storica, restando innervata in un comunicazione che è conclusa nella poesia stessa: "il *donzel* […] un *io* sovraesposto, quasi teatralizzato, l'unico uditore possibile per quello che avevo da dire", come lo stesso Cappello ha affermato (30). Ed ecco allora la necessità di ritornare all'italiano, per realizzare il rapporto con il lettore e con la storia. *Parola data*

appunto perché si offre a un lettore, instaurando "un patto di empatica fiducia" (31); perché in quella parola, che è "dono e abbandono" il poeta "trova, inventa, è se stesso" (32); perché *data* vale anche come il sostantivo "che fissa il tempo in un punto preciso del suo scorrere"; dunque *parola data* in quanto capace "di dare senso all'accaduto, alla vita nel suo presente e nel passato che ancora la abita".

Nel presente e nel passato: e infatti specie la poesia dell'ormai raggiunta notorietà, caratterizzata dal ritorno all'italiano, origina dalla memoria del passato, cioè della realtà di Chiusaforte, con i suoi protagonisti "fuggiti al tiro della storia", ciascuno con la sua parola povera, la sua devozione, il suo canto, il suo odore: contribuiscono tutti a delineare una comunità – come scrive Gian Paolo Gri (Siarant i vôi par viodi. *Nota intorno all'esperienza del limite in Pierluigi Cappello*, 83-91) – "vissuta e vitale, larga e includente", la quale riceve testimonianza in un'esperienza poetica agitata da ossimori mirabili: lo stato di quiete cui il poeta è costretto e l'inesauribile libertà creativa della sua mente; i *vôi* che solo in quanto *sierâts* permettono una visione mistica, tale da trascendere i confini ristretti, per raggiunge "altri mondi", per addentrarsi negli "inferi lungo *La strada della sete*" (85); il sonno che è sogno – e che il friulano raddensa infatti nell'ambivalente *sium*, la cui semantica è rivelata "soltanto da una sottile venatura di genere", giacché *il sium* è 'il sogno', e *la sium* è 'il sonno' –, sogno così prossimo alla morte, già secondo la mitologia antica, ma così inesauribilmente fecondo di vitale creatività. Ossimori che non possono non ricordarci la figura dell'aedo cieco e tuttavia capace di vedere e di intendere oltre, con una profondità di analisi ignota anche a chi ha dono di una vista acutissima. E di tale capacità di analisi, come ancora ricorda Gri, è prova il saggio dedicato da Cappello al suo poeta prediletto, Ungaretti, quel *Bosco di Courton*, dove la genesi del testo poetico è ricostruita attraverso una minuta analisi variantistica, non paga del dato puramente tecnico e stilistico, ma capace di evocare la febbrile e fabbrile tensione esistenziale che anima la ricerca ungarettiana, per giungere a esprimere "la sacertà e il terrore di uomini la cui esistenza rimane drammaticamente in bilico" (Cappello 2006).

Ossimorico, secondo Anselmo Roberto Paolone (*Poesia ed educazione in Pierluigi Cappello*, 73-82), è anche l'imparare a scrivere, assumendo da un canto la gabbia di consolidate convenzioni, con obbligo conseguente di rispettare i tradizionali vincoli metrici e prosodici; ma esercitando dall'altro canto, pur in tale costrizione, una propria libertà, dando vita e respiro alla propria individualità. Il che rispecchia una dicotomia tipica della pedagogia, la quale intende "educare e socializzare l'individuo senza snaturarlo; temperare natura e cultura; creare un uomo rispettoso delle regole, ma al contempo autonomo e creativo" (73). Fra gli argomenti trattati da Cappello nelle lezioni tenute presso l'Università di Udine (dal 25 settembre al 19 ottobre 2007), c'è quello, appunto, della continuativa tensione fra necessaria conoscenza e coscienza della tradizione letteraria; e altrettanto necessaria rivendicazione della libertà creativa. Al fondo di tale dicotomia, Paolone intravede la lezione sempreverde della poetica crociana, per la quale "il poeta è sollecitato allo stesso tempo dall'impeto di creare originalmente e dalla necessità d'intonarsi alla voce della poesia che ha risonato prima della sua, e di risponderle come in un coro" (75). La creatività individuale, che deve infine emanciparsi dalla tradizione, dà voce agli oggetti, i quali divengono peculiare segno di ogni autentica espressione poetica. Per Cappello, fra essi, sono "le nubi, il giardino di

casa, il bambino in giardino" (77). Il giardino per elezione è quello della poesia, quello in cui il poeta accompagna Fabiola Bertino (*Nel suo giardino*, 129-132), la quale può testimoniare meglio di altri come esso sia, appunto, simbolo sacralmente connotato, "verde, protetto, prezioso, il posto ideale in cui trova compimento l'esistenza di ciascuno di noi" (130). Ma ciascun lettore ha l'opportunità di reperire l'oggetto (gli oggetti) che lui stesso avvertirà quali peculiari e caratterizzanti. Se ne potrebbero annoverare altri, altrettanto significativi; e per me vale su tutti quella "cerata verde / bagnata dalla pioggia", dentro la quale il padre si ripara, rientrando dal lavoro oltre confine, schiudendo "ai figli il suo sorridere / come fosse eternamente schiuso"[2].

La *parola data*, in quanto dono e offerta, è generatrice anche dell'orizzonte amicale cui già in principio si è accennato, e che, come insegna Nicola Crocetti (*Pierluigi Cappello, un poeta diverso*, 35-40), costituisce una peculiarità dell'autore, nella cui vita e nella cui scrittura vige un principio di umanità, avvertito solo raramente da altri poeti, ma da lui esercitato con spontaneità e costanza, in qualsiasi relazione, anche a carattere strettamente professionale: bene lo testimonia Angela Urbano, la quale di Cappello curò l'editing di alcune fondamentali raccolte (*Essere l'*editor *di un poeta*, 41-44). Da tale connaturata disponibilità all'incontro nasce anche l'esperienza dei *Cercaluna*, così vivacemente ripercorsa da Paolo Medeossi (*Con Pierluigi, cercando la Luna in un altro Friuli*) e da Isabella e Tiziana Pers (*Benvenuti sulla Luna. Il viaggio insieme a Pier tra il gesto e la parola*, 119-121), l'esperienza cioè di un'improvvisata e anomala compagnia teatrale che, a metà degli anni Novanta, animata da un Cappello a principio ancora della sua brillante carriera, e da stretti amici tra cui Leonardo Zanier e Alberto Garlini, percorre paesi, piazze e teatrini di un Friuli marginale e rurale, allestendo eclettici spettacoli, colorando la vita sociale e culturale "davanti agli sguardi stupiti di bambini, ragazze e ragazzi, donne e uomini di ogni età, ammaliati da versi sentiti per la prima volta, e che pure sembravano custodire un segreto accessibile a ognuno" (115)[3]. Alla base di tutto questo è un desiderio inestinguibile di pienezza di vita, giocosa socialità, bellezza muliebre: cioè una vitalità che già anima l'adolescente Cappello, sfollato a seguito del terremoto e residente con gli altri compaesani in Campo Ceclis, così come ci è ritratto da Vincenzo Della Mea (*Il discorso – Un ricordo*, 123-127); una vitalità (aggiungo) che ancora aleggia nelle pagine estreme dedicate alla finale malattia, nella descrizione di un'anonima sala d'ospedale, dove, spossato dal male, il poeta è accanto a un'infermiera, giovane, abbronzata dall'estivo sole friulano, Musa inattesa, cui implora di rinnovare il senso della sua esistenza: "Tieni nella tua mano scura la mia mano pallida, accompagna la mia indifferenza e trasformala in desiderio, fa' che torni a mordere la vita la mia vita stanca" (Cappello 2018: 433).

Personalità ritratta a tutto tondo, in diversi e complementari aspetti – poeta, saggista, animatore culturale, docente appassionato e appassionante, amico capace di dono e di condivisione – a Cappello è accreditato anche il ruolo dello sciamano: e infatti, nel tentativo

[2] Cappello (2018: 243); Fabbro, Riem Natale, D'Agostini (2019: 21). Il medesimo oggetto ritorna in Cappello (2013: 49): "lì, d'inverno, aspettavo il ritorno di mio padre. Lavorava ad Arnoldstein come scaricatore, tornava la sera sotto una cerata verde, spesso bagnata dalla pioggia, ma né pioggia né fatica cancellavano il suo sorriso quando mio fratello e io gli correvamo incontro […]".

[3] Ricordo *en passant* che l'esperienza dei *Cercaluna* è rivisitata anche, con grande empatia, in Garlini (2019).

arduo d'interpretarne l'opera più criptica, *La strada della sete*, Franco Fabbro (*Pierluigi Cappello tra poesia e sciamanesimo*, 93-109), esaminate le ipotesi esegetiche finora avanzate (da pochi ma autorevoli critici: Gian Mario Villalta, Eraldo Affinati e Mario Turello), ci ricorda che la scena centrale del visionario poemetto è l'incontro con il padre e con il serpente "nella metà iniziale di una galleria", di là della quale "si scorgeva una scarpata / inondata di luce"; sapendo, per diretta confessione del poeta, che la visione riproduce un sogno ricorrente, Fabbro propone dunque una nuova e avvincente interpretazione in chiave psicologica e antropologica: la visione è infatti quella tipica dei viaggi sciamanici: "l'esperienza di pre-morte (la visione del tunnel di luce)" e il sogno del serpente, che il poeta decide di seguire, assumendo così il ruolo di uno sciamano, nella specifica accezione di "uomo di conoscenza".

Si può così meglio intendere anche il titolo che i curatori hanno assegnato al volume: *Un poeta sulla pista della luce*. Perché di fatto *luce* – e il corrispettivo ampio spettro lessicale in friulano (*lûs* / *lusî* / *luminôs*) – assume valenza speciale non solo in *La strada della sete*, ma in molte altre poesie dell'autore. Sarebbe anzi interessante vagliarne con sistematicità le ricorrenze, in considerazione fra l'altro delle plausibili influenze esercitate dalla tradizione poetica italiana, specie antica, e dantesca in particolare, cui Cappello ha dedicato sempre viva attenzione, sia nella saggistica (Cappello 2015), sia in poesia (italiana come friulana). Basti qui ricordare *Un foglio*: "Questo foglio. Battuto per tre quarti / dalla luce. Nella sua luce cresca /l'incerto zampettìo delle parole" (Cappello 2018: 102); *Idillio*: "fra il pettine dei rami dal sereno / sull'angolo di muro in piena luce / ritornano fulminee le lucertole" (Cappello 2018: 116); *Scrivi lune*: "Dentri il lusî de lune / ch'o viôt lusî come perfete sul fuei / cumò ch'o le ài scrite" (Cappello 2018, 215: 'dentro lo splendore della luna che vedo splendere come perfetta sul foglio adesso che l'ho scritta'; in friulano "splendere" è appunto *lusî*, connesso a *lûs*); *Il spieli* (con uso ossimorico): "frut gno, ombre luminose" (Cappello 2018: 219: "bambino mio, ombra luminosa"); *La luce toccata*: "ogni debolezza è stata offerta / la pietra aperta, la luce toccata" (Cappello 2018: 244); *I vostri nomi*: "Ieri sono passato a trovarti, papà, / la luce in questi giorni non è tagliata dall'ombra" (Cappello 2018: 245); *Il codirosso*: "si sono aperte voci di bambini / e tutta la luce dell'estate ne riempiva le bocche" (Cappello 2018: 262); *Luglio, domenica*: "Ci sono domeniche di luglio dove sembra di stare / al sicuro, ma non c'è riparo, il mondo è nella luce" (Cappello 2018: 285).

E si potrebbe proseguire a lungo, poiché anche altrove il tema assume un rilievo peculiare; ma piace concludere con una lirica in particolare, in friulano, culminante appunto nel vocabolo *lûs*; lirica notissima, citatissima, conclude nella raccolta *Mandate a dire all'imperatore* la sezione *I vostri nomi*, ed è l'ultima, in friulano, recitata dal poeta, in occasione dell'estrema sua intervista, rilasciata a Celestino Vezzi nel giugno del 2017[4]:

> Cence di te, cun te
> un pas indaûr, un pas indenant
> slungjant la man
> cu la fuarce dal ramaç tal penç dal cîl

[4] Cfr. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_WTpvpgGAOA (a 8′ e 20″), consultato il 19/02/2021.

cul viaç dai vôi tal mont
a planc a planc si cjatarìn 'ne gnot,
cjalant di nô ce ch'a nol reste,
intun trimul lusî di lune, di fûr, tal cûr
dentri la lûs.

"Senza di te, con te / un passo indietro, un passo avanti / allungando la mano / con la forza del ramo dove si raddensa il cielo / con il viaggio degli occhi nel mondo / a poco a poco ci troveremo una notte, / guardando di noi ciò che non resta, / dentro un vago splendore di luna, là fuori, nel cuore / dentro la luce" (Cappello 2018: 265).

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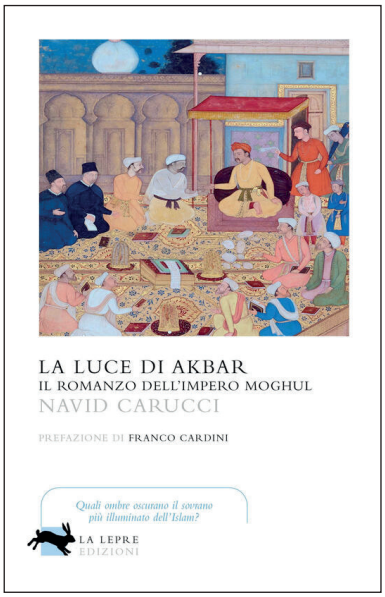
Niccolò Serri

La luce di Akbar. Il romanzo dell'impero moghul

Navid Carucci. 2021. La luce di Akbar. Il romanzo dell'impero Moghul. Roma: La Lepre Edizioni, 285 pp., € 18.00, ISBN 978-8899389826



https://lalepreedizioni.com/prodotto/la-luce-di-akbar/

Per descrivere la figura di Akbar il Grande, terzo imperatore della dinastia Moghul che ha dominato il subcontinente indiano per gran parte dell'età moderna, valgono le parole già usate da Jacques Le Goff per descrivere la personalità di Federico II di Svevia: "un uomo fuori dal comune". Entrambe le figure, nei rispettivi contesti politici e culturali, sono state antesignane della modernità, animate da uno spirito riformatore che ne ha fatto dei precursori, ma anche, allo stesso tempo, degli incompresi dai propri contemporanei.
Con "La luce di Akbar", edito all'inizio di quest'anno da La Lepre Edizioni, Navid Carucci ci porta alla scoperta della corte di Akbar, che ha retto il trono Moghul nella seconda metà del XVI secolo, restituendoci tutta la complessità di un sistema politico stratificato, frutto dell'incontro tra la tradizione turco-mongola, le influenze persiane e quelle indiane. Carucci padroneggia tutti gli strumenti del romanzo storico, ricostruendo con dovizia di particolari e

fonti i personaggi storici chiave dell'impero: il libro è corredato da una cronologia dettagliata e da una bibliografia. Ai personaggi della finzione letteraria, il Kotwal Jamal Nagauri e suo figlio Samir – vero protagonista del romanzo, insieme al primogenito di Akbar, il principe Salim – sono affidati i carotaggi nel sistema politico e sociale dei Moghul, illuminando la centralizzazione amministrativa e la difficile opera di tessitura diplomatica tra le diverse frange dell'impero portata avanti da Akbar.

Proprio sul rapporto tra padri e figli si gioca molto dell'intreccio narrativo del romanzo. Oltre che dall'amore per la principessa rajput Manbhawati Bai, Samir e Salim sono uniti dal comune risentimento che nutrono verso i propri genitori: il primo, per un senso di vergogna rispetto all'eccessivo servilismo e arrivismo del proprio padre, impegnano in una fallimentare scalata delle gerarchie imperiali, il secondo, per un senso di inadeguatezza rispetto all'ingombrante figura del grande Akbar, che pur riferendosi spesso al proprio primogenito con l'affettuoso appellativo di "piccolo sceicco di papà", non nasconde le proprie diffidenze sulle reali qualità del figlio.

Del resto Salim, che succederà ad Akbar nel 1605 con il nome di Jahangir, "il conquistatore del mondo", si dimostrerà essere un sovrano indolente. Nella sua Storia Do Mogor, il medico e scrittore veneziano Niccolò Manucci, che a lungo aveva viaggiato per l'impero Moghul, dirà di Jahangir: "è una verità dettata dell'esperienza che i figli dissipano quanto i loro padri hanno guadagnato con il sudore della propria fronte"[1]. Proprio durante il regno dell'erede di Akbar cominceranno i primi contatti commerciali tra la corte imperiale e la East India Company britannica, la cui progressiva penetrazione nel subcontinente indiano farà da battistrada alla colonizzazione occidentale.

Al cuore del romanzo di Carucci non c'è, però, l'*histoire événementielle*, ma la civiltà Moghul nel suo complesso, crocevia di incontro tra culture e religioni, a cavallo dell'area mediterranea e dell'Estremo Oriente. Malgrado non sapesse né leggere né scrivere, Akbar si dimostrò grande patrono delle arti e della letteratura, nel solco tracciato dal Rinascimento timuride, assembrando una biblioteca di oltre 24.000 volumi scritti in arabo, sanscrito, urdu, persiano, hindu, finanche greco e latino. L'intuizione del sovrano, messa a nudo nel romanzo, è che per governare una compagine multiculturale fosse necessaria una koinè comune.

Akbar si fece promotore di une religione sincretica, la Dīn-i-Ilāhī, o "Religione di Dio", mischiando elementi provenienti dall'Islam e dall'Induismo, ma anche dal Zoroastrismo, dal Giainismo, dal Buddismo e dal Cristianesimo, promuovendo, non senza resistenze, il dialogo cooperativo tra le diverse fedi. "Il nostro scopo è prendere ciò che vi è di buono in ogni religione, senza perdere il buono che è nella propria" – Carucci fa dire ad Akbar – "in questo modo si offre lode a Dio, pace al popolo, sicurezza all'impero" (183). La Casa del Culto dell'imperatore – la cui miniatura, tratta dall'Akbarnama, è non a caso raffigurata nella copertina del libro, a sottolineare la centralità della tematica nel romanzo – divenne un luogo di incontro e scambi tra personaggi come il gesuita Rodolfo Acquaviva, il mullah Badauni, poi autore di una caustica cronaca del regno di Akbar, il dotto sceicco Abu Fazl, e tanti altri. Carucci fa ancora dire ad Akbar: "pensate ad una ruota […] i mistici, da qualsiasi

[1] Findly, Ellison Banks. 1993. *Nur Jahan, empress of Mughal India.* New York: Oxford University Press, 311.

religione muovano, tendono come i raggi verso il centro, e più si avvicinano a Dio, più si avvicinano tra loro" (252).

Proprio come nel caso di Federico II di Svevia, la modernità di Akbar il Grande non venne però raccolta dai propri contemporanei, rimanendo come un fiume carsico nella tradizione dell'Asia centro meridionale. Il libro di Carucci ci offre un documento che, pur con i tratti del romanzo storico, fa emergere questa figura troppo a lungo relegata ai margini della storia.

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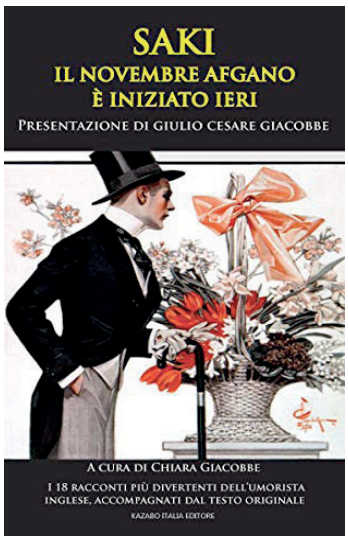
Federica Boero

Il novembre afgano è iniziato ieri

Saki, Il novembre afgano è iniziato ieri. 2015. Chiara Giacobbe (a cura di). Kazabo Italia Editore, 273 pp., € 5.99, ISBN 978-19-4810-420-3



https://www.mondadoristore.it/novembre-afgano-e-iniziato-Chiara-Giacobbe-Giulio-Cesare-Giacobbe-Hector-Hugh-Munro-Hector-Hugh-Munro-Saki/eai123000144815/

Saki, *nome de plume* di Hector Hugh Munro (1870-1916), non è uno di quegli autori in cui può capitare di imbattersi facilmente, curiosando tra gli scaffali di una libreria ma, una volta scoperto, è in grado di offrire ore e ore di piacevole lettura, deliziati da *short stories* argute e dal finale mai scontato. Nato nel 1870 in Myanmar, allora Birmania, egli trascorse la sua infanzia in Inghilterra, dove suo padre, ispettore generale dell'Impero britannico, lo lasciò in seguito alla morte prematura della moglie, quando il piccolo Saki aveva soltanto due anni d'età. Frequentò la Pencarwick School di Exmouth e la Bedford Grammar School. L'infelicità che contraddistinse questi suoi primi anni fu forse, in parte, la causa della nascita in lui di un senso dell'umorismo tagliente, che egli trasfuse nei suoi racconti fino a far loro assumere talvolta i connotati del macabro. Lavorò come corrispondente per diversi giornali

inglesi, tra cui la *Westminster Gazette*, il *Daily Express* e il *Morning Post*. Nel 1900, pubblicò *The rise of the Russian*, il suo primo libro.

La raccolta *Il novembre afgano è iniziato ieri*, curata da Chiara Giacobbe, comprende diciotto racconti in lingua originale, accompagnati da una traduzione attenta a salvaguardare la spontaneità e l'eleganza dello stile di Saki. L'ambientazione privilegiata è l'Inghilterra edwardiana, raccontata tramite i più svariati personaggi appartenenti alla *middle class* e alla *upper middle class*, con qualche accenno anche all'alta borghesia e all'aristocrazia. La continua aspirazione della *middle class*, la media borghesia, alla scalata sociale verso la *upper middle class* è di per sé motivo di comicità, in quanto scatena una serie di comportamenti ai nostri occhi inconsueti e caricaturali, vezzi esagerati, stili di vita inconsueti, descritti dall'autore con irriverente naturalezza. In particolare, l'attenzione a comportarsi in modo 'corretto' e rispettoso delle regole sotto ogni aspetto ricorre come un atteggiamento condiviso e quasi 'patologico', che fa da contraltare alla scioltezza con cui, invece, l'alta borghesia e l'aristocrazia amano contravvenire ai dogmi che loro stessi hanno imposto alla società, alla continua ricerca di evasione e di divertimento.

La figura più sorprendente di questo mondo è quella dell'arguto Clovis Sangrail, protagonista di numerosi racconti, pronto a giocare tiri mancini al prossimo senza provare il minimo senso di colpa. Questa sua caratteristica emerge, a mio parere, soprattutto nel racconto "La cura anti-riposo" (titolo originale *The Unrest-cure*), dove il nostro Clovis 'aiuta' il tranquillo – anche troppo – Pastore della parrocchia di Tilfield e sua sorella a dare una scossa a un'esistenza noiosa e ripetitiva, facendo loro vivere una (dis)avventura difficile da dimenticare, in grado di dare un bello scossone al solito *trantran*. Di più non è lecito rivelare, perché il bello di queste *short stories* sta proprio in questo, nel colpo di scena, nel finale mai prefigurabile che regala al lettore una sana risata, non senza indurlo a una riflessione sulla società e sulla vanità di certi atteggiamenti a volte piuttosto discutibili, allora come oggi.

Ogni storia è corredata di una spiegazione che precede il testo e che chiarisce alcuni concetti contenuti all'interno di esso, che potrebbero risultare di difficile comprensione a coloro che non conoscono bene l'epoca edoardiana. Ritengo questa scelta di grande pregio, perché dà modo al lettore di leggere con la giusta consapevolezza e di calarsi veramente nella storia. In queste spiegazioni vengono fornite precisazioni su particolari modi di dire, su fatti storici citati oppure su elementi curiosi come il prezzo di una tigre (ben 65 sterline dell'epoca, "il salario annuale di un impiegato d'ufficio o un operaio specializzato", spiega la curatrice della raccolta, per offrirci un adeguato termine di paragone). Cito non a caso questo ultimo punto, che mi offre l'occasione di parlare di un'altra caratteristica ricorrente nei racconti di Saki: il gusto per l'esotico. Esso è ravvisabile in un buon numero di racconti, ma emerge a mio avviso come strumento marcatamente ironico, in particolare, ne "La tigre della Signora Packletide" (titolo originale *Mrs. Packletide's Tiger*). La vicenda descrive la strampalata avventura di una donna appartenente alla medio-alta borghesia, che nell'India coloniale decide di intraprendere una sfida contro la sua rivale, Mrs. Bimberton, uccidendo personalmente una tigre per fare sfoggio della sua impresa dinanzi alla loro cerchia di amici facoltosi. Ovviamente, anche in questo caso, l'obiettivo di Mrs. Packletide sarà raggiunto nel

modo più incredibile e originale che si possa immaginare. Sta a voi scoprire come, magari davanti a una bella tazza di tè inglese.

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Nunziana Mastrangelo

In Conversation with Riane Eisler

Riane Eisler holds degrees in Sociology and Law from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). She taught pioneering classes on women and the law at UCLA, is a founding member of the General Evolution Research Group, a fellow of the World Academy of Art and Science and World Business Academy, a councillor of the World Future Council, and a commissioner of the World Commission on Global Consciousness and Spirituality, along with the Dalai Lama and other spiritual leaders. She is co-founder of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence, president of the Center for Partnership Studies (CPS), dedicated to research and education. She is best known for her international bestseller *The Chalice and The Blade. Our History, Our Future* (1987, Harper & Row) now in twenty-three languages, including Italian and most European languages, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Hebrew, Japanese, Arabic and Urdu.

Nunziana Mastrangelo This issue of *Le Simplegadi* recalls your latest book and is entitled *Nurturing Nature, Nourishing Our Humanity: Ecosustainable Narratives and Environmental Issues in Anglophone Literatures*. What inspired you to investigate the relationship between human beings and nature?

Riane Eisler All humans are part of nature and depend on nature for air, water, and other survival necessities. But how we relate to nature largely depends on our culture, on our values and our socialization. That vital issue is central to my research, writing, teaching, speaking, and activism.

NM In your books you have always described the history of humanity in relation to the partnership/dominator continuum. According to your recent work, *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future* (2019), the shift of humanity between dominator and partnership social paradigms has influenced the impact of humanity on the environment. In what ways have you witnessed this impact in your own experience?

RE We are all experiencing climate change today, with rises in temperature, icecaps melting, rising sea levels, droughts, severe storms, and other threats to us and future generations. Much of the discussion has been about industrialisation, but actually the degradation and exploitation of our natural life support systems is not new. It has been going on ever since the shift from a partnership to a domination cultural orientation about 5,000 to 10,000 years ago, and today it is accelerating as the result of ever more powerful human technologies driven

by an ethos of domination and exploitation. This ethos is central to domination systems – and at our level of technological development threatens our species' survival.

Yet if we look at human history from the perspective of the partnership-domination social scale, we see that for many thousands of years human societies oriented to the partnership side of the partnership-domination continuum. As detailed in *Nurturing Our Humanity* and other works starting with *The Chalice and the Blade* (which is now in 57 US printings and 30 foreign editions), the evidence from archaeology, mythology, and even now DNA studies shows that these earlier societies were more peaceful (contrary to popular beliefs, war is at most 5,000 – 10,000 years old); more generally equitable (there are no signs in either dwellings or grave goods of major differences in status or wealth); and more gender balanced (the archaeologist Ian Hodder, who excavated the large Neolithic site of Catal Huyuk, presented some of this evidence in the *Scientific American,* emphasising that women and men had equal status). In other words, what we see in these societies is the partnership social configuration. Integral to this configuration was the veneration of nature's power to give and nurture life, a power our ancestors recognised is incarnated in the female body. So, we find in these societies a plethora of female figurines representing this power.

However, with the shift to domination systems, with their focus on conquest (be it of men, women, or nature), these female deities gradually disappeared or became subordinate to male deities. What is today beginning to be called "toxic masculinity" became the norm, and male identity became associated with domination and conquest. The good news is that as part of the movement from domination to partnership many of us – men and women – are rejecting this gender stereotype of "real masculinity" – along with the devaluation of the so-called "feminine" work of caring, including caring for our natural life support systems.

NM In your speech to the United Nations General Assembly meeting on Harmony with Nature (2011) you said "our global challenges – not only global warming and other environmental disasters, but much of the suffering, hunger, poverty, violence that afflicts our world – are all symptoms of an underlying dysfunction […]". In other words, environmental issues imply a cultural, political, and economic crisis. What in your opinion is at the heart of this dysfunction?

RE The exploitation and degradation of our natural environment and the exploitation and degradation of people are not isolated matters. As noted above, they are both inherent in domination systems. When I spoke to the United Nations General Assembly, I emphasised that we cannot tack on harmony with nature to a fundamentally imbalanced system in which, starting in the family and shaping all our institutions, domination and exploitation are normalised.

For example, the most widely used metric for measuring economic health, Gross Domestic/National Product (GDP or GNP), relegates the damage human activities are inflicting on our natural environment just as "externalities". So, the trees on which we depend to breathe only show up in these metrics when they are dead, when they are chopped down, because all GDP/GNP measures is goods and services changing hands in the formal

monetised economy. Small wonder then that, again and again, environmentally conscious policies have been reversed with just the stroke of a pen, as we saw when President Trump came to power in the United States. That of course was a regression to the domination side of the social scale, but the dysfunction goes much deeper, to our legacy from more rigid domination systems. We need whole-systems change! And this includes new metrics that show the economic value of the work of caring for people, starting at birth, and caring for nature. This is why, inspired by my book *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics,* we are at the Center for Partnership Systems developing a Social Wealth Index that can guide policy makers, impact investors and social activists to invest in caring for people and nature.

NM As a person deeply involved in social, cultural, and economic issues, you have spoken at many environmental conferences. In addition, you are a Councilor of the World Future Council in Hamburg, which deals with the effects of environmental policies and practices on future generations. Can you expand on what you see as essential for a sustainable future?

RE What is needed is whole-systems change: a fundamental cultural shift from domination to partnership. The first step is changing our consciousness. Many current policies are still based on the notion that domination systems are inevitable. Even our language makes it hard to see that there is a partnership alternative.

We have to connect the dots, and that requires going beyond our conventional social categories. If you look at categories like right/left, religious/secular, Eastern/Western, capitalist/socialist, you see that there are, and have been, repressive and violent regimes in all these categories, whether secular like rightist Nazi Germany or Stalin's leftist Soviet Union, or religious, like the Eastern Taliban or Isis or the Western rightist-fundamentalist alliance. How we relate to nature is not mentioned in any of them. Moreover, they either marginalise or ignore nothing less than the majority of humanity: women and children. All this makes it impossible to connect the dots and see the contrasting configurations of the partnership and domination systems.

The only social categories in our language that are gender-specific are patriarchy and matriarchy. The message is that either fathers or mothers rule, again, there is no partnership alternative. Our education, both formal and informal, as well as conventional studies of society, have reinforced and perpetuated all this. They too have almost nothing to say about the so-called "feminine" caring, caregiving, or nonviolence, and even our "humanities" marginalise or ignore women and children – the majority of humanity. As Einstein said, we cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them.

NM What are the necessary actions we could take to reconnect our humanity with nature? And how do you attempt this in your own life?

RE I am blessed that I have been able to move from an urban area to live in a place surrounded by green, by trees and by flowers. This choice has made me more aware of nature – and we all need to have this privilege, whether we live in urban or rural areas. Our cities must be

planned and built accordingly, our economic systems must change so everyone can do this, as well as our whole way of thinking about how we relate to one another and nature must change. As I have emphasised, how we relate to nature is not isolated from how we relate to people. This is why my life has been devoted to changing our beliefs and our cultures.

NM Globalization has raised numerous problems not only related to environmental degradation but also animal exploitation, social disparities, the loss of biodiversity and the genocide of indigenous peoples. Has globalization been our downfall?

RE We are all interconnected today by technologies that span the globe. Globalization is a fact of life today, and while there definitely needs to be more localism in areas such as the provision of food and other necessities, I don't think we can, so to speak, put the genie back in the bottle. Besides, think of all the misery before globalization: the chronic inequalities, violence, and human rights violations of pre-industrial, pre-globalised times in our history. The real issue is not getting rid of globalization and retreating to isolation, which, as we see rising today, is again an us-versus-them kind of phenomenon, as is characteristic of regressions to the domination side of the partnership-domination scale, where the only alternatives are believed to be dominating or being dominated. The issue is what kinds of rules govern globalization so we do not see so much environmental degradation, animal exploitation, social disparities, the loss of biodiversity, and the genocide of indigenous peoples.

Here we need the partnership-domination lens to see what we have to do. First, we can then see that every progressive modern social movement has challenged a tradition of domination, from the "divinely ordained" right of kings to rule their "subjects", to the "divinely ordained" right of men to rule the women and children in the "castles" of their homes, to the "divinely ordained" right of one race to order another, all the way to the environmental movement, challenging our once hallowed conquest and domination of nature. These movements, and the consciousness that we can change traditions of domination, led to important shifts, from the abolition of slavery in most of the world to new concepts such as equality and human rights, most recently including women's and children's rights. But the main focus of these movement has been on dismantling the top of the domination pyramid: politics and economics as conventionally defined. Far less attention was paid to the foundations on which this pyramid has kept rebuilding itself.

This is why the "Make Partnerism Mainstream" movement launched by the Center for Partnership Systems focuses on four cornerstones that are foundational, but have been generally viewed as secondary if they are discussed at all: childhood/family relations, gender relations, a new economics, and stories/language.

We must take into account what we are today learning from neuroscience on the importance for how our brains develop of what children experience and observe in their first years, including the cultural construction of gender roles and relations, the hidden system of gendered values that has informed economics, both capitalist and socialist (consider the enormous damage to our environment caused by both), and our language and stories, especially stories about "human nature".

The last chapter of *Nurturing Our Humanity* describes these four cornerstones, along with actions that can shift them from domination to partnership. I invite readers to join this movement to build solid foundations for a more equitable, less violent, sustainable world.

NM Within global communication, you write that mass media conveys bad news to humanity and that it is time to create a new narrative. What advice would you give to the story-tellers of tomorrow?

RE *Nurturing Our Humanity* details the evidence from both social and biological science (including neuroscience) that we have been told false stories about human nature. Not only did we live in partnership-oriented cultures for millennia; studies today show that the so-called pleasure centers of our brains light up more when we share and care than when we dominate or win.

We need true stories about our past, present, and the possibilities for our future, and our story-tellers, whether in academia, the media, entertainment, education, etc., must tell these stories.

NM Your research has influenced a broad range of disciplines, such as the arts and literature, and here at Udine University the Partnership Studies Group (PSG) conducts multi- and inter-disciplinary research based on the partnership/dominator model within World Literatures in English, Language, Education and Arts. In which ways do you see literature nourishing humanity?

RE Literature can pay a huge part in the story-telling and the language needed to shift to a more equitable, sustainable, and caring world. This is why the Partnership Studies Group at the University of Udine is so important. We need many more such programs.

In that connection, I am now teaching at Meridian University, an accredited university in the United States, in an online and in-person program that offers PhD and Masters degrees for Partnership Practitioners, including those working for policies and practices that care for our natural life support systems. For more information, as well as information on online courses offered by the Center for Partnership Systems in which I teach, please go to www.centerforpartnership.org.

Our cultures, from our families and religion to education, economics, and politics – including policies and practices regarding nature – are human creations. Together we can shift them from domination to partnership.

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Juan Carlos Galeano

Matter as Cosmic Poetry: In Conversation with Serenella Iovino

In this interview, recorded in 2019, Serenella Iovino discusses with the Colombian poet and documentarist Juan Carlos Galeano about her personal roots and the inspiring principles of her interpretive practice as environmental philosopher and literary critic. Serenella Iovino is Professor of Italian Studies and Environmental Humanities at UNC-Chapel Hill. Working in the framework of the new materialisms, she has contributed to the development of material ecocriticism and is one of the leading animators of the environmental humanities debate. A co-founder and former President of the *European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment*, she is a member of the *ASLE* the Executive Council and a delegate of the *MLA* Forum Executive Committee for 20th-21st century Italian. She's author and editor of ten volumes and over a hundred essays and articles. Her books talk about landscapes and bodies, literary visions and artistic resistance, nonhuman companions and alien intimacies, earthquakes, pollutions, environmental justice, and cosmic creativity. With her volumes *Filosofie dell'ambiente* (Carocci, 2004), and *Ecologia Letteraria* (ed. Ambiente, 2006, 2015) she has contributed to the development of the environmental cultural debate in Italy. Her publications in English include the collections *Material Ecocriticism* (Indiana University Press, 2014), *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, both co-ed. with S. Oppermann), and *Italy and the Environmental Humanities* (co-ed. with E. Cesaretti and E. Past, University of Virginia Press, 2018). Her monograph, *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation* (Bloomsbury, 2016) was awarded the Book Prize of the American Association for Italian Studies and the MLA Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for Italian Studies. The book will soon appear in Spanish translation from the publisher Comares and in Italian from Il Saggiatore. Iovino's most recent work is *Italo Calvino's Animals: Anthropocene Stories* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Juan Carlos Galeano How have your ideas about ecocriticism and matter as cosmic poetry come to be in your life?

Serenella Iovino My history is an emotional one. In the 1990s I was a philosophy student, and I found myself in Germany studying the age of Goethe, the German poet, writer, and philosopher. I was fascinated by the way poets were also philosophers. And philosophers were investigators of nature. All these intersections between philosophy, poetry and nature were central in my imagination. What enthralled me the most was the way Goethe was able to write a poem like *Faust* and then scientific works like *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, or the *Theory of Colors*. He wrote about physics and meteorology, about animal anatomy as well as about stones. Although it would be imprecise to call him a forerunner of Darwin,

Goethe was convinced that there was kinship between all life-forms. In fact, he discovered the existence of the intermaxillary bone in the human skull, which he saw as proof of that kinship, a sign that all animals were "created equal", in a way. Because of his discovery, of which he was so proud, he was ostracised by a large part of the European community of scientists. At that time, in fact, it was thought that this jawbone, more visible in the animal skull, was something that discriminated between the humans and 'lower' animals: it was connected to chewing, to the ingestion of food. It was commonly believed that humans didn't have it because they were creatures whose essential features were speaking and thinking, not eating. Goethe, however, insisted that the human skull had this bone, and found the evidence after many years of research in comparative anatomy. Goethe was thinking in the framework of the monistic and pantheistic vision formulated a century earlier by the philosopher Baruch Spinoza. In Goethe's age poetry, nature and philosophy went hand in hand because of Spinoza's philosophy. The idea that God and nature were the same thing was very powerful, a subterranean river that connected 18th century thinkers with the Renaissance and the ancient philosophers. I was completely captured by the spirit of this age, and I decided to specialise in this period. However, after I finished my doctorate in German Philosophy, I was in a crisis. Evidently, I was not the only one to be fascinated by Goethe's age, and it was very difficult to find my voice in a field which had been so thoroughly explored over the previous two centuries. The crisis took a turn after an intense reflective session with my partner, who is also a scholar, on an autumn afternoon. After many conversations, he invited me to contemplate a question: What would those philosophers of nature do today, what kind of thinkers would they be? And the answer was: they would no longer be *Naturphilosophen*, philosophers of Nature, but environmental philosophers. That was my shift to environmental philosophy and, from there, to ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, I discovered, was one of those disciplines that finally and with a fresh perspective could enable me to link literature and poetry with the world "outside the page", as Kate Rigby says: landscapes, other beings and things, and the living imagination of the more-than-human world. That was a new key for me to understand reality. In the following years, I wrote two books in Italian about environmental philosophy and ecocriticism which are still in print and used in classes. That was the beginning of my pathway as an environmental humanities scholar. Even if today I am no longer a Goethe scholar, this gives me hope if I ever wanted to return to my ancient passion: as the work of the Germanist ecocritic Heather Sullivan brilliantly shows, it is still possible to find something unseen and unexpected even in much-studied classic authors like Goethe. For me, this is the power of ecocritical research: by exploring the infinite ways the human and nonhuman world intersect, you find new keys to rethink what has already been thought for centuries or millennia.

JCG Speaking of your personal upbringing and your sense of place, were you brought up in the city or in a rural area?

SI I was born in the foothills of an active volcano. I am from an ancient city near Naples, Torre Annunziata, by Vesuvius. The place I was born is exactly halfway between the volcano

and the Mediterranean Sea. I wasn't born in a hospital. My mother preferred to give birth in the house with the help of a midwife, surrounded by her mother and sisters. (My father was a medical student at that time, and he was himself overcome by this wholly 'traditional' – and yet so natural – experience!) I was born in a room that faces the sea. Therefore, in a way, I consider myself to be a creature who is half marine and half volcanic. The beaches by Vesuvius, as you can imagine, are black: the sand is pulverised lava. So, if you will, I have components of earth, water, and fire, too. And the wind – which in this area is often a land-wind, we call it *vento di terra* – is a steady presence here. In my personality there is this very mixing of elements.

JCG What you say takes me to the notion of the "storied matter", which is suggestive of the powerful agency of all elements in our life. I can see, presented in your personal accounts, a desire to pay homage to matter, a suggestion of a cosmic genealogy for all beings.

SI This is a very ancient idea that goes back to the Greek philosophers. Their idea is that matter has imagination. In fact, the Greeks speak of phantasy as a sort of imagination of matter – the power matter has to produce its own forms. And the way matter produces forms is a sort of cosmic poetry. Let's say it in Greek, cosmological *poiesis*. The material progression of producing forms is how this imagination materialises in time and space. We, along with everything else, are ways in which matter's imagination plays with its forms. We are all expressions of this cosmological force that we can call cosmopoiesis.

JCG I think this is an important point of intersection for you and me. What you just said is readily apparent in the Indigenous cosmologies of Amazonia. For them, the river is not only a giver of life, but also a producer of stories. And those are stories meant to teach the inhabitants about their surroundings. All of their myths, all of the supernatural creatures, in reality are poetic representations of the physical lands of Amazonia. The land is felt by this traditional culture as animated and sentient like us humans.

SI Yes, I think that there are so many of these archetypes, if we'd like to name them, all over the planet. I see many of these elements in the ancient Greek philosophers. When for example Thales of Miletus says that water is "full of Gods", he is saying that water, as an element, is endowed with a profound and infinite creativity. He says that everything that we can imagine is already here, already with us. This imagination of matter is what, I believe, makes matter something sacred, almost mystical – as Jane Bennett says at the end of *Vibrant Matter*. Something that we take for granted, such as water for example, is instead full of Gods.

JCG It obviously positions you, positions us as humans in relationship with water – an element which is so demystified and desacralised in our Anthropocene epoch. All of this also provides you with new perspectives about the world, it even changes the way you look at society. It gives you new ways of seeing yourself.

But what is the extent of our entanglements with the elements and the world? And how is the world, in its materiality, entangled with us?

SI After these philosophers, the research in quantum physics also teaches us how things are entangled. This is something that my co-author Serpil Oppermann has explored in her own ecocritical path. Quantum physics tells us that there is an intra-action between observer, scientific instruments, and observed reality, for example. In other words, when observed through an apparatus, matter reacts to the presence of an observer, for example. So, to think of matter as inert is to disregard its intrinsic force. This is, I think, another way to neutralise the world that we can't understand with our anthropocentric mentality which destroys anything that is independent from us, even though we pay the consequences of our hybris. I am not a physicist, but as a student of environmental and ecological phenomena, I have learned that everything in the world, from bigger entities, dynamics, and phenomena to smaller individual entities, is in and of this big entanglement. And I think that children, with their animistic sense of reality, are very aware of this. Unfortunately, as they grow, they tend to lose such important view of the world.

JCG You are right, people move away from that animistic thinking which plays such a big role in the symbolic narratives of traditional cultures all over the world. Such non-dualistic cosmovisions have been present in cultures since the dawn of our species.

SI Our contemporary world still experiences so many versions of cultural imperialism. To call indigenous cultures 'primitive', for example, is one of these acts. Still, to ignore that these cultures are in fact bearers of co-evolutionary entanglements, stratified over the eons, is to refuse to visualise the connections of humans and nonhumans in the world.

JCG Well, I wanted to go back to touch on the notion of poiesis. How is such a new way of seeing the world articulated through the first notion of poiesis?

SI The word *poiesis* in Greek means a doing, a making. Therefore, in principle, there is nothing culturally 'high' or spiritual in *poiesis*. *Poiesis* is something material, and as such something active. It is everything that is in-the-making – everything we do. But *poiesis* is also a making of matter, a making of life which is in-the-making: *physis*, the Greek word for "nature." Exactly like the Latin word *Natura*, the Greek word *physis* means something which is being born, which comes to light (*phōs*, in Greek). All these notions convey a material sense of making/becoming/coming to light. *Poiesis* might be the way *physis* manifests itself causing things to be made. *Physis* is therefore a first, radical form of poetry, a *poiesis*. And then, of course, we humans, we translate. In our thinking, we humans dematerialise this notion of *poiesis*.

JCG True. We dematerialise and get lost in constructing webs of meaningless words and concepts. And we have been lost in such labyrinths of concepts for a good couple of millennia.

SI Concepts are crucial to 'unlock' the world. The problem comes when they get completely separated them from their material referents. For instance, if you have a key and do not have a door to open, this key is of no use to you. But the difference between the key and the door is that the door could exist perfectly well without keys. Therefore, a world without concepts is still thinkable, but a world without material *poiesis* is not. You can have a world without humanly elaborated concepts, but you cannot have a world without beings, things, or matter. You can imagine a world full of doors, but a world just made of keys, with no door in it, doesn't make much sense.

JCG And for our matter, the importance of constructing the right concept is key if we want to create a better understanding of our world.

SI Let me give you an example by using the concept of 'storied matter', which Serpil Oppermann and I elaborated in our research on material ecocriticism. What are the doors that I want to open with this key? Storied matter is an idea that I connect to everything which is around us. Everything is storied matter, our bodies are storied matter, because if you read a body as a story, as a text, you can see so many different meanings in this text. You can see narratives in it. These might be, for example, genealogical threads. But they can be the narratives that come from the intersection between your bodily presence and the bodily presence of the place in which you are situated. So, for example, you may think of the way your body and this place react with one another. If you live in a polluted place your body will carry the stories of pollution, of toxicity which characterise the story of that place in connection with many other places and substances, as Stacy Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality so brilliantly explains. For example, your body will be a text in which the story of an industrialisation of a city is written, or the story of the colonisation of a region is written. There are many stories next to one another, which are readable in the way your body has reacted to all these intersections and these encounters. If you live near the Niger Delta, for example, your body will be an expression of a story of colonisation, of exploitation, dispossession, global capitalism. There are so many bodily narratives in the Amazon, as your beautiful books of poetry and documentaries also show. Indeed, storied matter is not only about human bodies but also about places. Places are also storied matter. Also in places you can read stories of imagination, of encounters, of manipulations, of pollution. If you don't look at places as mere settings, then different levels of knowledge are open to you. And you can see all the layers of a region, as if they were a chapter of a big narrative. This is for example the subject of my book *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance and Liberation*. I tried to read some places as storied matter. In the book these places are Naples, Venice, areas struck by earthquakes in the north as well as in the south of the country, or Piedmont, which is the region where I have lived for almost twenty years. These are all examples of places where ecological stories are interlaced with human stories, with stories of ideas, of imagination, of art, and with stories of bodily presence – stories of land, stories of agriculture, stories of pollution, stories of violence, stories of politics, criminal violence and political violence.

JCG And at the same time, this notion of storied matter carries the idea of matter as a producer of stories, as a co-producer as you say.

SI Yes, also co-producer because we humans are cognitive beings, we can elicit meanings from these bodily texts. We co-produce stories. Interpretation is not a mere projection of imagination: it is an encounter between our cognitive involvement and the ways matter narrates and builds its own (and our) stories.

JCG That is right, we have a medium, a fluid code, a language that produces stories. Animals produce stories with their bodies, plants produce stories, etc.

SI Biosemiotics is illuminating in this respect. As the study of how signs are intrinsically produced by life, it considers life itself as based on information. Information is carried at all levels, in the process of organisation of life from the cell up to more complex systems, such as organisms or forests in their entanglements with the species that live within them, including the human, as Eduardo Kohn has explored in his *How Forests Think*. Biosemiotics tells us that producing and interpreting signs is not an exclusive capacity of the human mind. DNA, for example, is a code, a thread of information which requires to be de-coded, namely, interpreted at a molecular level. Interpretation happens at very low levels of biological organisation. All this is a major reason to question human exceptionalism, as if we really were the thinking "pinnacle of creation" (a creation that we will never be able to prove, whereas, with Darwin and evolutionary biology, we can trace the infinite web of kinships that made life possible).

We humans can interpret texts, but DNA does not need a human reader to develop its host of information: life develops and happens independently from our interpretation. If we think of the DNA of a dog, all the elements that characterise that dog come from how the cells of her body interpret the "code" inscribed in themselves. Cells read and develop this inner information. Or think of cancer cells. A cancer cell develops by sending other cells misleading messages. This also is storied matter.

JCG Going back to the notion of cosmic poetry, in regard to the ecocentric, ecopoetry of our current times, could you mention some European and North American poets whose works make a timely contribution to contemporary environmental culture?

SI Of course, every answer I give you will be necessarily incomplete. But, if I may be partial, let me mention at least two great European poets: Giacomo Leopardi and Goethe. Both active in the 19th century, they really are bearers of cosmovisions in their poetry, namely of visions in which the human self is a fragment of the world's imagination. We already mentioned Goethe and saw how his vision based on the immanence and continuity of living forms was a source of inspiration for the age that was named after him, the *Goethezeit*. One of Italy's foremost poets, Giacomo Leopardi, was a younger contemporary of Goethe's. He was also a philosopher – a materialist one, and his images of Nature are disquieting,

threatening. Nature to him was not necessarily a benign force, it was a force that most of the time overwhelmed the human with its fierceness and indifference. But how huge and telling are the images of 'infinite silences', 'interminable spaces', of beings, of constellations that for him are in a deep and intense communication with human subjects. Going back in time, if we speak of the European tradition, I cannot help mentioning that the very roots of our philosophy were poetic in their origins: think of Empedocles, Parmenides, Anaximander, Thales, all authors whose philosophical thought was expressed in long poems titled simply *Perì physeos*, "About Nature". Lucretius's *De rerum natura* also belongs to this lineage. Therefore, all the ancient theories about the nature of reality were cosmovisions expressed in poetic form, enacting this connection between *poiesis* and *physis* which to their eyes was so immediately clear.

JCG Now if you were to think in general about a couple of 20th-century writers in the Western world whose ideas have also been so pivotal in contributing to this environmental imagination?

SI Well, here, too, I will be partial. As an Italian, I think about Italo Calvino. He is one of the few writers in the Italian tradition whose position is genuinely non-anthropocentric. In his work you can recognise all the topics that later became important for the environmental debate. Already at the end of the 1950s Italo Calvino had concerns about the environment. For example, in a book titled *A Plunge into Real Estate* (*La speculazione edilizia*), you can find a clear representation of the real estate speculation that affected Italy after the Second World War, leading to profound transformations in landscapes and ecosystems. In another novel, titled *Smog*, everything – the city (probably Turin), the protagonist, things – are always surrounded by a cloud of pollution. Calvino had also this incredible capacity to narrate for adults and children at the same time. In the book *Marcovaldo*, the protagonist is a poor guy, a Charlot-like character, who is always on the lookout for 'nature' in the industrial city. Yet, the 'nature' that he finds is 'compromised with artificial life' and 'mischievous'. For example, he is enthusiastic about finding mushrooms near the tram station. However, once these mushrooms have been cooked and eaten, they turn out to be poisonous and so Marcovaldo, his family, and even their neighbors, all end up in the hospital. In another tale, to heat his poor house, he decides to send his children to collect wood, but there are no trees in the city, and so the kids, who have never seen a tree in their lives, end up cutting billboards from along the highway. Published in 1963, the book is meant for children, but these are stories that speak to adults as well. Another Italian author who I consider extremely important for the development of environmental culture is Laura Conti. She is considered "our" Rachel Carson, and – yes – Carson is one of the really pivotal figures, certainly one of the major figures of literary environmentalism of all times.

JC Well, let's talk about her. Who is Rachel Carson for Serenella Iovino?

SI Rachel Carson is a source of inspiration for all of us. I think that a huge number of people working in this field started under the inspiration of her *Silent Spring*. With her writings and personal engagement, she has become an icon of ecological struggles and environmental culture. What she was fighting for was the spreading of environmental knowledge coupled with cultural models: the way we treat our environment depends on our knowledge of it. In *Silent Spring* she contrasts our primitive knowledge and ecological awareness with the violence of our technological attacks on ecosystems. Armed with the weapons of chemistry, we attack creatures and living systems, without really understanding the consequences of our actions. As long as our cultural tools are inadequate to the challenge, *this* science is in a state of war against nature. If there is something we have to improve, it is not only our behavior but also our culture, the way we think about the environment, about our presence in the world. And the solutions are not just to be found in science. Now I believe that the environmental humanities, this big disciplinary umbrella, are providing us with a vision that goes beyond the great divide of the so-called "two cultures", hard sciences and the humanities. The environmental humanities are a way to bring history, literature, anthropology, geography, media, philosophy into conversation with sciences such as biology, chemistry, climatology, geology, ecology. Only if we have a conversation between these alleged 'two' worlds, can we prompt and create a cultural shift. How can we really begin to solve complex problems such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, issues of environmental justice, if we don't really understand their many intersected layers? We need to create a new way of framing things which does not isolate science and humanities from one another. We humans are not only made of numbers, formulas, equations. We need philosophy, we need history, we need poetry and definitely a poetic vision of the world. This is something that the ancient thinkers, who were at the same time poets, philosophers, and scientists, had understood. Of course, we now have much more refined research tools. But the model they offer, putting together inquiry and enchantment, is still an example from which so much, I believe, can be learned.

Juan Carlos Galeano, born in the Amazon region of Colombia, is an international poet, environmentalist, filmmaker and academic. Galeano, a mythographer and 'translator' of Amazonian ecological spirituality for Western audiences, is the author of the book *Folktales of the Amazon*, several books of poetry, among them *Amazonia* (2003, 2011, 2012) and *Yakumama* (*and Other Mythical Beings* 2014), translator of various American poets, and the director of the documentary films *The Trees Have a Mother* (2009) and *El Río* (2018). For eight years, he was the director of the FSU Service/Learning Program: Journey into Amazonia in the Peruvian Amazon rainforest. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida, where he teaches Latin American poetry and Amazonian Cultures at Florida State University.
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Basudhara Roy

'Winter of things flow': Poetry, Nature and the Nurture of the Soul. An Interview with Jaydeep Sarangi

Jaydeep Sarangi, a widely anthologised bilingual Indian poet, editor and academic, is dubbed as 'bard on the banks of the Dulung'. Sarangi has nine published poetry collections to his credit and is on the editorial boards of different journals featuring poetry and articles on poetry like *Mascara Literary Review*, *Transnational Literature* (Australia), *Setu* (USA), *Geetanjali and Beyond* (Scotland) *Teesta*, *WEC*, *IJML* (India). He has authored seven critical books on poetry and has edited special issues on poetry for reputed journals in India and abroad. With Amelia Walker he has guest-edited a special volume for *TEXT* (Australia). Among his recent awards are the *Setu Award of Excellence*, 2019 (Petersburg, USA) and *Sufi Literary Award* (2020). He is a Professor of English and principal at New Alipore College, Kolkata[1].

Basudhara Roy You stand poised in the midst of a vibrant academic and creative life. For more than two decades now, you have been actively juggling research, criticism, translation and writing along with important administrative responsibilities. How do these multiple engagements play out in your everyday life and how does poetry interact with them all?

Jaydeep Sarangi I was brought up in a forest enclosed town, Jhargram, where my roots lie. I have been blessed, since my childhood days, with wonderful friends who have consistently brought out the best in me. My fellow academics and colleagues evince rare care, faith and concern for my various administrative, academic and creative commitments. I consider myself really fortunate that in this competitive era of globalization, there are genuine people who take interest in me and my work. I have been a close follower of *His Highness*, the Dalai Lama and have derived abiding inspiration from his book *The Art of Happiness*. I have seen people committed to the highest scale of Truth in various fields of life, have had the fortune of intellectually engaging with souls who epitomise Indian philosophical, spiritual and religious values, and all this has perennially constituted the stream of my motivation! I have learned from them the act of nurturing the golden light of the soul for a calm and peaceful course of mind and this has helped me do more justice to all roles that life has brought my way.

I have heartily enjoyed and benefitted from my teaching career spanning both the extreme rural and urban parts of West Bengal. My heart is full! Administrative posts are chairs to cater services to as many people as one can with an honest heart and a broad smile.

[1] More information about him is available on his website https://jaydeepsarangi.in/.

I attempt to use the spiritual and social laws of communication to bring myself into radiant union with the Higher Power through a collective coexistence. I always believe that there is enormous power and energy in every human relationship. Channelling that to activity is important. I'm blessed that everyone around me has always been supportive and that most administrative tasks have been accomplished by happy, democratic collaborations.

When it comes to writing, both creative and academic, I live a disciplined writing life. I don't carry my baggage of office anxieties to my writing desk. At times when I am down under metro-city numbness, this disciplined writing sustains me. For me, the job of the poet consists of placing those objects of the visible world which have become invisible due to the glue of habit, in an unusual position which strikes the soul and gives them a force. Poetry has been my door, both for entry and exit into a fuller life. It has been the substance of my imagination and the repertoire of my values. In a world given mostly to the pursuit of profit, delight and cheap popularity, poets stand out as saviours of our race.

My commitment to translation almost parallels my commitment to poetry. I believe that worthy literature should be accessible to as many readers as possible and therefore translating Bengali writers into English has been a project very close to my heart. No translation, in my opinion, is complete and definite and I do not consider my translation of a piece as the only way to do justice to its author. But a translative attempt is always a beginning towards ensuring the longevity of a work. As a translator, I am keenly aware of the fact that a translated corpus survives with possibilities and it leaves room for further translation when time ticks to a new frame. With Angana Dutta, I have translated and edited *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal* which has become a valuable text/reference book for universities. I have translated and edited *The Wheel Will Turn: Poems by Manohar Mouli Biswas*. I have worked with Anurima Chanda on a translation of Shyamal Kumar Pramanik's *Untouchable and Other Poems*. I've collaborated on a translation project with the International Centre for Nazrul, Dhaka, Bangladesh. The product is a refreshing read. Recently, my translation of the Sahitya Akademi award-winning author, Subodh Sarkar's poems into English *Not in My Name* has garnered a lot of appreciation from poet and scholar-friends.

BR Your first collection of poems, *From Dulung to Beas,* was re-launched in January this year. Considering that you wanted to update the past in the present, would you tell us why you felt an updated edition of your debut collection necessary and how has your understanding of poetry matured over the years?

JS As you know, we cannot do anything if people around us and the Good Angels don't support us. I am fortunate that all good powers help me when I work. My family, friends and relatives are my constant company. I believe in the principle: develop friendships and enhance existing relationships with co-workers, family and friends. We all live in an unfathomable sea of infinite riches. The world within is the creative power and we must channel this power to productivity. Friends inspire me to work more. My academic and poet-friends spur me on to write more!

Regarding my first book, *From Dulung to Beas,* as both poet and critic, I wanted to have a deeper look at it. In it, my choice of location/subject is deliberate because as a post-colonial

critic my engagement has chiefly been with marginal discourses. I believe in the virtue of celebrating the small and the local. If we look into geography, the big rivers are celebrated and respected widely. The world has so many things to say about them. However, rivulets and small rivers have gone largely ignored. In order to celebrate rural India, it is these smaller springs of water and wisdom that should be celebrated. In the river Dulung, in the Kanak Durga Temple in Chilkigarh located by the river and in the tribal culture associated with the river, I found something very vital both poetically and spiritually. I wanted to transmute what I have experienced with the big reading community through the global English language. Dulung and Beas are the metaphors of the celebration of the local in a global tongue. They constitute a postcolonial brand. On a personal note, Beas has always been the river of my dreams. It has been the cherished springhead of my thoughts since I looked upon it for the first time nearly three decades ago. It was love at first sight and the love has only grown with the years.

Dulung and Beas have been ever-kind to me. I updated this book of poems after ten years with my ageing eyes and with, I hope, a wiser heart. Every revisiting is a gain and I hope the book too has benefitted from this revisiting as much as I have.

BR You have a staggering nine poetry collections to your credit. How would you look back upon this journey? Could you reflect on the themes that are closest to your heart?

JS A well-crafted poem records a unique experience of the world where the poet takes us on a pleasure-ride into the dark embrace of eternal silence, seeking a place in the lyric order of things while words weave themselves into the necessary lines. I feel that night lamps wait in fear of losing their sight. I embrace that aspect of uncertainty and fuzzy zones between arrivals and departures in my poems. Poetry is pre-eminently the art of language. The poet organises the vast complex web of communication which keeps our social life going. Poetry heals the paints of suffering and the dirt of modern living. It is the honest expression of joy in living and loving. The world today is a far more self-conscious place than it was in the days of Alexander Pope. Poetry gives man hope for a better tomorrow. In poetry, the small things keep happening. I write about the land and its people. Rivers are in me. I flow with the rhythm they have.

I know that my poems are loaded with issues in me. My poetic self is a part of the chain of activities around me, my company and my engagements. I write of life, ageing, places, people, and this vast natural world which is our first and last home. In the endorsement to my latest book of poems, *Heart Raining the Light* (2020), Krysia Jopek, author of *Hourglass Studies* and Founding Editor of *Diaphanous Micro* says, "Jaydeep Sarang's poems amalgamate arresting imagery with illogical, yet poetically logical, shifts in their provocatively-dense poetic space[s]. He is a poet to be reckoned with as the reader directly experiences his pithy, rich poems' poetics in the process of writing and erasing their indeterminate, plethora of meaning[s]"[2]. Cameron Hindrum lives, writes and works in Tasmania, Australia. Since 2003

[2] https://jaydeepsarangi.in/poet/ (consulted on 3/05/21).

he has coordinated the annual Tasmanian Poetry Festival and his observation on my poetry runs thus, "Jaydeep Sarangi's poems are finely crafted moments, and take us towards that compelling intersection of the conversational and the metaphysical. Breathe them in deeply, and be rewarded". Much-admired contemporary poets like Mamang Dai, Keki Daruwalla, Bibhu Padhi, Jayanta Mahapatra, Lakshmi Kannan and Dennis Haskell have endorsed my many poetry collections and their observations on my art have shaped my work significantly. Positive vibes from knowledgeable quarters show us different things under new shades. Here goes one of my recent unpublished poems:

Evening
The day is too quiet
all are happy with daily living except
a slow evening without speaking to anyone
I never mind when
occasional thoughts remain to be taken
a friendship with unexpressed sorrow.
I can neither see you nor hear you
only winter of things flow
at the wheel of flying to and fro.
Where do we send our thoughts?
I am too feeble
to write about the evening.
I choose to call it a night
a space without sound and fury
only sleep, deep sleep and forgetting.

BR As a poet, how does the writing process manifest itself to you? Who have been your models in poetry? As an Indian writing in English, do you feel a necessity to uphold your Indianness in your art?

JS I believe there is absolutely no anxiety of upholding my Indianness. No user of English, in my opinion, should carry this anxiety anymore. I am a bilingual writer. I write in English because I feel confident in using the language for creative expression. It is as spontaneous and honest as prayers to an Indian yogi. My writing is inevitably shaped by my reading. I read a lot. There is hardly a day when I don't read poems. I have many models, some poets being close to the head while a few others are close to the heart. The sensuous mystique, John Keats is my favourite. There is always a charm of magic casements in his poems. Reading him is akin to participating in a festival of senses. I read a lot of Pablo Neruda, Geogios Sefaris, Salvatore Quasimodo, Nicanor Parra, Walt Whitman, Robert Browning, Philip Larkin, P. B. Shelley, T. S. Eliot, Emile Dickinson, W. B. Yeats, Nissim Ezekiel, Keki Daruwalla, Jayanta Mahapatra, Niranjan Mohanty, Meena Kandasamy, Kath Walker, A. D. Hope and many other poets during my formative years. Bibhu Padhi has always been a very special poet for me. I read a lot of poetry from the North East of India. Robin S.

Ngangom, Malsawmi Jacob and Mamang Dai are good poet friends. With Rob Harle, I have edited seven anthologies of poetry from Australia and India which brought me in touch with many Australian and Indian poets who are confident and ardent soul makers. I get back to them regularly. I read a lot of Bengali poets too, from Rabindranath Tagore to Srijato. The mosaic is varied and lucrative. I read a lot of poems by poets from different Dalit communities written for social change. What a rich reservoir of poetry! I am fortunate that I can read and write in Bengali.

BR Could you throw light upon your writing space and writing schedule? How does poetry travel from your imagination to your page?

JS I write whenever I get time. There is no particular schedule. But I come to it for a couple of hours every day religiously. Early morning freshness suits me for writing and reading. Thoughts are very important. Sometimes, thoughts stay for a while. Sometimes, they play truant and must be caught at the moment. For poetry, reading again and again helps. Ears are very important. Ears often wait for a particular word. The process is natural. But it comes and goes. There are times when I need revisions. I think a poem is never definite. I keep adding to my poems in time and space.

BR Your poetry, one notes, is intensely alive to a sense of place and placedness. You turn increasingly towards the local for your poetic subject, attempting to summon 'the world' to 'home' rather than vice-versa. What would you say to that?

JS For me, native place is where 'friends play games'. My poetry creates a sense of connectedness to the land, history and people. I write for the people whom I have known since my childhood days. Jhargram is known for its rich and composite tribal culture. Many villages here exhibit a rare tradition of tribal art. I carry my place and its people everywhere and my poetry, too, undoubtedly locates itself in their lives. There is an article I can share with you that throws light on my poetic engagements with place: "Land and Links: Poetic Connections between Kolkata/Jhargram and Canberra by Jaydeep Sarangi and Shane Strange" published in Indian-Australian exchanges through collaborative poetic inquiry[3].

Truthfully speaking, home is the place we return to, both in life and art. We stitch a home with threads of dreams and role relationships. The windows may have broken hinges, but homing is very important in this unhomely world where things fall apart. In my poetry, I always endeavour to return home to my native Jhargram and its green corridor of smiles and singing birds on the roof overhead, far from the city's dust and heat.

BR Though you have travelled much of the world and continue to spend more of your days in Kolkata, the City of Joy and your City of Work and Duty, your poetry remains consistently watermarked by the landscape and culture of your native town, Jhargram. What, in your

[3] *TEXT, Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, 60, 24, 2 (October): http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue60/Sarangi&Strange.pdf (consulted on 3/05/2021).

opinion, makes living in Jhargram distinct from the experience of living elsewhere and in what ways does it fuel your poetic sensibility?

JS Yes! My poems are about me and my surroundings! The City of Joy comes as a living force in my poetic lines. My familiar faces in Kolkata create an honest space for me and my poetic impulse. I often relate myself with the suffering lots of the red soil (in the Western part of the state). All streams from different sources make me write. I write, I flow. In Jhargram, however, I find a soul absent elsewhere. Jhargram is a district in the Southern part of West Bengal known for its dense forest and rain, old temples, and royal palaces. As my native place as also because of its rich natural beauty, its landscape evokes a deep movement of feelings in me. Let me express it through the following lines:

Let Trees of Jhrargram Sing
It's like green epidemic
Green turf, green ideas
Flowing like a rivulet
Murmuring a green song of hope (unpublished).

The poet prepares for an art of creating imaginary gardens with the help of images and symbols drawn from variegated sources. I do the same under the influence of Jhargram's calm and charm.

BR Your poetic self is largely sustained by its proximity to nature. One finds a sense of unhurriedness about your writing. There seems to be a switch in many of your poems from chronological or clock time to earth-time. Could you comment on this eco-consciousness in your poetry and mention in what ways it fulfils you?

JS Nature is our bed where we sleep and get up every day. It's a source of happiness and a harbour of different shades of moods. We ride on those moods. I admire the great Romantics for their preoccupation with nature. Rivers, mountains, fields, forests and leaf gatherers make notes in a symphony – rising, falling, diverging and coalescing for eternity. The return to nature, I find, is like returning to one's mother, to arms where one can always be assured of rest and peace. Many of my poems are landscape poems. I see a river always flowing, brimming happily. Snow-capped mountains are smiling every day. Human hearts can take their happiness from these perennial images in nature as they attempt to move ahead. The life of a poet is an endless journey. It involves the responsibility of uniting the varied dimensions of experience to bring to readers new ideas on life and living. The poet must look both within and beyond clock-time to understand its value and demolish its myths. My poetic eyes try to bring happiness to the mind by returning to nature's rhythms. I try to knit a dreamy yarn around me, its fibre being Nature: "Every evening I learn/many things in these big *sal* trees/There is a poem/ for each one of them/all homeward birds, after the day's toil/I follow them close, green after green"[4].

[4] Jaydeep Sarangi. 2019. *Heart Raining the Light*. Allahabad: Cyberwit.net, 3.

BR It is difficult to ignore in your poetry a deep empathy with the cause of the Dalits. I understand that much of it may stem from your academic championing of Dalit writing. However, empathy is a profound emotion and the presence of it in your writing is an indication of a committed engagement with the life and world of the Dalits. Would you share your experiences with us?

JS My formative years of engagement with the Dalit community has become the sap of my strength. My experiences in that part of Bengal gave me eyes to see, understand and intuit the world as I moved on in life. Now my tree is a full story. It has green as well as yellow leaves. A poet has a sensitive heart to feel all subtle arrivals and departures of wishes and dreams. I count them all. My friendship with several Australian Indigenous writers and activists also gave me a good insight and support into marginality discourse.

I had the opportunity to learn valuably from stalwarts of the Dalit movement in India: Sharankumar Limbale, Bama, Neerav Patel, Arjun Dangle, Harish Mangalam, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Jatin Bala and Kapil Krishna Thakur, all good friends of mine. One of the aims of working on Dalit literature in India has been to reveal to the greater society, the injustice, oppression, helplessness and struggles of many of the disadvantaged populations under the social machine of stratification in India. Caste politics in India is unique and culture specific. It's a powerful experience to work with Dalit writers! My work is my book. I chant for those who build homes sculpting Dravida shores. I stand for courageous bards singing plaintively the forgotten lofty histories of the Non-Aryan civilization.

I think my interest in Dalit literature goes back to the year 2002 when I started working on marginalised writers because I came across a grand corpus of marginal discourse from Maharashtra and Gujarat through my academic friends. Immediately, I could trace a sound militant body of discourse from West Bengal. I edited the Dalit writings of Bangla in *the Journal of Literature and Aesthetics* from Kerala long ago and that was my first engagement with the Bengali Dalit writers writing for quite some time. It came out from Kerala and it became an engagement for me. Now, it has become a mission of my life to be with them and shoulder their pains. It is also, perhaps, a sphere through which I can go back to my cultural roots. I find Dalit writing very potent and fascinating. I am not afraid to face the truth it places before the world and I am not afraid to unfold their truth in whatever small and humble way I can. So, now it has become a commitment – a journey we will travel together. I am happy to tell you that a sound corpus of Bengali Dalit Literature exists today with considerable academic authority. I, myself, have interviewed most of the Dalit writers I know and have published these interviews in seminal journals in Australia, India, Slovania, Romania, Spain and Italy. I am confident that these interviews have had far-reaching academic impact and that many scholars, drawn by them, have taken up projects on Dalit Studies.

BR Working within the broad post-colonial and post-modern literary / critical paradigm, as an academic and commentator, how do you view these dominant strands in English Studies in the Indian metropolitan universities of the first decades of the New Millennium?

JS Things are changing fast. Writers from the margins have emerged as a vital and significant literary force. Many universities have included new writings and papers on contemporary translation in their syllabi and students are taking up projects in new and challenging areas. For example, Dalit writing is taught at different universities today and it is good to see it properly represented. Bangla Dalit Writing and Literature from the North-East are yet to be included through a structural form. There are really quality works from these literary bodies. Manoranjan Byapari's *Itebritte Chandal Jiban* is a fascinating confessional autobiography. It should be translated and marketed widely. It should be available for the common masses of countrymen. I would like to see a Translators' Association and its active role in the near future. Some colleges and Universities have made useful changes in teaching and learning to cope with the current demands of students. Academic committees and Board of Studies of the universities should go for need-based literature courses and they should include or invite experts who have knowledge in designing new types of courses. I like to see a great change in academic governance in the Indian metropolitan universities in the days to come! Literature, if anything, should be inclusive and widely representative of its essential inclusiveness.

BR As a poet and critic, how do you look at the scenario of English poetry in India today?

JS English Poetry in India has become a significant self-sustaining tradition with ever-growing international readership and academic curiosity. The contemporary poets in English have earned their recognition through sheer merit and resourcefulness without an expiry date. They have wide readership across the globe as they reflect their private and universal links with the world. Some are writing about borders, blurring borders, hybrid space, angst of oppression, travels, social issues, which make them unique and amazing. The list of New Indian poets in English is a huge one. College and school students are writing fantastic poetry. The Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library in Kolkata has done a fabulous job of bringing poetry to the heart of the nation. The anxiety of acceptance and appropriation in the context of English poetry is a matter of the remote past now. Indian poets, today, are confident, blunt, bold and intelligent and there is no end of good and authentic anthologies to endorse the fact. They are writing from different backgrounds, time zones, linguistic-contact zones and cultural contexts with the result that Indian poets of the present generation are unique soul makers on several planes. They have great control over myths and legends, language, choice of words and cadence. I believe it's time to reject the nomenclature 'Indian Poetry in English' and call it 'English Poetry from India'.

BR Why do you write poems, a threatened literary species these days?

JS Man is made by his beliefs and volitions. As he believes, so he is. Poetry is a lot of things to a lot of people. Emily Dickinson said, "If I read a book and it makes my body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know that is poetry"[5]. It is the chiseled marble of language through

[5] Emily Dickinson. 1971. *Selected Letters* (ed. by Thomas H. Johnson) Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 208.

which emotions are expressed. For me, writing poetry is like grasping at the wind … I like Jayanta Mahapatra's famous comment, "poetry has to be witness" in his recent essay published in *Indian Literature*[6]. I write poems because I feel happy after writing. I call upon Lazarus keeping the mind shining gold:

Lazarus is Calling
Dark night is closer,
calling, calling from the trees
Night owls are crying
ominous is dancing in the branches
Of slow time, night unfolds
its ranges of stories, night's acts.
All dead voices lying ice cold
are up with night's song.
Night's mysteries are awake
after a long cold sleep.
Foul smells hard, ghostly
bodies decaying flesh.
One uncouth face conjures up,
other unshaped faces, deep dark.
Only the hooded eyes
strange sounds of murmur. Callings.
Nobody is awake, at this dead hour
only a child's shrill cry. Hags' hooting.
Spirits of the dead have a night out, refugee
camps are dim. All are waiting
for an appointment with the unknown[7].

Basudhara Roy is Assistant Professor of English at Karim City College affiliated to Kolhan University, Chaibasa. She is the author of three books, a monograph, *Migrations of Hope: A Study of the Short Fiction of Three Indian American Writers* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2019) and two collection of poems, *Moon in my Teacup* (Kolkata: Writer's Workshop, 2019) and *Stitching a Home* (New Delhi: Red River, 2021).
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[6] Jayanta Mahapatra. 2020. *Indian Literature*, 315 (March-April): 47.

[7] Jaydeep Sarangi. 2019. *Heart Raining the Light*. Allahabad: Cyberwit.net, 3.