Il Tolomeo

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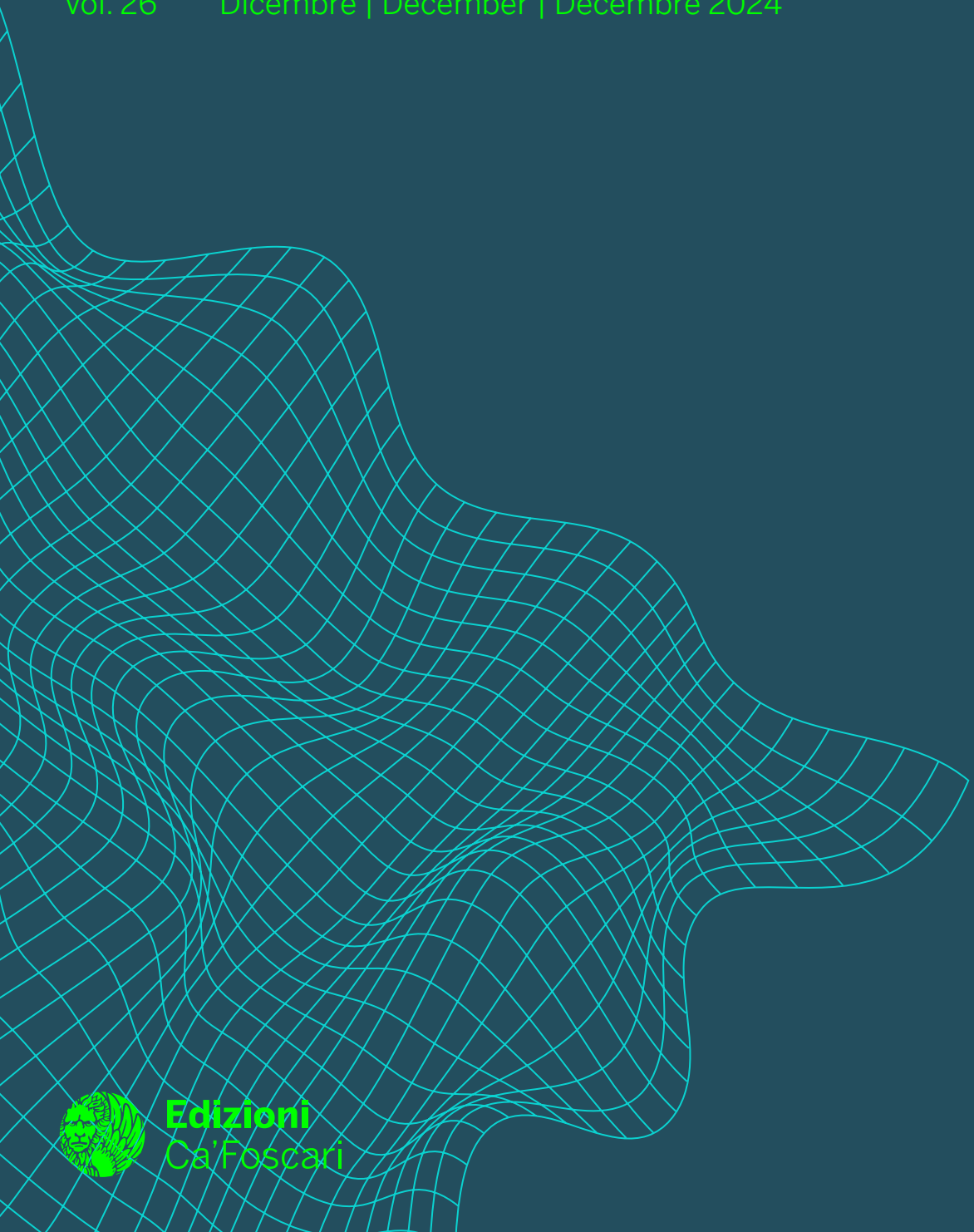

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Direzione e redazione | Head office | Siège | Sede Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia | Dorsoduro 1405, 30123 Venezia | tolomeo@unive.it

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Sommario | Table of contents | Résumé | Índice

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"The Malcolm X Stare": Messages from David Fennario on Where We Should Stand

Paola Irene Galli Mastrodonato
Università degli Studi della Tuscia, Italia

To Tom and Liz

I here present a selection of the almost ten-year-long email correspondence I enjoyed with David Fennario, an author on whom I have extensively written and published.[1] I have chosen to leave the stage offered by *Il Tolomeo* entirely to David, who is no longer with us, so that his message shall remain as loud and clear as possible. It is an excruciating and precious testimony to our times in the West, as seen by an incredibly talented but undeservedly unrecognized working-class artist.

The messages that follow deal with a variety of themes, ranging from Fennario's theory of political theatre, to the role played by war and the militaristic engagement of our western societies, to reflections on issues such as his upbringing and his neighbourhood, at the centre of his poetics, and they alternate with some of David's poems.

I received this email from David on January 23, 2014, the year when his play *Motherhouse* came out:[2]

1 See the select bibliography at the end of my obituary, "In Memory of David Fennario, 1947-2023". *Il Tolomeo*, 25, 2023, 363-5. http://doi.org/10.30687/Tol/2499-5975/2023/01/037.

2 In *Motherhouse* (2014), conceived as a sequel to *Bolsheviki* (2012) and dedicated to the Canadian engagement in World War I, Fennario further emphasizes his opposition to the "militaristic trend" of our times by adopting a woman character, the Anglophone

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> Recommend you start watching old films on the Turner Film classic channel 338 of the postwar forties before the rise of McCarthyism and blackmailing of leftist artists in Hollywood.
> Check out you tube for *Intruder in the Dust* based on Faulkner's novel of the same and *The Joe Louis Story* made in the black&white Forties.
> The Malcolm X stare in the eyes of the cornerman and trainer of boxing champ Joe Louis and William Faulkner's black Lucas of segregated Oxford, Mississippi, defies all stereotyping of blacks of the time when America was deeply segregated.
> Real breathing living blacks not step-n-fetching-it.
> No wonder Joe McCarthy and Nixon and other members of the House of Congress Committee on Un-American Activities went bananas with their campaign to 'purge Hollywood of Communists'.
> Took twenty years before we saw that Malcolm X stare back on the faces of black performers in film.
> What a terrible waste of talents occurred in the McCarthy Era when Leftists of all varieties were black-listed out of mainstream Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.
> But what are we to say today about the post modernist intelligentsia now in the Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences?
> Nobody beat them into silence
> Nobody really forced them to stop telling the truth
> They did it to themselves
> Malcolm said long time ago
> No Solution but Revolution.

Motherhouse is also the occasion for expanding David's theory and practice of an anti-illusionary theatre:

> I feel very satisfied with *Motherhouse* as an artistic and political intervention in its very nature without really purposely planning it to be such a challenge to theater establishment. A tremendous challenge because of its simple premise that the performers are up there IN touch with their audience letting them know their opinions and critique in a public form. In other words, a return to the age old tradition as a school of entertainment that we learn from by discussing in an entertaining fashion issues that affect our society. I don't pretend or ever wanted to be one of those artists with grand theories about what is the right or wrong theatrical technique. I came to my conclusions for the need of an anti-illusionary style of

Lillabit from David's neighborhood in Verdun, and representing through her long monologue all the female workers in the British Munitions factory that assembled weapons for the conflict in Europe.

> performance and script as an entertainer that wanted his audience to really think and feel and be moved, hopefully into action against some of the social issues facing us today.
> I think *Motherhouse* in a small but important way, proves it can be done. It's no coincidence that a lot of the negative reviews I've received for *Motherhouse* are hostile to my political vision, and in particular to my celebration of resistance from the ground up.
> I must admit I'm quite daunted with the thought that at this particular moment I'm actually the one taking the lead in this ground breaking challenge to the total theater of illusion. With all its world famous experts who have written whole books on the giants of our craft, including Brecht because up till now I've always managed to pay my rent without knowing my ass from my elbow.
> "Stanislavski who?"
> But as Karl Marx once said "FUCK EM if they can't take a joke." (February 6, 2016)

Motherhouse soon became a ground-breaker in Canadian theatre, as David himself points out:

> First to challenge in a public forum the Quebec Anglo elite on their continuing denial of the historical oppression of Quebec as a nation;
> First to define Protestant Verdun as a settler colony similar to those that British imperialists established in Asia, Africa and Northern Ireland;
> First to celebrate and advocate mass resistance as a deterrent to the growing militarization of our society;
> First to challenge the hierarchal imposition of Full Illusionary Theatre on all theatre practice and theory;
> First to point out that such a hierarchy exists;
> First to champion an anti-illusionary approach to theatre based on Brechtian practice and theory;
> A pioneer in the designing of plays made to be used as political interventions in the class struggle. (August 9, 2014)

Commenting on illusionary theatre, do we still need Beckett on stage, David wonders:

> The lack of support for Anglo theatre in Montreal could have something to do with what does get done on stage.
> For example Guy Sprung is a big fan of Samuel Beckett.
> You know, meaninglessness of life…ho hum…screaming angst… yawn… flashing lights …burp… and does anyone outside of tenured academia really-really believe any more that nudity on stage is some kind of social critique?

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> The Carré Rouge painting the whole town red during the student strike is the kind of energy we need on stage based on the celebration and affirmation of life. (September 16, 2017)

Canadian movie director, animator and actor Neil Affleck wrote this email to David on August 7, 2020, stressing David's recognition by the Francophone community as Montréal's leading playwright:

> *"Je me réjouis que Fabien Deglise nous rappelled l'importance de David Fennario parmi les écrivains qui ont le mieux reflété une des périodes les plus touchantes de la vie montréalaise."*
>
> Not Too Shabby Dave!! It seems you have officially joined *Maître* Michel Tremblay in the pantheon of significant progressive Quebecois *persons of letters!* Pretty cool!
> I read both the *Devoir* piece and the Louis-Dominique Lavigne letter to Editor *en français* and all I can say is Yeah Man!![3]

Despite some well-deserved critical acclaim, David held a strained relationship with the literary establishment:

> A few years back I got an email from something called the Canadian Theater Museum, who got my address from the Guild of Canadian Playwrights, congratulating me on being accepted on the roster of playwrights selected by the Museum.
> My gut reaction was one of anger.
> Who says I want to be part of their fucking selection or be congratulated for it?
> I mean don't you have to be dead before you get to be a museum display?
> Sorry I said in my gut response, I'm not dead yet and got a snarky reply back from them.
> But the truth is there's a lot of dead theater out that does belong in a museum.
> As the playwright Rolf Hochhuth says in his play *Soldiers*:[4]
>
> '…the theater isn't a museum.
> History only ceases to be academic

3 Fabien Deglise is a prominent journalist with Montréal's leading Francophone newspaper *Le Devoir*; Louis-Dominique Lavigne is a playwright and founder of CEAD (Centre des auteurs dramatiques); Michel Tremblay is Québec's leading author, novelist and playwright, sharing with David his common working-class origins.

4 Rolf Hochhuth (1931-2020) was a German author and playwright; his play *Soldiers, An Obituary for Geneva* (1967) contained a strong denunciation of the bombing of civilian areas by the Royal Air Force during World War II.

when it can illustrate for us and now
man's inhumanity to man…'
(December 6, 2014)

This feeling of rejection by the academia resulted in one of David's most striking poems:

For the Literati
I don't want to be remembered by you
I don't want your celebration or documentations
memorialized or editorialized or summarized by you
bar me from your schools of learning
spare me all your speculations
your museum retrospections
your plaques of recognition
your sanctifications and decorations
you are the death of me
I don't want to be remembered by you
(October 30, 2017)

My defiance of the literati in my poem is not based on self-pity but contempt
I was recently informed by city councilors in Verdun that they wanted to name some public space after me
I said no because I don't want them claiming me
I am anti-capitalist to the bone.
(November 1, 2017)

David often reminisces about his neighborhood in Verdun, Pointe-Saint-Charles / *Balconville*:[5]

This is what my first glimpse of the world looked like looking down from the second floor balcony of a six-plex on Second Avenue in

5 *Balconville* is David Fennario's greatest dramatic achievement. After it premiered at Centaur Theatre in 1979, in the wake of the Francophone nationalist party electoral success in 1976, the Parti Québécois, the play enjoyed a tremendous success with over 50 000 spectators attending in Montréal only, and it soon became one of the most popular plays ever in the English Canadian dramatic canon. It has been represented since then in Toronto and abroad, with a memorable *tournée* in England and Northern Ireland, an occasion which gave rise to Fennario's monologue play *Banana Boots* (1998), and in Italy it was presented at the Festival Quartieri dell'Arte in 2005 in Caprarola (Viterbo), with my translation. The play's title contains the poetics of Fennario's theatre: it is a hot summer day in Pointe-Saint-Charles, a disadvantaged, working-class, ghettoized neighborhood, where the eight characters (four Anglophones and four Francophones) living in a two-story popular tenement try to find relief from the heat, both groups expressing themselves in their own language.

> the most densely populated sector of the most densely populated municipality in Canada according to statistics
> the noise of it all echoing upward
> not exactly the 'road to Avonlea'
> motherhouse.
> The photo caption says it's a photo shot in the 1930's of a family moving but it could easily be a shot of yet another family being evicted for non-payment of rent on the Avenues at a time when half of Verdun was on relief in the Depression.
> A Verdun unemployment group lead by Kent Rowley often organized against evictions
> Militants would put the furniture the bailiff's men had deposited on the street back in the house and then block any further attempts to evict by picketing
> Essentially making the action a community action
> Kent went on later to lead in partnership with Madeleine Parent the historic Valleyfield strike of 1946, a landmark victory for Quebec workers.
> Now there's someone we can name a street after down here in Balconville.
> (August 30, 2014)

> As a four year old remembering when Wellington Street was still festooned with telegraph and telephone wires extending from pole to pole to pole and crowds of people bumping along sidewalks paved with slab stone and me hanging onto my sister Peggy Ann's hand hoping we don't get lost in all this sudden noise and never find our way back home to 633 Second Avenue. (November 23, 2020)

David's complicated relationship with the past makes him think back on his difficult journey from class subalternity to becoming a fully-fledged artist with a new name (from a Bob Dylan song) and a new identity:

> It saddens me to hear of that young humpback whale dying a few days ago and has me now thinking of all my crazy traveling days coming close to sudden death at least four times hitch-hiking that summer of 1963 down down down the US One all the way to Daytona Beach Florida where I got busted for vagrancy and even though I did manage to get back to Montreal a month later it was David Fennario that came back not David Wiper. (July 4, 2020)

As a Marxist, David has painstakingly documented himself on World War I in preparation for *Bolsheviki* and *Motherhouse*:

> Done a lot of reading on WWI especially over the last few years as research for *Bolsheviki* and *Motherhouse*.

> Some have a critique that includes imperialist ambitions as the main case of the war but only a tiny percent even barely mention that there was mass resistance from the rank-and-file and that it played a key role in ending that war.
> A few – so few you could list them all on one page – make the rank and resistance its central focus, i.e. *Generals Die in Bed*, *The Monocled Mutineer* recommended.[6]
> But I am the only one in Canadian literature and theatre or elsewhere – as far as I know – that actually celebrates that resistance and argues for it as the best way to stop wars.
> I'm more amazed than proud of that fact, disturbed really that it should be so.
> All this to say we have a weapon here so let's use it as part of the resistance to Harper's push to have us in another war.[7] (September 17, 2014)

David in his later years felt an increasing urge to denounce war and its aftermath, the human cost:

> Watching one of the episodes of the Ken Burns documentary series on the Vietnam war – recommended – dealing with the first American ground troops sent overseas, the US marines landing in Danang in 1965, and I'm thinking… Danang… yah my cousin Peter, a big brassy boom of a guy, he was one of those marines.
> A year later Peter was back home, all fucked up when we met him at a Xmas family gathering, passing around photos of dead bodies piled up on street corners in Saigon, along with photos of himself with teenage hookers all draped around his neck.
> Pete got better in time but never quite lost a strange shriek in his laughter that made you wonder… where did that come from?
> I never asked because I didn't want to know.
>
> My mother always said my father came back a stranger to her after being wounded overseas in WWII.
> The photos of my father before and after the war confirm what she said
> The human body is not wired for the stress of war even and despite being trained as a marine
> There's hope in that fault. (September 21, 2017)

6 *Generals Die in Bed* (1930) is an anti-war novella by Canadian writer Charles Yale Harrison; *The Monocled Mutineer* is a book published in 1978 by William Allison and John Fairley, which in 1987 became a famous BBC drama series centered on army deserter Percy Toplis.

7 Stephen Joseph Harper served as Prime Minister of Canada from 2006 to 2015.

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I was there today with Liz [Elizabeth Johansen, David's wife] standing behind the Échec à la guerre banner wearing our white poppies along with John Bradley, Martin Duckworth and about sixty or so other anti-war protesters and this year no attempt was made to push the protesters out of the vicinity of the Remembrance Day ceremonies.
Remember in November
I dedicated my first book *Without A Parachute* back in 1972 to my grandfather Andrew Boyle missing at the Battle of the Somme in 1916.
When my grandmother Jeannie first read the dedication she hugged the book to herself and burst out crying for the young man who had died over fifty years before
All that grief she held inside
I was thinking of her today. (November 12, 2017)

'Happy Ending'
Come down to Verdun on Remembrance Day when the browns and grays of November combined with the browns and grays of the tenements provide the perfect back of a community of doom and gloom that had the highest military casualty rate in World War One and World War Two.
So easy to put the statistics down on paper but not so easy to talk about, especially coming from a family with a long connection to death and mass murder.
My grandfather Jock Kerr fought in WWI and my father in WWII and I tried to join the Army in 1960's but flunked the medical, but my younger brother James Wiper junior continued the family tradition and joined the army and saw action in Bosnia and came back not too fucked up, not like my father James Wiper senior in 1945 who promised my mother when the war broke out in 1939, the year that they got married, that he wouldn't join the recruits, but when France fell to the Nazis in 1940 he decided to join the fight and signed up with the Engineers figuring he might learn a trade of some sorts overseas while fighting Hitler and Mussolini.
But he didn't tell my mother he was going overseas right away, waiting till the very last minute when she totally flipped out in the old Bonaventure train station and fell down screaming and crying and hanging onto his trouser leg right there on the platform in front of hundreds of people as he boarded the troop train in June of 1940 to England where he gets wounded twice in the Battle of Britain and doesn't return until August of 1945.
But he was not the same man I married, my mother used to say whenever she got pissed, "He came back a stranger to me".
He stayed a silent stranger with an angry frowning mask of a face put there from all the death and destruction he witnessed

overseas, until the 1980's when he started going senile with my mother complaining he kept forgetting to put on his socks when he put on his shoes, but in the process of forgetting who he was, my father also forgot the war and the more he forgot the more the frown disappeared from his face. (November 14, 2017)

So I decide ok – because this is in the 1980's and I'm really in the money – ok now's the time to give my parents a treat by taking them out to Vancouver because my mother hasn't seen her sister my Aunt Ann in thirty years and then going out there by CR Rail four days on the train because they won't get on a plane with my mother in her glory cheating at Bingo during the day and getting pissed in the bar car every night with me tipping the waiter, the bus boy and porters and the conductor so they'll put up with my Maw getting loud and pissed and then in Vancouver getting loud and pissed with my Aunt Ann in the Dover Inn pub in Vancouver where all the limeys on the West Coast go because the Dover serves British bitter on tap and fish and chips on newspaper and everyone singing the old army songs.
And my old man who was having trouble remembering who he once was, remembered the words to one of the songs they were singing

'There will be blue birds over
the white cliffs of Dover
tomorrow when the world is free
there'll be love and laughter
and peace ever after
tomorrow when the world is free'. (May 21, 2018)

Meanwhile working on writing about my family life in context of growing up in Anglophone protestant Verdun, a community that made a living getting itself killed in two world wars.
Did you know that Verdun had the highest war casualty rates of any community in Canada in both world wars?
That Verdun is the only community that has two annual war memorial ceremonies and parades in Canada?
There is a reason why there was a place until recently called the Verdun Protestant Hospital for the Insane
My father, who saw a lot of death overseas and was wounded twice, came back crazy and never really fully recovered and neither did hundreds of other veterans from Verdun. (June 15, 2018)

My dad spent five years in the Canadian Army as a volunteer in WWII and was wounded twice defending England during the Battle of Britain when Hitler was bombing the shit out of London

> And I remember when I was a young kid asking my father what he would do if Hitler walked in through our back door
> "Shoot him" he said. (July 22, 2018)

David took inspiration from real-life characters for *Bolsheviki*:[8]

> Harry Rowbottom was one of those kids still bitter about what he and his brother went through on the farms as "Home Children". Harry's brother died in the Battle of Loos in 1915 but Harry lived on until his 80's when I interviewed him and he told me about how he heard while lying in a bed in an army hospital after being wounded in the battle of Vimy Ridge that a revolution was happening in Russia and that the soldiers were walking out of the trenches going home and him and the other wounded soldiers got so excited that a riot broke out right there in the army hospital. Harry never had much of a family but he had comrades by his side all the rest of his life.
> I put his story in my play *Bolsheviki*. (October 7, 2017)

A poem by David, "Red Annie":

> The poem (Red Annie) I wrote regarding one of the Home children that got put on the farms, based on a story I heard down in a bar in what used to be called the West End and is now known as Little Burgundy:
>
> *I see my fourteen year old Anne of Green Gables*
> *freckles and red hair in pig tails with a pregnant belly and small suitcase in hand*
> *standing confused in the crowded concourse of Windsor Station in 1910*
> *on a cold wet day in April in Montreal*
> *she's not here to seek her fame and fortune*
> *she's here because she is five months pregnant*
> *and doesn't know which of the three men on that farm*
> *with the same rough hands had done it to her in the barn*
> *and now standing there with people banging and bumping into her*
> *until someone takes her by the arm*

8 In Fennario's provocative, anti-war, monologue play *Bolsheviki*, Canadian involvement in Europe during World War I becomes the occasion to create once again a mixed and wonderfully powerful bilingual theatre. Through the characters of veteran Rosie Rollins (modeled after Rowbottom), coming from the begrudging slum neighborhood of Griffintown, home to the descendants of the Irish who had escaped the Potato Famine of mid Nineteenth century, and his Francophone buddy Rummie Robidou, met in the hell of trench warfare in Flanders, separate destinies unite and languages merge.

down a flight of stairs of the Saint Antoine street exit
and turns the corner out of time and history
never to be seen again
except as an item viewed on archive microfilm
of just another woman found dead in just another rooming house
around the corner from Windsor Station
where the door slams the lights go out and she's no longer there
(October 8, 2017)

David has always remained true to his anti-establishment commitment to popular culture and its musical expressions:

> Just watched a tribute to Smokey Robinson on TV with various performers doing his greatest hits to a live but very white upper middle class audience in New York City, songs like "You Really Got A Hold on Me", and yah ok some of the performers were into it but our Jackie Robinson from Reading street in the Point on his own alone with a quart of beer and the usual broken string on his guitar I guarantee woulda broken hearts with his version of the same song.
> The only official gig Jackie ever did was one I organized for one night only in the Student's Union Room at Concordia before a small audience that kept getting larger and larger pulling in black students passing by in the hallway and stopping, puzzled by this skinny white kid with crooked teeth from the Point doing R&B blues so well in his own voice:
>
> 'I was born by the river
> in a little old shack
> and like that river
> I've been running ever since
> it's been a long time coming
> but a change is going to come'
> (July 23, 2017)
>
> One good thing about rock n roll music
> just one good thing about rock n roll
> when it hits you, you feel no pain
> (July 28, 2017)
>
> Meanwhile I'm gonna sign off on the correspondence on Jackie Robinson of Point Saint Charles, and sort of feeling a bit worried you'd be thinking that I've been trying to promote Jackie into the unique rank of the great artist category, because Jackie himself was quite content with just being himself for himself and giving his friends a good time.

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> Jackie does deserve personal credit I think, as being mostly likely one of the first in Montreal to introduce James Brown, Otis Redding and Etta James to a bunch of Verdunerheads like me before the color line on Soul Music was broken and James Brown went mainstream. Music of the people, by the people, for the people.
> (July 29, 2017)

> Their big hit song "1-2-5" can still get me up on the dance floor
> I crashed once with the Haunted[9] at their place in the infamous Amesbury Apartment on Dorchester street – now named after Uncle René Lévesque – back in 1966
> The nuns in the nunnery across the street used to call the cops on us just about every weekend and one night the drug squad hauled everybody in except me hiding under a bed hanging onto the bed springs
> People forget how so very straight and narrow and repressed and depressed and oppressed it was back then when what you wore or how long your hair was or your preference for grass over booze could and did end up with lots of my street pals doing serious time in the Pen
> But we kept on rocking.
> (April 19, 2019)

A poem by David, "James Brown dies on Xmas morning":

> *He was scheduled to play the Club Metropolis here*
> *in Montreal on January 3 2007, so I never got to see*
> *him live on stage doing the splits and spin*
> *but I lost respect for the 'Godfather of Soul' when*
> *he came out for Leon Spinks in the celebrated match*
> *with Mohammed Ali at the Hilton Hotel in Las Vegas*
> *all the experts figured Spinks was going to win*
> *so James Brown bet on him even though he said*
> *his heart was with Mohammed Ali*
> *I've known too many guys like him who once had soul*
> *but lost it when they went for the smart money*
> *sometimes you got to be dumb to be smart*
> (June 25, 2018)

Nobel prize winner Bob Dylan represented David's guiding star:

> 'And Ezra Pound and T.S Eliot
> fighting in the captain's tower

9 The Haunted were a Montreal rock band active between 1966 and 1971.

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while calypso ladies laugh at them
and fishermen hold flowers'
Bob Dylan (October 29, 2017)

'you don't need a weatherman
to know which way the wind blows'
Bob Dylan (June 27, 2018)

David's reflections on our political and social system, as climate change begins to hit hard:

> I am of the same generation as the pensioners down in Florida; many of them like me were part of the New Left that organized and protested in the 60's and 70's against oppression and exploitation and won some victories.
> A lot of them later in the downturn of the economy in 1980's and 90's began investing in the system as the only safe means of securing some security as they aged.
> Look at all those new high rise towers down in Florida being built-for the now retiring baby boomers to live out the rest of their lives safe, secure, and warm.
> Hurricane Ira is now teaching them what they really invested in
> This is what you paid for
> This is what you get
> But you still got time to correct your mistake
> Obviously the US government and FEMA[10] and other officials are much more concerned about protecting property than people
> so don't make it easy for them
> Don't leave town
> Get out there in the water wind and rain and kick ass
> Having the cops beat up on old folks will let people know where it's really at. (September 10, 2017)

> The Montreal Metro is under water with Venice sinking down into the sea and Australia and California and other parts of the globe either on fire or scheduled to disappear under water as we speak. It's like waking up inside an unreal B rated disaster movie featuring [a political leader] playing the role of the mad scientist in charge of an army of zombies. (November 14, 2019)

The first election of US President Donald Trump was felt by David as a traumatic event, as well as highlighting the American amnesia about the Vietnam war:

10 FEMA is the USA equivalent of Italian Protezione Civile.

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> Most frightening show on Halloween night is not a movie but watching the Trump creep show on the CNN news channel, the night crawlers, bottom feeders, vampires and zombies posing as human beings before the TV cameras
> Truly frightening to think what's going to happen down here at the bottom of the food chain if we don't start waking up from this nightmare soon
> Health Care Not War Fare
> Books Not Bombs
> No Blood For Oil.
> (October 31, 2017)

> The mass media busy satirizing themselves on mainstream television pumping out exposures on the Trump administration sounding like it was scripted by a hack reporter for a tabloid magazine minus a Martian or two seen in the White House.
> Trump in Vietnam, the country that lost three or four million people in the American attempt to 'bomb Vietnam into the Stone Age' back in the 60's and 70's
> telling the Vietnamese that 'America Comes First'
> Get the message?
> (November 10, 2017)

> Trump does a speech praising the military in front of the Lincoln Memorial, where Martin Luther King once did his 'I Have A Dream' speech in the summer of 1963, to an almost all white audience in their beady eyed bigot thousands looking like they just crawled out from under a rock cheering on their hero while military jets zoomed over their head all so grotesque, obscene and sinister.

> Trump in passing mentioned and praised the Civil War and World War One and Two as fights to defend American freedom but not one single word or syllable about Vietnam.
> The names of the fifty thousand or so Americans that were killed in that war are inscribed on a memorial wall in Washington that stretches about a city block long
> About eight million Vietnamese – give or take a hundred thousand or so – were killed in the decade long carpet bombing of Vietnam. If the Vietnamese ever erect a memorial wall with the names of their dead men women and children it'll stretch about 200 blocks long. (July 5, 2019)

David has granted special attention to Canadian First Nations, as in his play *Doctor Thomas Neill Cream* (1993), in these emails he deliberately uses the term Indian:

Indian is a deliberate choice because it was the only term used during the period that I'm writing about.
I respect the fact that officially native or indigenous people are the proper terms to use but unofficially I've had some activist friends object to the official choice
Indians are known to run wild
Natives get restless
But indigenous people are just items on someone else's agenda.
(December 4, 2017)

I think I have more written on a suicidal winter tour out west that included the Sault, Winnipeg, Regina and Edmonton known there as Deadmonton, and over all realizing it's the same coast to coast newspaper montage of Indians found shot sliced stabbed or fast frozen here in our home on native land
Maybe do my own tourist guide book
'The 911 Tour of Canada'.
(November 26, 2017)

It was during a coast-to-coast winter tour as a famous playwright back in the 1980's from Halifax to Vancouver, and everywhere it was the same tabloid montage of natives found fast frozen to the sidewalk often in the parking space next to the hotels we were booked into. It was all accepted hohum by the hotel management and my touring director but by time we hit Saskatoonie [Saskatoon] I was getting real fucking verbal about having fast frozen natives as part of the western hotel decor.
I'm usually a good time drinker as you know but I was persona non grata by the time that fucking tour ended in Vancouver, where the touring director left me on my own to find my way back home from what turned out to be my first and final national tour.
That'll teach me.
(December 6, 2017)

Check out the *Gazette* for an article on Sir John A Macdonald that reads "Historians Make Move to Strike Macdonald's Name From Prize".
The author James Daschuk, winner of the 'Sir John A Macdonald Prize for Best Scholarly Book in Canadian History', said he thought it ironic that his book entitled *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the loss of Aboriginal Life* (2013) which exposes Macdonald's genocidal treatment of indigenous people should win a prize with his name on it.
Some years back some Métis in Montreal under cover of the night sawed off the head of Sir John A's statue in Dominion Square and

left a note stating they were keeping it for ransom until the Métis got their land back.
I got some treasured photos of Sir John A still minus his head
It was a definite improvement.
(December 21, 2017)

David considered school a discriminatory institution for working-class kids:

An article in the Gazoo [*Montreal Gazette*] mentioning how many persons of talent and fame, doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs and artists like Mordecai Richler, were graduates of Baron Byng High School.
What a comparison to my old alma mater, Verdun High School, that can only claim three famous persons:
Buzz Beurling, the leading war ace of the Allied Armed Forces in World War Two who shot down more fascists than any other Allied pilot;
Scotty Bowman, the coach of the Montreal Canadiens who still holds the record for winning the most Stanley Cups for the Best [hockey] Team of the Season;
David Fennario, the playwright who was the first to put the F word into the theatrical dialogue on stage;
All of them high school drop outs.
(May 3, 2018)

Don't know much about Maynard,[11] but being black in Verdun at that time would have been a very solitary experience, unless you were willing to be a clown. Maybe ten blacks in an all white blue collar high school of hundreds of students, with very few being openly racist, but he would have been stereotyped beyond forgiveness, that's for sure.
Very much doubt if he'd appreciated being classified as a Verdunerhead.
I have very much the same feelings about myself.
When I was invited back to Verdun High as a 'Famous Canadian Playwright' I opened my speech to a large crowd of students by saying:
"I never thought I'd come back here except to burn the place down"
Maynard, no doubt, could have set what I said to music.
(May 7, 2018)

11 Walter Maynard Ferguson (1928-2006) was a white Canadian jazz trumpeter and bandleader, born and raised in Verdun, Montreal. He collaborated with Oscar Peterson (1925-2007), who was a black jazz piano player, also born in Montreal, as a correspondent writes to David on 8/5/2018.

British colonialism and the legacy left to Canada has often been portrayed in David's theatre; foremost is *Joe Beef* (1991):

> Watching the Royal Wedding and remembering Eddie Casey, Dan Casey's father, a Catholic out of Belfast saying "I'd like to take a good long piss on [a royal member]"
> Not Forgiven and Not Forgotten.
> (May 19, 2018)

> Can also add Metro Peel named after British prime minister Robert Peel, whose policies during the great Irish Famine of 1847 lead to the death by starvation of millions of men, women and especially children
> All the names of our oppressors and exploiters have to go along with a society based on profit not people.
> (June 24, 2018)

> Hope you're enjoying the increase of the decrease of Sir John [Macdonald] statues and memorials all across our true land strong and free
> I've been smiling in my sleep for weeks
> Imagine the equivalent happening down in the States to that slave owner George Washington father of the disunited States.
> Anyhow I've always had a vague idea of what Canada was all about anyhow starting from grade school down on the Avenues where protestant kids were taught to salute the Union Jack and sing 'God Save the Queen' first thing every morning in class and meanwhile there's my catholic buddies in parochial schools run by nuns and priests preaching that the only thing worth living for is dying as quick as possible so you can get into some fucking place called Heaven but only if and after you passed something called The Catechism with absolutely no instructions on how to become something people from Ontario called Canadian.
> (August 21, 2018)

The legacy of slavery in the US is also a heavy burden to bear:

> The film *Abraham Lincoln the Vampire Hunter* (2012) set during the American Civil War portrays the 'Old South' as an evil empire ruled by vampires feeding off their slaves, with Lincoln with an axe leading the attack against them; it has all the guts and gore of a film made for teenage consumption but it's the only thing I've seen on screen that truly portrays the pure evil and horror of an empire based on slavery and white supremacy, it gives a whole new take on *Gone with the Wind* and a heroine whose first name is Scarlet. (July 26, 2019)

David, whose life since the beginning of the new millennium had been severely hampered by a neurological condition, has some considerations on the COVID-19 pandemic:

> Very strange seeing Wellington street without even a single panhandler
> It's not the first plague I've lived through
> I survived Whooping Cough Scarlet Fever and Polio plagues of the 1950's
> Not to mention Miss Bruce Miss Dennison and Miss McMonoque in grade 1 and 2 and 3.
> (April 27, 2020)

> Having been through an epidemic back in the 1950's
> peak of the Baby Boom down on the Avenues in those crowded four-and-a-halves with two or three hearses cruising up and down with kids on the sidewalks skipping rope and singing
>
> 'if you ever see a hearse go by
> remember that you are the next to die
> they'll put you in a big black box
> cover you over with mud and rocks
> the worms will crawl in
> the worms will crawl out
> and eat out your eyes
> crawl out your mouth'
>
> and somehow doing a song like that together made us all less afraid
> because at least we were all scared together and
> on that note I'm going to share this poem I wrote with you
>
> *the song of a dead bird*
> *can only be heard*
> *in what they don't tell us*
> *we just die the way we do*
> *a disease no one makes claim to*
> *and nobody seems to care much*
> *if we don't stay around much*
> *ask them why and they'll tell you*
> *only what they did not do*
> (March 14, 2021)

David often focused his attention on protesting in our democracies; in this email he narrates with his unique style what happens when you confront police brutality:

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Riots

You can be sure the looting of stores happening down in Minneapolis during a protest march against police brutality was planned in advance by professional criminals and possibly agents provocateurs but not by the protesters.
I've seen such actions myself in my lifetime.
Back in the Sixties here in Montreal there were a lot of mass protests organized by various francophone Quebecois students and workers tired of working at what we used to call 'Joe Jobs'.
So one night in the autumn of 1965 I'm sitting in a popular coffee and donut shop on Saint Catherine street when I see a cousin of mine from the bad side of my family – as one of my aunts made a bad career move by marrying into a family who were part of the West End Irish mob – and hi and hello and I join my cousin and the guys he's with and they're discussing who's going to hit what stores along the street and then make their getaway while the cops are busy clubbing the shit out of the protesters in the middle of Saint Catherine and I got a really nice leather jacket at a good price
So put that in your fucking history books.
(May 29, 2020)

A poem by David, "Sudbury" (November 25, 2017):

Sudbury

the sound of the name Sud-bury
away up there in the north of the north far deep into a tundra landscape
looking like the blackened bald rock surface of the moon
with all the vegetation burnt off by cancerous clouds of sulfur and cinder smoke
back when the big booming in Vietnam caused a big boom in the smelting of nickel
with Stelco Inc. and Falconbridge hiring anyone who didn't talk or look too smart
tell them you're from the Maritimes was the advice we got from friends back in Toronto
but Toni was too young
you had to be eighteen
I was too skinny
you had to weigh a minimum of 145 pounds
Toni gets a job as a dishwasher at a Woolworth's lunch counter
and I get a job in a heartbreak hotel
with a grizzled old geezer guy on the top floor

ordering fast food to his door along with cigars booze broads
on a Saturday night when everyone else who didn't talk or look too smart
is out getting pissed and plastered
with the smash of glass and screech of cars and sirens
into a surreal Sunday morning calm
with a few drunken Indians staggering around like they just been hit with a giant fly swatter

Sudbury…it's not the end of the world but you can see it from there

Some time before we lost him in September 2023, David sent me this lovingly ironic self-portrait:

> Waking up unshaven on my 75 birthday to take a piss and looking in the mirror at this old fart looking back at me and thinking hey I must be dreaming and then went and cut myself shaving but at least now I don't look a day over 74. (October 24, 2021)

Figure 1 Photo courtesy of Sondra Edelstein Sherman, taken in Verdun, 2018

Dossier

Asilo, rifugiati e letterature postcoloniali | Asylum, Refugees and Postcolonial Literatures | Asile, réfugiés et littératures postcoloniales | Asilo, refugiados e literaturas pós-coloniais

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Editorial Notes
Asylum, Refugees and Postcolonial Literatures

Lucio De Capitani
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Since the beginning of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015, asylum seekers have been at the forefront of the Euroamerican imagination, as well as of media and political discourse. Of course, both the very term 'refugee crisis' and the choice of 2015 as its starting point are rather problematic. The number of refugees that actually reach Europe is very small compared to the total number of people fleeing their homes: most refugees worldwide are hosted in neighbouring countries (see UNHCR 2024), which is, of course, in no small part a result of the brutal border regime enforced by the Global North. If the term 'crisis' is to be used, it is perhaps more appropriate to talk of a "crisis of solidarity" (Agustín, Bak Jørgensen 2019, 12) – even though, from a neoliberal and nativist perspective, the system is working as intended, and perhaps one could argue that this is no crisis at all. And, of course, the foundations of the current 'crisis' were established, materially, legally and discursively, way before 2015: to make just one example that is relevant from a postcolonial perspective, the UK has been building the apparatus of the current neoliberal/securitarian management of asylum for decades, regardless of the party in charge: as argued elsewhere (De Capitani 2023, 230-1), there is a clear continuity between the New Labour migration policies in the late 1990s and early 2000s,[1] and the 'hostile environment'

1 For more on those policies, see Woolley 2014, 4-5; Gallien 2018, 739.

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established by Tory governments in the 2010s; and this continuity will probably not be disrupted by the new Labour government, considering Keir Starmer's recently professed enthusiasm in collaborating with Italy in matters of migration (see Crerar 2024).

At any rate, although the idea of a 'refugee crisis' as a recent and uniquely Euroamerican predicament is misguided, the experience of refugees and asylum seekers is, in practice, gaining an increasingly prominent role, including in literary representation and criticism. At first glance, this subject seems to be in continuity with established frameworks that have always addressed migration – such as postcolonial studies/literatures, the Francophone, Lusophone and Anglophone theoretical models, or Italian 'migration literature'. There are strong arguments, however, for claiming that the increasing visibility of these specific migrant subjects has been and still is an element of rupture within these fields. For example, in the Anglophone/postcolonial context, as early as 2006 Pablo Mukherjee pointed out how 'first-wave' postcolonial studies favoured migrant-cosmopolitans over migrant-refugees (Mukherjee 2006, 146). In 2011, David Farrier went so far as to say that the refugee experience was a 'scandal' for postcolonial studies, whose theoretical paradigms of in-betweenness and hybrid identities were ill-suited to provide an adequate framework for the specific historical, political and legal situation of asylum seekers (Farrier 2011). Conversely, more recent interventions (such as Gallien 2018) have argued how postcolonial studies can provide useful critical perspectives for discussing narratives by (and about) refugees and asylum seekers. Similar reflections can be found in other linguistic spheres, such as, within the Francophone context, the recent issue (no. 17) of the journal *Multilinguales* (2022).

Moreover, do these overlapping and interconnected fields need to shift their paradigms to properly accommodate and theorise the refugee experience? There are many factors to consider in discussing the specificity of a literature by/about refugees and its relationship to pre-existing critical discourse. For example, the trajectories of refugees often do not follow the pattern of a 'return' to the colonial 'motherland' – but, just as often, they *are* influenced by colonial history, broadly speaking. Finding recognition within a national context, to which an asylum seeker typically aspires, is at odds with cosmopolitan or diasporic paradigms – but the inherently transnational nature of refugee experiences nonetheless works to destabilise the idea of national literature. Moreover, the very category of the 'refugee' remains controversial. On the one hand, it is crucial to political and humanitarian mobilisations and claims – especially given the extremely violent policies of closure, exclusion, exploitation, and surveillance that affect refugees and asylum seekers in both the Global North and the Global South (albeit in different ways). On the other hand, the rigidly legalistic division between forced migrants and

so-called economic migrants obscures the fact that, in practice, the two categories overlap in the concrete migration experience (Schuster 2015). Many, moreover, argue that the (fundamentally political) grounds on which international protection can be claimed should be broadened (see Röhl 2005). What are the implications of these debates and complexities for a new critical/literary category that seeks to centre 'the refugee' as its key concept?

In short, the intersection of (postcolonial) literature, refugees and asylum, whether one wishes to emphasise continuity or rupture with earlier models and concepts, or to affirm or contest its critical utility, remains a rich and a politically timely site for debate for literary criticism. This monographic issue of *Il Tolomeo* contributes to this conversation by exploring examples of refugee/asylum literature across various historical and geographical contexts and literary traditions, and through different theoretical and methodological perspectives, including (and expanding the scope of) postcolonial ones.

The issue begins with an essay by Paola Della Valle, which focuses on the 2019 novella *Where We Land* by Tim Jones, an example of dystopian cli-fi/speculative fiction. The novella portrays New Zealand as subject to a strict anti-migration legislation, with the navy actively torpedoing and machine-gunning climate refugees. Della Valle's reading highlights how the novella explores, in a speculative setting, the xenophobic populism of neoliberal countries. Moreover, it is informed by theoretical reflections on 'negative solidarity' – a concept borrowed from Émile Durkheim – in relation to climate refugees, and on the impact of neoliberalism from the perspective of affect theory. The essay argues that the novella is underlining "the need to develop a 'language of the commons' and an affective economy" that can help replacing "neoliberalism and its effects".

Valérie Tosi discusses Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017), stressing how its magical realism – the appearance of magical doors that allow instantaneous travel between different parts of the world, and the refugee communities that emerge from it – articulates the vision of a chaos-world (after Glissant) and contributes to rethinking a cosmopolitan project (and its limits) in an era of global migration. Like Della Valle, also Tosi employs affect theory – alongside social geography and (post)migration studies – to argue how in Hamid's novel migration identities and experiences are reshaped in terms of affective transnationality, while exploring the psychoemotional dynamics of migration.

Amaury Dehoux's essay addresses the political uneasiness and the contradictions that the term 'refugee' entails, focusing on Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *Silence du chœur* (2017), which he reads as a critique of the compartmentalisation inherent in refugee status. In the novel, seventy-two African migrants arrive in the Sicilian town of Altino and wait for the authority to deliberate on their asylum requests – a

decision that is left unresolved as the novel ends. Dehoux argues that, by exploring the in-between status of these characters, the novel resists the delimitations that the very term 'refugee' introduces into the migratory experience, rejecting the binary divisions between immigrants and refugees.

Annarita Taronna's article merges theoretical reflections on decolonial pedagogy applied to English Language Teaching (ELT), specifically English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and an exploration of the educational potential of picture books on refugee experiences. The article first engages in a debate on how EFL pedagogy can be transformed in a praxis that "expands beyond the classroom and knowledge concerns to accommodate embodied affective, social, and cultural learning that draws from and transforms environmental and geopolitical spaces". It then proposes a lesson plan for Prospective Primary English Teachers (PPETs), in which multimodal stories about migration – the picture books *My Two Blankets* by Irena Kobald and Freya Blackwood (2014) and *My Name Is Not Refugee* by Kate Milner (2017) – are employed to promote metalinguistic awareness on language, and challenge the dominant narratives about migration.

Finally, Harjot Banga's article is dedicated to the work of Dalit poet Narayan Surve (1926-2010). Banga's reading of Surve's work highlights his Marxist and working-class sensibility, which gives voice to the marginalised in Mumbai. Banga's essay, specifically, reads Surve's poetry as emerging from the world of Mumbai's workers, specifically those of the former cotton mills, thus linking it with a specific subaltern social milieu shaped by an history of economic migration. While the cotton mill workers of Banga's essay (and Surve's poetry) are not refugees, they do represent an experience of migration that is underrepresented in mainstream postcolonial criticism. The article, therefore, aligns with the purpose of this monographic issue: expanding our migration imaginary in an era of increasingly uneven mobilities.

Notes éditoriales

Asile, réfugiés et littératures postcoloniales

Depuis le début de ce que l'on a appelé la 'crise des réfugiés' en 2015, les demandeurs d'asile ont été au centre de l'imaginaire euro-américain, ainsi que des discours médiatiques et politiques. Or, le terme même de 'crise des réfugiés', tout comme le choix de l'année comme point de départ sont assez problématiques. Le nombre de réfugiés qui arrivent effectivement en Europe est en réalité très faible comparé au nombre total de personnes qui fuient leur domicile : la majorité des réfugiés dans le monde sont accueillis dans des pays voisins (voir UNHCR 2024), ce qui est, bien sûr, en grande partie le résultat du régime brutal de contrôle des frontières imposé par le Nord global.[2] Si le terme de 'crise' doit être utilisé, il serait sans doute plus approprié de parler d'une « crise de la solidarité » (Agustín, Bak Jørgensen 2019, 12) – bien que, d'un point de vue néolibéral et nativiste, le système fonctionne comme prévu, et l'on pourrait peut-être même arguer qu'il ne s'agit pas du tout d'une crise. Bien entendu, les fondements de la 'crise' actuelle ont été posés, tant sur le plan matériel que juridique et discursif, bien avant 2015: pour ne citer qu'un exemple pertinent d'un point de vue postcolonial, le Royaume-Uni a mis en place le dispositif de l'actuelle gestion néolibérale/sécuritaire de l'asile depuis des décennies, quel que soit le parti au pouvoir. Comme cela a été souligné ailleurs (De Capitani 2023, 230-1), il existe une nette continuité entre les politiques migratoires du New Labour à la fin des années 1990, celles mises en œuvre au début des années 2000,[3] et l''environnement hostile' mis en place par les gouvernements conservateurs dans les années 2010. Or, cette continuité ne sera probablement pas perturbée par le nouveau gouvernement travailliste, étant donné l'enthousiasme récemment exprimé par Keir Starmer pour la collaboration avec l'Italie en matière de migration (voir Crerar 2024).

Quoi qu'il en soit, bien que l'idée d'une 'crise des réfugiés' en tant que phénomène récent et spécifiquement euro-américain soit erronée, l'expérience des réfugiés et des demandeurs d'asile prend, de fait, un rôle de plus en plus important, y compris dans la représentation et la critique littéraires. À première vue, ce sujet semble s'inscrire dans la continuité des cadres établis qui ont toujours abordé la migration – tels que les études/littératures postcoloniales, les modèles

2 Nous adoptons ici la notion géopolitique de 'Nord global' telle qu'elle est employée par les études postcoloniales pour désigner les 'pays du Nord' – englobés conventionnellement sous la notion d'Occident – par opposition aux pays du Sud, ou 'Sud global', notions qui supplantent aujourd'hui les termes antérieurs de 'pays sous-développés' ou 'Tiers-Monde'.

3 Pour plus de détails sur ces politiques, voir Woolley 2014, 4-5 ; Gallien 2018, 739.

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théoriques francophones, lusophones et anglophones, ou la 'littérature de la migration' italienne. Il existe cependant de solides arguments pour affirmer que la visibilité croissante de ces sujets spécifiques abordant la question des migrants a été et reste un élément de rupture dans ces domaines. Par exemple, dès 2006, dans le contexte anglophone/postcolonial, Pablo Mukherjee soulignait que les études postcoloniales de la 'première vague' favorisaient les migrants-cosmopolites au détriment des migrants-réfugiés (Mukherjee 2006, 146). En 2011, David Farrier est allé jusqu'à dire que l'expérience des réfugiés représentait un 'scandale' pour les études postcoloniales, dont les paradigmes théoriques de l'entre-deux et des identités hybrides étaient mal adaptés pour fournir un cadre adéquat à la situation historique, politique et juridique spécifique des demandeurs d'asile (Farrier 2011). Inversement, des interventions plus récentes (Gallien 2018) ont montré comment les études postcoloniales peuvent offrir des perspectives critiques utiles pour discuter des récits sur/par les réfugiés et demandeurs d'asile. Des réflexions similaires se retrouvent dans d'autres contextes linguistiques, comme dans le contexte francophone, avec le récent numéro de la revue *Multilinguales* (n° 17, 2022).

En outre, ces domaines superposés et interconnectés doivent-ils changer leurs paradigmes pour bien intégrer et théoriser l'expérience des réfugiés ? De nombreux facteurs doivent être pris en compte dans la discussion sur la spécificité d'une littérature par/des réfugiés et de sa relation avec le discours critique préexistant. Par exemple, les trajectoires des réfugiés ne suivent souvent pas le schéma d'un 'retour' à la 'mère patrie' coloniale – mais elles sont tout aussi souvent *influencées* par l'histoire coloniale, de manière générale. La reconnaissance dans un contexte national, à laquelle aspire généralement un demandeur d'asile, est en contradiction avec les paradigmes cosmopolites ou diasporiques – mais la nature intrinsèquement transnationale de l'expérience des réfugiés contribue néanmoins à déstabiliser l'idée d'une littérature nationale. De plus, la catégorie même de 'réfugié' reste controversée. D'une part, elle est cruciale pour les mobilisations politiques et humanitaires – en particulier face aux politiques extrêmement violentes de fermeture, d'exclusion, d'exploitation et de surveillance qui affectent les réfugiés et demandeurs d'asile à la fois dans le Nord et le Sud global (quoique de manière différente) ; d'autre part, la division rigide et légaliste entre les migrants forcés et les migrants dits économiques occulte le fait qu'en pratique, ces deux catégories se chevauchent dans l'expérience concrète de la migration (Schuster 2015). En outre, nombreux sont ceux qui affirment que les motifs (fondamentalement politiques) pour lesquels une protection internationale peut être demandée devraient être élargis (Röhl 2005). Quelles sont les implications de ces débats et de ces complexités pour une nouvelle catégorie critique/littéraire qui cherche à faire du 'réfugié' son concept clé ?

Autrement dit, l'intersection de la littérature (postcoloniale), des réfugiés et de l'asile, que l'on souhaite mettre l'accent sur la continuité ou la rupture avec les modèles et concepts antérieurs, ou que l'on souhaite affirmer ou contester son utilité critique, reste un lieu de débat riche et politiquement opportun pour la critique littéraire. Ce numéro monographique de *Il Tolomeo* contribue à cette conversation en explorant des exemples de littérature sur les réfugiés/demandeurs d'asile dans divers contextes historiques, géographiques, dans plusieurs traditions littéraires, et à travers différentes perspectives théoriques et méthodologiques, y compris, en élargissant leur portée, les approches postcoloniales.

Le numéro s'ouvre sur un article de Paola Della Valle, qui se concentre sur la nouvelle *Where We Land* (2019) de Tim Jones, un exemple de cli-fi/fiction spéculative dystopique. Le récit dépeint la Nouvelle-Zélande soumise à une législation anti-migration stricte, avec la marine qui torture et mitraille activement les réfugiés climatiques. La lecture de Della Valle souligne comment le texte explore, dans un cadre spéculatif, le populisme xénophobe des pays néolibéraux. En outre, elle s'appuie sur des réflexions théoriques d'héritage durkheimien sur la 'solidarité négative', en lien avec les réfugiés climatiques, et sur l'impact du néolibéralisme du point de vue de la théorie de l'affect. L'article soutient que la nouvelle souligne « la nécessité de développer un 'language of the commons' et une économie affective » qui peut aider à remplacer « le néolibéralisme et ses effets ».

Valérie Tosi analyse le roman *Exit West* (2017) de Mohsin Hamid, en insistant sur la manière dont son réalisme magique – l'apparition de portes magiques permettant de voyager instantanément entre différentes parties du monde, et les communautés de réfugiés qui en émergent – s'articule avec la vision du chaos-monde (d'après Glissant) et contribue à repenser un projet cosmopolite (et ses limites) à l'ère des migrations globales. Tout comme Della Valle, Tosi utilise également la théorie de l'affect – aux côtés de la géographie sociale et des études (post)migratoires – pour affirmer que dans le roman de Hamid les identités et les expériences migratoires sont redéfinies en termes de transnationalité affective, tout en explorant les dynamiques psycho-émotionnelles de la migration.

La contribution d'Amaury Dehoux aborde le malaise politique et les contradictions qu'implique le terme 'réfugié' en se concentrant sur le roman *Silence du chœur* (2017) de Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, qu'il lit comme une critique de la compartimentation inhérente au statut de réfugié. Dans le roman, soixante-douze migrants africains arrivent dans la ville sicilienne d'Altino et attendent que l'autorité statue sur leurs demandes d'asile – une décision qui reste en suspens à la fin du roman. Dehoux soutient qu'en explorant le statut intermédiaire de ces personnages, le roman résiste aux délimitations que le

terme même de 'réfugié' introduit dans l'expérience migratoire, rejetant les divisions binaires entre immigrants et réfugiés.

L'article d'Annarita Taronna fusionne des réflexions théoriques sur la pédagogie décoloniale appliquée à l'enseignement de l'anglais (ELT), en particulier l'anglais comme langue étrangère (EFL), et une exploration du potentiel éducatif des albums pour enfants sur les expériences des réfugiés. L'article engage d'abord un débat sur la manière dont la pédagogie EFL peut être transformée en une praxis qui « s'étend au-delà de la salle de classe et des préoccupations liées au savoir pour intégrer un apprentissage affectif, social et culturel incarné, qui puise dans les espaces environnementaux et géopolitiques et les transforme ». L'auteure propose ensuite un plan de cours pour les futurs enseignants d'anglais en école primaire (PPET), dans lequel des histoires multimodales sur la migration – les albums *My Two Blankets* d'Irena Kobald et Freya Blackwood (2014), *My Name Is Not Refugee* de Kate Milner (2017) – sont utilisées pour promouvoir la conscience métalinguistique sur la langue et remettre en question les récits dominants sur la migration.

Enfin, l'article de Harjot Banga est consacré à l'œuvre du poète dalit Narayan Surve (1926-2010). La lecture que fait Banga de l'œuvre de Surve met en lumière sa sensibilité marxiste et prolétarienne, qui donne une voix aux marginalisés de Mumbai. En particulier, la réflexion de Banga voit la poésie de Surve comme émanant du monde des travailleurs de Mumbai, notamment ceux des anciennes filatures de coton, la reliant ainsi à un milieu social subalterne spécifique façonné par une histoire de migration économique. Bien que les travailleurs des filatures de coton mentionnés dans l'analyse de Banga et dans la poésie de Surve ne soient pas des réfugiés, ils représentent une expérience de migration sous-représentée dans la critique postcoloniale dominante. L'article est donc parfaitement au diapason avec l'objectif de ce numéro monographique : élargir notre imaginaire de la migration à une époque où les mobilités sont de plus en plus inégalitaires.

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Climate Refugees and 'Negative Solidarity' in Tim Jones' *Where We Land*

Paola Della Valle
Università degli Studi di Torino, Italia

Abstract Jones' novella *Where We Land* belongs to the CLI-FI genre and envisages what might happen in New Zealand if a mass of climate refugees from Asia or Oceania should illegally arrive. The author describes a situation similar to the so-called "journeys of hope" occurring in the Mediterranean Sea. The refugees' boat is attacked by the NZ Navy frigate torpedoes and the few survivals who succeed in landing have to confront armed shore patrols of citizens defending their own territories from the 'invaders'. Official government propaganda, sense of the 'nation' and hate for foreign immigrants intertwine in the story to depict a society with no sense of solidarity or positive affect. The book catches the spirit of 'negative solidarity' rising in neoliberal countries, characterized by isolated competitive relations within populist political projects. By analysing Jones' story, the article shows how neoliberalism destroys the conditions for collective action and collective decision.

Keywords Climate refugees. New Zealand. Negative solidarity. Tim Jones. Neoliberalism.

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1 Introduction: *Where We Land* and Its Context

First published by New Zealand Paper Road Press in 2015, under the title *Landfall*, the novella *Where We Land* was re-printed in 2019 with the present title by The Cuba Press (Wood 2008).[1] In the "Afterword" to the second edition, author Tim Jones – a writer and climate change activist, born in Britain but naturalized in Aotearoa, where his family emigrated when he was three[2] – expresses his concern about climate change and the extraordinary rapidity of its effects:

> Since it was first published […] this novella has come closer to reality. Global warming has turned to global heating, the seas are rising faster, and fascism is suddenly fashionable again, tramping its old territories in new and shiny boots. Payment of the bill for colonialism has long been overdue, and now the planet has come calling for the massive ecological and climate debts incurred by the industrial revolution and its aftermath. (Jones 2019, 72)

Jones, who is now in his mid-sixties, has been at the frontlines of environmental battles since high school, as he explains in a webinar given on 10 July 2024 (Jones 2024) to present his latest novel *Emergency Weather* (2023). On that occasion, he recalled the numerous campaigns he has supported throughout his life: from the successful Save Aramoana Campaign (1974-83), which prevented the development of an aluminium smelter plant at Aramoana in the Otago harbour (Gourly 2022), to the more recent ones such as Coal Action Network (2007) to end coal mining in Aotearoa, and Save the Basin (2010)[3] for promoting low-carbon transport and, in general, reducing the use of fossil fuels. Jones underlined how decarbonizing the heat industry should be at the top of every Western government's agenda, but, turning to New Zealand politics, he denounces its 'short-termism', namely an endemic short-term view that does not look beyond electoral cycles. Jones' criticism is not only directed to the centre-right coalition currently ruling the country, which has sidelined the Climate Change Commission. The previous labour government, he contends, often ignored the Commission's recommendations too. Politics

1 See also Tim Jones's official website: https://www.timjonesbooks.co.nz/where-we-land/.

2 Aotearoa, the Māori name of New Zealand, is now added or used as an alternative to the other name, given by British colonizers. It means 'the land of the long white cloud', which is the image that appeared to the Polynesian explorers when they first sighted the country, presumably in the late thirteenth century. See King 2001, 16; see also *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*: https://teara.govt.nz/en/history/page-1.

3 See the following sites: Coal Action Network Aotearoa: https://coalaction.org.nz/; Save the Basin Campaign: https://savethebasin.org.nz/.

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thus seem completely ineffective at the task of bringing about a real change, and only focused on imposing the "seductive framing of the new normal", namely climate adaptation (Jones 2024).

Given Jones' burning interest in environmental issues, it is no accident that in his writing – which includes five poetry collections, two short-story collections and two novels, in addition to the novella under consideration – he has often speculated on climate change and its possible consequences. In particular, the previously mentioned novel *Emergency Weather* and *Where We Land* can both be included in 'Cli-Fi' (Climate Fiction), a genre of writing that takes place in a future world with severely altered weather patterns (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).[4] They also belong to 'Spec-Fic' (Speculative Fiction) – that is, in Marek Oziewicz's words,

> a subgenre of science fiction that deals with human rather than technological problems, a genre distinct from and opposite to science fiction in its exclusive focus on *possible futures*, and a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating "consensus reality" of everyday experience. (Oziewicz 2017; emphasis added)

Indeed, both books imagine possible futures, taking present situations to extremes. *Emergency Weather* explores life in Wellington after a devastating giant storm has crashed into the capital city. *Where We Land* describes New Zealand as a dystopian society subject to a strict anti-migration legislation, which allows the navy to torpedo boats full of climate refugees trying to reach its coasts. The survivors are then finished off by machine guns.

Both stories reflect major concerns of present-day Aotearoa, a country deeply affected by climate change, with regular cycles of droughts and floods, and by increasingly high rates of migration. The latter issue has also become a fearmongering strategy utilized by left and right governments alike. As reported by *The Guardian*, in 2023 "annual net migration to New Zealand hit a near record high of more than 173,000 non-New Zealand citizens in the year to December" (Corlett 2024).[5] In *Where We Land* Jones elaborates on the fear of a possible mass migration and anticipates, albeit in a paradoxical

4 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. "New Adventures in 'cli-fi'. Taking the Temperature of a Literary Genre". https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/cli-fi-clifi-climate-fiction-genre-words-were-watching.

5 Net migration is the number of immigrants minus the number of emigrants, including citizens and noncitizens (World Bank Group. "Metadata Glossary". https://databank.worldbank.org/metadataglossary/population-estimates-and-projections/series/SM.POP.NETM). Aotearoa New Zealand's resident population is about 5 million (4,993,923, according to the 2023 Census).

way, the trend of increasing strictness in immigration rules started by the Labour government in March 2023, when Immigration Minister Michael Wood put forward a bill determining that "[l]arge groups of asylum seekers arriving to New Zealand by sea could be detained in prison for up to 28 days without a warrant" (Graham-McLay 2023). Wood candidly admitted that there had never been an illegal mass-arrival maritime event previously in the country, due to its geographical isolation. He also added that it might remain a low risk event, but it was not a no risk event. This initiative was labelled as "election year cynicism", imputable to the coming General Election, and a raid into right-wing territory to gain some votes. In fact, the main opposition party at the time, the centre-right National party, reacted not only by supporting the bill, but also by questioning whether it still represented too appealing a regime for people smugglers. The National party won the October 2023 General Election and is now leading a coalition government with two right-wing parties: Act New Zealand and New Zealand First. Needless to say, it has already passed a series of stricter rules for legal immigration, especially for workers in low-skilled jobs (Malcom Pacific 2024). At the moment, defending New Zealand from sea mass-migration does not seem to be a priority because "illegal migration often happens through overstaying a visa" (O'Malley 2024). In *Where We Land* Tim Jones has, however, imagined this event as possible and speculated on its consequences.

The story is told from a double perspective. On the one hand, the readers follow the predicament of a Bangladeshi refugee, Nasimul, who has lost his wife and little son during the journey from the Bay of Bengal to Fiordland in Aotearoa. On the other, we see the point of view of a para-military woman, Donna, who has been recruited with many other civilians to patrol the coasts of the country and stop the entry of new refugees, defined with the dehumanising term of "infiltrators" (Jones 2019, 18). During the training, the military auxiliaries are given a few basic rules, such as: do not shoot unless you have to; do not shoot a citizen; do not allow an infiltrator to escape. Should the rules conflict with each other, the auxiliaries are told to use their judgement, which means, in practice, that they are free to kill all the infiltrators.

In *Where We Land*, the New Zealand government is enacting protectionist measures, nationalist policies and a populist approach based on the principle of "family and country and duty" (Jones 2019, 18), epitomised in the author's "Afterword" by his reference to a new fashionable type of "fascism" (72). The patriotic message, the "nation's call" (17), and the attraction of the uniform give New Zealanders "a sense of purpose" (16). They are encouraged to join the paramilitary troops, in order to defend the country from millions of desperate people displaced from their homelands, because they "look south hungrily at our green and fertile lands. They'd overrun us in months if we let them" (16). Indeed, there is also a minority of

citizens, the "so-called shepherds" (18), who attempt to help the survivors from the sunken boats. Their actions are however considered illegal and punished with a long period of mandatory detention.

The novella records a possible rise of populism in reaction to the increasing migration of climate refugees. Populism (namely "political activities or ideas that claim to promote the interests and opinions of ordinary people", according to Collins Dictionary)[6] is a phenomenon that mostly develops in liberal democracies, as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2020, 23) claim. It is an incomplete or "thin" ideology, unlike the full-bodied "thick" ones like fascism, liberalism or socialism (27-8). It must therefore be necessarily combined with other specific concepts, principles or ideological frames. In a Western context, populism is often connected to xenophobic and anti-migration positions (24) – that is, aimed at 'defending' lower class citizens against the threat to their rights (allegedly) represented by immigrants. The environmental crisis has added a new category of potential 'enemies' that populist governments and political leaders can use: climate refugees. Frequent cyclones or typhoons and floods are devastating many territories and coastal communities in South Asia, such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Coral atolls in the South Pacific (the so-called 'sinking islands') are being constantly flooded by the ocean due to sea-level rise, caused by the melting of continental ice sheets and the expansion of sea water as ocean temperatures slowly increase. Many outer low-lying islands in archipelagos such as Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands are no longer habitable, a fact that, in turn, results in internal migration toward the main islands and external migration to Aotearoa, Australia and the Western coast of the USA.

Beside populism, Jones' narrative also catches the spirit of 'negative solidarity' prevailing today in neoliberal countries and takes it to its extreme consequences, as will be explained in the following section.

2 The Concept of 'Negative Solidarity'

The concept of 'negative solidarity' was coined by sociologist Émile Durkheim to criticise the type of social organisation advocated by the utilitarian philosophy that supported the rise of individualism, industrialism and capitalism, as explained by Finn Bowring:

> In *The Division of Labour in Society* ([1893] 1964), Durkheim called the form of social organization imagined to be adequate by the

6 *Collins Dictionary*. s.v. "Populism". https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/populism.

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> utilitarians – a society based on competitive self-interest – 'negative solidarity'. Negative solidarity is a social order based on contractual non-interference rather than wilful commitment to a common goal, consisting "not in serving, but in not harming". "It does not lead wills to move toward common ends but merely makes things gravitate around wills in orderly fashion" ([1893] 1964, 116). (Bowring 2016, 23)

Durkhmeim highlights how negative solidarity is not true solidarity (Durkheim 1964, 119-20) distinguishing it from the positive solidarity of pre-industrial societies, which rose from the strength of collective conscience. In that context, characterized by a total adherence to common values and beliefs, citizens internalize the collective conscience, but they do so at the cost of their individuality: "This solidarity can grow only in inverse ratio to personality" (129). As societies develop and become more complex, such a 'mechanical' kind of solidarity turns into an 'organic' one, due to the diversification of roles and duties. The division of labour turns citizens into 'organs' of the society, tied by mutual interdependency, and becomes the principal aggregative bond, replacing common conscience.

As Bowring underlines in his critique of Durkheim's theory, these two kinds of positive solidarity (mechanical and organic) are, in fact, almost the same: they imply a subjection of the individual to the social body, either by totally introjecting the dominant social values or by accepting a fixed division of labour. This act of subordination might protect the individual, but can also reproduce hierarchies of social privilege and inherited wealth, which debunk meritocracy and the individual spirit of enterprise, reinforcing social inequalities. The rise of negative solidarity seems therefore to result from the individual's need to challenge a static system.

The compromise solution offered by Durkheim's humanism to overcome the lack of individuality of pre-industrial societies, without affirming the 'atomistic' individualism of the industrial era (leading to negative solidarity), is his concept of 'moral individualism'. The individuals' growing 'freedom from' the constraints of a rigidly hierarchical society can be transformed into 'freedom to': in particular, freedom to promote an ethical stance towards human dignity and to recognise the sacredness of the human person.

While Durkheim still believes in a "'container' model of society" (Bowring 2016, 22) – that is, a society as a body controlling the anti-social instincts of its members and maintaining social order –, he does not have a pessimistic view like Hobbes or Rousseau, who stressed a break in continuity between the individual and society. For Durkheim, society is a necessary entity for humans, morally and intellectually superior to the members it contains, and it plays a sort of 'educational' role. As Bowring explains drawing on another book by Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* ([1894] 1982):

> The individual's 'subordination' to society is accepted, moreover, not out of fear of a Leviathan or through then calculated pursuit of self-interest, but because it rests on "feelings of attachment and respect which habit has implanted within him". (23; quotation from Durkheim [1894] 1982, 144)

Durkheim therefore believes that the role of the state consists in promoting the moral faculties of reason, responsibility and self-discipline in its citizens. Hence the essence of social life lies not in physical constraint but in moral authority, a moral authority that becomes naturally internalised.

Bowring underlines the incongruities of Durkheim's ethical individualism, based on "a tension between a negative and a positive conception of human freedom" (26), an idealised vision of liberal humanism, and the belief in the possibility of a reformed capitalism. The anomie and egoism found in modern societies are, for the French sociologist, a result of an absence or insufficient presence of society in individuals (Dukheim [1897] 1951, 258).However, Bowring argues, if Durkheim had witnessed the neoliberal revolutions of the late twentieth century,

> he would surely have acknowledged that greed, ruthlessness, and indifference to the sufferings of others are neither instinctual expressions of human nature nor marginal deviations from the normative core of Western modernity, but are traits and values rooted in the economic organization of capitalist societies and the ideological apparatuses that sacralise and sustain them. (34)

Nevertheless, at the end of his study Bowring states that Durkheim is still relevant to this world "not because of the perfection of his ideas, but because their imperfections express the real contradictions with which we live" (36).

The contradictions of the contemporary age were also underlined by Hannah Arendt half a century later, when she used the term 'negative solidarity' to describe the main force underlying global relations. As Ciocca and Manian explain, it was employed in her essay "Karl Jasper: Citizen of the World?", published in 1957, where she argued that "an improved technology of European origin had brought the world together in a globalized unit kept by fear rather than responsibility" (Ciocca, Manian 2021, 3). Arendt was prophetic in foreseeing a global society kept together by the power of technology, which, on the one hand, provides the means for global communication, and, on the other, those for global destruction, with reference in particular to the nuclear threat. Therefore, she questions the humanists' idealised belief in the potentials of humankind, conversely pointing to the nihilistic consequences of a world paralysed by fear

and thus developing a pervasive state of negative solidarity: "This negative solidarity, based on the fear of global destruction, has its correspondence in a less articulate, but no less potent, apprehension that the solidarity of mankind can be meaningful in a positive sense only if it is coupled with political responsibility" (Arendt [1957] 1968, 83). The above-mentioned condition, in turns, leads to "political apathy, isolationist nationalism, or desperate rebellion against all powers that be rather than enthusiasm or a desire for a revival of humanism" (Arendt [1957] 1968, 83).

Ciocca and Manian claim that the same situation appears today in neoliberal societies, made up of isolated individuals deprived of the old sustaining bonds supplied by organic communities and deluded by the promises of capitalism with regard to success, wealth and well-being. The incapacity of politics to offer all citizens effective solutions causes a surge of populism within governments and induces a nihilistic attitude among common people, a reaction that does not translate into a will to reform the system itself, but rather into a generalised rage towards everyone, connected to a sense of meaninglessness, powerlessness and inadequacy (Ciocca, Manian 2021, 3). This discontent is then exploited by autocrats and supremacists coming to power in liberal democracies and enacting a revisionism of liberal values. Drawing from Pankaj Mishra's influential 2017 book *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, Ciocca and Manian explicitly refer to figures such as Hindu supremacist Narendra Modi, who rose to power in the 2014 Indian elections, and white supremacist Donald Trump, who was elected President of the United States for the second time in November 2024. To hide their ineffectiveness, governments distract people's attention from the real problems by creating imaginary outer enemies, scapegoats onto whom they project people's sense of failure and frustration: immigrants, refugees, 'others'.

The passage from Durkheim's optimistic belief in liberal humanism and a reformed version of capitalism, through Arendt's disillusioned view of contemporary technological society, up to Mishra's picture of populist governments rising in the wake of collapsed social solidarities seems to point to a type of society like that described in *Where We Land*. Jones' dystopic novella conveys the author's scepticism about the possibility of developing forms of responsible and moral individualism in neoliberal Western countries, and shows to what extent negative solidarity could affect society today. In *Where We Land*, negative solidarity is not merely the lack of intervention of the state in economic or social relations, as formulated by Durkheim to describe the utilitarian view. It is the construction of a narrative of fear and hatred towards the alien and the strange, which constitutes the main glue binding people together and encouraging their violent and hyper-defensive attitude, according to the paradigm illustrated by Ciocca and Manian, with reference to Arendt's and Mishra's

views. The brutal protectionism against climate refugees, decided by the New Zealand government and carried out by its citizens, is not a necessary act of defence of a country under attack. Rather, it follows a social and political agenda, enforced in a neoliberal society by capitalism, that works, in Gilbert's terms, by "regulating our modes of relationality, prohibiting many types of relationality and only enabling others, to ensure that only those which facilitate capital accumulation can occur" (Gilbert 2014, 129).

3 Neoliberalism, The Language of the Commons and Affect Theory

In his seminal monograph *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism* (2014), Jeremy Gilbert illustrates the resurgence of a (renewed) Hobbesian view of human nature in neoliberalism, promoting "competitive individualism and market-oriented consumerism as the templates for all social relations" (Gilbert 2014, 42). The capitalist paradigm behind neoliberalism, in fact, aims "to maximise the profitability of any interaction […] having no interest in interactions beyond their profitability" (43). In Hobbes' anti-social view of humans, the state was represented as a Leviathan, a single giant individual made up of an aggregation of separate, formally identical but unrelated individuals, each pursuing his/her own interest: a sort of "meta-individual" (51). What binds individuals together is their subjection to the power of the sovereign, who represents the only possible cement of society and the force preventing a perennial war of everybody against everybody else, according to the well-known formula "homo homini lupus". In Gilbert's view, neoliberalism also theorises competitive individualism as natural to humans. Individuals are not the product of social relations. Relations just happen to them; they do not define their identity or existence (32). Like Hobbes, neoliberal supporters do not believe in lateral bonds of fellowship or common purpose, but only in a collection of parallel 'vertical' bonds, linking each individual to a central or superior locus, which can be a central institution, a leader or an idea (50). This vision is fostered by capitalism's tendency to "creative destruction", in Schumpeter's terms ([1942] 2003),[7] or "deterritorialization", in Deleuze and Guattari' s words ([1972] 1983), and by its drive to weaken social bonds, disaggregate collectives and disrupt communities (Gilbert 2014, 46). Neoliberalism is, in fact, grounded on the combination of individualised liberalism

7 This expression refers to the relentless search of capitalism for new markets, new commodities, and new sources of profit.

and public authoritarianism – i.e. "the weakening of democratic capacities and deterioration of public life" (47), which is fairly visible in the low rates of political participation and civic engagement in today's liberal democracies. Economic lobbies and minority interests control politics rather than the mass of ordinary people, against a background dominated by the death of ideologies and ethical values. Politicians are technocrats, influenced by their perceptions of voters' wishes and seeking solutions to localised or specific problems from appropriate 'experts' rather than being representatives of "a coherent body of ideas and goals" (7), as the above-mentioned story of ex-Minister Wood demonstrates. In this context, Gilbert says,

> elections become increasingly empty procedures, offering publics the opportunity formally to validate programmes whose contents they have virtually no control over, and which differ little between competing parties. (1)

In Gilbert's view, the fall of the Soviet bloc had been a clear pre-condition for "the full-scale neoliberal assault of the 1990s" (12). If capitalism regulates our modes of relationality by inhibiting relations that do not produce profit, the ex-Soviet system, too, with its authoritarian socialism allowed only certain modes of relationality, prohibiting those forms of relationship "which might enable concentration of power and resources to accumulate anywhere outside the purview of the state apparatus" (129). Gilbert therefore seeks viable alternatives both to authoritarian socialism and the hegemonic culture of competitive individualism in this era of late capitalism, which is the economic basis of our condition of postmodernity (Lyotard 1984), or late modernity (Giddens 1991), or liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), so much so that Fredric Jameson explicitly defined postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson 1991).

The basic postulate of individualism, the independent autonomy of the individual, is debunked by Gilbert. Quoting Canadian painter Emily Carr's famous statement "You come into the world alone and you go out of the world alone yet it seems to me you are more alone while living than even going and coming" (Carr 2006, 69; quoted in Gilbert 2014, 34), Gilbert replies that this cliché of individualist culture is easily refutable (at least in its first part) because babies are born with their mothers and in any known culture childbirth is always attended by the members of the community (Gilbert 2014, 34). Extending this highly symbolic moment to human experience in general, he underlines how the biological and cultural existence of humans depends on their relations with others:

> The necessarily relational nature of human existence clearly extends beyond the basic biological level as well. Culture as such is

> nothing but a set of relations of various kinds: relations between individuals and groups, relations mediated by custom, by symbolic and non-symbolic forms of communication, between past, present and future. […] The human capacity to act alone in the world is incredibly limited. (34)

He then turns to affect theory, drawing in particular from Deleuze, Guattari, Simondon, Hardt and Negri, and analysing the influence of Hume, Spinoza and Marx on them. Affect or "affectivity", in Simondon's terms, is the basic medium of intersubjectivity (147). Like Simondon, Gilbert believes that collective groupings constitute themselves neither by virtue of a community of action (namely, their commitment to a common activity or project), nor by identity based on conscious representations, but rather that "inter-individual participation is possible when affectivo-emotive [*sic*] expressions are the same" (Simondon 2005, 248-9; quoted in Gilbert 2014, 143). What binds the collectivity is the sharing of sentiments and sensations that operate at a subconscious level. The implementation of affect could therefore play an important role in theorising new forms of communality and contrast neoliberal modes of relationality.

Common Ground concludes by offering viable alternatives to the neoliberal narrative, in particular following a "language of 'the commons'" (164), where the notion of commons is distinct from the conservative idea of a homogeneous community, but implies people with a shared interest in defending or producing a set of resources and is therefore the basis of an egalitarian and potentially democratic set of social relationships (165). The commons can ultimately be understood as "that domain of creative potential which is constituted by, and constitutive of, sociality as such" (167). Gilbert proposes a model of society where people engage in "a lot more meetings" (211), creating spaces where it is possible to envisage a world based on communality, and produce forms of "radical and experimental anti-individualism" (216). He also provides examples of experiences of participatory democracy in social and political movements, for instance those narrated in Francesca Polletta's book *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting* (2002).

Gilbert also warns us that thinking of affects as always positive is a mistake, since they can index a diminution of agency rather than an augmentation of it. For example, the language of populists or supremacists is particularly effective in exploiting affects (emotions and sensations) in order to construct enemies that must be feared, or to create alliances with an imaginary homogenous collectivity that is at risk and whose rights must be defended, as Jones' novella demonstrates. Affects must thus be carefully handled as they can also be manipulated.

Interestingly, the words used in the novella by the commander of the military auxiliary, Sergeant Wilson, during his speech to the new

recruits (Donna included), evoke the tone and content of a real document, the "British National Front Poster", from which Sara Ahmed has extracted some lines as an incipit for her study on the emotionality of texts, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* ([2004] 2014). Sergeant Wilson's words and Ahmed's incipit are reported below.

> We're a military auxiliary, but we're also a team. *We help defend our country*, but we also take in young people and give them a sense of purpose. We train them in weapons and tactics, but we also train them in life. […] We must never forget that the threat we face is very real*: millions upon millions* of poor and desperate people, displaced from their teeming homelands by the rising seas, who look south hungrily at our green and fertile lands. *They'd overrun us* in months if we let them, and the Shore Patrol is a vital second line of defence that frees our nation's Navy and Army to do what they each do best. (Jones 2019, 16; emphases added)

> Every day of every year, *swarms of illegal immigrants* and bogus asylum seekers invade Britain by any means available to them […] Why? They are only seeking the easy comforts and free benefits in *Soft Touch Britain*. All funded by *YOU* – The British Taxpayer! (British National Front Poster). (Ahmed 2014, 1; emphases added)

Both narratives construct the opposition between 'us' and the illegitimate 'others', by working on emotions. The second text actually uses 'you', but it is a 'you' that includes the Poster's writers, who appear as kindred to the addressees of the message and part of the same group; so, it is in fact 'us'. They also create a homogeneous community of New Zealanders/British, composed of kin by race, culture and religion, who feel love for their nation and want to defend it from dangerous intruders. Even the historical racial contrast Non-Māori/Māori seems to be resolved in the novella. The patrol is also formed by members who are easily recognizable as Māori from their names, such as Mere and Corporal Rewiti. The common enemy erases ethnic differences, as during the two World Wars of the twentieth century, when a mixed-race NZ division fought with the Allied army. In that case the enemy was a real foreign army. Māori men enlisted as volunteers "to demonstrate their 'pride of race' to the world and their own country, and thereby to have their rights and full citizenship acknowledged at home" (Della Valle 2010, 218). In *Where We Land*, on the other hand, both Māori and Pākehā[8] are acting against an imaginary enemy, inflated by the government's propaganda, from fear of losing their own privileges.

8 New Zealanders of European origin.

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The vulnerability of the country is also underlined in both texts ("they'd overrun us"/"Soft Touch Britain"), as well as the danger of the contact with the 'others', defined as an indeterminate multiplicity ("millions upon millions") or a generic horde ("swarms"). The two narratives point to the pernicious nature of the proximity with the 'others', as in an epidemic: contact and contagious have in effect a common root in the Latin verb *tàngere* ('to touch'). As Ahmed asserts, "to take in is to be taken in" (Ahmed 2014, 2).

In her fascinating monograph, Ahmed explores texts that "circulate in the public domain, which work by aligning subjects with collectives by attributing 'others' as the 'source' of our feelings" (1). Using Spinoza's theory that emotions shape what bodies can do, increasing or diminishing the power of their action, she suggests dealing with emotions not by asking what emotions are, but rather what they can do (4). Ahmed's conclusion is that feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as "effects of circulation" (8). Therefore, she adds, "the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others" (10). Ahmed's view of emotions offers an interpretive key to the final scene of Jones' novella, which describes a major turning point in the story: the narrative of hate informing the main thread of the plot is suddenly undermined by Donna's direct contact with the 'other', which completely changes her perspective.

4 The (Positive) Affective Turn in *Where We Land*

The clash between the (abstract) image of the dangerous immigrant depicted by the supremacist government's propaganda and the emotion 'shaped' by the contact with the (concrete) 'other' occurs when Donna finds herself alone in front of Nasimul in the flesh.

Throughout the book, Nasimul's predicament is narrated in separate chapters and from his own point of view: the trip from Bangladesh to the Tasman Sea in terrible conditions, the loss of his son and wife, the attack on the boat carrying him and other immigrants by the NZ navy, his fortunate and fortuitous survival. These chapters alternate with those dealing with Donna: the preparation for her first night shift with the patrol, her unsatisfying everyday life, the political and military indoctrination she receives, and the general atmosphere in the country. The two threads show an opposite perspective on the issue at stake, but are destined to come to an intersection.

Interestingly, Jones builds the world of his novella through small details and dialogue, as Vyas (2019) noted. For example, in Chapter 1, the sense of the refugees' fatal destiny is conveyed by a series of statements and allusions expressed in a plain language, as in a chronicle. We learn that Nasimul's son died of cholera "in the camps"

(Jones 2019, 9). The third-person narrator does not explain what "the camps" are, but the word evokes a negative connotation from common sense. Also, Nasimul's wife had been kept alive through the Tropics by her will to see the land again, although the closest place would be the Australian continent, "where it was said whole groups of people could disappear into the interior without ever being noticed or pursued, if only they could find their way ashore through the frigates and the proximity mines and the thickets of razor wire" (8). Weakened by dysentery and cold weather she eventually dies, but the reader might suppose she would not have survived in Australia anyway. Finally, the river ferry carrying the refugees was inevitably overloaded since "no self-respecting Bangladeshi river ferry sailed without at least twice the number of passengers it was rated for" (9). The allusion to the country's customs rather than the profit made by human smugglers is pervaded by bitter irony, which continues when the narrator says that the situation was soon regularized, not by government functionaries but by death. When the ferry is torpedoed by the NZ navy, there are in fact enough lifeboat places for everyone.

The other part of the story is narrated through Donna, a young woman with a low-paying job in a country apparently going through economic depression. Her hours at the stockroom of a clothes shop risk being cut because "south of the Harbour Bridge no one could afford to buy clothes any more" (25). We are also told that coffee was a "rare and precious fluid" (65), and that people used ration cards in the shops (69). Donna has joined the patrol only to earn a few extra bucks, but she is thrilled to have been given a cap, a jacket, a badge (17) and, most of all, a walkie-talkie, since cell phones have been forbidden by the government for health reasons: "Donna wished she still had her phone. She thought all that cancer stuff was bullshit" (14). Her reaction denotes a superficial and conformist attitude. The third-person narrator indirectly divulges Donna's frustration, through her extremely coarse language and continuous complaining about everybody and everything: "Donna wondered what the flying fuck she was doing here with this bloody dog and this bunch of grinning morons" (24). Among them is Big Bob Sergeant Wilson, who had groped Donna when he thought no one was looking (17). Donna dreams of a better job, maybe in the army, where they take anyone "who could stay off the pills and shoot straight" (25). The world depicted by Jones is therefore one of economic slump, sexism, drug addiction and xenophobia.

In the final part of the novella, Donna and her four patrol mates manage to capture and bring to the auxiliary police's headquarters a 'shepherd' (one of those citizens who rebel against the government's policies; in this case, a teacher from West Auckland), and a brown-skinned woman infiltrator, hidden by the shepherd in an abandoned house on the coast. The teacher is interrogated and beaten; the

woman, who has a gunshot wound, is kept in a separate room. During the operation, Donna's attitude oscillates between obedience and boredom, especially when she is not directly in action. She follows the group's rules, carries out her assignment uncritically, executes orders and acts mechanically, keeping a detached and cold attitude. She passively identifies with the group's purpose and reasons. There seem to be no active relationships between the patrol members. As in neoliberal societies at large, relations just happen, since individuals are not the product of real social relations. If they get together, it is for an apparently profitable common goal.

However, Donna has to go back to the abandoned house to fetch Rufus, the dog that has sniffed out the two 'outlaws' and has been left behind, inside the house, because the two prisoners needed all the attention of the patrol members. Donna worries about Rufus, its well-being and its possible suffering from a sense of abandonment. Meanwhile, after swimming across a long stretch of sea, Nasimul lands ashore and enters the house, hungry and exhausted. He finds Rufus, wagging its tail, happy to see a human being. Nasimul shares the water and chocolate that he finds in the place with the dog: a gesture of solidarity towards another living being. Then he falls asleep.

Unfortunately, while Nasimul is sleeping Rufus eats the chocolate leftovers and gets sick. When Donna arrives in the house, her reaction in front of the sick dog and the sleepy infiltrator is to feel pity for the non-human and not for the human. After discovering that Nasimul has given Rufus food that is harmful to dogs, she comes close to killing the man. Then something happens. Emotion prevails over cold detachment and diminishes Donna's sense of hyper-defence. She seems to enlarge the surface and boundaries of her 'self' to include Nasimul: a real contact occurs, which goes beyond political propaganda and indoctrination. Donna feels Nasimul has the same right to live as she has. Therefore, she neither kills him nor reveals his presence to anybody else. A state of confusion is evident in her contradictory behaviour. She knocks the man unconscious but makes sure he is still breathing; then she runs away, leaving some water, chewing gums and a few coins. She has infringed the law to give him a chance. When Nasimul comes to his senses, he will wander around the countryside until he finds a grocery shop run by a brown-skinned man, who speaks Bengali and helps him. He is safe, at least for the moment.

The process of enlarging the surface of one's self is activated by emotions, as Ahmed (2004, 117) explains. Emotions play a crucial role in the 'surfacing' of individual and collective bodies. They "create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds" (117). This is the reason why, she argues, emotions are not a private matter and do not belong to the individual only. They are the result of the contact with others, since "all actions are reactions,

in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others" (Ahmed 2014, 4). Donna's reaction is the result of a 'circulation of affects', that stirs emotions, changes her behaviour and saves Nasimul's life. Before pulling the trigger of the gun, she repeats to herself the story fabricated by the government about the refugees, but this does not correspond to the human she sees in front of her:

> She tried to think of him as just another infiltrator, a nameless brown figure escaping from the teeming, broiling North, floating south to overwhelm New Zealand and its way of life. Let in one, they said, and you may as well let them all in. Now she had her first chance to do her duty. Was she going to fail her country?
>
> Yes. Yes, she was going to fail her country. All she could see before her was a man cowering in fear of death. He was a stationary target, and she was good at shooting stationary targets but she could not bring herself to shoot this one. (Jones 2019, 58)

Ahmed uses psychoanalysis but also Marxist theory in her discourse. Language constructs emotions, and emotions work as a form of capital. Affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as a result of its circulation (Ahmed 2004, 120). In the title of her essay, "Affective Economies" (2004), Ahmed is using the term 'economies' to suggest that emotions circulate and are distributed across a social as well as psychic field (120). Given this, affective economies need to be seen as social and material, as well as psychic: "In other words, the accumulation of affective value shapes the surfaces of bodies and worlds" (121), for example the body of a controversial concept like 'nation' or, in our case, the image of an immigrant.

Jones' novella shows how the populism, supremacism and protectionism of the imaginary New Zealand government aim at defending the status quo: the privileges of a Western country, neoliberal democracy and the capitalist system. New Zealand politicians do so by propaganda – specifically, by using a language which inflames emotions reinforcing the boundaries (or rather walls) of the socially-constructed body called 'nation' (as claimed by Benedict Anderson), and increasing the fear of losing what seems to belong only to the nation's members. A different emotional discourse could ignite an alternative approach to refugees and immigrants, prompt the search for solutions and remedies, and activate a different concept of collectivity animated by the creative "language of the commons", in Gilbert's terms, rather than competitive individualism.

Jones' novella describes the condition of immigrants or refugees as a common feature of a global and fluid world, where masses of people, desperately fleeing from wars, famines or environmental disasters, try to enter the rich Western countries. It is a global space of "flows", in Appadurai's terms (1996), characterised by movement and

mobility, affecting people in different and contradictory ways, and creating unequal relations of power. In recent years, displacement, mobility, and placemaking have asserted themselves in human experience, consciousness, and imagination with newly compelling force. Jones' book seems to advocate the spreading of a 'postmigrant' attitude in the present global world. 'Postmigration' refers to a new set of emergent spaces of plurality and is a concept in which the prefix *post-* is not just temporal, but also epistemological (Bromley 2017, 36). *Where We Land* also underlines the need to develop a "language of the commons" and an affective economy if we want to enter a new cultural, political and economic paradigm, which can replace neoliberalism and its effects: competitive individualism, negative solidarity, a binary vision of reality.

Where We Land is a short, powerful book that poses many questions connected to our contemporaneity and goes to the core of crucial issues of today's global reality. While inducing a reflection on the pernicious relationality fostered by capitalism and encouraged in neoliberal societies, Jones warns the readers about its possible extreme consequences. The degeneration of the controversial concept of negative solidarity from the original utilitarian view into an irrational narrative of fear and hatred towards the 'other' shows its questionable nature and intrinsic dangerousness. The novella's open ending seems to point to a different direction. It highlights the importance of the circulation of affects in human relations, in private and public life, to undermine the false certainties and easy solutions provided by populists. Most of all, it promotes the search for alternative viable ways of co-existence for human beings in complex societies increasingly marked by racial, ethnic, socio-economic differences – that is, a major change of paradigm.

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Inhabiting a Chaos-World: Refugee Transnational Identities in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017)

Valerie Tosi
Università di Pisa, Italia

Abstract This article explores Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017) combining principles pertaining to social geography, affect theory, and (post)migration studies with postcolonial theory. It aims to highlight how Hamid's use of magical realism triggers political, philosophical, and socio-emotional reflections by condensing in the story arc the intercultural and intersubjective processes that characterise the migratory experience and the postmigrant condition. Firstly, it investigates how *Exit West* incorporates magical realism to represent the psychoemotional dynamics of migration and to problematize the concept of cosmopolitanism; secondly, it discusses how the novel promotes a re-thinking of migration identities and experiences in terms of affective transnationality; thirdly, it points out how the refugee communities represented in the novel are manifestations of a chaos-world in which identity formation is shaped by sociocultural encounters, multilingualism, media use, and processes of affiliation.

Keywords Mohsin Hamid. Exit West. Refugee novel. Chaos-world. Multiplicity. Transnationalism.

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1 Introduction

Exit West (2017) by Mohsin Hamid explores contemporary geopolitical and social events through the lens of a speculative narrative set in "a paradoxically globalized yet bordered world" (Naydan 2019, 435) where global economic integration is counterpointed by harsh migration policies. The novel was published in the aftermath of the European migrant and refugee crisis of 2015 and 2016, when wars, identity-based persecutions and repression in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen drove millions of people to leave their homes and seek refuge in Western countries through the Balkan and the Mediterranean routes. At that time, the massive pressure from immigrants and refugees resulted in a humanitarian crisis, while at the same time threatening the key instruments of border control in the European countries. This situation led to a rise in euroscepticism and anti-immigrant discourses in several countries such as the United Kingdom, Hungary, Greece, France, and Spain.

Exit West deals with the migration journeys of two refugees, Saeed and Nadia, and their encounters with other migrants and asylum seekers trying to enter Western countries in an era of global migration crisis. Saeed and Nadia are two young lovers who live in an unidentified city on the verge of a civil war between the government and an extremist group. As Hamid pointed out in various interviews (Hamid, Tepper 2017; Hamid, Brown 2018; Hamid, Preston 2018), his choice not to give a name to Saeed and Nadia's home city – despite admitting it resembles his home city Lahore – is due to two main reasons. First, it is driven by his emotional bond with Pakistan, and his will not to reduce his own country to a setting for a tragedy; secondly, it is part of an allegorical mode that speaks to humanity as a whole. On the contrary, having only two named characters "keeps the reader in touch with the emotional heart of the story" (Hamid, Brown 2018), which is also a key aspect of this article.

As the fighting between the radical militants and the city soldiers worsens, the couple hears rumours about the appearance of magical doors that can transport people anywhere in the world. Frightened by the escalation of the conflict, they meet with a man who secures them a safe passage out of the city via one of these mysterious portals. Once Saeed and Nadia have gone through it, they find themselves on the Greek island of Mykonos, where a large refugee camp has grown. After a few months in the camp, Saeed and Nadia no longer feel safe. Therefore, they pass through another door and emerge in London, where they start to live in a multicultural house and work in migrant labour housing sites. Distressed by unresolved tensions between the natives and the migrants, and by an increasing emotional

distance, they decide to try another door, which leads them to Marin County, in California.

The most relevant critical approaches to *Exit West* have focused on thematic clusters, formal features, and genre identification. Betsy L. Fisher has underlined how Hamid's novel reminds the reader of "the failures of modern asylum systems that prioritize border security over human rights" (Fisher 2019, 1134), using the novel as a starting point to dwell on contemporary politics of migration across the world. Some scholars have pointed out how Hamid used magical realism to represent the porosity of borders, to blur the distinction between the East and the West, and to challenge a monolithic idea of nation in a globalised world (Goyal 2020; Della Valle 2022; Bellin 2022). Others have offered a symbolical reading of the magical doors as thresholds having transformative powers that result in migrant characters' flexible and transnational identities (Sattar et. al. 2020; Della Valle 2022; Faiz et. al. 2023). Liliana Naydan (2019) and Michael Perfect (2019) have underscored how the novel suggests comparisons between the magical doors and digital technologies, while other critics have read it through the lens of world literature (Bilal 2020) or sci-fi dystopia (Jiménez 2020).

Despite focusing on the magical doors as symbols of unstable and permeable borders in an era of migration crisis, the above-mentioned approaches have not thoroughly examined Hamid's magical device in relation to the cosmopolitan imagination and the affective dimension of migration. Furthermore, literary criticism concerned with the characters' identity transitions has failed to analyse how such identities – i.e. relationship roles, religious identity, ethics, and sexual orientation – change in Saeed and Nadia's postmigrant conditions. Firstly, by using cosmopolitanism as a theoretical approach, this article investigates how *Exit West* problematises the notion of global citizenship by incorporating magical realism. It also explores the affective implications of the fantastic elements, highlighting how the characterisation of the magical doors reflects the emotional status of migrants and refugees appearing in the narrative. Drawing on concepts pertaining to affective geography and recent theorizations within the field of border studies, it highlights how Hamid represents *Exit West*'s multiple settings as affective borderscapes where migrant characters construct their transnational identities. Thirdly, Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation will be used to interpret Hamid's fictional world as a chaos-worlding in progress.

2 The Magical Doors

Written from the third-person omniscient point of view, *Exit West* combines realistic narration with elements pertaining to magical realism. The fantastic, "irreducible element" (Faris 2004, 7) peculiar to magical realism is represented by the magical doors, whose behaviour creates a sense of non-linear time and spatial disruption that reflects the fragmented nature of migration journeys while originating a hybrid narrative form that could be read as a transnational migrant novel. Kai Wiegant has coined the label "transnational migrant fiction" (Wiegant 2020, 206) to identify a literary genre characterised thematically by a focus on the transnational identity of migrant characters, and formally by a combination of styles and subjects from different cultures and literary traditions. Thematically, Hamid's novel is concerned with transnational migrant identities, while the magic element evokes the transcultural realms of allegory, fairytales, fantasy, and science fiction.

Through the device of the magical doors, Hamid poses a challenge to the parochialism of Western cosmopolitanism and its biased ideals of universality, transnationality, and global citizenship, unveiling how modern nation-states disregard the needs of "nonstatus migrants" (Nail 2015, 191) and asylum seekers. In fact, some of the doors to Western countries are guarded by men in uniform who prevent people from passing through them. From an allegorical perspective, the inaccessibility of these portals may symbolize migrants and asylum seekers' limited cosmopolitanism. Conversely, it can be read as a metaphor for the limits and contradictions of the Western "political imagination" (Glăveanu, de Saint Laurent 2015, 559) regarding migration and citizenship. Political imagination, developed by people engaged in social life, is both individual and collective; it is grounded in symbols, written arrangements, and institutions; it is concerned with political aims in relation to *otherness*, and involves processes of assimilation, exclusion, control, domination, emancipation, and so on. On a global scale, it could be named 'cosmopolitical imagination'. In the novel, the "major global crisis" (Hamid 2017, 83) epitomized by the doors unveils a crisis of the Western cosmopolitical imagination when it comes to implement the idea of global citizenship in new and puzzling relational scenarios not bound by geopolitical borders. Furthermore, the association of the notion of crisis with the migration phenomenon reminds us of Jane McAdam's conceptualization of "crisis migration" (McAdam 2014, 28). As McAdam points out, in an era of increasing migration flows, right-wing populist politicians supported by the media often conflate the notions of crisis and migration (44). Such a discursive blend implies that the movement of people is the crisis rather than the result of circumstances rooted in geopolitical imbalances, ecological violence and

neocolonial oppression. Hamid narrativizes this detrimental ideological shift, which nullifies the idea of global citizenship and results in xenophobia. For example, in the London setting, a local newspaper refers to the area where refugees have settled as "the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation" (Hamid 2017, 126), while in a vignette set in Vienna, the nationalists view the doors as a threat because they challenge their idea of Austria as a stable and purist nation. Even the unnamed city where Nadia and Saeed once lived is described as "swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace" (Hamid 2017, 1). As Perfect observes, this characterisation provocatively associates the presence of refugees with potential sociopolitical conflicts (Perfect 2019, 190). The panic and related negative affects caused by the magical doors unveil "the impossibility of global citizenship" (Wood 2008, 22) in a world where migrants and asylum seekers are perceived as dangerous intruders, relegated to the margins of society, hampered in their attempts to build a better life, and stripped of their dignity.

The magical doors are identity thresholds that produce affective and emotional states when they are perceived and crossed. From their first appearance in the protagonists' consciousness, the magical doors elicit affects that characterise the pre-migration condition as a state of hesitancy. When rumours about the magical doors spread around the world, Saeed and Nadia begin to gaze at their everyday doors differently. In their eyes,

> each of their doors […] became partially animate […] an object with a subtle power to mock, to mock the desire of those who desired to go far away, whispering silently from its door frame that such dreams were the dreams of fools. (Hamid 2017, 70)

In this passage, the personification of the doors as mockers, and the identification of aspiring asylum seekers with fools expresses the protagonists' defensive pessimism, related to feelings of helplessness and resignation.

Regarding their appearance, the magical doors are described in vague terms as "darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness – the heart of darkness" (Hamid 2017, 6), "a portal of complete blackness" (27), or "a door black even in the dimness" (63). Michael Perfect suggests that the novel's emphasis on the darkness of the portals might be read as a metaphor for those traumas that are unrepresentable in fiction (Perfect 2019, 196). In his observations, Perfect draws on a traditional model of trauma that assumes the unrepresentability of suffering. Nevertheless, Hamid seems to focus less on the unspeakability of trauma than on the refugees and migrant' affects during the crossings, using powerful similitudes to express the characters' emotional status while passing through the portals.

For example, in the first chapter, the narrator puts into the foreground the affective memory of a black man emerging from a magical door in Sydney. The man passes through a closet doorway that is "the heart of darkness" (Hamid 2017, 6-7) and finds himself in a bedroom where a white woman is sleeping unaware of what is going on. The man's actions overlap with his memories:

> He wriggled with a great effort […] as though pulling himself up against gravity, or against the rush of a monstruous tide. […] He rallied himself […] in desperate silence, the silence of a man struggling in an alley, on the ground, late at night, to free himself of hands clenched around his throat. [H]e was aware of the fragility of his body. (6-7)

The allusion to Conrad's novella in this passage has been grasped by several critics. Sheri-Marie Harrison, for example, observes that it evokes "the colonial baggage […] with all its attendant assumptions and prejudices" (Harrison 2019, 592). Harrison does not dwell on such implications, but they are worth highlighting. The dark man comes out from a heart of darkness that seems to evoke the traumatic experience of slave ships and migrant boats – alluded to through the image of the monstruous tide – and the violence experienced by Indigenous people in (post)colonial countries. From a symbolical perspective, it also evokes the strategic amnesia developed by white Australians regarding the British colonisation, subjugation, and almost total annihilation of Australian Aboriginal people.

The magical doors also symbolise a fracture between the self before and the self after migration. They are "like a beginning and an end […] like dying and being born" (Hamid 2017, 98). The conceptualization of migration as rebirth, which is a key concept in Hamid's novel, appears also in Naipaul's novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), and in an article on immigrant writing by Bharati Mukherjee, where she used the phrase "the messiness of a rebirth as an immigrant" (quoted in Maxey 2005, 183) to describe the suffering and energy required to adopt another country as homeland. In "La barque ouverte", which serves as a preamble to *Poétique de la relation* (1990), Édouard Glissant compares the deportation of African slaves across the Atlantic Ocean to the birth of a new humanity emerging from traces rhyzomatically rooted in different sociocultural systems (quoted in Lambert 2019, 116-18). Rivisiting Glissant's trope of birth in his essay "Le Migrant Nu: 'Le déporté sur des frontières'" (2005), Alexandre Alaric compares the experience of today's migrants to

> a second "coming to the world", a second hoped-for birth […] and later to a "proto-genesis of self and the world". (quoted in Lambert 2019, 120)

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Despite its being a human tragedy, the experience of migration can be seen as a new beginning involving identities in movement and giving rise to non-essentialist epistemologies and worldviews.

The figure of the migrant as a newborn is evoked in various parts of the novel. In the first chapter, a man emerges from a closet door in Sydney, "pushing, trembling and sliding to the floor like a newborn foal" (Hamid 2017, 7). Also for Nadia and Saeed, the separation from the mother country is like coming out of a human mother's womb. While stepping through the door that will lead them to Mykonos,

> Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it, and she felt cold and bruised and damp […] trembling and too spent at first to stand. (98)

Nadia's primary purpose while crossing through the door is physical survival, as in the case of newborns displaying survival instincts like grasping and trembling. The "kind of extinguishing" she experiences is a metaphor for migrants' contingent and variable detachment from their original customs, habits, beliefs, values, ideas, meanings, social roles, and sentiments. It is an initiation, a first reconfiguration of identities that will undergo other changes in the ongoing process of errantry. The representation of Saeed and Nadia's migration as a twin birth may be read as a rhetorical device that prefigures a series of transformations that will occur in their relationship. In a matter of seconds, Nadia's identity suddenly shifts from that of a partner to that of a parental figure. Once Saeed has emerged on the other side, she starts to behave like a mother, cradling him as if he were a newborn seeking comfort and protection. Her caregiver attitude towards him reflects an early change in her relationship role, which will be followed by other readjustments involving her ethics of care and sexual orientation as the story develops.

The magical doors, which appear everywhere and bridge the gap between the West and the non-West, can also be seen as a mockery of geopolitical borders and ethnic nationalism. In his collection of essays *Discontent and its Civilizations*, Hamid pointed out that civilizations are "illusions: arbitrarily drawn constructs with porous, brittle, and overlapping borders" (Hamid 2015, 7). In *Exit West*, Hamid's philosophical and political reflections are given a narrative form through magical realism. Because of the ease of travel they offer, the magical doors represent the dissolution of the borders that keep people in and out of nation-states, and therefore bring into question "the concept of nationhood itself" (Perfect 2019, 192), as this passage overtly underscores:

> Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory, and people were questioning what role they had to play. (Hamid 2017, 155)

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However, the novel is less focused on questioning the legitimacy and ethnicity of geopolitical spaces than on investigating the affective dimensions of borderscapes in an era marked by a "proliferation [and] heterogenization of borders" (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013, 3). If the contemporary world is characterised by the emergence of economic, technological, symbolic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries that transcend the geopolitical borders (vii), the emotional dimension of borderscapes should be taken into account as an integral part of the socio-spatial imagination. The next section focuses on the representation of affective borderscapes and affective transnationality in *Exit West*.

3 Affective Transnationality

According to Doreen Massey, in the contemporary world where various kinds of borders are incessantly erected, renegotiated or dismantled, border studies should focus on the relational and therefore affective dimension of border regimes (Massey 2005, 179). Hamid's novel seems to dwell on such issues to re-humanize the refugee figure and restore its agency in a transnational process of identity formation.

By taking on an emotion-focused – but not merely pathological – perspective in his characterization of Nadia and Saeed, Hamid sheds light on multiple emotions involved in their process of migration from the entrance phase to the extended migratory phase: displacement, fear, resignation, anger, anxiety, guilt, joy, and hope. The two refugees are represented less as "victims of the circumstances" (Albrecht 2016, 26) or of "*objective* social processes" (Breckner, Massari 2019, 4; emphasis in original) than active shapers of their existential transitions.

In Hamid's novel, locations accessible by migrants and refugees can be investigated as relational and "affective borderscapes" (Tsoni 2019, 17). Ioanna W. Tsoni coined this expression to identify

> sites of affective and emotional investment, where fear, hope, longing, desire, despair, indignation, disorientation, death or rebirth converge and are implicated in various ordinary and exceptional encounters between migrants, citizens, humanitarian volunteers, state agents, and the dispersed material traces of both state power, and the undocumented migration apparatus. (17)

Exit West's multiple settings can be read as affective borderscapes where political and military actors, the media, and dominant social groups construct concepts such as safety, citizenship, and otherness through the cultivation and mobilisation of emotional dispositions. From this perspective, Hamid's magical doors are interpretable as

thresholds between different affective borderscapes in which Nadia and Saeed experience different degrees of marginalisation. For example, Mykonos is a place pervaded by boredom and fear of an endless captivity; uniformed guards prevent the undesiderables from accessing portals to Western countries, while residents on the outskirts of the old town are willing to get in touch with migrants and refugees. In the chapters set in London, the affective dispositions of the legitimate city dwellers and the various ranks of urban undesirables are made more explicit. The large-scale operation to "reclaim Britain for Britain" (Hamid 2017, 132) evokes the historical context of the Brexit Referendum, when the Leave supporters expressed concerns over immigration as a potential danger to European values. While migrants and refugees are engaged mostly in the struggle for food supply,

> the nativist extremists were forming their own legions, with a wink and a nod from the authorities, and the social media chatter was of a coming night of shattered glass. (132)

The rise of nativist mobs, and the reference to the historical "night of the broken glass" reflect hyperbolically Western countries' application of affective counterincentives – i.e. the mobilisation of anger and irrational fear – in the implementation of migration politics. The rise of violence in the city produces changes among the migrant community as well, leading its members to reassemble themselves

> in suits and runs of their own kind, like with like, or rather superficially like with superficially like, all the hearts together, all the clubs together, all the Sudanese, all the Hondurans. (143)

What is described in this fragment is a socio-affective reconfiguration of the London migrant community through processes of affiliation, with new social groups being formed according to arbitrary parameters such as fan loyalty, likeness, emotional similarity, and ethnic affinity.

Within this context, Hamid investigates Nadia and Saeed's emotional transnationality. Chien-Juh Gu coined the expression "emotional transnationality" to identify

> the emotions experienced when immigrants […] search for behavioral guidance and a foundation of moral judgements from the cultural norms of both their sending and receiving societies. (quoted in Albrecht 2016, 29)

Emotional transnationality, identifiable as a negotiation of "feeling rules and patterns of interpretation" (31) rooted in different sociocultural contexts, is the core of the postmigrant condition. It is a state

determined by a "dialectic of belonging and unbelonging [resulting in] split subjectivities" (Bromley 2017, 36), namely fragmented identities that are incessantly under construction under the influence of both past and contemporary beliefs and value systems. Saeed and Nadia's affective transnationality is the way they re-think their identities, emotional ties and ethics while moving from one place to another. In Mykonos, Saeed suffers feelings of guilt over leaving his family, while Nadia takes comfort in "playing house" (Hamid 2017, 102) as she did with her sister as a child. While Saeed's painful memories reflect his view of home and traditional family as an inseparable pair, Nadia's memories unveil how her idea of home lies in the reproduction of emotional ties constructed through sisterhood. As Saeed and Nadia's individual relationships to their mother country change, their perceptions of other migrants from their own country, of themselves, and of each other change as well. Traumatic memories, connections with fellow countrymen, new locations and encounters affect their identities, sense of belonging, and future expectations. When a lot of Nigerian families come to reside in Nadia and Saeed's house in London, she begins to take part in their regular meetings. The narrator informs the reader about the character's affective condition during the councils:

> They represented something new in her mind, the birth of something new, and she found these people who were both like and unlike those she had known in her city, familiar and unfamiliar, she found them interesting, and she found their seeming acceptance of her, or at least tolerance of her, rewarding, an achievement in a way. (145)

Nadia's emotional attitudes reflect aspects of affective transnationality that sociologists of migration identify as strategies of "affective displacement" (Wise, Velayutham 2017, 126). Such displacement manifests itself when migrant people who experienced trauma re-orient themselves "from the source of that pain toward another collectivity" (126) within which they can empathise with other subjects, mend their divided selves, and adjust their ethics. Previously unable to take part in the community life of her war-torn city, and later a victim of marginalization and racism within the host country, Nadia gradually re-orients her affective dispositions. At first, comparing "[t]he fury of those nativists advocating wholesale slaughter [to] the fury of the militants in her own city" (Hamid 2017, 156), she believes that young refugees' violent behaviour is justified. However, after hearing the Nigerian elders promote "non-violence [and] civility" (151), she realizes there is "wisdom" (152) in their words and becomes unsure what to think. Not only does Nadia's split subjectivity emerge in her rethinking her ethics of violence, but it is also visible in her

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dressing habits, as she keeps wearing the black robes she wore in her home city as a tool for keeping men at a distance. As for Saeed, he is the only man from his country in the house, and his condition

> touched upon something basic, something tribal, and evoked tension and a sort of suppressed fear. (146)

The absence of a men's group in the domestic sphere undermines Saeed's sense of masculinity, since his notion of masculinity is built around classic patriarchal definitions of the man as manager of the household and provider for its needs. When a tough Nigerian woman blocks Saeed's path in the house, he feels "emasculated" (147). The woman's behaviour upends his sense of traditional gender roles as his native culture propagates them, so he sits on his bed with his heart racing and wanting "to shout and to huddle in a corner" (148), unable to fix his split self. Saeed is uncomfortably divided among the traditionalism of his past and the relative progressivism he witnesses in his present. Moreover, in a dark London where refugees are in a constant "state of siege" (147), he feels threatened by the government forces and by potentially dangerous migrants. He finds comfort only in the company of people from his country, encouraged by "familiar languages and accents and the familiar smell of cooking" (148). His decision to pray with them, while painfully thinking of his father,

> made him feel part of something, not just something spiritual, but something human, part of his group. (148)

Saeed's feelings and attitudes reflect aspects of affective transnationality that sociologists of migration identify as strategies of "affective intensification" (Wise, Velayutham 2017, 122). Examples of strategic intensification include

> the cooking and consumption of certain evocative foods […], and life-cycle and religious rituals replicated from the homeland. (123)

As Saeed and Nadia discuss the possibility of moving from the Nigerian house to a different house occupied exclusively by natives of their home country, Nadia expresses a change of perspective in her conceptualization of *sameness* and *strangeness*. Pointing out that they have left their home country for a new beginning elsewhere, she states that her fellow countrymen in London are not like her, that they are "strangers" (150). Nadia and Saeed's diverging ideas make them begin to see each other differently, and result in their physical and emotional separation. After their discussion, Saeed opts against bridging "the tiny distance it would have taken to kiss" (153). When Saeed is informed of his father's passing away, he "doesn't know how

to mourn, how to express his remorse" (Hamid 2017, 170). His reaction is to work hard in the building site where he found employment, displaying another affective strategy peculiar to emotional transnationality and migration guilt that consists in the body doing work to increase affective engagement with the homeland (Wise, Velayutham 2017, 122).

Saeed and Nadia's emotional distance intensifies when their diverging attitudes to rituals around death are unveiled. Realising that Saeed does not want her to pray with him for his father, Nadia feels "unwelcome. Or perhaps unengaged. Or perhaps both" (171). Her feelings unveiling how *welcome* is a socioemotional process that concerns not only the immigration policies within a host society, but more complex and layered networks of interpersonal affective interactions. Hoping that they will be able to make their relationship work again, Saeed and Nadia pass through another door that teleports them to Marin, in California. However, once settled there, Nadia starts a homosexual relationship with the cook of a food cooperative, while Saeed falls in love with the daughter of a local preacher. Saeed's new partner is one of the leaders of a regional assembly promoting justice and human rights.

His taking part in the assembly, which has a "moral authority [and is also] substantial" (219) reflects an emotional strategy identified by Wise and Velayutham (2017) as "moral intensity" (123), which consists in participating in transnational social movements, religious organizations, and solidarities.

4 Hamid's Chaos-world

The various cultural and affective borderscapes represented in *Exit West* can be read as fictional manifestations of the Glissantian chaos-world, that is,

> the shock, the intertwining, the repulsions, attractions, complicities, oppositions and conflicts between the cultures of peoples in the contemporary world-totality. (Glissant 2020, 54)

From this perspective, the unpredictable destinations of the magical doors reflect "the unforeseeable meanders of Relation" (Glissant 1997, 20), in a world-totality defined by errantry and superimpositions of cultural and emotional "sediments" (33) that shape individual and collective identities. The superimposition of sediments results in *creolization*, that is,

> a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open. (34)

In *Exit West*, the news describes nations as "dissolving and collapsing entit[ies]" (Della Valle 2022, 5) also on an ethnic level, as

> the nation was like a person […] whose skin appeared to be dissolving as they swam in a soup full of other people whose skins were likewise dissolving. (Hamid 2017, 155-6)

This characterisation of nations reminds the reader of *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (1996), where Glissant underlines how the chaos-world is not "a melting pot, a mush, a mish-mash" (2020, 64) of cultures, but a cultural diversity that is subject to contingent clashes, readjustments, and harmonisation. The soup mentioned in the above passage is a metaphor for the way Western cultures often perceive creolization as standardisation, and therefore as a threat to cultural identity. Challenging essentialist discourses, Hamid offers a representation of the world as a chaos-world in which differences encounter without cancelling each other. Moreover, he thematises the Glissantian process of creolization, which implies "multilingualism and […] the incredible explosion of cultures" (Glissant 1997, 34). While a "symphony of languages" (112) resounds throughout Glissant's chaos-world, Nadia perceives "a cacophony that was the languages of the world" (Hamid 2017, 100) upon her arrival in Mykonos. 'Cacophony' is a conceptual tool developed by postcolonial theorist Jody A. Byrd to describe the competing voices struggling for legitimacy and recognition across multiple axes of colonial domination. It

> focuses not only vertically on the interactions between the colonizer and colonized, but horizontally between different minority oppressions within settler and arrivant landscapes on the baseline between racialization and conquest. (Byrd 2011, 31).

Far from carrying a negative connotation, Hamid's use of the term 'cacophony' seems to identify the struggling phases of Glissant's process of cultural creolization, which involves linguistic hybridization. This hybridity is described in Chapter 7. In their Nigerian House in London, Nadia realizes that

> Nigerians spoke different tongues among themselves, and belonged to different religions. Together in their group they conversed in a language that was built in part from English, but not solely from English. (Hamid 2017, 144)

In this passage, Hamid alludes to the concept of linguistic creolization, that is, the formation of what Glissant defines a "baroque chorus" (Glissant 1997, 119) characterised by the multiplicity, fluidity and permeability of languages.

Also in his description of Marin County, the narrator focuses on multifaceted encounters between cultures and people. In Marin, cultural creolization results in a new kind of jazz music and

> all kinds of ensembles, human with humans, humans with electronics, dark skin with light skin […] and even people who wore masks. (Hamid 2017, 216)

What Hamid represents through these images of linguistic, cultural, and artistic *métissage* is a "multiplicity of identity and community" (Mandaville 2001, 172) originating from contacts among cultures. In *Exit West*, as we have already underlined, identities are "constructed out of a number of constituent parts" (Nelson 2006, 297) that are reminiscent of Glissant's sediments. In the description of Marin, the narrative voice focuses on the county's hybrid ethnocultural identity by fragmenting any essentialist conception of nativeness. The narrator highlights how contemporary America features various kinds of natives ranging from Indigenous people to "those with light skin who looked most like the natives of Britain" (196) and descendants "from the human beings who had been brought from Africa […] as slaves" (197). This third layer is characterized as a stratum of soil that perhaps made possible all future transplanted soils (197).

These transplanted soils signal different phases in the creolization process, which Hamid counterposes to the ideology of nativism.

A final observation should be made in relation to the role played by technology in objectifying migrants and refugees. In a vignette in Chapter 5, a migrant family with dark skin is teleported to Dubai, where its members are captured first on the feeds of surveillance devices, and then on the camera feeds of tourists' smartphones, where they appear as "four disparate individuals" (88). In this example, digital devices contribute to encoding and producing information "[whose] veracity remains elusive" (Naydan 2019, 444), obliterating the empathy that could be aroused by the image of a whole migrant family. In Glissant's chaos-world, technology, media, and social networks are identified as "flash agents [that] are in tune with the implicit violence of contacts between cultures [dictating] fashion and common place" (Glissant 1997, 166). In *Exit West*, flash agents are represented as concealed controlling instances that turn subjects into objects, virtualising and dehumanising migrants and refugees. Imagining a chaos-world in which human beings have access not only to networks of information, but also to instantaneous travel across the globe, *Exit West* encourages the reader to consider the ways in which ideas of *sameness and otherness* are shaped by sociocultural encounters and flash agents.

5 Conclusion

In *Exit West* (2017), Mohsin Hamid uses magical realism to address relevant issues pertaining to cosmopolitics and to dwell on the cultural, affective and identity dynamics of the migratory process in the contemporary world. The magical doors that appear in the novel are a polysemic narrative device that builds a cultural and ideological bridge between literary traditions and critical thinking on migration and postmigration. As a literary *topos*, magical portals belong to the realms of fairy tales, fantasy, and fantastic fiction, where the movement of characters from one place to another often involves identity formation, liberation from oppressive forces, and reconfigurations of earlier morals, principles, and ideologies. In *Exit West*, the two protagonists Nadia and Saeed use the magical doors to flee war, persecution, and manifold existential limits. Each time they find themselves in a new geographical and sociocultural context they are called upon to negotiate their beliefs and transnational identities. On a metaphorical level, Hamid's magical doors function as a symbolic tool for emphasising the critical points in the cosmopolitan project and the limits of the cosmopolitical imagination in an era of global migration. Causing a disjunction between the concept of nation and its ethnic, cultural, and linguistic components, they problematise the notions of native, migrant, asylum seeker, community, and home. Furthermore, their teleporting powers collapse the temporal dimension of border crossing, resulting in a narrative that focuses on the characters' psychological and socioemotional condition during, before, and after the migratory experience. The magical doors, whose physical characterisation evokes historical trauma and postcolonial affects, are thresholds that open on material, social, and emotional landscapes.

In *Exit West*, the narrative settings close to the portals are represented as affective borderscapes where residents, migrants, and refugees experience emotional states that influence their identity formation and sociocultural hybridisation. As emerges in several interviews, Hamid himself is conscious of his being a hybrid person born from and projected towards multiplicity. His novel may be read as a "personal project" (Hamid, Travers 2018) that aims at creating a fictional space where people like him can recognise themselves and be given agency and a voice to express their inner conditions and developing Selves. Through the stories of Saeed and Nadia, the author represents the refugee consciousness as a diasporic one, "point[ing] to present (and future) myths and realities" (Nelson 2006, 314). In the fourth section of this article, I underlined how these myths and realities may be read as a Glissantian chaos-world under construction, where the positive shock of new encounters breaks down ideological boundaries and promotes the right to search for a better future anywhere in the world.

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La figure du réfugié ou les limites de la pensée binaire
Une approche postmigrante de *Silence du chœur* de Mohamed Mbougar Sarr

Dehoux Amaury
Université catholique de Louvain, La Belgique

Abstract This article examines Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *Silence du chœur* as a critique of the compartmentalization inherent in refugee status and its impact on our understanding of migration. The analysis begins by revealing how the concept of the refugee perpetuates binary divisions rooted in colonial thought. Building on this premise, the study explores the poetics of space as a mechanism for rejecting these binary divisions, positioning refugees not within the confines of camps but at the very heart of urban life. Aligning with postmigrant perspectives, which engage with postcolonial theories, Sarr's novel articulates a poetics that 'demigrantizes' the refugee and explores the vision of a pluralistic future for contemporary European societies.

Keywords Refugee. Postmigration. Mbougar Sarr. Poetics of space. Pluralism.

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1 Introduction

Dans *Silence du chœur* de Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, une certaine indétermination entoure le statut des soixante-douze migrants africains arrivés dans la ville sicilienne d'Altino. Certes, tout au long de ce roman polyphonique, ils sont plusieurs fois désignés comme des réfugiés. Mais, dans les faits, ils attendent toujours de passer devant la commission qui doit statuer sur leur sort et décider de leur attribuer ou non des papiers. En raison de divers événements, le récit s'achève même sans que cette commission ne se soit jamais réunie. En d'autres mots, le roman de Mbougar Sarr s'attache à ne jamais dire clairement si les immigrés peuvent être assimilés à des réfugiés. Par là, il traduit une résistance aux délimitations que le terme même introduit dans l'expérience migratoire. Une telle résistance traverse en réalité tout le roman. Celui-ci donne en effet à lire une remise en question – tantôt explicite, tantôt implicite – de l'horizon ontologique et épistémologique ouvert par le statut de réfugié. Dans le même temps, par les événements relatés et par la façon de les raconter, il propose un imaginaire qui échappe en partie à cet horizon.

L'objectif sera ici d'approfondir comment *Silence du chœur* peut être lu comme une réflexion critique sur l'imaginaire de la migration dans son rapport à la figure du réfugié. Pour ce faire, il sera d'abord question de montrer que le roman met à distance cette figure en raison de sa propension à maintenir des oppositions binaires dans l'appréhension de l'immigration. Quelques considérations sur la poétique de l'espace permettront alors de souligner comment l'œuvre de Mbougar Sarr esquisse un lieu qui tend à dépasser les dualismes. Un tel dépassement se verra finalement envisagé à travers le dessin romanesque d'une société postmigrante (Foroutan 2019 ; Espahangizi 2021) qui, en désamorçant certaines implications du statut de réfugié, est amenée à se reconnaître comme une société transformée par l'immigration.

2 Le réfugié ou le maintien des dualismes

Dès leur installation à Altino, les migrants africains font l'objet d'une opposition revendiquée : ils sont confrontés à l'hostilité manifeste d'une partie de la population menée par Maurizio Mangialepre et les frères Calcagno. Dans le cadre d'une telle opposition, le statut de réfugié ne se voit prêter aucune pertinence : en raison de la logique causale qu'il suppose, il est proprement inenvisageable pour les personnes qui refusent l'immigration. Aux yeux de celles-ci, il n'existe en effet aucun motif qui puisse justifier la présence des migrants dans la ville sicilienne. Ceux-ci sont littéralement indésirables (Agier 2022) : ils sont considérés comme une menace pour la communauté

sicilienne, qu'il faut absolument contenir. Accusés injustement de viols et de meurtres, ils sont assimilés à des sauvages qui assiègent l'Europe et qui menacent de la détruire (Agier 2022). Directement inspirée de l'imaginaire du colon qui se pense entouré de barbares (Hage 2016), une telle assimilation place l'appréhension de la migration sous le signe de la pensée binaire héritée du colonialisme (Bhabha 1994). Ainsi, la dichotomie du colon et du colonisé se voit prolongée dans l'opposition entre le citoyen européen, dit local, et l'immigré (Römhild 2021). Par le biais même d'une telle opposition, les migrants sont inévitablement exclus par Maurizio et ses suiveurs du 'nous' constituant la communauté imaginée (Anderson 1991) d'Altino. En un sens, le procès d'exclusion culmine dans le combat mortel qui, à la fin du roman, met le groupe de Fabio Calcagno aux prises avec certains migrants menés par Salomon. Survenant dans un décor apocalyptique dû à l'éruption de l'Etna, ce combat traduit exemplairement comment la pensée binaire nourrit un désir d'éliminer l'autre tenu pour une menace.

Dans *Silence du chœur*, cette pensée binaire se révèle tellement forte qu'elle imprègne également des modes de pensée qui ne sont pas hostiles à l'immigration. Ainsi, elle se retrouve même dans les discours de personnes liées à l'association Santa Marta, qui prend en charge l'accueil des migrants à Altino. Alors même qu'elle est responsable de la communication au sein de cette association, Veronica ne peut s'empêcher de recourir à une rhétorique qui mobilise un 'nous' sicilien duquel les migrants ne font pas partie :

> Ils portent des valeurs que leurs cultures leur ont données. Et il est possible que ces valeurs ne soient pas les mêmes que les nôtres… (Mbougar Sarr 2022, 199)

En mobilisant une telle rhétorique, la chargée de communication entend appuyer l'idée selon laquelle les migrants ne peuvent s'intégrer à Altino qu'en se conformant aux valeurs qu'elle tient pour définitoires de la culture sicilienne : « Nous faisons beaucoup pour eux, ils pourraient faire l'effort de s'adapter ! » (197). Tel qu'il est ici formulé, le devoir d'adaptation se voit aussi corrélé à la réduction ontologique que suppose le statut de réfugié. En effet, en se voyant présentés comme des hommes qui devaient absolument fuir leur pays, les migrants africains sont perçus par certains membres et sympathisants de l'association uniquement comme des victimes qu'il faut aider (Agier 2002). Autrement dit, le discours humanitaire maintient une forme de hiérarchie – et donc de distinction – entre les Siciliens, qui sont capables d'accueillir, et les réfugiés, qui dépendent entièrement des Siciliens.

Dans le roman de Mbougar Sarr, le terme 'réfugié' se voit dès lors institué comme le vecteur d'une grille de lecture qui perpétue une

série de cloisonnements dans la vision de l'immigration. Bien plus, à travers le chapitre 20 qui prend la forme d'un véritable essai consacré aux implications de la question posée à chaque migrant sur les motifs de son départ, ce terme est présenté comme la source de nouvelles divisions. Parce qu'il ne s'applique pas à tous les migrants, il offre insidieusement la possibilité d'établir un classement entre eux. Suivant les arguments développés dans le chapitre en question, ce classement joue en faveur du réfugié, qui se trouve en réalité considéré comme le seul migrant légitime par la société d'accueil. Ainsi, comme l'explique *Silence du chœur*, la migration n'est jugée tolérable qu'à l'unique condition qu'elle relève de l'urgence vitale que suppose le statut de réfugié : les « bons migrants » sont ceux qu'« une mort certaine […] menaçait » et qui, de ce fait, peuvent justifier leur arrivée par « l'absolue nécessité du départ (guerres, famines, persécutions, discriminations, catastrophe naturelle, écologique, etc.) » (Mbougar Sarr 2022, 183). Par le jugement de valeur qu'il met en avant, le roman dénonce alors une dérive paradoxale qui s'attache à la figure du réfugié : alors même que l'identification d'une telle figure soutient l'accueil de certains immigrés, elle devient simultanément un moyen d'en exclure d'autres. À partir du moment où la migration des individus ne se place pas sous le signe de l'absolue nécessité, ceux-ci deviennent objets de méfiance :

> [L]eur réponse peut toujours convaincre ou émouvoir, mais avec plus de mal, puisqu'aux yeux de l'interlocuteur, cette réponse lie le départ à une raison non absolument nécessaire, voire superflue (gagner plus d'argent, aider sa famille, trouver un emploi, avoir des perspectives d'avenir, avoir une meilleure vie). (183)

En d'autres mots, par un effet de contraste, la catégorie du réfugié crée les « mauvais migrants » (183) qui, au nom de leur dépréciation, pourraient légitimement être rejetés. Cette catégorie nourrit autrement un imaginaire de l'invasion, qui n'est pas sans lien avec celui véhiculé par les opposants à l'immigration. S'ils ne peuvent être assimilés à des réfugiés, les migrants sont automatiquement soupçonnés d'être des envahisseurs qui s'imposent sans justification à Altino, à la Sicile et, plus largement, à l'Europe. Dans l'illégitimité qui est prêtée aux motifs économiques de la migration, il est possible de voir une nouvelle actualisation de la pensée binaire, suivant laquelle les immigrés constituent des étrangers indésirables qui tentent de s'approprier des ressources auxquelles les habitants locaux devraient être les seuls à pouvoir prétendre.

Poussant encore plus loin la réflexion, le roman de Mbougar Sarr souligne que la catégorie du réfugié sert également cette pensée binaire à un autre niveau. En effet, même si cette catégorie permet de justifier l'accueil d'une partie des arrivants, elle en vient ultimement

à maintenir la dualité qui oppose les autochtones aux migrants. La raison d'un tel maintien réside dans le fait que, pour se voir attribuer ou non le statut de réfugié, le migrant est toujours confronté à la question des motifs de son départ. Or, suivant les arguments déployés par *Silence du chœur*, cette question souffre d'un défaut épistémologique majeur pour appréhender la migration. Cherchant « à définir le réfugié par son seul passé » (Mbougar Sarr 2022, 185), elle le renvoie toujours à son pays d'origine. En d'autres termes, elle cristallise le migrant comme un corps étranger à la communauté dans laquelle il arrive. Par là même, elle témoigne d'une forme de cécité, puisqu'elle refuse d'interroger et d'envisager la présence du migrant dans la société d'accueil. C'est pourquoi le roman estime qu'en déniant toute pertinence au statut même de réfugié, les personnes opposées à l'immigration ouvrent paradoxalement la voie à une autre façon de penser celle-ci :

> Dans leur méprise, cependant, les hostiles sont les seuls à poser le doigt sur ce qui est peut-être la vérité de la situation. Oui : ils sont les seuls à considérer le migrant, même si c'est souvent pour de tristes raisons, comme un homme qui est là, qui est arrivé, qui a un présent et veut construire un futur. (185)

Par leur indifférence au passé, qui, à leurs yeux, ne peut jamais justifier l'accueil des migrants, Maurizio et ses partisans se concentrent sur la place que les nouveaux arrivants prennent inévitablement dans l'espace européen, ici symbolisé par Altino. Avec une forme de lucidité, ils perçoivent la migration comme un phénomène durable qui risque de transformer la société européenne. En une sorte de paradoxe, ils montrent qu'en renonçant au paradigme du réfugié, il est possible d'apercevoir la fin des dualismes qu'eux-mêmes tentent de perpétuer.

3 Sortir le réfugié de l'encampement

Dans le traitement qu'il propose de l'espace, le roman de Mbougar Sarr s'attache justement à inscrire cette fin des dualismes dans l'horizon littéral et métaphorique d'Altino. En effet, la description des lieux ne porte aucune trace de la politique de l'encampement qui est généralement appliquée aux réfugiés et qui consiste à gérer leur présence à travers leur installation dans un camp (Agier 2014). Certes, les migrants sont regroupés dans un quartier spécifique de la ville sicilienne, qui n'abolit dès lors pas entièrement la séparation avec le reste de la population. Mais, dans le même temps, par sa nature même, ce quartier appartient pleinement à l'espace d'Altino : il ne correspond nullement à un camp de réfugiés qui serait localisé à la

périphérie de la ville et qui en serait séparé par une frontière infranchissable (Agier 2022). Autrement dit, les réfugiés ne sont pas du tout placés, pour reprendre le titre d'Agier (2002), « aux bords du monde ». Ils ne doivent pas occuper un non-lieu (Augé 1992) entendu comme une zone de passage ou de transit (Agier 2002) que les hommes sont censés fréquenter provisoirement, mais qu'ils ne sont – à la base du moins – pas destinés à habiter durablement. Ils n'arrivent aucunement dans un lieu qui resterait à anthropologiser – comme cela finit par se passer, selon Agier (2002), dans les camps de réfugiés. *De facto*, ils ne sont pas cantonnés dans un espace a priori impersonnel, au sein duquel ils seraient des figures anonymes et indifférenciées (Augé 1992).

Au contraire, dans *Silence du chœur*, ils se trouvent directement inscrits dans le lieu anthropologique que représente la ville d'Altino. Conformément aux thèses d'Augé (1992), cette ville conserve bien la mémoire de la communauté qui l'habite. Comme le montre la statue d'Athéna qui est exposée au musée d'Altino et qui en constitue la fierté archéologique, une telle mémoire remonte très loin dans le temps : l'espace offre ainsi à la communauté des traces qui lui permettent d'éprouver sa solidité et son évolution au fil de l'histoire. Parallèlement à cette fonction mémorielle, l'espace urbain d'Altino possède également une fonction relationnelle : avant et après l'arrivée des réfugiés, il dessine en permanence des échanges entre les membres de la communauté. Il offre de multiples possibilités et sites de rencontre, que le roman s'attache à mettre en lumière. De cette façon, le récit se focalise à un moment sur l'église où les fidèles assistent ensemble à la messe célébrée par le Padre Bonianno. De même, le chapitre 27 évoque le musée dans lequel les habitants se regroupent pour participer au vernissage de l'exposition de Vera et Vincenzo Rivera. Il est aussi question des locaux de l'association Santa Marta, où se réunissent ses membres, ou encore du petit restaurant, où Maurizio Mangialepre entame des négociations politiques avec le maire. Parce qu'ils ont la possibilité de fréquenter tous ces lieux, les migrants se trouvent eux-mêmes pris dans la fonction relationnelle de la ville. Se soustrayant lui aussi à l'encampement du monde, l'espace urbain n'est donc pas institué comme un autre camp où les Siciliens s'auto-enfermeraient à l'écart des migrants (Agier 2022). Par là, le roman de Mbougar Sarr explique également la mélancolie postcoloniale (Gilroy 2005) de Maurizio et des frères Calcagno qui, conformément aux thèses de Gilroy, vivent dans la nostalgie d'un monde où les colons et les colonisés étaient clairement séparés, et qui, dès lors, perçoivent la migration postcoloniale, incarnée par les soixante-douze réfugiés, comme une mise à mal de cette séparation au sein même de la ville d'Altino.

En appelant à penser l'espace des migrants en dehors du camp des réfugiés, l'œuvre de Mbougar Sarr continue à prêter une forme

de lucidité aux personnes hostiles à l'immigration : à travers l'image qu'il construit d'Altino, le roman institue effectivement la ville européenne postcoloniale comme le site de la Relation théorisée par Édouard Glissant (1990).[1] Conformément à la définition du philosophe et écrivain martiniquais, l'espace urbain de *Silence du chœur* se donne comme la co-présence réalisée d'un ensemble de différences que, malgré les efforts de Maurizio et de ses partisans, il est impossible de contenir et encore moins d'effacer. Pour le redire dans les termes de Gilroy (2005), la traduction et la reconnaissance spatiales de ces différences placent la ville sous le signe de la convivialité : même si le racisme, nourri par la mélancolie postcoloniale, continue à se manifester, il ne parvient pas à empêcher une série de processus qui instaurent le multiculturalisme comme un trait quotidien et ordinaire d'Altino, entendu comme cité européenne postcoloniale (Gilroy 2005). En d'autres mots, l'espace de la ville devient un site de négociations (Foroutan 2019 ; Arnold 2016) entre les habitants d'Altino et les réfugiés, entre les différentes parties de la société affectée par l'immigration. Même si elles ne sont pas toujours réussies ou harmonieuses, ces négociations permettent de sortir de la réduction ontologique usuellement imposée aux réfugiés. Définissant ceux-ci comme des partenaires avec lesquels il faut traiter et composer, elles les autorisent à progressivement retrouver un statut d'être humain. En tant qu'individus visibles dans les rues de la ville qu'ils arpentent, les migrants ne peuvent plus totalement être assimilés par leurs opposants à une masse indistincte d'ennemis barbares. De même, en ce qu'ils ne sont pas contraints d'attendre dans un camp de réfugiés, ils ne se laissent pas entièrement enfermer dans l'image de victimes passives à aider. Au contraire, par leur capacité à évoluer dans la ville, ils démontrent une forme d'agentivité.

Le symbole d'une telle agentivité se retrouve dans l'équipe de football qui, à l'exception de Gianni, est composée uniquement de migrants. En remportant un tournoi, ceux-ci s'affirment comme des fières composantes d'Altino, dont ils portent et font triompher les couleurs. Leur victoire se voit d'ailleurs célébrée au cœur même de la ville :

> Dès vingt et une heures, la *Tavola di Luca* fut prise d'assaut. Ragazzi, membres de Santa Marta, simples habitants : tous buvaient, mangeaient, fêtaient. (Mbougar Sarr 2022, 413)

1 De façon significative, *Silence du chœur* peut également se lire selon le paradoxe que Glissant (1998) tient pour fondateur de l'œuvre de Faulkner. Dans les deux cas, le contact des cultures et des différences a lieu malgré la force ségrégationniste qui agit tant dans le Sud des États-Unis de Faulkner que dans la Sicile de Mbougar Sarr.

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Comme le montre très bien cet extrait, la fête marque une communion entre les supporters locaux et les footballeurs migrants, qui ne forment plus qu'un seul ensemble. En ce sens, elle traduit bien l'inscription des réfugiés dans la ville et, par métonymie, dans la population de cette ville. Une telle inscription se voit encore renforcée par le rôle central que joue le désir dans la fête. Ainsi, différentes relations amoureuses se jouent au cours de la soirée qui célèbre la victoire de l'équipe de football. Fousseyni et Lucia échangent leur premier baiser, tandis que Jogoy et Carla se rendent mutuellement jaloux. Bemba et Concetta, pour leur part, finissent par faire l'amour. Les trois relations ont un point commun remarquable : elles unissent un homme réfugié et une femme sicilienne. En d'autres mots, elles transcendent le dualisme du 'nous' sicilien et du 'eux' migrant : à travers les couples mixtes qu'elles dessinent, elles pointent vers un 'nous' transculturel, qui se conçoit en dehors de la pensée binaire héritée du colonialisme. Par le biais d'un tel 'nous', les réfugiés se voient pleinement restaurés comme des êtres humains aux yeux d'autres êtres humains qui les considèrent comme désirables : envisagés comme les partenaires d'une vie à construire, ils retrouvent la plénitude ontologique que leur dénie le statut de barbare ou de victime.

Comme le montrent très bien les rapports amoureux transculturels, la ville d'Altino actualise pleinement la fonction relationnelle prêtée aux lieux anthropologiques, qu'elle étend aux réfugiés accueillis en son sein. Par là même, elle modifie le sens de la communauté et, *de facto*, la mémoire qu'elle conserve de cette communauté. En effet, que les habitants le veuillent ou non, Altino porte désormais à la fois les traces d'une histoire incluant la migration (Luna-Dubois 2021) et les traces des négociations que celle-ci a entraînées dans l'espace urbain (Petersen 2021). L'inscription de ces traces se voit parfaitement figurée à travers l'affrontement, déjà mentionné, entre les groupes de Salomon et de Fabio Calcagno. Quand Lucia et son père arrivent sur le lieu de cet affrontement pour chercher Fousseyni, ils découvrent une petite place d'Altino jonchée de cadavres :

> Les corps étaient éparpillés au sol. La scène donna l'impression à Simone Marconi qu'ils s'étaient entre-tués jusqu'au dernier, comme des naufragés sur une île déserte et finissant par s'entre-dévorer. (Mbougar Sarr 2022, 554-5)

Telle qu'elle est décrite, la scène présente une forme d'ironie par rapport à la vision binaire défendue par les frères Calcagno et par Salomon : en raison de leur corps-à-corps meurtrier, les réfugiés et les personnes qui leur sont hostiles se trouvent ultimement mêlés les uns aux autres dans l'espace urbain. De façon encore plus ironique, ce mélange paraît devoir leur survivre pour l'éternité. Ainsi, en raison de l'éruption de l'Etna, « [l]es poussières envelopp[ent] la place » et

« [l]e nuage entre dans la ville vide » (555), où il se répand. Comme le note le père de Lucia, il en résulte que les cadavres sont

> recouverts par les premières particules de cendres, éclairés par cette lumière particulière que l'apocalypse jette sur le monde qu'elle va révéler en détruisant. (555)

Par sa description même, le contexte apocalyptique ne manque pas d'évoquer l'éruption du Vésuve qui a touché Pompéi. En figeant une série d'habitants dans leur quotidien, le nuage de cendres a permis de conserver un aperçu vivace de l'existence au sein de la cité antique du I^er^ siècle. En un écho à la ville de Pompéi, le roman de Mbougar Sarr indique alors que, grâce à l'éruption de l'Etna, la scène de l'affrontement va à son tour porter le témoignage de la vie quotidienne à Altino au début du XXI^e^ siècle. Telle qu'elle est fixée par les cendres, cette scène donne parfaitement à voir la convivialité que la migration a engendrée dans la ville sicilienne : tout en montrant la prégnance du racisme, elle signale également qu'Altino n'a pu échapper à la mise en relation de ses habitants et des réfugiés. Par conséquent, elle garde la trace du processus de constitution d'un horizon pluraliste au sein duquel la différence est incluse, plutôt que de faire l'objet d'un encampement étanche.

4 Penser au-delà du réfugié

Par sa critique de la pensée binaire et par son refus de l'encampement, le roman de Mbougar Sarr manifeste explicitement sa volonté de dépasser le réfugié comme catégorie spécifique de la migration. Aussi, dans la lignée de sa poétique spatiale, s'attache-t-il à retirer tout caractère distinctif à une telle catégorie. Pour ce faire, il dessine un univers diégétique au sein duquel les personnages eux-mêmes affaiblissent le sens du terme 'réfugié'. Parallèlement aux opposants à l'immigration, qui n'accordent aucune valeur à ce terme, certains alliés des migrants en viennent également à neutraliser les hiérarchies qu'autorise le statut de réfugié. Le roman présente ainsi le Padre Bonianno comme un homme parvenant à se jouer de la question qui sert à conférer ce statut et qui porte sur les motifs du départ. Ce personnage aide en effet tous les migrants à répondre à cette question par une histoire dans laquelle le fait d'être parti découle inévitablement d'une absolue nécessité :

> Amedeo Bonianno lui avait répondu qu'il aiderait les ragazzi à mieux raconter leur histoire aux commissions chargées de leur évaluation, quitte parfois à arranger un peu le récit lorsqu'il le fallait. (Mbougar Sarr 2022, 131)

Comme le prêtre le reconnaît, il n'hésite pas à manipuler la réalité et à produire des histoires partiellement mensongères. Par là même, il fait perdre tout pouvoir discriminant à la notion de réfugié, laquelle se voit généralisée par des départs qui sont tous placés sous le signe d'une urgence vitale. Autrement dit, sous l'action du Padre Bonianno, les termes 'migrants' et 'réfugiés' deviennent littéralement synonymes. *Ipso facto*, le statut de réfugié se charge d'une valeur pleinement inclusive en ce qu'il s'applique désormais à l'ensemble des immigrés et en ce qu'il les fait tous apparaître comme des individus devant être accueillis.

Tout en neutralisant la distinction que la catégorie du réfugié introduit entre les migrants, *Silence du chœur* s'attache plus largement à effacer la dualité que celle-ci perpétue entre les autochtones et les immigrés. Dans cette optique, le roman de Mbougar Sarr met en place un dispositif narratif qui, ici aussi, permet d'étendre le champ d'application d'une telle catégorie à un plus grand nombre de personnes. Ce dispositif narratif repose sur l'éruption de l'Etna, qui oblige à évacuer Altino. Ainsi, les migrants et les autres habitants de la ville sont amenés à fuir ensemble un lieu dans lequel ils ne peuvent rester en raison d'une catastrophe écologique qui fait peser une menace absolue sur leur existence :

> [Q]uelques habitants d'Altino s'arrêtèrent quelques instants pour regarder leur ville. […] Chacun d'eux se demanda s'il pourrait un jour y retourner ou s'il serait obligé de retrouver une vie ailleurs. Tragique question qu'un jour […] plusieurs ragazzi qui étaient à leurs côtés durent aussi se poser. (563)

En d'autres mots, les exilés d'Altino se voient tous assimilés à des réfugiés environnementaux (Bates 2002). En un jeu de renversement complet, le statut de réfugié ne sert plus à isoler des individus parmi les habitants d'Altino, mais il les rend tous égaux. Il perd toute fonction définitoire : il renvoie à l'ensemble des personnes présentes dans la ville sicilienne. L'apocalypse finale pointe donc aussi vers la possibilité de reconstruire autrement le monde. En effet, tout comme l'éruption de l'Etna détruit Altino et lui offre l'occasion d'un nouveau départ, elle balaie les limites attachées à la notion de réfugié : elle ouvre un horizon épistémologique inédit pour penser la migration au-delà de cette notion. En réalité, un tel horizon se voit déjà esquissé par les termes que le roman de Mbougar Sarr emploie tout au long de la narration. Très souvent, les réfugiés se voient désignés comme les ragazzi – ce que l'on pourrait traduire par les 'gars', les 'garçons'. En elle-même, une telle désignation échappe totalement à la migrantologie (Yildiz 2014 ; Römhild 2021) : elle ne situe plus

du tout les ragazzi par rapport au phénomène migratoire.[2] Elle permet d'envisager la migration à Altino en dehors des dualismes nourris par la terminologie des discours et des études sur la migration (Römhild 2021). Par le recours assumé à l'italien, le roman instaure les migrants comme une composante intrinsèque d'Altino, qui peut dès lors être dite dans la langue quotidienne du lieu. Bien plus, par ses connotations affectives, le terme 'ragazzi' suggère une forme de familiarité (Brinker 2023) qui tend à abolir linguistiquement la distance avec les personnes qu'il désigne.

Comme l'indique l'emploi du mot 'ragazzi', *Silence du chœur* peut se lire comme une tentative d'aller au-delà de la pensée binaire.[3] En déconstruisant le statut de réfugié et les hiérarchies qu'il crée dans l'immigration, le roman vise à développer une perspective épistémologique et artistique qui l'autorise à renouveler l'approche et la figuration du phénomène migratoire. Une telle perspective entre en dialogue avec la postmigration comme cadre critique qui permet d'envisager la migration au-delà de la dichotomie entre non-migrants et immigrés (Petersen, Schramm, Wiegand 2019 ; Römhild 2021).[4] De façon significative, la postmigration assume elle-même des liens avec la critique postcoloniale (Yildiz, Rotter 2023), avec laquelle elle partage notamment une remise en question des oppositions binaires nourries par un regard eurocentrique. Elle appelle à dépasser un tel regard en vue de relire autrement les sociétés européennes d'immigration. En rupture avec la figure du réfugié qui, selon Mbougar Sarr, renvoie toujours le migrant à son pays de départ, la postmigration n'appréhende plus la migration comme un élément extrinsèque aux sociétés européennes. Au contraire, elle l'institue comme une dimension constitutive de ces sociétés. En d'autres mots, la migration se voit 'démigrantisée' (Yildiz 2014) et instaurée comme une composante de l'horizon pluraliste promis par les démocraties européennes (Foroutan 2019). Par là même, ces démocraties sont elles-mêmes

2 La 'migrantologie' renvoie aux discours qui, en se focalisant sur la migration comme un objet en soi, enferment le migrant dans un monde distinct de celui des non-migrants. En voulant à tout prix dire la spécificité du phénomène migratoire, ces discours interdisent de penser le migrant au-delà de son identité de migrant et, corollairement, de redéfinir la communauté nationale à laquelle il est implicitement opposé. Voir Römhild 2021.

3 Si les autres romans de Mbougar Sarr ne traitent pas de la migration, ils participent eux aussi d'une entreprise de déconstruction des systèmes de pensée binaires. Cette entreprise s'attaque à la vision manichéenne des intégristes religieux dans *Terre ceinte* (2015) et à l'hétéronormativité dans *De purs hommes* (2018).

4 Venue de la critique allemande, la 'postmigration' est un terme polysémique qui peut renvoyer aux descendants de migrants, à une société transformée par l'immigration ou à une perspective critique dépassant la dualité entre migrants et non-migrants (Petersen, Schramm, Wiegand 2019). Dans le cadre de cet article, elle sera envisagée selon les deux derniers sens.

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tenues pour postmigrantes : elles relèvent de sociétés transformées et structurées par l'immigration.

Par sa façon même de traiter de la situation des réfugiés et du rapport à ceux-ci, le roman de Mbougar Sarr dessine justement une ville répondant aux caractéristiques majeures que Foroutan (2019) prête aux sociétés postmigrantes.[5] Ainsi, bien qu'Altino ne soit jamais légalement déclaré une société d'immigration, la question de la reconnaissance constitue une sorte de fil d'Ariane de la narration. À tous les niveaux, la ville sicilienne est progressivement forcée d'admettre le rôle que la migration tient dans sa configuration actuelle. D'ailleurs, toutes les composantes de l'histoire sont, d'une manière ou d'une autre, reliées aux réfugiés. La situation politique de la ville joue, par exemple, d'un tel lien. Pour avoir une image positive, le maire d'Altino se déclare favorable aux réfugiés. Par la suite, il n'hésite pas à se rapprocher du principal opposant à l'immigration, Maurizio, pour servir sa carrière. À l'image du maire, l'actualité de la ville évolue dans un rapport constant à l'immigration. Même s'ils ne sont pas responsables des meurtres et des viols commis après la fête célébrant la victoire de l'équipe de football, les réfugiés y sont mêlés : ces actes sont commis par les frères Calcagno et leurs acolytes au nom de la haine qu'ils vouent aux migrants. De façon encore plus significative, chaque vie individuelle est influencée par l'immigration. Depuis les ragazzi jusqu'à leurs alliés de l'association Santa Marta, en passant par leurs opposants, tous les personnages sont appelés à se situer dans l'histoire postmigrante d'Altino. Sur ce point, l'existence de Maurizio offre le parfait symbole d'une vie entièrement transformée par l'immigration. Il consacre tous ses efforts à chasser les réfugiés en raison même du rôle que la migration a joué dans son propre destin : il veut se venger de sa rupture amoureuse avec Sabrina, qui a été provoquée par sa jalousie à l'encontre d'un réfugié pour lequel sa fiancée éprouvait des sentiments.

Parallèlement à la reconnaissance, les négociations définitoires des sociétés postmigrantes laissent – comme on l'a vu – des traces dans l'espace. Elles traduisent la lutte des réfugiés pour être intégrés comme des composantes à part entière de la ville d'Altino. Cette lutte se marque sur le plan politique par la quête des papiers, qui pose explicitement la question des droits et de l'appartenance des réfugiés. Cette question permet l'expression des ambivalences qui agitent les sociétés postmigrantes. Dans le roman de Mbougar Sarr, ces ambivalences se manifestent à travers la critique du statut de réfugié : tout en permettant des négociations en faveur de l'accueil, ce statut empêche aussi la pleine intégration des migrants. De façon ambiguë, la pensée binaire influence également ceux qui sont favorables

5 Sur ce point, voir aussi la très claire synthèse d'Arnold 2016.

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à l'immigration. Il n'en reste pas moins qu'à travers ceux-ci, *Silence du chœur* peut figurer les alliances qui se nouent dans les sociétés postmigrantes autour de la défense de la diversité et qui sont ici représentées par l'association Santa Marta et le Padre Bonianno. En une espèce de symétrie, ces alliances sont mises face à des antagonismes qui s'exacerbent dans les sociétés postmigrantes et qu'incarnent Maurizio et les frères Calcagno. *Silence du chœur* indique d'ailleurs bien que la violence de ces antagonismes témoigne de la conscience d'un devenir postmigrant inévitable : le combat mortel mené par Fabio Calcagno peut se lire comme le geste ultime et particulièrement radical auquel les opposants ont recours pour tenter, malgré tout, d'empêcher ce devenir.

Comme le montre l'identification de la reconnaissance, des négociations, des ambivalences, des alliances et des antagonismes, *Silence du chœur* ne se fait pas le roman du réfugié, entendu comme justification de son départ et de son statut : il se donne plutôt comme l'exposé de la société postmigrante qui est en train d'émerger à travers la 'démigrantisation' de l'horizon ontologique et épistémologique usuellement supposé par la figure du réfugié. De façon significative, la narration s'intéresse d'ailleurs assez peu au passé des ragazzi. Seul celui de Fousseyni est évoqué au cours d'un unique chapitre, à savoir le chapitre 32. Dans le cas de Jogoy, qui est un réfugié arrivé avant les soixante-douze ragazzi, le passé fait l'objet de six chapitres qui constituent un cahier matériellement distingué du reste du roman. Ainsi, tant qualitativement que visuellement, le départ et le voyage sont marginalisés dans *Silence du chœur*, qui se centre sur le présent postmigrant d'Altino. De fait, la narration d'un tel présent se voit soulignée par un jeu de mise en abyme. En effet, par les connexions entre le dernier chapitre et le Prologue/Épilogue, le roman se voit institué comme un récit livré par Jogoy lui-même. De cette manière, après l'éruption, la statue d'Athéna, « mémoire incarnée » (Mbougar Sarr 2022, 567) d'Altino, s'anime et confie la matière du roman au personnage :

> Athéna devait lui transmettre la mémoire du lieu. Ce serait ensuite à lui que reviendrait la tâche de dire le récit des ragazzi d'Altino. (568)

Par son geste même, la statue d'Athéna signe la reconnaissance d'une histoire postmigrante de la ville. Alors même qu'elle symbolise les racines gréco-latines de la société sicilienne – et européenne –, elle indique l'impossibilité de se penser selon une origine ancestrale unique. Elle place Altino sous le signe d'une Digenèse (Glissant 2006). Par là, il faut entendre que, devenue composite en raison de l'immigration, la ville sicilienne contemporaine se conçoit selon des

commencements qui viennent de partout (Glissant 2006).[6] Aussi la mémoire d'Altino inclut-elle désormais l'histoire des ragazzi, qui en fait partie intégrante. En ayant la charge de raconter une telle histoire, Jogoy se voit donné comme une figure renouvelée qui échappe totalement à la catégorie du réfugié. Comme l'explique Agier (2002 ; 2023), cette catégorie réduit au silence les personnes auxquelles elle s'applique : à l'instar du subalterne défini par Spivak (1988), dont il constitue une nouvelle actualisation, le réfugié n'est pas autorisé à parler ou, du moins, sa voix n'est pas entendue. En tant que victime, il se voit réduit à un être humain affaibli ou diminué, au nom duquel il faut dès lors parler. Or, à travers Jogoy, le roman de Mbougar Sarr dessine des réfugiés qui retrouvent leur voix et qui, de ce fait, cessent d'être des réfugiés dans la ville postmigrante. Le récit étant confié à Jogoy, la voix des ragazzi se voit même reconnue comme un vecteur pleinement légitime par et pour la mémoire d'Altino, incarnée par Athéna.[7] Matérialisant l'horizon pluraliste des sociétés européennes d'immigration, les ragazzi ne racontent pas seulement leur histoire : ils font le récit de toute la communauté sicilienne postmigrante à laquelle ils appartiennent.

5 Conclusion

En définitive, dans *Silence du chœur*, l'emploi flottant du mot 'réfugié' ne relève pas d'une indifférence au sens de celui-ci ou d'une absence de rigueur terminologique. Au contraire, il répond à une visée romanesque parfaitement consciente et maîtrisée, qui entend manifester une forme de méfiance devant l'enfermement auquel peut conduire ce mot. Un tel enfermement est ontologique, en raison de la dépendance et du silence qu'impose la réduction du réfugié à une victime. Il est aussi épistémologique dans la mesure où la catégorie du réfugié contribue à maintenir la pensée binaire héritée du colonialisme. En vue de lutter contre les deux versants qu'il prête à l'enfermement, le roman de Mbougar Sarr s'attache à déconstruire certains traits attachés au réfugié. En refusant de figurer l'encampement, il utilise l'espace comme un site de négociations qui permet d'envisager un horizon inclusif. En vue de développer un tel horizon, il mine les définitions figées qui perpétuent la migrantologie. Il en vient ainsi à dessiner une perspective et une poétique postmigrantes grâce auxquelles

6 Glissant (2006) oppose les sociétés composites, qui se pensent selon la Digenèse et la rencontre des cultures, aux sociétés ataviques, qui se définissent selon une genèse et, par là, selon une racine unique.

7 Il faut noter que, par ce jeu de réflexivité autour de la mémoire et du récit polyphonique de la mémoire, *Silence du chœur* pose les bases de la poétique que Mbougar Sarr déploie dans *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021).

le réfugié est 'démigrantisé' et, par là, l'immigration dans sa totalité peut être intégrée au sein d'un chœur véritablement pluraliste des sociétés européennes contemporaines.

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Representing Refugees in Children's Transethnic Literature: Two Multilingual and Intermedial Narratives as a Case Study

Annarita Taronna
Università degli Studi di Bari «Aldo Moro», Italia

Abstract This contribution aims to explore two picture books of transethnic literature that open up intermedial narrative paths by supporting each of the proposed books with a free accessible illustrated audio book. Accordingly, it examines the extent to which implementing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons with such multimodal stories about migration can engage students in deconstructing such tropes as the idea of a national literature, a mother tongue language, a stable community of belonging and a hostile country of arrival that typically characterise mainstream migration narratives and paradigms.

Keywords Migration. Narratives. Language. Intermediality. Decoloniality.

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1 Introduction

In an era of global crises on multiple scales, it has been a priority for scholars engaged in the humanities to find distinctive tools and materials that enable both general readers and students of world languages and literatures to acquire awareness of translingual and transcultural knowledge and practices. Rather than reflecting on English as a language with a colonial history, institutions tend to favour a view of English as a neutral, culture-free tool for professional success. In fact, English has long been taught as a 'neutral' tool, a technical type of knowledge that is passed on without questioning its role in history and in creating the current state of the world, which actually perpetuates its use as a instrument for discrimination and oppression. With the increasing changes in classroom configurations, the urgence of rethinking language teaching and environment has become inescapable.

This conservative view draws on such consolidated issues as the cultural model of monoglot standardization, of proper English versus linguistic variety, and of native speakers versus new speakers which have helped to deconstruct the hegemonic qualities of Global English, as well as the label of neutrality conventionally associated with it. Traditionally, the ideology that underlies the nativeness model reproduces a series of myths according to which the variety of English – but not only – spoken by a native is a model of preferable and desirable correctness. This common opinion has inevitably triggered a dichotomous classification of linguistic identification that pits the native against the non-native and has promoted the idea, devoid of any scientific foundation, that moving away from the centre or from the historical and authentic origin of the native language detracts from the quality of the language. Moreover, the boundaries between native and non-native English speakers are increasingly fuzzy, and the notion of nativeness is losing ground in favour of plurilithic (as opposed to monolithic) and evolving cultural contexts (Jenkins 2015).

Specifically, retracing the main dynamics through which the process of the most recent globalization trends has led to the hegemony of the English language problematises the dissemination of the myth of English and the rhetoric of naturalization. Among these is the diffusion of a model based on a culture of monoglot standardization, which Silverstein defines as the constitutive base of a linguistic community that influences the structure of different communities of speakers (Silverstein 1996, 284). Drawing on a purist idea of language, this cultural model exerts its influence within a linguistic community that is linked to the idea that there is a rule that allows an individual to use his/her own language for denotative purposes, by reproducing a natural social and linguistic order (Preisler 1999; Taronna 2016).

In particular, such standardization is consolidated as a hegemonic process through different phases and methods based on social codification and the functional usefulness of language as a means of representation or denotation. Finally, the rhetoric of standardization in the form of naturalization of the language has consolidated two dichotomous value models: possessing the standard (*possession-of-standard*) gives the individual a high social and cultural status; not having the standard (*lack-of-standard*) becomes a negative indicator of the social and cultural status of the speaker. In both cases, however, pursuing a model based on a standard language, as many educational institutions do, becomes unsuccessful when it must be taken into account that the purist idea of language is only an ideological construct historically marked by stories of colonization, diaspora, forced migration, nationalism, abuse, and sometimes even fanaticism.

Yet today, the plurality of languages is more visible largely due to migration and mobility. The experience of migration (whether voluntary or involuntary) dislocates people as well as languages, and only the acceptance of language plurality, the polyphony of stories, linguistic habits, and cultures will facilitate hospitality and translation. In contemporary scenarios, this is particularly easy to observe when taking into consideration ELT classrooms where non-native speakers interact by sharing different linguistic and cultural heritages, thus problematising the traditional understanding of language as a social projection of territorial unity held together by common behavioral norms, beliefs and values. In this view, ELF classrooms can be conceived of as contact zones where it is possible to experiment with the use of English as a translingual practice that reminds us of different theoretical neologisms and paradigms such as those elaborated, among others, by the decolonial linguist Pennycook (1998) who, in defining the new varieties of English as "plurilithic Englishes", tries to systematize and problematise the principles and conditions that might shape these new variations of English (i.e. 'Englishes'). Similarly, the use of English as a translingual practice was also predicted and encompassed in 2010 when Ofelia Garcia coined the term "translanguaging" to refer to "new language practices that make visible the complexity of language exchanges among people with different histories, and releases histories and understandings that had been buried within fixed language identities constrained by nation-states" (Garcia 2010, 520). In line with such a reconceptualization of terms and practices related to language exchanges, the decolonial linguist Canagarajah introduces the idea of "translingual practice" as one that, while recognizing norms and conventions established by dominant institutions and social groups within given contexts, is more closely focused on the fact that speakers can negotiate such norms according to their own repertoires and translingual practices.

Accordingly, assuming the creative power of the new linguistic models born around English – a language that is becoming less and less monolithic, more adaptable and more open to negotiation, this contribution sets out to examine how an English language university course for Prospective Primary English Teachers (PPETs) turns out to be a place both for shaping theoretical assumptions on complex discourse constructions framing deep and problematic (de)colonial relationships. Additionally, it also aims to implement English Language Teaching (ELT) classes with new teaching materials such as the multimodal narratives on migration that have been selected for this study in order to bring the human speakers back to the centre.

In particular, we are interested in the way the intersection between language(s) and stories of migration finds a space within pedagogy and in particular ELT pedagogy. Over the last ten years, the experience of teaching English to undergraduate students of primary education has served as both the context and the content of my courses for Prospective Primary English Teachers (PPETs),[1] shaping but also shaped by theories, policy analysis, and studies of practice circulating in the field. Drawing on this experience, the present study is an attempt to understand why and how to train PPETs in such challenging topics as migratory flows, citizenship education, cultural diversity, and competence through the use of multiethnic children's literature. Among the general motivations that have sparked and nurtured such a research and educational goal, it is worth mentioning the role that prospective teachers can play as agents of change and reformers in the composite contemporary geolinguistic scenario insofar as they know from the start that they are part of a larger struggle and that they have a responsibility to reform, not just to replicate, standard school practices. Furthermore, taking into account the dramatic changes in demography across Italy and many other European countries, the need to prepare teachers for a more culturally responsive teaching environment stands out as a national educational priority.[2] This preparation will give teachers the chance to become critical readers and inquirers, and to develop intercultural competence in different educational contexts by using such powerful tools as the multilingual and intermedial narratives that offer representations of

1 They are generally young students but also include mature students who have already graduated in other courses such as educational science, modern languages and literatures, or philology. During their five-year course in primary education, they have to complete three different English syllabi (*Lingua inglese I, II, III, IV, V*) and the pass the three respective exams, in order to earn their English language teaching qualification for primary schools (*abilitazione all'insegnamento della L2*).

2 Gay (2002) defines culturally responsive teaching as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (106).

migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers which counter stereotypical mainstream portrayals of them.

2 Decolonising EFL Pedagogy: A Praxis from the Global South

In the light of the contemporary migratory flows that have contributed to the constant evolution of the linguistic models that speakers can use, it would be of little use to speak of standard English today or to replicate a hierarchy of English defined as more or less valid, given the heterogeneity of its domains. Having become aware of the dynamics that have led to the diffusion of English at an international level, one might perhaps agree with Rajagopalan (2004, 11) when he provocatively affirms that "English has no native speakers", sanctioning, in some way, the transfer of ownership of English from its (former) native speakers to new speakers. Thus, the present situation for English expansion is not as it was during colonialism because English varieties are now disrupting efforts at standardization.

Crucially, over the past thirty years, research on the evolution of English[3] has played a major role in promoting the recognition of the creativity and legitimacy of the new forms of English that have emerged in our postcolonial, globalizing world. Driven by the insight that speakers for whom English is not the native tongue now outnumber those for whom it is, the above-mentioned scholars have pointed out that English "as a consequence, is being shaped, in its international uses, at least as much by its non-native speakers as its native speakers" (Seidlhofer 2004, 211-12).

Accordingly, deviating from linguistic purity, native speakerism, and language ownership, this study also aims to demonstrate that what we need in prospective teacher education are productive ways of constructing progressive, holistic, and engaged pedagogy, as suggested by hooks (1994, 15). Specifically, she promotes a notion of praxis as a combination of reflection and action which requires teachers to be aware of themselves as practitioners and as human beings if they wish to teach pupils in a non-threatening, anti-discriminatory way. Thus, the goal of any teacher should be to develop self-actualization and intercultural competence through the "decolonisation of ways of knowing" (hooks 2003, 3) and systematic self-critical inquiry.

Among the promoters of the idea of pedagogy as a praxis, we take into consideration Walter Mignolo's approach, which envisages and elaborates a decolonial epistemology and a critical method,

3 Firth 1996; Canagarajah 1999; 2013; House 1999; Jenkins 2000; 2007; Seidlhofer 2004; 2011; among others.

also known as "border thinking", which allows both scholars in the humanities and language practitioners to switch from imperial and territorial epistemology to an epistemology emerging from the places and bodies that have been relagated to the margins (e.g. the anthropos, the East, the Third World, the imperial language) (Mignolo 2011, 91-2). His decolonial approach is one of the theoretical frameworks that we adopt here in order to examine the case studies under discussion that enact what he defines as "epistemic disobedience". This is a lens used to reshape the knowledge and languages that have undergone centuries of systematic suppression and to imaginatively construct pluriversal social, communicative, and educational institutions (Mignolo, Walsh 2018, 241). Additionally, Mignolo's border thinking challenges categories, entities, and objects that populate Western epistemologies and, consequently, the "representation" which has come to be a key word of the rhetoric of modernity. Representational rules and norms that for decades have been applied to regulate social and environmental life, as well as language(s), are reshaped by Mignolo in terms of more relational knowledge and processes. A language pedagogy influenced by these shifts will give more importance to the adaptive and generative dispositions that students can creatively use for the diverse unpredictable communicative situations they encounter rather than to disembodied teaching materials and policy concerns such as program development. In fact, in such a view students will be prepared for lifelong learning rather than receiving the false hope that a set of grammatical norms will help them. As ELT scholars and practitioners, we have to cultivate in PPETs dispositions that may foster the constant negotiation of meanings in diverse environments and, in turn, social becoming and bonding. As a consequence, we can come to perceive and recognize the creative power of the new linguistic models born around English – a language that is becoming less and less monolithic and more adaptable for negotiation in Global Southern contact zones, as outlined by the decolonial linguist Canagarajah. In his introduction to the special issue of *ELT Journal* on *Decolonizing ELT* (2023), he defines pedagogy as a praxis that, on the one hand, expands beyond the classroom and knowledge concerns to accommodate embodied affective, social, and cultural learning that draws from and transforms environmental and geopolitical spaces, and, on the other hand, involves the reflexivity of action, reflection, and relearning, thus challenging the condescending view of 'practice' as secondary to research, policy, and scholarship.

In line with what Mignolo had already envisaged, Canagarajah goes beyond the prescribed readings in the syllabus and proposes a more dialogical pedagogy in which student and teacher interactions develop stances against dominant language ideologies and narratives, that is, the codified versions of pedagogy in the form of

textbooks, handbooks, or published materials which draw from a different kind of expertise – that of materials preparation, longitudinal and systematic trials, and textbook publishing. In all these orientations, teachers are treated as mere technicians who implement knowledge handed down to them by experts. To such a normative approach to English language teaching, Canagarajah counterposes a more complex orientation to pedagogy based on Global Southern knowledge to be conceived of as

> including both autochthonous Indigenous peoples and diverse native communities colonized by Europe in modernity and subject to continuing forms of domination through the hegemony of its ideological, state, and economic structures. (Canagarajah 2023, 8)

However, for the purposes of the present study, the term 'Global Southern' has also been extended to encompass the context in which the reported experience of teaching English to PPETs has been carried out, that is, an undergraduate course at the University of Bari. Crucially, this city proves to be a crossroad of migration flows and transnational interests in Southern Italy that are leading to new models of contact between people with different linguistic and cultural heritages, thus problematising the traditional understanding of language as a social projection of territorial unity held together by shared behavioral norms, beliefs, and values. Additionally, the term 'Global Southern' also refers to the environmental state of the Global South that is framed by the two stories of the refugees who feature in section 3.[4] By widening PPETs' perspectives on migration as a crucial force that crosses Global Southern spaces, both physically and linguistically, the selected stories will help to question geopolitical borders and to restructure the human, urban, linguistic, and cultural landscape, thus contributing to the emergence of new worldviews on migration along the Mediterranean routes.

Finally, as it stands here, children's transethnic literature can also develop and expand multicultural understandings by depicting experiences that are common to all by recounting the things that make each cultural group special, and by exploring the effects of migration on the lives of ordinary individuals. The challenge here is to integrate such literature into the classroom as one method for introducing concepts and agents for change, and for creating learning communities among PPETs that not only acknowledge and celebrate

4 Here the word "multilingual" refers to the fact that the selected stories that were originally written in English are also available in Italian and other European languages. The choice to translate such narratives can be conceived of as a tool for resisting monolingual discourse and for developing the representation of refugees' stories in real language teaching and learning situations.

interculturality but also dissolve stereotypes in educational settings. Crucially, the proposal basically aims to train PPETs to develop intercultural competence through multilingual children's literature, but also to help them understand the part language(s) plays in acculturation and to recognize how migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers can influence culture in Italy too. Putting cultural diversity at the heart of their didactic approaches and methods, PPETs can teach pupils to recognize likenesses and differences, to change traditional views on such issues as language, belonging, community, citizenship, and inclusivity, and to understand that the borders between countries are not permanent.

3 Words in Pictures: The Performative Power of Refugees' Narratives Across Language(s)

Language is particularly revealing and important as a key mechanism by which stories are transmitted across generations and across cultures, and therefore a potential point of intervention. The relationship between language and the underlying stories that societies, cultures, and people's lives are built on is a highly complex one, and subject to a great deal of debate within the literature on linguistics. The latter provides tools for analysing the texts that surround us in everyday life and shape the kind of society we belong to. These tools can help reveal the hidden stories that exist between the lines of the texts and can make more evident and explicit the intersection between migration and language.

With this in mind, the research goal of this section is twofold: first, we propose specific content and sessions for a teaching project on the selected refugees' narratives that can be carried out within a PPETs class; second, we provide a narrative content analysis (Clandinin 2013), along with a multimodal approach (Machin, Caldas-Coulthard, Milani 2016) that evolves around distinctive language and visual patterns in the texts in order to identify and analyse the discursive constructions of such categories as language, migration, belonging, homeland, race, and discriminatory stereotypes. Such goals are not new in the research field of the decoloniality of ELT through picture books, as the contributions by Bland (2018) and Ibrahim (2020) prove. In particular, the former encourages ELT practitioners to diverge from monomodal novel formats and to opt for such multimodal literary texts like picture books as a powerful instrument of human thought that serves to expand cognitive abilities and to foster the acquisition of new perspectives and intercultural awareness though the main literatures in English from nations throughout the world (Bland 2018, 7-8). Similarly, the latter author examines the benefits of using multilingual picture books in the ELT classroom to achieve more

inclusive teaching and learning practices by questioning the use of exclusively English-language books and the appropriateness of English to represent every culture when attempting to teach interculturality (Ibrahim 2020, 31). More incisively, it is also worth mentioning the PEPELT project,[5] which is built on a community of practice that supports teachers and professionals in the field of language education to critically explore, select and use picturebooks in the classroom to develop language as well as intercultural understanding and an awareness of global issues.

To these ends, the use of children's transethnic literature is encouraged through two specific picture books that open up intermedial narrative paths[6], given that each of the recommended books is also supported by an illustrated audiobook accessible free of charge: *My Two Blankets* by Irena Kobald and Freya Blackwood (2014) and *My Name Is Not Refugee* by Kate Milner (2017).[7] In addition to the relevance of migration-related topics, there are other significant reasons that motivate the selection and implementation of the abovementioned picture books within an EFL course designed for PPETs. Among them, the fact that the books are available both in English as the source language and in Italian serves two different teaching and learning purposes, along with different targets (e.g. PPETs, multilingual primary classes).

To this end, a set of evaluation criteria has been outlined as an example of useful guidelines:[8]

5 PEPELT stands for Picturebooks in European Primary English Language Teaching, a project that began as an idea in 2017 when four friends, all passionate about using picturebooks in Primary English Language Teaching (PELT), worked on an application for funding from a European body. During the Covid pandemic, it supported teachers and parents working remotely by creating mini picturebook e-lessons based on a read-aloud by a picturebook creator. For more information, visit `https://pepelt21.com/`.

6 A partial analysis of the two case-studies has been published in Rubini, Taronna 2023.

7 By asking young learners to draw on previous knowledge and experiences to interpret the visual-narrative sequences of the picture book, PPETs can engage in dialogic, intertextual, and multisensory reading, thereby enhancing the visual literacy skills of the learners. This exploratory journey into the visual semantics of the picture book highlights illustrative criteria such as iconography, iconology, and intertextuality, which enhance the hermeneutic possibilities of a visual text, eliciting an affective-emotional response in the reader and constructing 'meaningful relationships'.

8 The table below is adapted from Cullinan, Galda 2005; Kasten, Kristo, McClure 2005; Robles de Meléndez (unpublished).

- The story and the characters are free of any historical distortions, gender or ethnic stereotypes. Messages about the cultural group, including gender, race, and social class, are free of any bias.
- Characters are portrayed according to the time and setting. If set in contemporary times, characters reflect current lifestyles.
- Characters reflect a variety of physical diversities.
- The story presents people with disabilities in a positive, non-stereotypical way.
- Female and male characters are presented in a variety of roles that exemplify non-stereotypical tasks.
- The roles of females and males are equal and consistent with those in their cultural groups.
- Roles and the importance of families are reflective of views held by the cultural group.
- People from diverse groups are portrayed in positive and leadership roles.
- Illustrations depict the culture and people in culturally accurate ways.

These evaluative criteria can be implemented in the following examples of lesson plans built on (a) specific content and linguistic objectives, and (b) strategic timing, sequencing, and development of the activities. Through the reading of/watching/listening to the suggested stories, the content objectives will deal with issues of migration, language, belonging, citizenship, inclusivity, and interculturality. By focusing on this content, PPETs can support the development of inclusivity through empathy, which is the ability to share in the perspectives and emotional feelings of others. They can also promote intercultural sensitivity by ensuring that children are able to react in positive ways to similarities and differences among people.

Against this background, the linguistic objectives will be pursued by using the original (English) edition of the two picture books and by resorting to ELF as a contact language in multilingual classes, along with their respective Italian translations as needed. By reading/listening and comparing the two stories, terminology related to migration, belonging, citizenship, inclusivity, and interculturality (e.g. old/new, cold/warm, hard/soft, comfortable, strange/weird, safe, sad; leave, remember, feel, cry, laugh, change; home, war, friend) will be identified and discussed. In particular, attention will be drawn to the performative power of the words identified and underpinned by the performative power of the illustrations (e.g. fences, small boats, water metaphors).

With regard to the timing, sequencing, and development of the activities, they can be carried out by implementing four lesson plans with an estimated time of 45-60 minutes for each session. The sequence of the activities will be set as follows: making predictions (lesson plans 1 and 2) and connections (lesson plan 3), then giving opinions and opening up discussion for output (lesson plan 4). More specifically, in lesson plan 1, the English teacher/educator shows and shares the title pages and front covers of the books:

Figure 1-2 Title pages and front covers

Then, s/he asks the PPETs to undertake the following tasks: (a) identify the different children portrayed by race, age, and what they are doing; (b) identify the setting of the story; (c) make predictions about the story; and (d) look again carefully at both covers and focus their attention on the similarities in the female characters or on other surrounding elements portrayed.

In lesson plan 2 (entitled "Let pictures speak!"), the English teacher/educator shows the illustrations for each stage of the story and asks the PPETs to (a) follow along; (b) 'translate' such visual (re) presentations into Italian (no more than 15 minutes for each picture book); and (c) add missing details from their own imaginations. Then, s/he reads the stories aloud (15 minutes for each).

In lesson plan 3 ("Linking wor(l)ds"), the PPETs are asked to (a) retell the stories in English showing the illustrations as the plot develops and (b) make any connections to other picture books and fairy tales or to their personal experiences of the world. Finally, in lesson plan 4, the English teacher/educator can help the PPETs discuss the stories and give reactions through the following sample questions and guided activities:

a. How were the protagonists in each story different from each other?
b. How were they similar?
c. Make a graph of their physical diversity choosing categories such as: light skin, dark skin, tall, short, curly hair, straight hair. Remind the PPETs that individuals may fall into more than one category.
d. What kind of (visual, material, linguistic) symbols emerge from each story?
e. What kind of common words/pictures/topics connect the two stories?

f. Try to remember whether you have ever dealt with a physical or imaginary border in your life. Share your experience with the class and tell how you have 'crossed the border'.

The visual, material, linguistic, and symbolic references to migration, language, belonging, citizenship, inclusivity, and interculturality that emerge from the four lesson plans as common linguistic patterns in the texts are also provided by the following narrative content analysis (Clandinin 2013), along with a multimodal approach (Machin, Caldas-Coulthard, Milani 2016). Specifically, such linguistic patterns thematise the complexity of the migration experience through constant references to the past and the present, the place of origin and destination, the mother tongue and the language to be acquired. The performative power of these thematic connectors is reinforced by the visual power of the illustrations, which refer to both the physical and material places of migration (fences, small and precarious boats, docks) and the protagonists (men, families, mothers with children, police). They depict the reasons why a family (usually represented by the mother-daughter relationship) leaves their home country ("it's not safe for us") **[fig. 3]** and migrates, as well as the narrative and visual representations of border areas and the migratory flow (fences, borders, dormitory camps, multitudes of migrating people) along new routes.

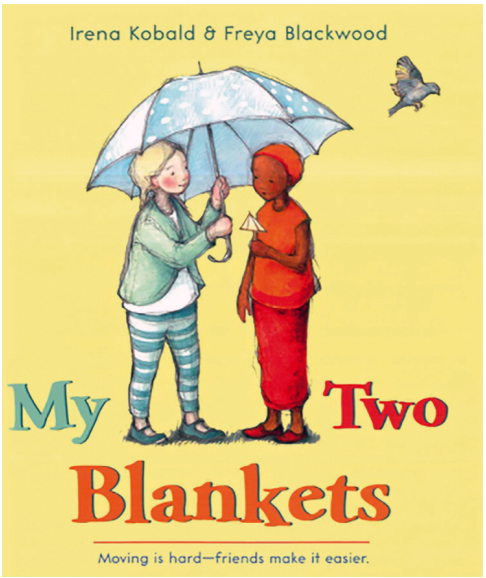

Figure 3
Text & illustrations
© 2017 Kate Milner

The focus on the young child holding hands with the mother is a recurring theme in picture books that depict migrations. Generally, the

figure of the father is absent, presumably having migrated earlier. The journey to the new destination brings the protagonists into contact with places and individuals with whom they share stops, movements, and times of waiting **[figs 4-5]**.

Figure 4 Text & illustrations © 2017 Kate Milner

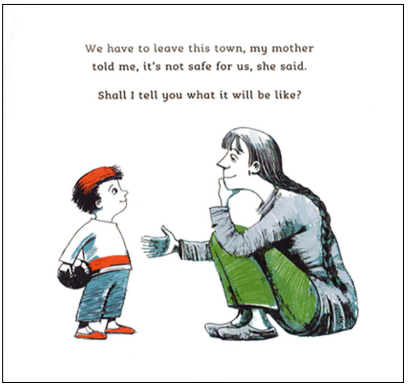

Figure 5 Text & illustrations © 2017 Kate Milner

The initial feelings of disorientation upon arrival are material, emotional, and perceptual. The contact with the new language creates disorientation ("We'll hear words we don't understand") **[fig. 6]**.

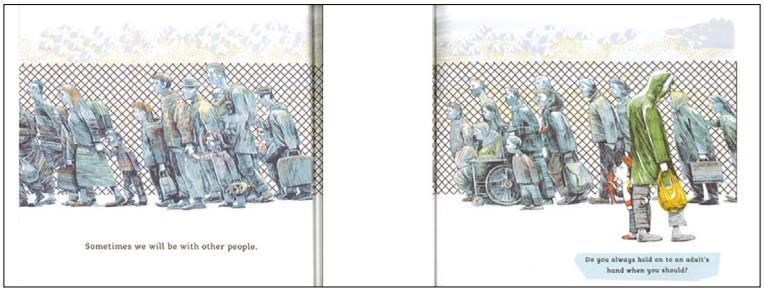

Figure 6 Text & illustrations © 2017 Kate Milner

Despite the emotional burden associated with the discovery of the 'new' being destabilising, there is still an ongoing search for a 'safe' place to settle and to reconnect with the need to feel 'at home' ("What things would remind you of your old home?") **[fig. 7]**.

Figure 7 Text & illustrations © 2017 Kate Milner

Soon, even linguistic estrangement will acquire a new meaning, and the new language will become a form of languaging ("And soon those strange words will start to make sense") **[fig. 8]**, as Humberto Maturana (1990) would say, capable of resignifying the experience of the refugee.

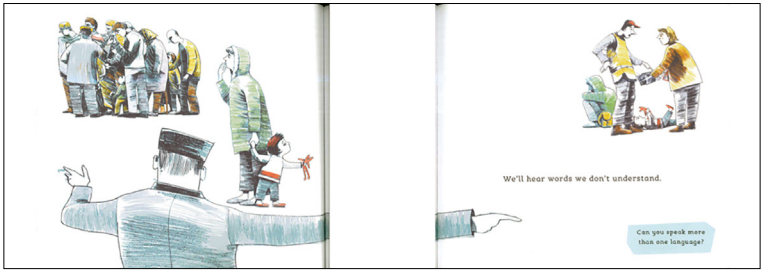

Figure 8 Text & illustrations © 2017 Kate Milner

The same thematic sequence characterizes the narrative structure of *My Two Blankets*. The story opens with the same narrative pattern: leaving the place of origin due to an ongoing war, seeking safety ("We came to this country to be safe", 3). The effects of uprooting are described using the same narrative formulas as in *My Name Is Not Refugee* ("everything was strange"/"The people were strange", 3), defining the place, the people, the food, the animals, the plants, and even the wind as disorienting. The solitude and linguistic estrangement ("Nobody spoke like I did", 5) are vividly described through the metaphor of a liquid cascade of strange sounds experienced by the protagonist ("when I went out, it was like a waterfall of strange sounds", 6), which is later emphasised through a visual metaphor in the representation of a tree with roots sinking into a small boat that is reminiscent of the 'boats of the sea' used by seafarers to reach the shores of the Mediterranean. Similarly, the theme of a sense of belonging to the place of origin is embodied not only in the construction

of a relationship with the new language, but in keeping the past alive through the connection with an old blanket and the old language that provides security ("When I was at home, I wrapped myself in a blanket of my own words and sounds", 8). The theme of friendship becomes a bridge that unites and assists ("Every time I met the girl, she brought more words. Some of the words were hard. Some of them were easy", 21) in embracing the new language, signs, and sounds in a syncretic manner ("my new blanket grew just as warm and soft and comfortable as my old blanket", 28).

Finally, the reading of the picture books under discussion can become an integral part of today's curricula on the education of young children in many national settings. Starting from the assumption that PPETs – like architects and engineers – need blueprints to guide their work as early childhood teachers and have to learn to practice cross-cultural teaching, these picture books can also lead PPETs to focus on a set of questions, as follows, that prioritise the reshaping of ELF teaching practices from an intercultural perspective: how can we act through language(s)? To what extent does language carry the burden of culture? And which are the most concrete contemporary examples that narrate the extent to which language is (en) acted? The selected picture books incorporate the answers to these questions in the way that they thematise the current transcultural scenarios through which as speakers, teachers, scholars, or merely as readers we resort to language to establish a permanent exchange with the other(as). Such questions also echo the idea of 'languaging' elaborated by decolonial scholar Humberto Maturana (1990) as a way to decolonise the very concept of 'language' traditionally used as a noun that simply refers to a normative and institutional set of rules and principles. The shift from the noun to the verb ('we language') and to the gerund ('languaging') is central to a new view on more dynamic interactions among human beings within speakers' communities (Maturana 1990, 29) that prove to be collective spaces of intercultural exchange.

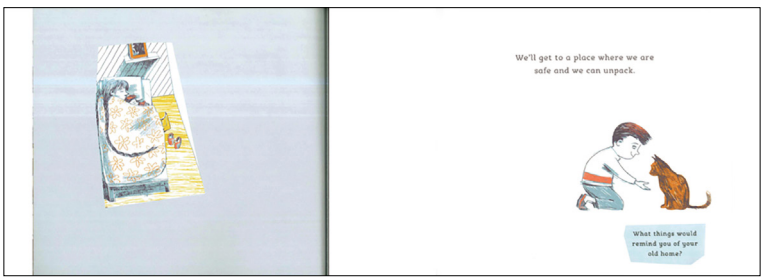

Figure 9 Text & illustrations © 2017 Kate Milner

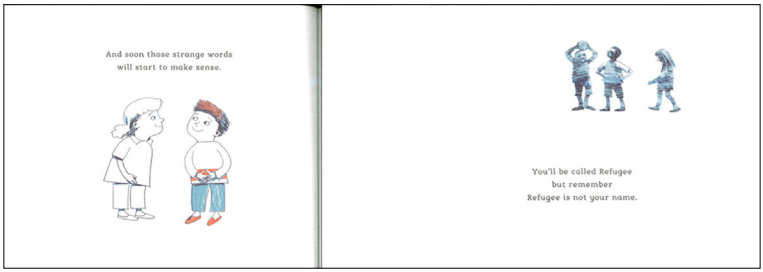

Figura 10 Text & illustrations © 2017 Kate Milner

4 Concluding Remarks

Finally, it is important to note that the conceptual framework offered in this study is not a model for PPET education programs, nor a set of assertions about which practices are the most desirable. In fact, there are no recipes, no best practices, no models of teaching and training that work across all differences in schools, communities, cultures, subject matters, purposes, and home-school relationships. Instead, what this study has attempted to do is to encourage the renewal of readings and representations related to the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in Italy by activating a continuous process of thinking and rethinking the deep tensions and issues underlying the ideas of translingual and transcultural teaching practices. Crucially, one of the main observations of the study has been that training PPETs on children's transethnic literature and migration-related contents proves to be difficult and uncertain work since it is profoundly practical, given that it is located in the daily routine of classroom decisions and actions: in teachers' interactions with pupils and their families, in their choices of material and texts, in their use of formal and informal assessments. Accordingly, such a training is also a matter of developing a particular kind of pedagogy based on co-constructing knowledge and curricula with students and teachers, and on reaching the goal of assisting children as they develop into productive citizens in a pluralistic society.

In the light of this, it is essential that English teacher/educators continue their efforts to train PPETs by designing programs which focus on a decolonial and cohesive, culturally responsive pedagogy throughout the entire curriculum. Using such refugees' narratives as those examined here promotes a metalinguistic reflection on language that has helped PPETs and their students alike to become familiar with stories that challenge the dominant ones and pave the way for a pedagogy of becoming that embraces diversity. Furthermore, a more critical acquaintance with the role of language(s) that

is not merely representational fosters a decolonial awareness of English as a translingual practice, as a repertoire that transcends native speakerism to achieve the purpose of communication and community building in more inclusive, diverse, and ethical ways.

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Unheard Voices: The Migrant Workers of Mumbai's Cotton Mills and Narayan Surve's Poetic Legacy

Harjot Banga
Università degli Studi di Torino, Italia

Abstract Migrants play a key role in Mumbai's dynamics, shaping its identity through cultural fusion. This paper shifts focus from the city's colonial legacy and Dharavi to overlooked cotton mill workers, mostly migrants from nearby villages. Recruited by 'jobbers' and housed in cramped chawls, their lives mirrored subaltern destitution. Narayan Surve, an orphan poet raised by mill workers, captures their struggles in his Marxist poetry, giving voice to the marginalised and highlighting the socio-economic and cultural challenges faced by Mumbai's migrant labourers.

Keywords Mumbai migrants. Cotton mill workers. Narayan Surve. Subaltern studies. Urban identity.

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1 Introduction: Cotton Mills and Mill Workers

This article shifts the focus from the commonly studied slums, such as Dharavi, and the colonial history of Mumbai, to the experiences of cotton mill workers in the city. These workers, primarily economic migrants, faced significant violence and discrimination yet played a crucial role in the city's development. By integrating into Mumbai's fabric, they contributed to the formation of distinct identities through the fusion of diverse cultural elements.

The first part of the article offers a socio-historical analysis of the experiences of these migrant workers within the context of their identity. Most of these workers migrated from surrounding villages, recruited by intermediaries known as 'jobbers', and lived in cramped quarters called *chawls* (Adarkar, Menon 2004, 31-2).

The second part of the article presents a literary analysis of Narayan Surve's poetry, sourced from the site-archive *GiranMumbai/Mill-Mumbai: Revisiting the Mill Lands of Mumbai and its People*. Through Gramsci and Guha's theories, this section addresses migrant-cotton mill workers as subalterns. Surve's poetry, marked by Marxist ideology and a profound empathy for the working class, articulates the voices of the marginalised and underscores the socio-economic and cultural challenges they faced in Mumbai.

When engaging with Narayan Surve's poetry, one must immerse oneself in the grim realities of the cotton mills, as his works offer a poignant and vivid depiction of the lives of Mumbai's cotton mill workers. His poems, while being artistic expressions, also function as historical and social documents that capture the essence of mill life. As Mumbai transformed from a modest fishing village to a bustling metropolis – a metamorphosis vividly described by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* (1981, 121-2) – the rise of the cotton mills, fuelled by colonial intent, played a crucial role in shaping its industrial and socio-economic landscape. By delving into themes of labour and exploitation, the migrant experience, social marginalisation, economic hardship, and the resilience of the human spirit, Surve's poetry provides a critical perspective on the cultural and economic transformations that have defined Mumbai and offers a powerful critique of the injustices endured by cotton mill workers while celebrating their contributions and enduring spirit. Thus, understanding the figure of the cotton mill worker as an economic migrant integrated into the social fabric of Mumbai is essential.

The transformation of Bombay, now Mumbai, into a major industrial hub began in 1854 with the establishment of the first cotton mill by James Landon and Ranchhodlal Chhotalal, which became operational in 1855. This marked the beginning of a significant demand for cheap labour, met primarily through the 'jobbers' system" (Chandavarkar 2004, 32). Jobbers played a crucial role in recruiting workers

and maintaining discipline within the factories. They navigated the challenges of ensuring a steady supply of skilled labour and upholding workforce discipline by leveraging extensive networks based on kinship, caste, and village affiliations (31). In Girangaon, the bustling cotton mill village, they held significant sway, acting as both recruiters and mediators in social and economic interactions. As labour dynamics shifted, jobbers faced scrutiny from mill owners, particularly during general strikes when their ability to manage unrest was questioned. By the 1950s, their influence had diminished, shifting from recruitment to supervision within the mills, yet they continued to hold sway in working-class communities.

The permanent establishment of cotton mill workers gradually faced a crisis due to socio-political issues in the latter half of the twentieth century with the rise of the Shiv Sena, a right-wing political force in Maharashtra. The Shiv Sena's agenda included reclaiming Mumbai's authentic identity and that of Maharashtra. The renaming of Bombay to Mumbai, in homage to the goddess Mumbadevi, aimed to liberate the city from its colonial legacy and reaffirm its pre-colonial roots (Hansen 2001, 11). However, this quest for authenticity among the 'Marathi Manoos', the inhabitants of Maharashtra (Parkash 2010, 26; Adarkar, Menon 2004, 331), also led to the marginalisation of cotton mill workers, who were often discriminated against and perceived as 'outsiders' (Finkelstein 2019, 118).

2 Mill Workers: Economic Migrants

To understand the identity and background of cotton mill workers, consulting Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's introductory chapter in *One Hundred Years, One Hundred Voices: The Mill Workers of Girangaon. An Oral History* (2004) by Neera Adarkar and Meena Menon, along with his work *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (1994) is essential. First of all, he notes that:

> In public discourse, the term 'migrant' can be applied both to workers who depend entirely on the city for their livelihood but retain some ties to the countryside, and to workers who migrate seasonally. (Chandavarkar 1994, 125-6)

According to this definition, mill-workers can be characterised as migrants. They constituted the predominant workforce in Bombay's burgeoning urban industrial sector, underscoring their pivotal role in shaping the city's socio-economic landscape. They were drawn by employment prospects and maintained strong ties between their urban neighbourhoods and rural origins. Initially settling in the "native

town" (30) of northern Bombay, they later gravitated towards Girangaon, the cotton mill village. Limited infrastructure in Bombay led to harsh working conditions, irregular employment, and low wages, prompting workers to live near the mills. Hiring practices were flexible, often conducted daily at the mill gates. The majority of workers were migrants, with 84% of Bombay's 1921 population originating from outside the city, a trend lasting fifty years (125). Migration was driven by economic necessity rather than social mobility aspirations, with workers supporting their rural families through urban employment. Social networks based on caste, kinship, and village affiliations facilitated employment, housing, and credit access, forming the basis of workers' welfare and collective action for rights and livelihood protection in working-class neighbourhoods (30-2).

The ascendancy of the Shiv Sena in the late twentieth century intensified the scapegoating of migrants for the unemployment of 'Marathi Manoos' (Parkash 2010, 26; Adarkar, Menon 2004, 331), thus stigmatising the term 'migrant' within Mumbai's socio-political landscape. This rhetoric likely heightened discriminatory attitudes toward mill workers and other migrants alike. Therefore, it can be stated that:

> The term 'migrant' thus signified within the dominant discourse an ideological conception of the nature of the working class, the processes of its formation and its implications for the social order. (Chandavarkar 1994, 145)

As noted by Maura Finkelstein (2019), cotton migrant workers have reported instances of "isolation, alienation, discrimination, and threats of violence" (117). Despite considering the city their home, migrants from North and South India encountered inhospitable conditions. Indeed, during Finkelstein's interview with Kishan, a migrant from Bihar, he points out:

> That [Bihar] is my birthplace, but this [Mumbai] is my workplace. This is where I belong. This place has given me work. I am here now, so this is where I belong. (118).

This sentiment emerged following the Great Textile Strike of 1982-83, which resulted in the establishment of a policy that allocated 80% of jobs in mill lands in Maharashtra exclusively to the Marathi population. The remaining 20% was designated for individuals classified as 'outsiders' (118):

> When Bombay's cotton mills closed and many a dream died amongst the cotton littered mill floors, the unemployed workers drifted into taking whatever jobs they could land. "If people

> are lucky they become taxi drivers", a maid sagely informed me. (Sarukkai, Taylor 2014, 85)

Consequently, this measure gave rise to the development of "a powerful identity-based hierarchy" within the region (Finkelstein 2019, 119). This change in perspective concerning migrants has resulted in a notable increase in xenophobia, as well as various forms of discrimination and violence. Finkelstein further highlights the importance of taking into account the viewpoint of a Marathi individual, Raj, within these accounts:

> When Biharis come to Mumbai… they are a problem. They are taking over jobs… When you have people from your own country [desh], why don't you support them and give them jobs? Everyone needs a job, but your residents should be given preference. (124)

The perception of migrants as 'other' has intensified. Bombay's cultural identity, once celebrated for its cosmopolitan ambiance, has transformed into a more provincial character as Mumbai. This shift has triggered an identity crisis, resulting in migrants, now recognized as genuine residents, struggling to reconcile their present reality with their prior perception of the city.

Finkelstein's question on the legitimate stakeholders of Mumbai's textile industry, historically dominated by labourers from Maharashtra, North and South India, poses a complex challenge (139). Exploring the Shiv Sena's history reveals its use of coercive tactics to establish dominance in Maharashtra. Founded in June 1966, shortly after the establishment of Maharashtra as a state, the Shiv Sena placed significant emphasis on regional citizenship. They advocated for the recognition of Maharashtra as the rightful domain of Maharashtrians. Their ideology centred around preferences for job allocation to Maharashtrians (80%), discouragement of migration from other Indian states (20%), promotion of local industrial expansion, and espousal of Hindu nationalism, which clashed with communist ideologies.

Disparities in the labour market fuelled tensions within the social fabric of Mumbai. While migrants from coastal and mountainous regions of Maharashtra had historically moved to the city, rural Marathi-speaking migrants of the 1950s and 1960s faced economic disadvantages compared to skilled migrants from outside the state. Despite political changes, the Marathi-speaking middle class continued to experience economic frustration. This sentiment was expressed through Bal Thackeray's cartoon weekly, *Marmik*, which was launched in 1963.

The Shiv Sena's nativism targeted outsiders, particularly South Indians, derogatorily known as *lungiwalas* (Sarukkai 2014, 80), in the 1960s, amidst waves of North Indian migration that exacerbated

housing and job shortages. The party emerged as a response to the anxiety of marginalisation, as non-Maharashtrian migrants strained the city's resources. Thackeray's definition of a 'Mumbaiker' included Marathi speakers and others who considered Maharashtra their homeland. This fostered a sense of belonging that bridged the gap between insiders and outsiders, but excluded non-Maharashtrian working-class migrants. This sentiment laid the groundwork for the contemporary Sena's platform, which focuses on development and replaces older regionalist and xenophobic ideologies (Finkelstein 2019, 136-7).

3 Narayan Surve: a Poet of 'the Politics of People' and of Marginalisation

1.1 Surve's Life, Poetry and Subalternity

After examining the origins of the cotton mill workers' migration to Bombay/Mumbai, it becomes evident that their settlement in the city set the stage for the harsh living conditions they would endure. These economic migrants, drawn to the city by the promise of work, found themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty, with limited job opportunities, and subjected to communal violence and discrimination. Surve's poems vividly capture this reality, depicting the social and economic hardships faced by these migrant workers within the city's cotton mills. This reality is also reflected in Narayan Surve's own biography. As a cotton mill worker himself and the non-biological son of two cotton mill workers, Surve's experiences are intimately connected to the harsh living conditions and systemic marginalisation endured by these migrant workers. His poetry encapsulates the essence of the worker experience, shedding light on the struggles and resilience of these economic migrants. Through his poignant observations, Narayan Surve, a leading figure in modern Dalit poetry, brings to the forefront the plight and perseverance of Mumbai's cotton mill workers.

Born in 1926 and passing away in 2010, Surve was raised by cotton mill workers in a Mumbai chawl. His early life challenges and factory experiences profoundly shaped his literary work. His poetry, known for its simple language and emotional depth, explores themes of rebellion against oppression, including the caste system, gender inequality, religious prejudice, and the harsh urban living conditions in Mumbai in relation to cotton mill workers. His portrayal of marginalised women highlights his dedication to exposing societal injustices. Surve's poetry, shaped by his keen observations on the *pavement*, which he describes as his 'university', reflects the complex

social dynamics of race, religion, gender, class, and caste. His verses, marked by stark realism to the detriment of sentimentalism, portray the resilience of society's most impoverished against adversity in slums, chawls, cotton mills, and the streets, offering lessons on overcoming challenges and promoting social justice. While not focusing on conventional themes, Surve's work possesses clarity and lucidity, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the human condition. Ultimately, his poetry stands as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, urging readers to confront societal injustices and strive for change.

Thematically, Narayan Surve's poems align with the experiences of cotton mill labourers as migrants and marginalised individuals, portraying their struggles against social and economic injustices in the urban landscape. Surve's poetry illuminates the lived experiences of marginalised communities, particularly highlighting their resilience amid systemic oppression and exploitation in the urban environment. This resilience is vividly illustrated by the struggles of the cotton mill workers, who, to paraphrase an article from 1924 whose description is still relevant, were "proverbially underpaid and overworked, with the result that they are always heavily in debt to the money-lender. Their right to organise into trade unions is not legally recognised; they have no regular labour organisations and no union fund" (Roy 2007). Consequently, it can be stated that Surve's themes resonate with Ranajit Guha's concept of "dominance without hegemony" (1997), depicting these individuals as subalterns, lacking recognized identity by the dominant other. Before delving into Guha's concept, which holds significant relevance in this discourse, it is essential to trace its origins back to Antonio Gramsci.

The ideas of Antonio Gramsci and Ranajit Guha are explored to explain the mechanisms of power and domination in society. According to Gramsci's insights from his *Prison Notebooks*, the ruling class maintains its dominance not only through coercive force, but also through the dissemination of its ideology and values, which are internalised as common sense by the wider population. This process of cultural domination, known as hegemony, is facilitated by institutions such as the media, education, and religion, which shape the beliefs and values of the masses and secure their consent to be governed. Gramsci argues that cultural hegemony is crucial for the stability of the capitalist system, as it discourages the oppressed classes from challenging the existing order. However, Gramsci also emphasises the role of intellectuals, particularly "organic intellectuals" from the working class, in challenging hegemony and driving social change (Gramsci 1999, 142). As summarised by Ramos:

> An organic ideology was formulated by these "organic intellectuals" through an "articulating principle" which, upon unifying

> the various ideological elements from the discourses of subaltern groups (classes and individuals) and forming from them a unified ideological system, became a "hegemonic principle". Indeed, since two classes or, for that matter, two members of different classes, could adhere to or advocate the same ideological element and articulate it in their particular ideological discourses, it was conceivable for a solid class alliance to be forged through this process of ideological absorption. (Ramos 1982)

Ranajit Guha's work challenges the conventional understanding of hegemony proposed by Gramsci. Guha suggests that, in specific contexts like colonial India, dominance can be maintained without cultural hegemony. According to Guha, political coercion was more prevalent than persuasive cultural hegemony in colonial India. He argues that the divergent interests of the post-colonial elite, including wealthy capitalists and landowners, hindered the establishment of cultural hegemony over subaltern groups. Guha contends that the failure of the colonial state and subsequent independent nation to assimilate civil society into political society meant that dominance was exercised without hegemonic consent. This challenges the notion that cultural hegemony is essential for maintaining power and control in society. Guha's scholarship provides a critical perspective for examining power dynamics in colonial and post-colonial settings, shedding light on the complexities of domination and resistance beyond Gramsci's framework of hegemony.

> Whichever version one takes, it is the civilizing or institutionalizing function of the regime that figures as the generative impulse of Indian politics and its unifying force in this neocolonialist view. The nationalist standpoint shares the same assumption, but turns it to its own advantage by defining the content and character of politics simply in terms of the indigenous elite's response to colonial rule and the sum of all the ideas and activities by which it dealt with the government of the day (Guha 1997, X).

In the context of Indian politics and historiography, both the neocolonialist and nationalist perspectives recognize the important role played by the colonial regime in shaping the political landscape. The neocolonialist perspective argues that the colonial regime's efforts to civilise or establish institutions were crucial to the development of Indian politics, serving as a catalyst for political activity and unity. On the other hand, the nationalist perspective agrees that the colonial regime had a foundational role, but offers a different interpretation of its influence. Nationalists frame the political narrative around the responses of the indigenous elite to colonial rule. They define the essence and trajectory of politics based on the collective reactions,

ideas, and actions of local leaders and intellectuals as they interacted with and resisted the colonial government. If we consider Guha's assertion that the voice of history should be articulated by the subalterns, who are often marginalised and silenced by dominant hegemonic forces, Narayan Surve emerges as a quintessential representative of the subaltern experience. Surve's poetry serves as a powerful medium through which the voice of the subaltern can be heard, offering a poignant narrative of their struggles and resilience in the face of oppression and adversity. Through his verses, Surve gives voice to the lived realities of the working class, particularly migrants and marginalised individuals, who grapple with the harsh realities of urban life in Mumbai's chawls, cotton mills, and streets, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs. So, he can be identified as an exponent of what Guha terms as "the politics of the people" (X).

1.2 Poems

Surve's poetic corpus, featured in the *GiranMumbai/MillMumbai: Revisiting the Mill Lands of Mumbai and its People* project, an archive/website specifically dealing with cotton mills, cotton mill workers and their living conditions, focuses on the experiences of cotton mill workers who migrated and settled in Mumbai. This collection, originally written in Marathi, has been translated into English to reach a broader audience. His work serves as a poignant testimony to the subaltern existence of these cotton mill workers, who are depicted as migrants grappling with the harsh realities of a metropolis dominated by communal violence. Narayan Surve masterfully captures the existence of migrants in a city that they attempt to make their own, but whose natives continually deny them full acceptance. In Surve's portrayal, the migrant remains perpetually an outsider, forever marked by their migrant status.

Because of the unavailability of chronological data, the poems have been listed in a thematic sequence to underline various aspects of Narayan Surve's poetic exploration. This thematic approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of Surve's diverse themes, spanning from the harsh realities of labour and urban life to profound social and political commentary. The sequence progresses to introspective themes touching on existential questions, highlighting the breadth and depth of Surve's literary contributions and showcasing how his work resonates with the complexities of human experience in urban settings.

The first poem to be examined is "Mother", characterised by powerful imagery. This poem reflects on themes of loss, childhood innocence, and the harsh realities of life, especially for marginalised individuals. It begins with a vivid description of the stars fading and

the sirens of the cotton mills singing, possibly indicating the end of the day and the start of a difficult night for the mother. The mother's repeated turning back "again and again" as she leaves for work highlights her reluctance to separate from her children and her continuous concern for their well-being.

> She used to keep turning back again and again.
> "Don't fight", she used to say tenderly.
> Thus, she used to earn her two-penny.

Later in the poem, the mention of "Dashera", a festive period, sharply contrasts with the everyday struggle, highlighting moments of joy and togetherness when the mother takes her children through the departments, observing the decorations. This brief escape into a world of play and imagination, where the children "turned into birds", serves as a strong metaphor for freedom and happiness.

However, the poem takes a tragic turn with the sudden and violent death of the mother, depicted through the stark image of her wide-open eyes and blood flowing from her mouth. The confusion and search for their mother shown by the children represent a desperate longing for security and comfort that has been abruptly taken away.

> It so happened once,
> They brought her in a car.
> Her eyes staring wide open,
> Blood streamed out of her mouth.
> Her co-worker, Salu drew me close.
> I was watching with restless eyes,
> Was looking for the roof above.
> We were looking for our mother.

The final stanza is heart-wrenching as the children huddle together under a bed-cover, seeking solace in their mother. The realisation that they are now "completely destitute" without her conveys the extent of their loss.

Upon closer examination, Surve's poetry explores themes beyond personal and familial narratives. It delves into struggles faced by the working class, the impact of industrialisation on households, and the mother's role as a resilient and nurturing figure. This poem can also be interpreted as a sincere tribute to the mother and a reflection on the void left behind by her absence. It lays the groundwork for understanding Surve's subsequent political activism, as personal sorrow and societal conditions often compel individuals to seek change.

The next poem, titled "Sheegwala", is closely connected to the previous one since it narrates the story of another female figure through the character of Dawoodchacha, a butcher. The poem begins with a

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simple interaction between Dawoodchacha and a young boy, possibly his son, who is practising writing. This ordinary activity sets the stage for a profound reflection on the values of integrity and the challenges of adhering to one's principles.

> Keep this in mind, son!
> It's so easy to write a word,
> And so hard to live for it.

Dawoodchacha, a Muslim, recounts a harrowing incident where he took a stand against communal violence directed at his wife, who is presumably Hindu, indicated by her name, Kashibai. Despite his religious identity, he never compromised on his moral principles, such as refusing to slaughter a pregnant cow, which exemplifies his reverence for life.

> Just look at my leg…
> Your mother, Kashibai's my witness.
> I'm a butcher, son… but
> Never slaughtered a pregnant cow.

The poem then takes a sombre turn as Dawoodchacha describes how he was attacked by a mob for defending his wife and for being perceived as a traitor to his own community. The attack left him physically disabled, having lost a leg. However, it also symbolises the loss of humanity and communal harmony that once prevailed ("Allah-ho-Akbar walas" and "Hinduwala").

The concluding lines of the poem lament the decline of values in society, where money has become the predominant force, overshadowing virtues such as compassion and solidarity. Dawoodchacha's darkness encompasses not only physical violence but also the ethical decay that has resulted in a society where people no longer champion what is right. Therefore, Surve's poem serves as a potent commentary on communal tensions in India and the erosion of moral values in the face of materialism. It reminds us of the human toll of communal violence and the imperatives of empathy and unity in a diverse society. It calls upon us to remember the significance of keeping our word and the courage this necessitates, particularly when we are confronted with adversity.

The poem "Okay, Kiddo?" captures a moment of personal triumph and reflection within a broader social movement. It takes the form of a monologue by a father to his son in which he recounts an experience of leading a large group of people, epitomising his role in a socio-political cause.

> Papa was talking…
> All of us were listening; those at home,

In the chawl, from tomorrow's world!
The water in the gutters of the chawl was glistening in the
[floodlights.

The father describes his journey from chawl-dweller to leader, portrayed as an "ocean" that "pierced the skies", pointing to a rise in status and influence. The mentions of telegrams from England and the fall of the "queen's minarets" can be interpreted as metaphors for the far-reaching impact of his actions and suggest the end of colonial influence and a significant change in the socio-political landscape.

The blood "glimmering across the darkness" creates a serious tone, hinting at the cost and sacrifice of this transformation and activism. The poem also conveys pride and accomplishment, as the father is recognised as a leader by his neighbours.

The neighbours whispered,
"Look, Atmya's father… a leader"

The scene of the son sleeping in his mother's arms while the father waves to them contrasts the public and private aspects of the father's life. It highlights the personal sacrifices made by individuals involved in activism and the complex nature of their struggle.

The sentence "You know what, son" is used repeatedly throughout the poem to emphasise the father's desire to share his experiences and lessons with the next generation. The mention of memories related to May Day, a day associated with labour movements and workers' rights, suggests that the father's activism is rooted in these causes.

Memories of that May Day well up in my heart.
You know what, son!
You know what, son…

This poem combines personal narrative with political discourse, reflecting on the complexities of leadership, the sacrifices made in the pursuit of activism, and the hope for a better future.

Surve's poetry undergoes a noticeable transformation as it moves away from subjects related to parents and adults and delves into the realm of labour. His verses take on the perspective of a labourer, invoking imagery of strength and perseverance ("I am a worker, a flaming sword"). This shift in focus reflects Surve's personal experiences and observations within the labour sphere, allowing his poetry to resonate with the hardships and successes of the working class. His poetry gains a newfound depth and emotional power, offering a compelling depiction of the challenges and aspirations of labourers who strive for dignity and justice.

"A Beginning" is a powerful expression of working-class consciousness and the personal journey of the poet. The poem addresses the daily struggle for sustenance, exemplified by the recurring theme of "bread", which represents essential needs and survival.

> The struggle for the daily bread is an everyday question
> At times outside the door, at times inside

Surve metaphorically describes himself as a "worker, a flaming sword" that embodies the labour force's power and resolve. The irony of "committing a crime" implies that the act of demanding more than subsistence is seen as rebellious by the elites.

> I'm a worker, a flaming sword
> Listen, you intellectuals! I'm going to commit a crime.

The poem reflects the poet's journey through adversity and learning, and the ways they shaped his outlook and literary voice. He values the essential need for bread but also advocates for dignity, respect, and justice, represented by a "royal seal". His poetry, depicted as flowers turned into swords, embodies both elegance and strength, with the power to incite transformation. The closing warning of a storm hints at a rising collective force and a profound change in the sociopolitical landscape.

> It's here that I drop flowers into the palms of my words
> It's here that I give swords into the hands of my words.
> I haven't arrived alone; the epoch's with me
> Beware; this is the beginning of the storm

Surve's poetry centres his worker identity to provoke intellectuals to heed the changing times. The "crime" stresses his poetry's role in empowering the working class, potentially sparking a revolution.

> I'm a worker, a shining sword
> Listen, you intellectuals! A crime's about to happen.

It marks a bold beginning to a series of poems delving into the life and activism of Narayan Surve.

Surve's 'university' is the pavement and the streets, which offer deep life lessons and contrast sharply with formal academia. His poem "From My University" authentically depicts slum life as an unconventional classroom. It opens with the speaker's homelessness and kinlessness, yet celebrates the liberty to roam and find solace in places like "shop sheds" and "municipal footpaths". Furthermore, it vividly portrays the slums with "red bulbs on the doors", hinting

at brothels, and "noisy throngs" in the evenings, infusing the scene with a chaotic energy.

The essence of the poem is captured in the bond between the speaker and Yakoob, the horseshoer. The speaker, likely a young boy, is introduced to labour by assisting with the horseshoe box, while Yakoob's laughter and the swapping of a *beedi* for a *jalebi* represent a friendship that softens their tough surroundings.

> "Come, catch the rope… yes, pull hard…scared? Are you a
> [Brahmin's son or what?
> We're workers; hold the horse; ya, that's good, my little
> [horseshoer!"

The poem's tone shifts to sombre as it recounts Yakoob's death in riots, alluding to sectarian strife. The speaker's mourning, devoid of familial bonds, highlights the deep connections made through common hardships. Joining the 'Milad-Kalama' funeral chant represents a unity beyond religion. The concluding verses ponder the insights gained in the "world of the unclothed", which symbolises the poor and overlooked. These experiences, etched in memory, are cherished as profound teachings. The poem stands as an ode to the enduring human spirit and the priceless knowledge gained from life's experiences.

"Karl Marx" is a pivotal poem in Narayan Surve's collection, reflecting his dedication to Marxist thought. Surve uses vivid imagery and emotive language to express defiance and resistance to the dictatorial power of factory owners. The poem emphasises his firm disapproval of the widespread poverty and subjugation of workers, and his staunch commitment to Marxist ideals is clear in his depiction of the fight for freedom from exploitative socio-economic structures.

The poem opens with the narrator's crucial experience of joining his first strike, where he adopts Marxist ideology by literally carrying the Marx banner.

> Right at my first strike
> I met Marx so…
> At the centre of the procession
> I held his banner on my shoulders.

Janaki Akka introduces Marx to the narrator as "Marcus Baba", a term that conveys endearment and respect, and provides a brief overview of Marx's life and work. Drawing a parallel between the narrator and Marx, particularly by noting their shared experience of having four children, humanises the philosopher and establishes a connection between his struggles and the struggles of the working class.

Janaki Akka said, "Know this chap –
This is our Marcus Baba.
He was born in Germany, wrote a sackful of books
And passed away in England.
You know, for a mendicant
All lands are the same…
Like you, he too had four kids".

As the poem progresses, Marx personified guides the narrator, addressing the roots of poverty and despair, and his enduring ideas inspire resistance to economic and social injustices.

Later: I was speaking at a meeting,
– So, what's the cause of this depression?
What's the source of poverty?
Again, Marx came up; I'll tell you, he said
And went on speaking incessantly…

The poem concludes with a rally at the gate, where the narrator proclaims workers as "the heroes of history". Marx's applauding presence validates the narrator's odyssey and poetic voice.

"Now we alone are the heroes of history
And of all the biographies to come too."

The final lines, in which Marx appreciates the narrator's poetry and mentions his own fondness for Goethe, bridge the divide between the intellectual and the worker, emphasising the universal appeal of art and the shared human experience.

"So, do you write poems or what…?
Great!
I, too, liked Goethe."

"Bigari Naka" delves into the lives of day labourers and portrays the bustling street corner of Bigari Naka as a microcosm of the labour market, where workers of various skills gather for daily jobs. Surve's narrative captures their collective struggle, resilience, and camaraderie as they face the uncertainties of urban employment. As Adarkar and Menon point out:

> The mills hired labour according to need, which varied not only from day to day but at times also fluctuated on a single day within the same mill. Notionally at least, workers were hired at the mill gates each day. (Adarkar, Menon 2004, 31)

The poem begins with a diverse group of individuals, including men, women, and a child, drawn together by their common pursuit of work.

> Right in the morning,
> They get together
> From no one knows where
> At the street corner.

The labourers are depicted as rural migrants with their "dark glistening bodies", emblematic of both their strenuous toil and enduring spirit. They await, eager for work, ready to take on tasks like "painting, masonry, or simply cleaning" to secure their daily bread.

Surve highlights the collective spirit of the workers, especially the women who find unity and comfort together. They are depicted as unsung builders of the city, their hard work unrecognised. The precariousness of their existence is emphasised by their homes on the city's margins, often razed first for urban development, reflecting their perceived disposability by those in power.

> They set up shacks
> Anywhere…
> Raising brick on brick
> They build houses for others,
> Dig holes,
> Haul the muck from the deep manholes.
> They live on the margins of the city,
> Yet they are no citizens.
> They stay for months together
> Untouched, neglected…
> With faith…
> But, for the progress of the city,
> Their shacks are demolished the first.

Indeed, as Adarkar and Menon note, the cotton mill workers, despite facing significant challenges in a city like Bombay/Mumbai, had to work tirelessly to build their lives. They highlight that

> for over a century, the textile millworkers held centre stage in the history of Bombay. They were among the first migrants who came to the city, braving the arduous journey to work under extremely adverse conditions which included sickness and inhuman living arrangements. They put down roots, evolved social institutions and associations, fought great political battles, entertained and educated the city with their plays, their music and verse, and influenced its economy, politics, culture and space in innumerable ways (Adarkar, Menon 2004, 14).

The poem conveys the labourers' bewilderment at the city-dwellers' indifference, despite their vital role in the city's construction, highlighting the stark social disparity and the affluent class's lack of compassion.

> Why do they act like strangers?
> After doing so much for them,
> Why are they so rude?

The poem ends with labourers creating makeshift homes by creeks and railways, returning to Bigari Naka daily, emphasising their ongoing marginalisation. Surve's poem is a powerful plea to recognize and value the labour force's humanity and contributions, often overlooked in urban development narratives. It underscores the critical need for solidarity and justice for workers, the unsung pillars of society's progress.

"I Don't Want Your Melancholy Nights Anymore" expresses a desire to break free from the heaviness of sadness and the repetitive routine that perpetuates it. The speaker's departure from a *mehfil*, a gathering often associated with poetry and music, stands for a rejection of the gloomy atmosphere that has affected the event.

> I don't want your melancholy nights anymore
> I don't want your melancholy nights anymore
> Just about now I walked out of a mehfil
> I felt so melancholy, I walked out…

The poem reinterprets the moon, often a serene symbol in Indian poetry, as tarnished, mirroring the speaker's disillusionment. The day's flags fluttering signify a shift from nocturnal gloom to daytime hustle, a metaphor for transitioning from despondency to activity.

Jivba, gathering funds at the gate, embodies life's relentless grind. His gritty remark, "We eat fire and shit embers", captures the working class's gritty endurance.

> Jivba sat at the gate
> On a bench
> Collecting subscriptions
> The lantern burned still…
> "Hey Jivba, … how long would you stay up man?"

The poem ends with a resolute dismissal of despondent nights, highlighting the speaker's resolve to break free from despair. It is a call for transformation and a life driven by meaning and energy, not melancholy.

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Really, I don't want your melancholy nights anymore.
Truly, I don't.

"It's Getting Tough…" starkly portrays the ongoing battle to sustain hope and resilience amid life's trials. The poem narrates the challenge of self-comfort during tough times. The "howling heart" symbolises deep emotional distress, while the "grain-sack stuffed with sawdust" represents deceit and disillusionment. The repeated line "it's getting tough" underscores the growing hardship of enduring and adhering to the ethos of coexistence. Affirming one's being and integrity is depicted as a relentless struggle.

To deny one's existence; it's getting tough…
I understand and convince myself, but even after that if I
[don't fall in line…

The poem's conclusion uses the allegory of a "lit matchstick" near a warehouse to highlight the risk of catastrophe without constant vigilance. It underscores the delicate balance of life and the ongoing diligence needed to keep chaos at bay.

Surve's poem "A Measured Life…" critiques the constraints of living by others' expectations, depicting a life confined within rigid societal norms. It portrays a life where everything is calculated and restricted and where there is a lack of freedom and spontaneity. The repetition of "measured" emphasises monotony and restriction. The speaker conforms to a prescribed path, the "measured track", which leads back to a "measured home," symbolising a cycle of conformity.

A measured life; at the moment of birth…
Glowed a measured light
Spoke measured words. Whining
Walked the measured track; walked back
To the measured home; lived a measured life

The speaker challenges the notion that conformity leads to spiritual rewards, rejecting the idea of a higher plane for those who follow a measured life. The poem shows disdain for the constraints imposed by "the four measured pillars", representing societal, cultural, religious, and moral limitations.

The final line, "And, I spit on it all", is a defiant rejection of the prescribed order. It also expresses the speaker's desire for a life beyond measurements, one that is genuine and self-determined. Surve's poem questions the structures that govern our lives and encourages us to seek a more authentic existence defined by our own values and experiences.

"The Time Nehru Died…" captures the collective sense of loss and the dark mood that enveloped the city upon Nehru's death. It

describes the city's transformation, with colours shifting from grey to brown, and darkness symbolically engulfing the "ruby", which represents the life and vibrancy Nehru brought to the nation.

> The tenements that sat warming their backs clamoured
> The city slowly turned grey
> And then brown
> Then… darkness swallowed the ruby.
> The mills wearing their stone-gowns
> Lit their cheroots and
> Drowned in their thoughts.
> Later…
> With wet shirts thrown across their shoulders
> The workers turned towards their shacks.

The poem depicts workers returning home, their routines disrupted by Nehru's passing. A conversation between Sundri and another character shows how the news spreads, leading to a spontaneous day of mourning.

> "Hey Sundri, what's happened…?"
> "…Don't burn the incense today… Nehru's dead!"
> "Really… then, it's an off tonight…!"
> The women who comfort the weary slumped on the cot.

The poem's atmosphere is heavy with grief, and the city's desolation mirrors the speaker's emotions.

> I walked on despondent… depressed
> The roads seemed so desolate

The image of a man carrying a paper lantern in the darkening city streets is poignant, suggesting the need to persevere and find light in sorrow. The man's response to the speaker's question about the lantern – "Up ahead darkness would be baring its fangs!" – serves as a metaphor for the uncertain future without the leader, delivering a powerful conclusion to the poem and leaving a profound impact on the nation and its people.

> Bearing a paper lantern a man pushed his handcart.
> I asked,
> "Why are you carrying the light now?"
> "Come on sir;
> Up ahead darkness would be baring its fangs!"
> It was the time Nehru died…!

4 Conclusion

Narayan Surve's poetry provides a profound and intimate glimpse into the lives of Mumbai's working class. It reflects the historical development of the city through the perspective of migration and labour. His verses effectively capture the essence of Mumbai as a city where dreams and struggles coexist. It is a place that draws people from diverse backgrounds with the promise of opportunities, only to confront them with the harsh realities of urban life.

Surve's poems are not only personal stories; they represent the collective voice of marginalised individuals, labourers, and migrants who contribute to the city's foundation but remain on its fringes. Through his work, one can witness how Mumbai, often referred to as a "world-class city" (Parkash 2010, 328), is shaped by the labour of countless unnamed workers:

> Mumbai is just a *mahanagari*, a metropolis that poor immigrants endure to earn a living. They may live two or three generations in slums, but home is still the village or the small town they came from. Belonging is a complex emotion for those who struggle to survive amid daily injustices. (332)

The historical context of migration in Mumbai is deeply intertwined with Surve's writing. The city, known for its cotton mills and factories, attracted waves of migrants in search of employment and a better life. Surve's characters, often migrants themselves, navigate the complexities of this new world, facing exploitation, communal tensions, and the constant threat of displacement.

However, amidst these challenges, Surve's poetry also celebrates the resilience and solidarity of the working class. His portrayal of their daily lives, hopes, and defiance serves as a testament to their indomitable spirit. The poems serve as a call to acknowledge the dignity of labour and the humanity of those who toil in obscurity. As Sarukkai argues:

> Mumbai can be repulsive yet beguiling, inviting all to enter its porous skin and become an implant in its body. […] Mumbai is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow even if it is a slum with beds rented out on twelve hour shifts. (Sarukkai 2014, 80)

In conclusion, Narayan Surve's poems provide insights into the city's character and migrant experiences. They highlight the human endurance and pursuit of justice underlying Mumbai's economic growth and architectural marvels. Surve's legacy lives on in Mumbai's streets and slums, amplifying past voices and inspiring future generations to continue the fight for equity.

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Habel de Mohammed Dib : une histoire d'émigration en quête de visibilité

Francesca Todesco
Università degli Studi di Udine, Italia

Abstract The article proposes an analysis of the novel *Habel* (1977) by the Algerian writer Mohammed Dib. Written with a style steeped in allegory and lyricism, as elusive and complex as the reality represented, the novel delves into the inner universe of a young immigrant in search of visibility. The space of the city outlines a 'topography' of the character's intimacy, in a dysphoric heterotopia of disillusionment. The analysis also explores the space of the supermarket, tracing the contours of a paradoxical non-place: a transient microcosm that, as a workplace, gives the emigrant a minimal sense of identity. Ultimately, rather than returning to his homeland, Habel chooses to reside in a psychiatric clinic with his beloved, Lyli. In a paradoxical twist, it is precisely the space of the hospital – heterotopia of 'deviation' – that salvages Habel from anonymity. Here, within the 'closed' regenerative space of the clinic, in contrast to the open yet consuming city, Habel can be reborn, albeit in madness. Situated between stylistics, semiotics, and narratology, this study interprets Habel's heterotopic, destabilising trajectory as the prelude to an euphoric, neutral, and purifying delineation of the 'douceur' of utopia (Foucault 2009), within a new, uchronian present.

Keywords Mohammed Dib. Habel. Migrant literature. Heterotopy. Visibility.

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1 Introduction

« Quand je danse devant toi, Occident, sans me dessaisir de mon peuple, sache que cette danse est de désir mortel, ô faiseur de signes hagard » (Khatibi 1971, 188). L'intellectuel et écrivain marocain Khatibi condense dans une métaphore chorégraphique, dynamique, corporelle et musicale le sens de la littérature maghrébine francophone, où la conscience de la valeur fluctuante et séduisante des mots se mêle au regret de ne pas être chez soi et au sentiment fort de l'impossible renonciation à sa propre identité. La nécessité de raconter sa blessure identitaire va à l'unisson avec le désir de révolte formelle et linguistique, dans une écriture qui est lieu d'une articulation complexe d'espaces culturels éloignés et en transformation.

Nous sommes dans les années soixante-dix et nous lisons dans ces mots le sens d'une littérature émergente qui « quémande en quelque sorte son existence, son identité à une reconnaissance qui se trouve nécessairement ailleurs et vis-à-vis de laquelle elle développe une relation de dépendance et de séduction vitales » (Bonn 2002, 140). En effet, dans cette période, les littératures francophones du Maghreb représentent, plus que les littératures institutionnalisées, un discours dont l'identité se « constitue à travers la négociation de leur droit à venir au monde » (Bonn 2002, 140). Il s'ensuit l'idée de la « scénographie » :[1] en renvoyant à l'espace et au temps à partir duquel se développe l'énonciation que cette littérature suppose, la « scénographie » dont parle Jean-Marc Moura se connote comme la situation qui articule l'œuvre dans le monde et qui lui confère une légitimation ; un espace 'scénographique' dans lequel la « danse » dont parle Khatibi (« quand je danse devant toi, Occident ») peut être lue comme l'un des « rituels » de cette volonté d'affirmation.

C'est une littérature inscrite dans un chiasme, spécifie encore Khatibi à l'aide d'une métaphore : « d'une part elle appartient à la tradition de la langue française […] d'autre part, cette littérature est travaillée par la langue maternelle, émergence du récit oral, parole

1 « Par la scénographie l'œuvre définit les statuts d'énonciateur et de coénonciateur, l'espace et le temps à partir desquels se développe l'énonciation qu'elle suppose » (Moura 1999, 109). L'idée de Moura, tirée d'ailleurs de la théorie de l'énonciation de Dominique Maingueneau (1988), s'attache à montrer que l'œuvre postcoloniale, plus que toute autre, s'inscrit « dans une situation d'énonciation (réelle) où coexistent des univers symboliques divers dont l'un a d'abord été imposé et a reçu le statut de modèle […]. Dans cette situation de coexistence, la construction par l'œuvre de son propre conteste énonciatif est à la fois plus complexe et plus importante que dans une situation de monolinguisme relatif […]. Pour l'auteur francophone, il s'agit d'établir son texte dans un milieu instable (et d'abord au plan linguistique), où les hiérarchies sont fluctuantes et mal acceptées, les publics hétérogènes, et de le faire reconnaître sur une scène littéraire occidentale qui lui est peu propice. D'où la nécessité d'une scénographie précise réagissant à tant d'incertitudes » (Moura 1999, 109).

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proverbiale » (Khatibi 1981, 8) ; elle est capable de traduire dans son imaginaire tensions et tentatives d'équilibre historiques et politiques difficiles et elle a été, dès l'aube de son affirmation, lieu d'une transformation, d'un passage, d'un franchissement, pareils, peut-on dire, sur le plan linguistique et culturel, au franchissement physique et spatial du phénomène migratoire.

En effet, le surgissement de cette littérature et le phénomène migratoire se superposent dans l'évocation de cette idée basilaire de franchissement, d'espaces linguistiques aussi bien que physiques, dépassés, outrepassés, violés. Comme le suggérerait Lotman (1973), c'est ainsi que se crée sémiotiquement l'événement : le changement, le dépassement de la frontière, le passage d'un espace originaire à un nouvel espace dans la structure binaire caractérisant un discours narratif polarisé autour d'isotopies antithétiques, comme il en est pour ces créations littéraires.

Après quelques remarques générales, notre lecture essaiera de parcourir cet événement, cette tentative de dépassement symbolique et réel, cette « entrée dans le nouveau monde », comme le dit Bonn, à l'aide d'une narration qui se situe quelques années après l'Indépendance et qui, à l'intérieur d'une réflexion qui s'élargit sur le statut problématique de l'écriture, se saisit du thème de l'émigration pour en exploiter la marginalité sociale. Notre référence est au roman *Habel* (1977) où l'écrivain algérien Mohammed Dib, par un langage empreint d'allégorie et de lyrisme, fuyant et problématique comme la réalité qu'il raconte, nous livre son regard aigu et pénétrant sur les moments cruciaux, intimes et personnels, d'un jeune immigré de ces années-là. « Arpenteur des territoires du signe et du monde » (Ali-Benali 2019, 17), penseur dont l'œuvre magistrale s'étend sur une soixantaine d'années, Dib représente la génération qui a donné ses lettres de noblesse à la littérature algérienne : la génération d'écrivains algériens qui « s'exprime au moment même où la colonisation qui l'avait en quelque sorte façonnée entre dans sa phase d'agonie. [..] Moment où parallèlement tout écrivain algérien autochtone est investi du devoir de témoignage, engagé bon gré mal gré, à travailler dans l'épaisseur du temps historique » (Khadda 2003, 5).

Nous proposons des suggestions de lecture du récit de l'exil *Habel*,[2] « méta-roman de l'introspection psychanalytique » (Mokhtari 2021, 23) et expression éloquente de l'élan paradoxal qui parcourt l'écriture dibienne : celui de la préciosité et de la finesse d'un phrasé mis au service d'un dévoilement laborieux d'un réel aux contours complexes, sombres et souvent indéchiffrables. Des renvois empreints de symbolismes ou d'envolées surréalistes ponctuent une parole qui est toujours une interrogation sur la langue et qui vise à « donner à soupçonner l'inconnu, à rendre perceptible l'indicible, à nommer ces larges pans de l'expérience restés innomés – innommables, aussi, parfois » (Khadda 2003, 8). « Aussi bien l'opacité du monde que les pouvoirs de la narration » (Khadda 2003, 8) sont au centre de cette écriture.

Ces quelques notes de lecture sont conçues en valorisant le concept de frontière, l'idée d'un espace à faire exister face à un autre espace en opposition. Si on ne peut pas s'abstraire du concept du rapport entre un espace supposé 'centre' et des espaces périphériques, il faut cependant reconnaitre que ce rapport crée un « entre-deux », un « tout-autre », un « troisième terme » qui est « la relation » dont parle Khatibi : « Oui, un étranger est toujours un étranger pour l'autre […] mais entre eux il y a […] la relation qui les maintient dans leur singularité (et) qui est, d'une manière ou d'une autre, intraduisible » (Khatibi 1987, 204). Cela renvoie à l'exotopie bachtinienne, à l'idée d'un monde extérieur qui, loin d'être contrastant ou restrictif, est nécessaire à l'accomplissement de l'individu : la compréhension de l'autre exige une vision extérieure, extralocalisée et au même temps active et participée, une tension dialogique qui le reconnait dans sa perspective tout en considérant sa propre vision. Comme Bakhtine l'affirme, « dans le chœur, mon chant ne s'adresse pas à moi-même, je ne suis actif que dans le rapport qui s'instaure à l'autre et je suis passif dans le rapport qui, en l'autre, s'est instauré à moi » (Bakthine 1979, 129-130).

C'est un point assumé par l'écriture de Dib qui par son Habel, émigré à l'écoute de ses propres interrogations et aspirations, nous implique dans la lecture d'un *je* fuyant et complexe, à la recherche d'une visibilité, d'un regard d'autrui qui lui rende la possibilité de se sentir exister.

2 Le roman *Habel* (1977), tout comme *Terrasses d'Orsol* (1985), *Le Sommeil d'Ève* (1989), *Neiges de marbre* (1990) et *L'infant maure* (1994), explorent l'aventure et le drame de l'exil : ils constituent « le cycle de l'exil », explique Naget Khadda (2003). Mais, au-delà de toute classification, la complexité et les liens esthétiques de l'œuvre de Dib représentent sans doute un 'continuum d'écriture', un univers ininterrompu au sein duquel Dib n'a cessé d'évoluer, comme le remarque l'écrivain lui-même : « De l'un à l'autre de mes livres, des passerelles sont jetées, non d'une manière calculée mais comme la conséquence naturelle d'une manière de procéder, traverses qui relient chaque livre à un autre, nullement dans une succession logique, mais organique » (Dib 1998, 207).

2 Littérature et phénomène migratoire : les premiers textes et la narration d'un espace inexistant

L'émigration dans la littérature maghrébine francophone se caractérise d'abord par le silence dont elle est objet : le texte, dans sa réticence ou ses ellipses, est dans la première phase de cette littérature – prémoderne, dirait Marc Gontard (2003, 9-25) – une sorte de caisse de résonance où l'absence de parole fait écho au sentiment de la perte du lieu où vivre. « Une identité nationale, y compris celle d'une diaspora, se réclame toujours d'un pays, dont elle redessine inlassablement la carte » (Bonn 2016, 126). Il en suit que le migrant (si on considère le processus) où l'émigré (si on considère la condition), par définition loin de ce pays, installé ici et venant d'ailleurs, ne peut que vivre dans un paradoxe : il ne peut représenter un espace identitaire qu'il a quitté. Et la littérature se trouve dans la difficulté de nommer et célébrer cet espace qui n'existe pas[3] en racontant un phénomène, comme celui de l'émigration, qui apparait comme un objet sans visage et sans nom.

C'est ainsi que dans l'un des tout premiers textes de la littérature maghrébine francophone, *La Terre et le sang* (1952) de Mouloud Feraoun, Amer, le protagoniste, représente en tant qu'émigré « une sorte de passeur vers un espace littéraire encore non reconnu » (Bonn 2012, 2) : passeur qui ne raconte pas de son espace d'émigration, mais renforce plutôt la représentation des caractères identitaires de son milieu d'origine. Tant pour l'action principale du roman (la relation amoureuse scandaleuse d'Amer avec sa cousine Chabba) que pour l'accident qui a lieu dans les mines du Nord et dont Amer est l'acteur inconscient, il s'agit de « faire exister l'espace identitaire, face au monde » (2), s'adressant au regard occidental pour le convaincre à reconnaitre ce monde jusque-là ignoré. Comme le note Bonn, « l'espace de l'émigration comme la vie qu'Amer y a mené n'ont pratiquement aucune réalité dans le roman, même s'ils y conditionnent la fin tragique du personnage » (Bonn 2016, 129).

Voilée ou presque oubliée dans la période où la littérature francophone maghrébine s'engage dans la décolonisation et dans la reconnaissance du sentiment national, la problématique migratoire réapparaît dans la narration romanesque quelques années après l'Indépendance : dans les textes des années 1970, comme *La réclusion solitaire* de Tahar Ben Jelloun (1976) ou *Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée* (1975) de Rachid Boudjedra. Ne signifiant que

3 « Force est de constater qu'en ce qui concerne l'émigration-immigration, la littérature est peu prolixe, et en tout cas infiniment moins que la sociologie des banlieues ou le discours politique » (Bonn 2016, 124).

l'Ailleurs, l'émigré est ici un personnage en creux, invisible, transparent et sans image, dont l'existence est paradoxalement construite dans la négation de ses dimensions vitales mêmes : comme le héros de Ben Jelloun, « sans amour, sans pays, sans visage, il vit dans un non-espace caractérisé par l'absence » (Bonn 2016, 130). Échappant lui-même aux contours d'une description, il est dépouillé des attributs qui l'assimileraient à une personne (état civil, profondeur psychologique, existence sociale), anéanti dans une non-réalité où les objets et les personnes n'ont aucune épaisseur. Ou bien c'est un personnage anonyme, dépourvu de parole – comme l'émigré du roman *Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée* (1975) de Boudjedra, dont la réalité fuyante et indéfinissable n'est saisie qu'à travers les discours des autres, des flics d'un côté et, de l'autre, des « laskars », anciens émigrés qui suivent son itinéraire de loin sur un plan de métro et en prédisent crûment la fin. Ce sont des discours qui émanent d'un regard qui ne photographie jamais son visage ou sa personne, mais plutôt ses comportements, ou bien les objets qui l'accompagnent, comme « sa valise », ainsi qu'on le lit dans l'incipit de ce roman : « la valise en carton-pâte bouilli qu'il portait presque toujours à la main gauche […] bourrée à craquer, avachie et au bout de son vieillissement avec sa peau tavelée de centaines de rides » (Boudjedra 1975, 7) ; un incipit écrit, en outre, comme une longue digression introductive, dépourvue de tout signe de ponctuation et de toute surcharge typographique qui puissent sélectionner ou mieux définir quelques données significatives ou spécifiques.

Le roman maghrébin d'expression française représente « une irruption de l'Histoire dans l'univers traditionnel » dont il met en scène « le conflit tragique entre visions du monde et langages différents », explique Bonn (2016, 47) : un tragique qui retentit fortement dans la narration du thème de l'émigration et dans les différentes phases de son évolution. Lieu de l''entre-deux', ethnique et social ainsi que littéraire, dans une tension complexe d'appartenances et d'exclusions multiples, le thème traverse l'histoire d'Habel, récit de la perte, de la renonciation, du 'brûlage' – comme pour les 'harragas', les brûleurs de papiers de la traversée méditerranéenne – de l'identité originaire, mais aussi du questionnement, de la prise de conscience, et de la célébration du pouvoir de l'écriture.

3 Habel et l'espace de la ville, 'topographie de l'intime'

Habel (habil en arabe, l'Abel de la Bible),[4] héros éponyme du roman dibien central sur l'émigration, est chassé, exilé ailleurs, en enfer, au pays des « autres », par son Frère aîné, symbole du pays d'origine et d'un appareil étatique qui ne le reconnaît pas et se désintéresse de lui. Ce Frère s'est débarrassé du cadet et l'a sacrifié, pour extirper 'la mauvaise graine'.

Dès son arrivée à Paris, Habel est victime d'une sorte de dissociation après l'ébranlement nerveux provoqué par un accident : il se transforme, pourrait-on dire, en un *Maboul*, l''homme dont l'esprit se promène', écho prégnant et expressif du héros qui donne le titre à un roman de Jean Pélégri (1962) : un esprit méditatif, mais dont la réflexion parait curieuse aux autres, il est 'maboul' car il interpelle et scrute la réalité avec une liberté singulière ; un peu comme le voyant de Rimbaud, il vit aux frontières de l'humain. Et plus que jamais il cherche la voie du salut.

Dès cet événement traumatique, Habel est en condition de voir ce qui échappe aux autres : il pourra discerner le Mal et juger le monde car Azraïl, l'Ange de la Mort, venu avant son heure, lui a fait don d'une des nombreuses paires d'yeux dont son corps est couvert (selon la tradition populaire ; cf. Déjeux 1977, 88). Il pourra voir au-delà des visages et des refoulements d'un monde où tout est voilé, où tout se joue.

Et voilà que, par une stylisation émotive diffuse, s'insinue la perception de l'espace : elle est véhiculée par l'instance énonciative impersonnelle qui, bien que fil conducteur omniscient du déroulement de l'histoire, est souvent actualisée par l'émergence du *je*, personnel et intradiégétique, qui fait éclater tout le côté expressif et tragique des émotions mises en scène, sous la forme d'un monologue.

Si le lieu est fondateur de sens et la narration a besoin – comme nous le suggèrerait Henri Mitterand – d'« un *ubi* autant que d'un *quid* et d'un *quando* » (Mitterand 1980, 194), c'est l'espace d'un croisement, le point de commencement de son aventure, spatiale et existentielle :

4 Le nom *Habel* renvoie la lecture au thème du frère sacrifié, d'après la Genèse (4, 2-8) : second fils d'Adam, il est cité aussi dans le Coran (Sourate 5, 27-31). Mais 'Habel' peut être aussi rapporté à la racine arabe '*habala*' qui signifie 'devenir fou' et rappelle le culte érotique et mystique de la légende arabe *Medjnoun Leïla* ('le fou de Leïla'), qui a inspiré l'épopée romanesque en vers du poète iranien du XIIe siècle Nizami. Dans le roman, Habel déclare avoir aussi le nom d'Ismaël, renvoyant alors par ce personnage biblique, fils d'Abram et d'Agar, éloigné par son père, à l'idée d'une civilisation nomade face à la civilisation sédentaire fondée par Caïn ou les descendants d'Isaac. « On retrouve là, dans cette identification du personnage à la lignée de nomades, une constante de la mythologie dibienne qui installe l'identité hors cité », explique Naget Khadda (2003, 97). Toutes ces significations trouvent leur expression symbolique dans le statut du personnage mis en scène.

lieu de la transformation du jeune émigré investi dès son approche du nouvel espace citadin d'un « phaéton démoniaque » (Habel 1977, 23)[5] qui a manqué l'écraser.

> Il se rappelle. Il entendit le hurlement des pneus déchirer l'air. Il se retourna. Il vit l'auto qui continuait à déraper, roues bloquées, exhibant ses crocs de nickel dans un rictus impudent. Une auto, un noir phaéton démoniaque qui fonçait, arrivait. Puis il remarqua la tête. Une méduse collée derrière le pare-brise. Et une voix prophétisa, trop monocorde et machinale pour être ironique : tout peut arriver maintenant ! (Dib 1977, 23)

Le style assertif du simple constat de réalité rythme ces lignes : l'urgence d'une succession de phrases simples ou enrichies par des adjonctions intégrant des précisions analytiques met en scène l'actualité du souvenir qui surgit (*Il se rappelle*) et qui reviendra au fil des pages, résonnant l'impossible oubli. La conscience, au présent, fluctue dans la temporalité figée d'une suite d'actions narrées au passé simple : des hors-temps, délimités et définis, qui éclatent « sans densité, sans volume, sans déploiement » (Barthes 1972, 26), et qui devraient unir le plus rapidement possible une cause et une fin ; des instants appartenant à un passé dont on voudrait se distancier mais qui, par contre, reviendront dans la conscience d'Habel, comme des rappels obsédés à un événement inscrit en lui pour toujours. Le fragment se conclut par le renvoi au saisissement d'une voix dont la fixité de l'intonation laisse bien comprendre son impossible ambiguïté : par la modalité exclamative, dans une clarté sans équivoque, une énonciation explicite (« tout peut arriver maintenant ! ») fait résonner la conscience et l'acceptation fataliste du mystère insondable de la vie de ce jeune homme revenant soir après soir au lieu de son interminable inquiétude.

Et, semblable au refrain d'une obsession folle, ce souvenir retentit au fil des pages, marquant le début de plusieurs chapitres, comme dans les exemples repris ci-dessous :

> Depuis deux soirs que je débouche du métro, que je me plante à ce carrefour, que j'attends. (23)

5 L'auteur utilise ce renvoi à la mythologie gréco-latine en raisonnant sur la violence et la prédestination de l'accident qui, le premier jour de la venue d'Habel au rond-point, a failli le tuer. « Mortel par sa mère, mais fils d'Hélios, Phaéton se présente un jour à la porte du palais du Soleil. Il vient s'assurer qu'il a bien ascendance divine. Imprudemment, Helios jure, sur le Styx, qu'il exaucera un vœu de l'enfant et celui-ci réclame de conduire, pour un jour, son char lumineux. Il est trop tard pour renoncer et Phaéton s'embarque sur son destin. Incapable de maîtriser les chevaux fougueux du Soleil, il est foudroyé par Zeus, avant que la terre entière ne s'embrase » (Philibert 2002).

e-ISSN 2499-5975

> À ce même carrefour où j'ai raté ma mort, le carrefour, au phaéton du diable. (27)
>
> Encore ici. A ce carrefour. J'y reviens comme un assassin sur les lieux de son crime. (33)
>
> Je reviens à ce carrefour, je rôde, je me plante comme cet assassin, soir après soir. (43)
>
> Sept soirs d'affilée que je donne rendez-vous à ma propre mort, à ce carrefour. (55)
>
> Je suis à ce carrefour. J'attends. C'est le deuxième soir. (142)

Une série de retours plus ou moins iconiques de phrases leitmotiv est mise en scène à travers la subjectivité d'un *je* qui dynamise la trame narrative : des énoncés, renvoyant à la même idée hantée et phobique, qui font retentir la volonté d'insister sur la situation vécue, pour l'emphatiser et amplifier la résonnance tragique de l'ineffaçable présence à l'esprit de ce rendez-vous manqué avec la mort.

La Voix intérieure d'Habel, jeune étranger inconnu dans cette ville immense, « narre les événements à reculons, par renvois et nœuds successifs, rappelant l'architecture circulaire du carrefour » (Mokhtari 2021, 233), croisement des routes qui serpentent dans toutes les directions et des rencontres étranges et révélatrices du protagoniste ainsi que des monologues qui scandent sa parole réfléchie et secrète, interrompant l'écoulement du récit.

La ville d'arrivée est un espace où l'on s'égare : elle se referme sur le héros et ne conserve de traces de lui que le temps qu'il s'y perd. L'on a l'impression d'un présent inépuisable, frénétique et réitéré, qui anéantit le lien avec le passé et le projet d'un futur. Une suite d'assimilations comparatives scande le passage descriptif que nous citons ci-dessous, où l'idée euphorique et valorisante de l'entrée dans un espace, semblable dans ses dimensions et dans sa centralité à un corps céleste gravitant autour des étoiles (« une planète »), s'oppose à la dysphorie de ses connotations affectives et valorielles : obscurité, colère et malveillance identifient le lieu évoqué, ainsi que l'exprime l'image comparative d'un substitut maternel hargneux et rancunier (marâtre).

> Habel s'en fut plus loin. Il pénétra aussi dans une ville grande comme une planète, sombre, vindicative comme une marâtre, et rageuse comme elle. Une ville s'ouvrant comme seule savent s'ouvrir les forêts, en reculant sans cesse. Assez loin en tout cas pour être harcelé de prémonitions singulières, pour nourrir des certitudes de rencontres, peut-être d'épreuves, sans pareilles aussi et qui ne seraient pas seulement de hasard. (Dib 1977, 56)

L'espace citadin s'ouvre à mesure qu'on y avance, mais, comme les bois, il s'éloigne progressivement, jusqu'à s'échapper, à se soustraire et à créer le vide autour de l'âme déambulante du héros, secouée par des pressentiments angoissants et étranges et par la conscience lucide de relations humaines, surprenantes mais pas fortuites, qui mettront à l'épreuve son endurance.

La ville est « ce monde vidé de toute substance » (8-9) : abstrait et inconsistant, presque inexistant face à l'humanité qui l'habite. Et, comme le traduit une riche isotopie de l'incertitude diffuse au cours de la narration, la plume de Dib dépeint toutes les nuances de sa réalité vague, insaisissable et inexplicable ou, plus encore, absente : « une ville, un monde, des passants, incertains. Un ciel, une bluette sans chaleur » (8), « une ville creuse, une ville abandonnée aussi morose qu'un cinéma sans spectateurs quand le film est fini » (131), « un pays de vapeur, engourdi, en suspens » (56) où il y a « un fleuve qui coule sans en avoir l'air, sans bouger » (79) et où y défilent, comme des « créatures impayables autant qu'absurdes », (9) « des corps inhabités » (8).

Les bruits étourdissants du trafic y sont diffus, surplombant et aplatissant toute forme de vie : « un orage de circulation […] n'a cessé d'avoir barre sur tous les bruits » (8) ; ou, encore, nous lisons : « au bout, il se retrouve dans une large artère où lancées, des autos-fusées fendent la nuit à grand renfort de rugissements » (63). Et c'est un vacarme qui ne conflue que dans l'absence et le vide : dans l'« agonie », le « mutisme du monde vacant » d'une ville où Habel reste suspendu, incapable de se reconnaitre ou de reconnaitre même l'amour qu'il vit : « Quand il se retrouvent dehors, Sabine et lui, ils ont besoin, encore une fois, d'un bon moment pour décider qui ne reconnaît pas l'autre » (7).

Dès lors, la nuit qui enveloppe Habel revenant au carrefour maudit, ne peut être qu'« invisible » (71) : par une hypallage on attribue à l'espace et au temps des ténèbres nocturnes le caractère de l''invisibilité' qui, implicitement, n'est que l'attribut connotatif de toute une réalité cachée de dégradation, d'émargination, de prostitution : le coté dysphorique du monde duquel le héros éponyme s'approche et que la ville même semble ne pas vouloir voir, en le refusant.

> la nuit, j'ai remarqué, ne plaît pas énormément aux villes. Ça finit toujours par une lutte à mort entre elles. Et sur cette ville, la nuit avait établi sa loi plus dure, plus ancienne. (31)

Tout le faste de la grande ville est renfermé, donc, autour de son inconsistance, de son incapacité de rayonner pour les yeux et les âmes qui la traversent : ses lumières sont fausses et ne renvoient qu'à elles-mêmes.

> Depuis longtemps investie par la nuit, la ville est figée en monuments de ténèbres. Des boules et des boules de lumière hérissées de pointes la criblent. Mais toutes luisent sans éclairer, ne brillant que pour elles-mêmes. (70)

L'espace citadin est donc l'image d'une illusion, d'« un endroit qui voudrait m'en rappeler un autre, […] quelque chose qui se trouve ailleurs » (39) : Habel s'enfonce « dans des rues qui sont de moins en moins des rues et de plus en plus de voies ouvertes sur – sur quoi, avec leurs feux tantôt rouges tantôt verts ? Sur rien vraisemblablement » (71) : et il éprouve « un brassage amer d'impulsions et de marche (71).

4 Espaces autres et utopie : un voyage vers la folie

En somme, l'émigré arrive en ville, il pénètre « là-dedans » (8), mais, remarquons-nous, comme on entre dans une hétérotopie : la ville d'Habel est « un lieu ouvert qui a cette propriété de vous maintenir dehors »,[6] comme nous l'expliquerait Foucault en explorant, parmi les principes de la science qu'il appelle 'l'hétérotopologie', les hétérotopies « qui ne sont pas fermées sur le monde extérieur, mais qui sont pure et simple ouverture » (2009, 32). Espace ouvert, mais dont l'entrée n'est qu'une tromperie, le Paris d'Habel est ce « lieu autre » où tout le monde peut accéder, mais restant à l'écart, dans ses marges : un lieu où, « une fois qu'on y est entré, on s'aperçoit que c'est une illusion et qu'on n'est entré nulle part » (Foucault 2009, 32). Elle est une « une sorte d'hétérotopie entièrement extérieure » (33) qui inscrit dans sa topographie l'étrangeté physique et spirituelle de cet émigré ayant perdu ses repères.

> […] cette ville qui ne le lâchait pas, ne voulait pas à aucun prix lui rendre sa liberté, mais qui ne serait jamais la sienne. La même, l'étrangeté de l'étranger coupable de l'être et n'y pouvant rien, restant en sa possession, pris au piège. (102)

L'émigration géographique est donc le catalyseur qui permet l'écoute de la voix intérieure. En anéantissant le temps de l'histoire, l'écriture

6 Comme la chambre – dont parle Foucault – ménagée à côté de la porte d'entrée, mais avant la porte d'entrée, dans les maisons du XVIII[e] siècle, en Amérique du Sud : « n'importe qui, à n'importe quelle heure du jour et de la nuit, pouvait entrer dans cette chambre, pouvait s'y reposer, pouvait faire ce qu'il voulait, pouvait partir le lendemain matin sans être vu ni reconnu par personne ; mais dans la mesure où cette chambre n'ouvrait d'aucune manière sur la maison elle-même, l'individu qui y était reçu ne pouvait jamais pénétrer à l'intérieur de la demeure familiale même » (2009, 32).

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dibienne creuse dans le temps intime, fuyant et imprévisible, de l'intériorité de l'homme, confronté à sa propre histoire grouillante d'angoisses et de démons, d'illusions et de désillusions.

En effet, en traversant cette ville invisible, en croisant la déviance et la marginalité de ses dimensions clandestines et obscures, Habel croise aussi son propre invisible ; et cela dans une mise à nu qui est une mise à mort de son être, un soulignement de son écart et de son invisibilité.

Mise à mort et sentiment d'invisibilité se produisent également en lui par une hallucination dans laquelle il se reconnait : il se revoit dans ce pénitent, une sorte de clown, rencontré un jour dans les toilettes d'une brasserie, assommé par deux individus qui « le pilonne(nt) avec une rage froide, mécanique, le roule(nt) ensuite sur le sol mouillé » (66), sous le regard indifférent de deux acolytes. L'homme embrasse le sol humide, soumis et veule, dans un sous-sol dégoûtant. La voix implicite et résonnante de ce cauchemar noir nous révèle qu'Habel est bien lui-même cet individu humilié, abandonné dans l'eau dégoulinante, qui dévoile affreusement sa déchéance, sa soumission, dans ce monde vacant, dans cet enfer où les hommes sont des « damnés inutiles » (36), « ne faisant l'aumône d'un regard à personne ni à aucune chose » (36), comme l'auteur le commente par l'engagement émotif et subjectif d'une écriture amère, empreinte de déception, désespoir et nihilisme, où retentit aussi un intertexte sartrien (« L'homme est une passion inutile »). « Tous insultent la dignité de l'homme … des salopards, des bâfreurs, des fornicateurs … avec Celui qui est monté sur la Croix » (61) s'exclame une ivrogne qui, « jambes écartées au milieu du trottoir, lance une harangue et un jeu d'urine vers le lampadaire » (61), glose le narrateur par un zeugme qui uniformise de manière elliptique et caustique le renvoi aux mots d'un discours solennel et l'expression d'une fonction corporelle ordinaire, s'appuyant sur le sémantisme partagé d'un mouvement de projection connoté par son énergie, ainsi que l'exprime le verbe 'lancer'. « Habel est exposé à la moquerie, comme le Christ est exposé à la croix », observe Jean Dejeux (1981, 26).

Et voilà que le protagoniste ne peut que sombrer dans un sentiment désespéré de chute et d'anéantissement :

> C'est Habel. Mais c'est aussi quelqu'un d'autre et de perdu, qui se sait perdu […] Il se sait plus perdu que jamais. Plus perdu que l'inconnu qu'il a abandonné dans ces toilettes. Plus que cet homme qu'il n'arrive pas à chasser de son esprit. Plus que cette ville, plus que ce monde. Plus, et plus impuissant. S'il ne reste que des flics pour aller au secours de quelqu'un parce que personne ne veut y aller : un monde perdu, des hommes perdus, un Habel perdu. (69)

On le nomme, Habel, et l'on emphatise cette nomination dans la brièveté d'une phrase simple et à l'aune d'un présentatif résonnant. On

le spécifie et on le qualifie aussi dans la déclinaison comparative absolue de l'univers émotif qui le connote : celui de la perte. La répétition anaphorique de l'adverbe de comparaison 'plus' scande comme une litanie le climax ascendant d'une inquiétude et d'une impuissance que l'espace citadin exaspère. L'horreur de la ville anthropophage se serre autour d' Habel.

Dans l'obscurité de la nuit, dans le labyrinthe du monde citadin secret, le héros rencontre aussi l'amour qui a pour lui le visage de Sabine, la dévoreuse d'hommes aux hanches voluptueuses, qui jongle avec les mots et se joue des apparences d'Habel ; ou le visage ambigu de l'écrivain Éric Merrain, « le Vieux » – ainsi que le surnomme Habel –, alias la Dame de la Merci, le travesti, à la fois homme élégant et femme attirante et exquise : personnage *bifrons*, qui initie Habel « aux vérités effroyables de l'homme, de ses démons intérieurs, de ses exils, de ses noirceurs » (Mokhtari 2021, 229). Mais pour Habel, l'amour est surtout Lily, la belle fille du Nord qui unit « Beauté et Séduction suprêmes, comme la Mort est séduction et soif d'autres chose » (Déjeux 1981, 23) : « déesse persécutée et enchainée » (Dib 1977, 119) qui habite les ténèbres de ses chimères (Mokhtari 2021, 242) : « Lui, Lily, l'attend dans sa nuit. Une nuit, une ville, un domaine à lui seul, Habel, réservé. Où il la retrouvera » (96).

> Habel la rencontre pour la première fois en ville, « dans une foule où il ne connaissait personne, où il n'était lui-même personne » (97). Et elle lui saisit sa main – « une main insinuante, souple et douce de femme » (97), indifférente à « tous les regards pointés sur eux » (97), jusqu'au moment où lui, Habel, la souleva, « toute petite […] et toute contente » (98), dans ses bras, comme elle s'y attendait, paraît-il.

Depuis lors, depuis leurs premiers rendez-vous amoureux, elle tisse la toile de son quotidien peuplant les fantasmes de son esprit et de son cœur : comme pendant le travail, au supermarché, nouvelle dimension spatiale encadrant la narration et la mise à nu de l'âme de Habel, qui trouve « dans les yeux du bazar, l'incurable tristesse de (son) reniement » (95). Le sentiment de perte ne cesse de se renouveler et le jeune émigré ressent encore une fois toute la solitude et la vanité de sa nouvelle vie, dans l'anonymat de cette grande surface où il ne cesse d'aller, venir, ranger, installer : un « non-lieu », un espace interchangeable, de consommation, « ni […] identitaire, ni […] relationnel, ni […] historique », dirait Augé (1992, 100).

Habel a « l'impression de peupler à lui seul l'immense magasin et ne faire qu'aller dans la même direction » (95), même si, en vérité, il peut se confondre avec la foule de clients dans la dysphorie d'une superposition analogique de ses déplacements et des mouvements de la masse d'êtres et de choses qui l'environne : elle aussi, comme

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lui, réduite à la névrose de « son propre mouvement, son propre enfer » (95).

Et la voix du narrateur omniscient d'introduire, dans la polyphonie d'une énonciation à la forme indirecte libre, la distanciation ironique de son point de vue par rapport à une commune pensée élogieuse à l'égard de tout un monde hautain et prétentieux, consacré à un inopportun respect pour soi-même, qu'il voit autour de lui :

> Tout ce qu'Habel voit, tout ce qui l'environne, choses, êtres, qu'on devine précieux, superbes, accomplis, et grands dieux, ils peuvent l'être ! car en dehors d'eux, qui – ou quoi – le serait plus, ou seulement autant ? Mais avec cette incurable, abstraite tristesse au fond du regard. (96)

Dans la surprenante véracité d'un style nourri des formes explosives de l'affectivité, l'auteur esquisse la mise en texte du lieu par une riche actualisation évaluative de ses référents descriptifs, hommes et choses : représentation d'un espace qui s'inscrit dans le mouvement intérieur de la conscience du héros, le fragment contient l'énonciation d'une suite de qualités valorisant les univers humain et matériel environnant (« précieux, superbes, accomplis, et grands dieux »), emphatiquement énumérées à l'intérieur d'une résonnante modalité exclamative et interrogative. Mais les excellentes évaluations déclamées, renforcées dans l'interjection de leur reprise pronominale (« ils peuvent l'être ! ») s'ouvrent à l'ironie de la fausse question de la proposition causale qui suit (« car en dehors d'eux, qui – ou quoi – le serait plus, ou seulement autant ? ») : les qualifications positives en sont renversées dans l'emphase manifeste d'une exagération laudative. L'adverbe 'mais' sanctionne l'effet déstabilisant annoncé par les modalisations subjectives de l'interrogation et de l'exclamation en introduisant, à l'opposé, la véritable et explicite caractérisation de ce monde : le côté négatif de l'inguérissable et vague mélancolie du regard de ces gens, enfermés dans « cette supériorité de leur part, […] ce respect un peu trouble et superstitieux qu'ils se vouent » (96).

Habel peut contempler le défilé de l'humanité de sa ville, en déjouant ses masques et ses mises en scène pompeuses, dans le microcosme transitoire représenté par cet endroit de ventes et d'achats : une synecdoque du monde extérieur, une hyponymie de sa complexité. À l'intérieur de la ville et comme reflet restreint de cet espace, le supermarché peut aussi représenter une hétérotopie de contestation, peut-on noter en suivant les suggestions de Foucault : « un espace réel […] parfait, […] méticuleux, […] arrangé » (2009, 34) qui, tout en le reproduisant en petit, s'oppose, par son ordre, au monde extérieur, chaotique et brouillon. Mais il représente aussi un non-lieu paradoxal. En effet, Habel, qui pousse des chariots et refait le plein des réfrigérateurs et des étagères de cette grande surface, n'est plus seulement

l'exilé, l'errant, migrant sans image et sans parole, mais il devient un habitant transitoire d'une hétérotopie qui lui redonne, étrangement, une petite portion d'identité. Et la nourriture qu'il range et empile, bien qu'identifiant en grande partie le pays étranger (« l'assortiment de fromage […] camembert, coulommiers, chèvre, pont l'évêque, bleu d'Auvergne… ») est un objet et une image rassurants en ce qu'elle représente, pour lui comme pour tous ses clients, une nécessité partagée, un point de contact – alimentaire et vitale – essentiel. Or, c'est toujours un rapport synecdotique qui lui permet de sortir de son anonymat : bien qu'à l'intérieur d'un monde d'aliénation, le supermarché circonscrit une partie symbolique à l'intérieur de cet univers vain où Habel, émigré au travail, retrouve un sens, une âme, un rôle et des points de rencontres.

En effet, ce va-et-vient le long de ses couloirs qui paraît anéantir Habel, ses courses répétitives et obsessionnelles, tracent, comme on lit, « l'infini du cercle » (95) : l'auteur introduit le renvoi à un temps cyclique, cosmique, à un itératisme temporel qui inscrit la vie de Habel dans le recommencement, dans une *renovatio ad infinitum*. L'espace devient pour un instant celui de la perfection qui anéantit les contraires, dans une heureuse alternance vie-mort-renaissance.

Le supermarché, lieu autre de la mise en ordre apparente, mais aussi paradoxe d'une synecdoque identitaire qui génère une première quête personnelle, est en effet le point de départ d'un élan, d'une promesse : c'est dans cet espace que le visage et l'esprit de Lily reviennent à Habel, insistants, constants, répétés et toujours réconfortants, presque divins.

> Habel s'affaire tant et plus à travers le supermarché aujourd'hui, un samedi, et tout ce qu'il voit : l'image de Lily. De quelque côté qu'il aille, de-ci, de-là, elle brûle devant lui. Elle le brûle aussi en dedans au moins autant que la miséricorde divine. (92)

Lily a « une blancheur qui sitôt dévêtue fait défaillir le cœur, se serrer la gorge, une peau exacte comme une gaine, si exacte, si mystérieusement rayonnante, que vous-même […], ne sauriez où situer, où localiser le miracle » (93) et « la lumière de ses yeux (est) douce à donner la fièvre » (99) : comme une statue de pierre ciselée, lumineuse, elle dit la douceur du visage, le regard et le sourire. Mais Lily est aussi l'énigme : « Ce sourire où il se croit soudain reconnu, ce regard d'un vert insaisissable, c'est une déesse persécutée et enchaînée par des génies vindicatifs qui les lui dispense » (119). Étrangère à elle-même, elle semble vouloir « rattraper un temps perdu ou pas même perdu […] mais demeuré là-bas, arrêté à sa source, pétrifié au milieu de son origine et en attente » (111). Lily est une figure théophanique qui « cristallise l'ambivalence du monde » (Khadda 2003, 9). Lumière et obscurité, conscience et instinct irrationnel, paradis et enfer, terre et ciel,

coexistent en elle, superposés et confondus, sans qu'il y ait une hiérarchisation de valeurs ou l'expression, même voilée et implicite, d'une hiérarchisation ou d'une dichotomie morale. Elle n'est aucunement jugée et le texte, bien que fortement connoté, élabore sa présence et sa réalité à travers « une dynamique de fusion – mais aussi de diffraction, de réverbération » (Khadda 2003, 9), au-delà de tout questionnement autour des normes, personnelles ou collectives.

Elle reste insaisissable : tombée dans la déraison, elle s'évade, comme une chimère nervalienne, s'éloignant imprévisiblement d'Habel, lors de leurs rencontres. Il la poursuit et la retrouve dans les quartiers les plus louches et mal famés, où, déguisée en Pierrot, elle fait le clown pour amuser les passants. Mais son errance n'est que l'errance d'Habel : « Nous sommes cet ailleurs, transportés dans une époque autre, peut-être dans un temps sans analogue » (114). « Présente mais sans cesse absente » (111), elle est cet « espace absolument autre » (Foucault 2009, 25) « où convergent, où se découvrent toutes les réponses » (94).

C'est pour cela que le parcours physique, affectif, mental et spirituel d'Habel peut se conclure à l'hôpital psychiatrique où Lily est internée : c'est la fin de son voyage aux frontières de la schizophrénie dans les tréfonds de Paris. Et c'est aussi l'arrivée dans un espace brillant d'une lumière radieuse, dorée et naturelle : un espace clos, surveillé, mais bienveillant, apaisant et propice à la sérénité.

> Dehors, dans la cour de la clinique, le ciel paraissait avoir été tendu d'or. Il était comme un reflet du ciel des anges et des bienheureux. Ce miracle bleu, avec un seul nuage d'argent au centre, gardait raison sur tout, avait le dernier mot sur tout. On pouvait lui adresser une prière. Ce que fit Habel (188).

Opposé à l'espace ouvert, mais dévorateur, de la ville, la maison de santé est assumée comme l'espace fermé de la régénération. Elle représente l'un de ces « lieux que la société ménage dans ses marges, dans les plages vides qui l'entourent » : c'est l'hétérotopie de la déviation, expression « des individus dont le comportement est déviant par rapport à la moyenne ou à la norme exigée », explique Foucault (2009, 27). Mais Habel, qui ne choisit pas de vivre son amour passionnel avec Sabine, ni de revenir dans son pays natal solder les comptes avec le frère qui l'a poussé sur la voie de l'exil, préfère s'enfermer avec Lily dans cet espace : un lieu qui, bien que délimité, est le point de départ d'une ouverture, d'un renouveau, d'une transformation. La narration reconfigure l'idée de l'hôpital qui devient expression de la véritable « topographie de [..] l'intime », comme le dirait Bachelard (1961, 27). Avec Lily, « le voyage d'Habel a fini par trouver sa raison » (93) : volontairement, poussé par sa propre décision, il « fait de son existence quelque chose qui (lui) ressemble » (183).

Et voilà qu'il peut crier au Frère qui l'a chassé :

> Ne me croyez surtout pas parti pour l'un de ces voyages dont on revient. Voyages que vous n'avez jamais faits, n'aviez nulle envie de faire, et qui laissent une chance de retour. Oubliez-moi comme je dois vous oublier aussi. Quelqu'un d'autre, non celui que vous avez congédié, rôde désormais dans l'ombre de cette ville. Quelqu'un d'autre, et il a rencontré Lily. D'abord il a eu de la peine à la rencontrer ; puis il l'a reconnue. Ma trahison envers vous a dès lors été consommée. (57)

Il peut aussi s'exclamer, en faisant exploser sa colère pour le refus subi :

> N'êtes-vous pas l'aîné et le plus sage, le plus avisé ? Ne l'avez-vous pas montré en toute occasion, affaires de famille, affaires d'autrui, et en toutes votre jugement ne s'est-il pas toujours révélé le meilleur, une raison jamais prise en défaut, une chose tellement reconnue, dite, répétée qu'il n'y a plus rien à ajouter ? (55)

Une apostrophe personnelle, intradiégétique et actualisée par le 'vous', interrompt la narration sous l'urgence d'une suite d'interrogations qui hyperbolisent les données positives de l'interlocuteur-adversaire, le Frère, pour les anéantir dans la polyphonie d'une antiphrase ironique.

Dib aime le style de la tromperie ouverte, des doubles jeux énonciatifs contradictoires, et c'est ainsi que son héros véhicule son point de vue polémique, démystifiant et désacralisant, par les biais d'une raillerie communiquée par antiphrase, dont le Frère, l'autorité inviolable, en est, de manière virulente et blessante, la cible. D'ailleurs, comme Habel le commente, l'air sérieux et convaincu, feint à merveille, de leur « face à face », ne mériterait qu'un éclat de rire bruyant et se traduit par un regard glacial et ennuyé.

Cet homme hautain, image du pays d'origine qui ne l'a pas reconnu et l'a obligé à s'en aller, mais qui a pour lui tant de belles certitudes, cet homme qui ne sait pas se regarder en face dans sa vérité, n'avait pas prévu que la dépossession de soi à laquelle Habel a été contraint par l'émigration pouvait être le début de sa renaissance.

Après avoir migré à travers des espaces inconsistants tout en étant réels, Habel s'installe heureusement dans la consistance de son rêve : « un rêve allant encore à la recherche de Lily, les yeux rivés uniquement sur ce point, comme s'il voyait quelque chose, la silhouette qui aurait dû marcher devant lui, le précéder juste comme Lily l'aurait fait » (102). Il se place dans un espace qui s'oppose aux autres, en les neutralisant, en les effaçant, en les purifiant ; l'espace de l'utopie, notons-nous, et d'un nouveau présent, uchronique.

Les parcours hétérotopiques déstabilisants d'Habel aboutissent à « la douceur »[7] d'un espace utopique : la folie de Lily, qui est « la douceur sombre » (70), la « douceur troublante » (94) d'une chimère qui se réalise et qui pour Habel représente la réponse à sa quête. Il décide de s'installer dans ce pays sans lieu et dans cette histoire sans chronologie que représente la maison de santé, matérialisation finale utopique de son itinéraire existentiel bouleversé.

Par rapport à l'émigré des premiers textes, expression d'une génération rasant les murs qui cherchait à passer inaperçue et cultivait sa transparence, Habel a acquis, dans la littérature francophone maghrébine des années '70-'80, le contour d'une visibilité jeune et séduisante : il est l'expression – avant la génération « beur » d'émigrés enfin visibles et dicibles – d'une génération d'immigrés dans le paysage citadin français revendiquant sa visibilité. Toutefois, sa vie, tendue vers un espace dont l'identité reste exclusive, demeure inassimilable et son refuge ne peut être, à la fin, que la folie ; égarement et fuite de la réalité qui, cependant, sous la plume de Dib, acquièrent les traits euphoriques d'un exil mental et spirituel dans la sérénité et la grâce d'une utopie : dans l'espace, on peut conclure, de « ces cités, ces continents, ces planètes, dont il serait bien impossible de relever la trace sur aucune carte […] » car ils sont « nés, comme on dit, dans la tête des hommes, ou à vrai dire, dans les interstices de leurs mots, dans l'épaisseur de leurs récits, ou encore dans le lieu sans lieu de leur rêves, dans le vide de leurs cœurs » (Foucault 2009, 23).

7 Aux hétérotopies, ces lieux « absolument autres » qui ont un rapport de contestation ou d'inversion avec les lieux réels et ordinaires d'un espace culturel, Foucault oppose les utopies : lieux irréels, en relation d'analogie directe ou inverse avec l'espace réel, et il les connote par leur « douceur » : mot qui, complété par des qualifications différentes, revient dans le roman.

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Fantastique et réel merveilleux ; sorcellerie et faits divers *Le commerce des Allongés* d'Alain Mabanckou

Francesca Paraboschi
Università degli Studi di Milano, Italia

Abstract The novel *Le commerce des Allongés* by Alain Mabanckou, launched at la *rentrée littéraire* in September 2022, is a fulfilment of the novelist's desire to reconnect with the oral narratives of his childhood: by his own admission, Mabanckou draws on the *répertoire* by his mother bequeathed to him. The result is a singular work in which the fantastic is grafted onto news and gives way to the magic realism, while exploring workings of black magic rites. My purpose is to study the writer's use of the supernatural and his manipulation of stereotypes, prejudices and commonplaces associated with Africa. The aim of Mabanckou's work is to convey a strong, though biased, criticism of the powerful and influent African men who are stifling and corrupting their country's society, and to plunge Western readers into a fearsome reality that is likely to amuse, shock and outrage them at the same time.

Keywords Mabanckou. Whichcraft. Supernatural. Social criticism. Subverting of the imaginary.

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1 Introduction

Écrivain-monde déroulant son activité d'auteur, professeur, essayiste, documentariste, animateur d'émissions radiophoniques et télévisées entre la France et les États-Unis, Alain Mabanckou revient toujours à l'Afrique de ses origines. Dans *Le commerce des Allongés* (Seuil, 2022),[1] il se penche sur le monde des morts avec une expertise d'ethnologue en livrant l'histoire d'un jeune homme décédé précocement dans des circonstances incertaines et qui revient parmi les vivants pour mener à terme une mission mystérieuse mais nécessaire, dont le lecteur ne découvrira l'ampleur qu'à la fin du roman. Dans cet ouvrage singulier, l'évocation du revenant renoue d'un côté avec le genre fantastique,[2] mais s'explique d'un autre côté dans une mimésis romanesque répondant à une conception magique de la réalité[3] et faisant écho à des faits divers liés aux rites de magie noire. Mabanckou se veut l'interprète de données culturelles spécifiques de son pays natal – « pour que la culture que j'ai héritée de l'Afrique puisse être un bénéfice pour les autres cultures également » dit l'auteur dans un entretien (Paraboschi 2022, 189) –, agrémentées de tout un répertoire oral que sa mère[4] lui a légué:

> Il y a beaucoup à l'intérieur de ce livre: il y a des faits divers qui sont survenus au Congo, il y a la conception de la mort chez les Bembés, la réincarnation, des choses un peu mystérieuses, des phénomènes paranormaux etc. etc.
>
> Quand j'avais écrit *Mémoires de porc-épic*, qui est un livre raconté par un animal, c'était en partie des contes et des légendes que me racontait ma mère. Je n'avais pas épuisé le répertoire qu'elle m'avait laissé. (193)

Je me propose de présenter la conception de la mort évoquée dans le roman, le maniement de certains stéréotypes, préjugés et lieux

1 Toutes les citations sont tirées de cette édition ; le numéro de page sera indiqué entre parenthèses.

2 J'entends par 'fantastique' un genre narratif de dérivation occidentale, notamment théorisé par Todorov (1970), qui se définit par l'irruption du surnaturel au sein du quotidien (souvent à travers l'apparition de figures liées à la mort comme le vampire, le revenant, le diable etc.) et par l'hésitation du lecteur face aux manifestations de phénomènes qui n'obéissent pas aux règles physiques régissant l'univers ordinaire. Bien que la réflexion critique soit très vaste sur ce sujet, Todorov reste le point de repère incontournable.

3 J'entends par 'réel merveilleux' la perception du réel régi par des lois physiques et magiques en même temps et par 'réalisme magique' le choix esthétique romanesque de représenter cette manière de percevoir le réel ; la réflexion sur ce sujet est très vaste depuis le 'manifeste' d'Alejo Carpentier, *El reino de este mundo* (1949) ; je renvoie, pour le moins à Chanady 1985 ; Scheel 2005.

4 Le roman est dédicacé à sa mère, « dont les fables sont peu ou prou reprises ici » (7).

communs liés à l'Afrique et le recours textuel au surnaturel. Le but de Mabanckou serait finalement de véhiculer d'une part une forte critique, quoique biaisée, des hommes politiques qui étouffent et corrompent la société de leur pays, et, d'autre part, de plonger le lecteur, et plus spécifiquement occidental – « le lecteur des littératures africaines [étant] généralement européen » (Mabanckou 2012, 115) – dans une réalité redoutable, susceptible de l'amuser et le fasciner, mais aussi de le choquer et l'indigner en même temps.

2 La conception de la mort

Une histoire de revenants est à la base de la rédaction du roman, comme l'écrivain l'explique dans une interview :

> *Le commerce des Allongés* est peut-être le fruit de mes voyages en Afrique. Quand j'étais au Congo j'avais lu dans la presse une sorte de fait divers dans lequel on disait qu'une jeune fille qui était morte revenait fréquenter les boîtes de nuit. Et en partant de là je me suis dit que peut-être les boîtes de nuits sont bourrées de gens qui ne sont pas forcément de notre monde réel mais qui sont de l'autre côté de la réalité. (Fruchon-Toussaint 2022)[5]

Mabanckou s'inspire d'un fait divers pour développer dans son œuvre la vision particulière de la mort chez les Bembés, qui est répandue aussi dans d'autres sociétés congolaises, comme le remarque Tschibola Kalengaye:

> [L]es morts [sont], selon la croyance traditionnelle, les vivants par excellence ; ils sont doués d'une vie qui ne finit pas.
>
> Mais pour que cette vie dans l'au-delà« dure » et atteigne sa plénitude, les morts ont besoin du concours des vivants. Il y a donc entre les vivants et les morts un échange continuel ; il y a comme un fleuve de vie. (Tschibola Kalengaye 2001, 26-7)

Mabanckou situe son roman dans un contexte culturel où les frontières entre le monde des morts et celui des vivants ne sont pas étanches; le récit dans son entier est centré sur le monde de l'au-delà, que raconte une voix narrative 'tierce'[6] s'exprimant à la deuxième personne du singulier et s'adressant au protagoniste. Quoique

5 Mabanckou s'inspire-t-il également de *Pays sans chapeau* de « [s]on ami l'écrivain Dany Laferrière » (Mabanckou 2020a, 245), un roman où les frontières entre le monde des vivants et l'au-delà s'avèrent poreuses ?

6 Selon la définition que donne l'écrivain lui-même dans un entretien (Fnac 2022).

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extérieure, cette modalité énonciative crée un lien intime avec le héros (et le lecteur par conséquent) ; il s'agit finalement d'une voix rassurante qui explique les événements en train de se produire, mais aussi les émotions et les sensations vécues par le protagoniste. Ce dernier, Liwa Ekimakingaï, « autrement dit la mort a eu peur de moi » (42), atteint effectivement sa « nouvelle vie » (11) après la découverte de sa propre mort et son enterrement au cimetière des pauvres de Pointe Noire, appelé 'Le Frère Lachaise'.[7] La veine ironique de Mabanckou sert à son dessein de banaliser, de démystifier la mort et de ne pas la considérer comme la fin de toute chose : de son propre aveu, Mabanckou y pense de façon humoristique (cf. Fruchon-Toussaint 2022).

Certes, le décès prématuré de Liwa cause une très grande douleur à sa grand-mère Mâ Lembé qui l'a élevé,[8] et son chagrin est évoqué dans le texte de manière poignante ; toutefois, le fil de la narration revient à l'« atmosphère festive » (90) de funérailles somptueuses que la grand-mère a organisées grâce à la cotisation des femmes du marché. L'évocation se déroule sur plusieurs pages et rend compte d'une fête fabuleuse où « les chants en bembé déchirent la nuit. La transe est générale » (89). Les intervenants arborent les vêtements colorés traditionnels (103) et assistent aux spectacles magnifiques des chanteuses-danseuses-pleureuses (84-9). Mabanckou explique dans un entretien :

> La conscience que nous avons de la mort ici en Occident, c'est que c'est quelque chose de sérieux, costume-cravate noir, enterrement, discussion, héritage, tout ! Dans mon pays, au Congo-Brazzaville la mort est une véritable cérémonie dans laquelle les gens se fixent rendez-vous pour venir se draguer, […] pour venir voir quelle est la femme qui va danser en roulant bien son derrière etc. etc. C'est pour ça qu'il y a la présence des danseuses pleureuses qui sont là et qui en même temps peuvent aussi trouver leur mari. Et le cadavre regarde tout cela avec un sourire. (Trapenard 2022).

Et dans *Le commerce des Allongés* de trouver le mort qui « piaff[e] d'impatience » (89) pour le désir de prendre part « à ce rassemblement qui s'amuse » (91) ; il est pris d'une formidable envie de se mettre à danser le *Muntutu* (84), il est ravi des chants, des danses, des pleurs qui ne cessent de le glorifier et le regretter même pendant la nuit, ce qui empêche « un grand silence de ternir [s]a joie » (88). La présence d'esprit du cadavre ne doit pas trop étonner : le texte

7 Il existe aussi un cimetière des riches où Liwa n'a pas pu être enterré puisqu'il est « 'mal mort' » (122).

8 Sa fille est morte après l'accouchement.

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rapporte en effet que, normalement, les morts expriment leur participation émotive à leurs funérailles : certains défunts font des caprices, d'autres versent des larmes de crocodile, d'autres encore consentent à des sourires d'acquiescement après avoir parfois abusé de leur position (cf. 81). On assiste à des scènes potentiellement macabres qui s'avèrent cocasses dans leur débordement dans le grotesque. Un corbeau braille en sillonnant le ciel tandis que des mouches bourdonnent autour du cadavre de Liwa, pendant que Mâ Lembé manie maladroitement son balai de feuilles de palmier.

> Dans son zèle pour te protéger contre ces insectes dont les plus opiniâtres foncent dans tes narines, elle rate parfois sa cible, et tu reçois des coups dans le visage pendant que les chanteuses-pleureuses-danseuses contiennent leur éclat de rire. (102)

De plus, Liwa dans sa bière est trimballé dans les rues et en proie à des « violentes saccades lorsque ces hommes accélèrent leur foulée en rythme afin d'esquiver les camions » (103-4), ou évitent le choc avec la « promenade d'un autre cadavre » (105) qui procède dans le sens de marche opposé, ce qui occasionne des haltes pour les hommages et les salutations distinguées (108 ; cf. aussi Trapenard 2022 ; Lemoine 2022). Toute la première partie du roman, intitulée « Le rêve le plus long de ta mort », retrace la mise en place prodigieuse des funérailles, entrecoupée de souvenirs de Liwa liés à son enfance ou à un passé plus récent. La deuxième partie, qui se déroule entièrement dans le cimetière, prolonge une vision de la mort qui n'est aucunement terrifiante : plusieurs défunts prennent tour à tour la parole pour raconter à Liwa leur vie et les circonstances de leur décès ; ils le renseignent sur 'la vie de l'autre côté de l'existence' (cf. Lemoine, 2022) où règne une ambiance plutôt joviale dans l'absence totale d'un rapport avec la/les divinité/s. Toute une communauté de morts apparaît bien vivante : ils célèbrent la fête nationale (128), ils « s'amusent comme des dingues » et abusent occasionnellement de la boisson (171-2). Leur emploi du temps est bien rempli et il leur faut programmer les activités à l'avance (« Es-tu disponible le weekend prochain ? », 172) ; ils prennent garde au temps qui passe (« Je ne vais pas te raconter ça, c'est une autre histoire, sinon on en aura pour une éternité », 172). Les renvois à la nourriture (« Ici aussi pour vivre on doit se nourrir », 129) sont susceptibles de donner lieu à une sorte d'humorisme macabre : « Tu n'as pas encore mangé depuis que tu es mort, tu trouves ça normal ? Tu risques d'avoir la peau sur les os ! » (193). Ils procèdent à des renversements étonnants : « On ne meurt qu'une fois, tu risques de regretter… » (173). Ils en arrivent à recourir aux expressions hyperboliques du langage commun liées à la mort, ce qui apparaît hors propos mais finalement très amusant : « Je suis mort de

e-ISSN 2499-5975

fatigue » (171) ; « Tu ne resteras quand même pas là à faire le tour de ta tombe la mort dans l'âme ! » (172).

Il n'y a donc pas de représentations sombres et même lugubres de la mort, entraînant la hantise du jugement dernier[9] et une aura de mystère impénétrable.[10] Même dans la troisième partie du roman, quand Liwa se dirige en ville pour accomplir sa mission, les ressources narratives et expressives d'amplification de l'inquiétude (offertes par la littérature fantastique)[11] ne sont pas exploitées. En effet, le spectre du roman de Mabanckou n'est aucunement malveillant : le héros s'en retourne chez les vivants pour redresser le pire des torts faits à une jeune femme.

3 L'apparition du héros et les déviances du fantastique

Dans la première scène du roman, le narrateur décrit en détail la condition du protagoniste Liwa à son réveil dans sa tombe, ses perceptions sensorielles et surtout ses émotions : sa surprise cède le pas à un sentiment d'épanouissement, à une « gaieté absolue » (19):

> Un large sourire de contentement détend tes lèvres, tu estimes désormais avoir assez de raisons de ravitailler ton humeur joyeuse et de contrer pour de bon la chaîne de ces images de tristesse qui avait obstrué jusque-là tes pensées.
>
> Revigoré par ton euphorie, tu décides enfin de te lever. (14)

La disposition d'esprit du mort (vivant) contredit l'horizon d'attente du lecteur ; même la sortie de la tombe, tout en s'apparentant à un imaginaire potentiellement lugubre de dérivation gothique, suscite l'étonnement et non l'inquiétude. Liwa s'appuie sur la croix campée

9 « C'est du pipeau ces histoires de jugement de l'au-delà. Des balivernes qu'on te vendait à l'église *Grâce à Dieu* » (196).

10 Il suffit de mentionner *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* de Flaubert qui met en scène les tentatives d'accouplement monstrueux du sphinx et de la chimère dont la lecture symbolique montre l'impossibilité de l'imagination de pénétrer le mystère de l'au-delà dont le sphinx est le gardien.

11 La littérature fantastique « est d'abord un jeu avec la peur » souligne Caillois (1966, 13). Lovecraft fait de l'amplification de la peur son chiffre d'écriture, mais pour nous limiter à un cas exemplaire dans le panorama littéraire français, Maupassant est l'auteur qui, selon Steinmetz, « fait de la peur l'une de ses spécialités. Ce n'est plus la hautaine terreur des romans noirs, mais une sensation relativement commune que tout un chacun peut éprouver et qui métamorphose lugubrement les choses et les êtres, les données de l'espace et du temps. Elle peut même aller jusqu'à l'épouvante 'lorsque s'y mêle un peu de la superstition des siècles passés'. Il s'emploie à scruter les 'incompréhensibles ébranlements nerveux, les 'affolements du cerveau' ». (Steinmetz 1990, 87). Pour une réflexion critique plus récente sur le sentiment de fantastique et son exploitation textuelle, cf. Bozzetto, Huftier 2004, 50-8.

sur sa sépulture, ses articulations engourdies grincent, puis il fait enfin son apparition, 'sapé comme jamais' :

> Tu portes une veste orange en crêpe et à larges revers, une chemise verte fluorescente, nantie d'un grand col à trois boutons et aux poignets mousquetaires arrondis. Le nœud papillon blanc est un peu de travers, tu le rajustes […] Tu observes à présent d'un air admiratif ton pantalon violet à pattes d'éléphant, également en crêpe, puis tes chaussures Samalander rouges vernissées et pourvues de lacets blancs. (14-15)

On sait l'importance que Mabanckou accorde au trait culturel de la SAPE, signe et signal d'un affranchissement identitaire heureux, ironique et auto-ironique qui s'accorde bien à sa personnalité, à son style d'écriture et à ses tenues vestimentaires.[12] On retrouve cette même ironie joyeuse dans l'évocation du revenant désemparé : sa nouvelle condition de mort entraîne une vision du monde à l'envers, avec le ciel en bas et la terre en haut, ce qui l'oblige à reculer pour avancer. L'apparition du revenant n'entraîne donc pas l'inquiétude générée par la subversion des lois régissant la séparation entre la vie et la mort et n'occasionne pas la célèbre 'hésitation' liée au genre fantastique selon Todorov (1970, 29) ; c'est plutôt au fantôme de souffrir de la perte des repères. Tout de même, ce désarroi ne semble pas trop le perturber : ce revenant joyeux expérimente un « immense bonheur » dès qu'il apprend posséder des ailes lui permettant de s'envoler « d'un endroit à un autre avec l'aisance d'un aigle » (24). Il est même acclamé par les gens du quartier où il se rend pour aller voir sa grand-mère :« Bravo Liwa Ekimakingaï ! Bravo ! », « Tu voles comme Superman ! » (25). Et le protagoniste se réjouir du fait qu'« il suffit [de lever] les bras bien haut et les agit[er] à plusieurs reprises pour que ces ailes reparaissent » (25). C'est en somme un mouvement enfantin singeant un oiseau qui permet au revenant sapé de se transformer en superhéros applaudi. L'acclamation de Liwa ne dure pourtant qu'un temps ; il est en effet sommé de s'en retourner au Frère-Lachaise par un autre groupe de jeunes, alertés par l'aboiement déchaîné de chiens :« Si tu ne retournes pas maintenant, tu vas mourir une deuxième fois » (27). La menace de mort à un mort semble couronner la représentation surprenante, presqu'outrée : le ridicule des gestes de Liwa pour activer le ressort des ailes et le grotesque de la situation restituent le désir de Mabanckou de « mettre de l'humour » à l'intérieur de son roman et de montrer à ses lecteurs « comment nous [les Congolais]

12 Mabanckou se présente souvent sapé ou en tout cas habillé de manière excentrique, même en occasion de ses cours au Collège de France (cf. Mabanckou 2020a, 175-86).

e-ISSN 2499-5975

nous rions plutôt de la mort, alors qu'ici [en Occident] c'est quelque chose d'endimanché avec redingote » (Lemoine 2022). On pourrait pourtant se demander quelles sont les raisons du choix de l'écrivain ; ce dernier semble mettre en place certains clichés paternalistes issus de l'inconscient colonial qui considèrent l'esprit africain simple et naïf, témoignant d'un émerveillement enfantin pour les figures de la modernité occidentale (Superman). L'auteur feint ainsi de livrer un roman d'évasion, avec une forte composante ethnologique, pour que le « 'lectorat de raison' » (Mabanckou 2012, 115) se laisse prendre par un roman au style enjôleur et amusant et en subisse un choc majeur quand il se retrouvera confronté, dans les pages suivantes, à des faits déconcertants comme les rites de magie noire, les sacrifices humains, les dépècements d'albinos qui constituent d'autres clichés liés au continent africain. Mabanckou montre ainsi une habilité particulière dans le maniement de stéréotypes qui voient l'Afrique comme un pays exotique, sauvage et redoutable, où les lois rationnelles n'ont plus de prise sur une réalité régie par les arcanes inquiétants des religions ancestrales (cf. Kandji 2001 ; Mabanckou 2020b, 114). Or, le but de l'écrivain n'est pas une simple mise en déroute du lecteur ; à travers son roman, Mabanckou véhicule une critique sociale mordante, que l'on sait récurrente dans la littérature africaine, adressée principalement aux politiciens assoiffés de pouvoir qui n'hésitent pas à engager des sorciers pour assurer leur réussite. Ces féticheurs avides et sans scrupules s'avèrent des êtres malfaisants, finalement responsables de la désagrégation de l'Afrique : ils cessent d'être les dépositaires de savoirs traditionnels, puisque ce qui détermine leurs actions n'est que leur égoïsme mesquin. Mabanckou pointe du doigt ces pratiques venant de la dégénération de la culture animiste : « la modernité a apporté du barbarisme, les cultures traditionnalistes ont le respect pour la vie » dit-il dans un entretien (Fruchon-Toussaint 2022 ; cf. aussi Bernault 2005, Tonda 2005). Ce n'est donc pas la sauvagerie prétendument atavique de l'Afrique qui est mise en scène, mais une sauvagerie acquise, moderne, en contradiction avec les principes d'une éthique qui s'inscrit dans la Tradition. Les pratiques magiques ne répondent pas à un dispositif métaphorique romanesque ;[13] des faits divers attestent le recours à ces rites, parfois brutaux,[14] dans la réalité quotidienne où toutes les couches sociales sont impliquées.

La véritable cible de la critique acérée de Mabanckou est le monde des hommes qui usent et abusent d'un pouvoir qui ne leur suffit jamais et qui entraînent toute la communauté dans leur perte : « les gens qui sont au désespoir écoutent n'importe qui, qui s'exprime avec

13 Cf. entre autres : Geschierre 1995 ; Martinelli, Bouju 2012.

14 Cf. *infra*.

assurance, même s'il dit n'importe quoi » note l'écrivain dans une interview (Fruchon-Tussaint 2022).

4 Rites et sacrifices

Cela est vrai surtout quand celui qui prend la parole est un prêtre entreprenant : le roman présente la figure de Papa Bonheur officiant dans l'église *Grâce à Dieu* et recevant la visite du président aux approches des élections (63) – le lecteur est à même de comprendre qu'au cours de la visite ils discutent les détails des rites à commanditer, censés garantir la victoire de l'homme politique. « Mâ Lembé lui vou[e] un respect et une vénération sans bornes » (61) comme tant d'autres fidèles, séduits par l'histoire du Saint Esprit qui lui a prétendument « confié la lourde tâche de purification des brebis égarées de Pointe-Noire » (63-4), frappés par les miracles qu'il accomplit, en guérissant les malades par la simple imposition des mains (65). Le merveilleux chrétien est convoyé pour parachever la caractérisation de cette figure soi-disant élue de Dieu et apparemment douée de la vertu thaumaturgique des rois de France au Moyen âge, mais qui est en réalité au centre d'une sombre affaire d'abus sexuel de mineures et de pratiques magiques avec la complicité du pasteur Aje Tanimola, « venu du Nigéria avec une statuette effrayante dont on prenait soin comme s'il s'agissait d'une personne » (68). Les deux prêtres s'adonnent à des rites et à des commerces avec « les esprits qui surgissaient des profondeurs marines et restaient avec eux jusqu'à l'aube » (68) sur la Côte Sauvage, là où se consument les sacrifices les plus immondes, dont le démembrement d'une jeune fille albinos (72-3). Le choix de Mabanckou est de ne pas restituer de détails macabres, censés horripiler le lecteur, ou invectiver contre une pratique effectivement répandue (en témoignent les articles dans les journaux africains, les émissions et les mouvements entrepris pour contraster ce fléau social).[15] Tout en dénonçant, comme d'autres l'ont fait avant lui,[16] la persécution des albinos qui continue de sévir, l'auteur ne dénature pas son roman, ne le transforme pas en un dossier documentaire.[17] Le but de Mabanckou est de porter une critique sur certains maux sociaux africains, de rendre compte des revers d'une réalité qui n'est pas simplement régie par des lois physiques, mais aussi de revenir sur les souvenirs des contes et des croyances que sa mère lui a transmis et évoquer ainsi une vision du monde populaire qui se veut authentique.

15 Tliha 2016 ; Amar 2017 ; Hauchard 2017 ; Le Monde Afrique 2017 ; Ikponwosa 2019, BBC News Afrique 2019 ; La Presse 2022 ; Amnesty International 2022b.

16 Signalons au moins Sassine 1976 ; 1998.

17 La réflexion critique est assez vaste sur le sujet: cf. au moins Chelala 2007.

Un passage, où le ton se fait exceptionnellement ludique en abordant la thématique de la corruption et de l'égoïsme, semble solliciter chez le lecteur l'abandon de la rigueur et de la linéarité logique qu'exige une approche rationnelle du réel :

> La population avait fini par s'expliquer pourquoi le Maire ne souhaitait pas installer un feu qui sécuriserait la circulation au croisement de ces deux artères. Ces victimes d'accidents, en particulier les morts, seraient nécessaires à sa réélection, et ses sorciers étaient les plus gourmands du pays puisqu'ils demandaient d'être payés en âmes. Donc, plus les gens mourraient, plus le Maire restait au pouvoir. Ceux qui ne suivaient pas cette thèse répandue dans le quartier Rex rejetaient plutôt la responsabilité sur les étrangers, c'est-à-dire les petits commerçants ouest-africains qui se livraient entre eux une concurrence sans merci à cette intersection, vendant des pagnes en wax, de la quincaillerie, des produits de première nécessité et des sucreries pour les enfants. Pour beaucoup, si leur commerce florissait à cet endroit mieux qu'au Grand-Marché, c'était grâce à ces morts […] dont ils rachetaient les âmes qu'ils hébergeaient et nourrissaient dans leur arrière-boutique. (116-17)[18]

Cette explication, paradoxale d'un point de vue rationnel, rend le passage sinon humoristique, du moins engageant, ce qui permet au lecteur d'abandonner pour un instant l'indignation éprouvée pour les sacrifices humains et de se laisser impliquer doucement dans la mimésis romanesque d'un réel singulier et inattendu, où les morts sont sacrifiés par un maire qui veut garder sa place et deviennent monnaie d'échange pour les sorciers qui s'évertuent à garder leurs âmes vivantes. Dans la deuxième partie du roman, se déroulant au Frère Lachaise, le lecteur est convié à se mettre à l'écoute des défunts qui prennent tour à tour la parole et ajoutent une pièce importante à la fresque sociale où le surnaturel est de mise.

5 Le réalisme magique

Force est de remarquer qu'un mort ne reste jamais seul, même après les funérailles. Si d'un côté Liwa ne trouve pas sa mère ou d'autres membres de sa famille, d'un autre côté les défunts l'accueillent au sein de la communauté soudée qu'ils composent: « Laisse le vouvoiement aux vivants, ici on est entre nous… » (127)[19] dit le DRH à leur

18 Cf. aussi 153-4.

19 Cf. aussi 171, 175, 194.

e-ISSN 2499-5975

première rencontre. Ce dernier, de son nom Prosper Milandou, est un ancien Directeur des Ressources Humaines d'une grande entreprise à Paris, dont la mort a été commanditée par un homme politique corrompu ; il connaît les histoires de chaque occupant du cimetière et se fait ainsi en quelque sorte un nouveau griot, dépositaire des faits et gestes des hôtes du cimetière, et de certains visiteurs, dont Mâ Mapassa. Le DRH restitue l'histoire terrifiante de cette femme qui a vu mourir ses deux enfants, deux jumeaux, empoisonnés par leur oncle Julien Ndoki, qui les a sacrifiés afin de gagner des élections doubles, municipales et régionales. L'évocation des effets du poison pendant l'agonie des enfants est conduite de manière réaliste, fuyant tout possible pathétisme :

> Depuis que Mâ Mapassa les avait mis au monde, elle n'avait jamais vu ses rejetons prendre cette couleur verdâtre et se transformer heure après heure en véritables momies. […] Ils avaient perdu la voix, leurs yeux s'étaient retournés, leurs corps grelottaient de froid alors que nous étions dans une période où la canicule sévissait. (156)

La course à l'hôpital et la résistance des jumeaux, « se serr[ant] la main afin d'être solidaires jusqu'au bout » (156), livre au lecteur toute l'horreur de cette mort déterminée par l'égoïsme sans scrupules d'un homme qui, de surcroît, est un membre de la famille. Ce meurtre s'avère un fait relevant de l'inadmissible ; c'est pourquoi la narration du trépas s'inscrit dans une sorte de réalisme magique où des renvois aux Évangiles, et plus spécifiquement à la Passion du Christ, permettent de mieux saisir la révolte de la Création et la colère divine face au pire des crimes :

> Mais à six heures du matin, dès que leur oncle fit son apparition devant le seuil de leur chambre d'hôpital […] les deux enfants hurlèrent en chœur en le désignant :
>
> « C'est lui ! Le diable qui est venu hier à la maison avait son visage ! »
>
> De verts, ils étaient devenus bleu foncé et presque congelés. Ils reperdirent leur voix au moment où on entendit au loin *un coq chanter trois fois* pendant que *le ciel s'obscurcissait* et qu'une petite pluie commençait à tomber. Les yeux des deux jumeaux se fermèrent à jamais… (156-7 ; emphase ajoutée)

Julien Ndoki obtiendra les postes ambitionnés, mais son triomphe ne sera que de courte durée. Il finira ses jours tel « une ombre : pas de domicile, pas de voitures, pas de travail, pas de famille » (162). La réitération de la particule négative 'pas' souligne l'état de manque auquel son égoïsme le destine et montre que le recours à la magie

noire comporte toujours un prix à payer. Même les morts des deux cimetières ne veulent pas du cadavre de cet oncle assassin : ils organisent une grève formidable, créent des désordres chez les vivants, déchaînent les forces de la nature (pluies torrentielles, éruptions volcaniques, raz-de-marée) pour manifester leur refus d'accueillir l'homme qui avait tué ses neveux. La mort de Julien Ndoki reste pourtant auréolée de mystère :

> Était-ce une mort naturelle ? La question n'a jamais eu de réponse jusqu'à ce jour. Beaucoup soutiennent qu'il s'était donné la mort pour abréger son long calvaire, sa lente descente en Enfer. D'autres pensent plutôt que les jumeaux étaient sortis de leur tombe pour se venger eux-mêmes […] Je penche pour cette dernière explication, sinon comment justifier que le cadavre de Julien Ndoki avait des marques de strangulation ? Mieux encore, ces empreintes détectées autour de son cou étaient étranges : elles provenaient de toute évidence des mains de deux enfants… (162-3)

La mise à mort de l'oncle meurtrier de la part des jumeaux, ne serait-elle pas finalement un acte de bienveillance des deux enfants qui pardonnent ce qui est impardonnable et abrègent les souffrances de quelqu'un qui est réduit à une loque humaine ? En effet, la vengeance n'est pas une prérogative des spectres africains. Le DRH, qui à son tour avait ressenti l'envie de repartir chez les vivants pour se venger, avait enfin renoncé: « Je me suis retenu. Les gens d'ici me l'ont déconseillé. Ils m'ont raconté que cela c'était toujours mal passé pour ceux qui souhaitaient se rendre chez les vivants afin de se venger » (149). Pourquoi alors les jumeaux auraient-ils eu du succès si leur entreprise était malveillante ?

La suite de l'histoire de Liwa confirme l'esprit bienveillant des revenants, appelés à mener à terme des missions importantes et nécessaires. Deux autres personnages permettent de mieux saisir le dessein derrière leurs actes. Le premier est Mamba Noir, dont l'autorité est presque superposable à celle de l'instance narrative : il sait tout et, en qualité de gardien de la nécropole, son rôle est d'expliquer aux nouveaux « bleus » ce qu'il leur arrive, ce qu'ils éprouvent. Pour les réconforter dans leur nouvelle condition, il se nourrit de leur imbécillité (195). Il révèle notamment une vérité qui peut paraître inattendue :« toutes les morts sont méritées » (197). Quoique sibyllin, pour ne pas dire déconcertant, Mamba Noir incarne une figure de réconciliation et assure le rôle de truchement que la tradition attribue au serpent dont il porte le nom :

> Symbole d'une cosmogonie bien marquée où le règne animal et l'espèce humaine se fondent, se complètent pour mieux être en harmonie avec les ancêtres, ceux-là qui ne sont jamais partis,

> ceux-là qui rôderaient autour de nous, nous protégeraient ou nous puniraient lorsque nous nous écarterions des règles élémentaires de la vie en communauté… (Mabanckou 2020b, 117)

Néanmoins, la figure la plus importante de l'œuvre (Fruchon-Toussaint 2022) est la Femme Corbeau, justicière par excellence dans ce « roman de l'injustice sociale » (Lemoine 2022). Ne pouvant pas avoir d'enfants, elle se charge de venger les enfants abusés et s'en prend aux pédophiles. Figure féminine liée au fantastique – « les femmes stériles souffraient de la réputation de diablesses » explique Mamba Noir (210) – figure de l'altérité par excellence, elle arbore « des canines longues et acérées qui lui affectent l'air d'un Dracula » (215). Elle s'en sert notamment pour émasculer « les ennemis de l'innocence [qui] tombaient dans [son] piège » (216) : elle se métamorphosait en adolescente et entrait dans les rêves des hommes coupables pour mettre en place une punition exemplaire après les avoir séduits :

> dans leurs rêves, ces hommes la suivaient dans une chambre d'hôtel, s'étendaient sur le lit pendant qu'elle les déshabillait, les berçait avant qu'ils ne se réveillent en sursaut, hurlant au secours de toutes leurs forces. C'était trop tard : ils étaient au milieu d'une mare de sang, leur sexe avait été arraché avec une violence qui leur faisait croire que c'était l'œuvre d'une bête sauvage à la fois enragée et affamée et qui avait surgi de leur cauchemar. (216)

En Afrique, les questions de la plus haute gravité peuvent effectivement se régler en visitant l'adversaire dans ses rêves.[20] Force est de constater que l'épisode de la Femme Corbeau (de son nom Liliane Bilongo) renoue avec l'imaginaire occidental et africain à la fois. Pour ce qui concerne la tradition occidentale orale et romanesque, elle apparaît liée aux vampires et aux succubes, et donc, à nouveau, à des figures du fantastique. Pour ce qui est de la culture de l'Afrique de l'Ouest, elle semble s'inscrire dans certaines croyances populaires liées à la femme loup-garou qui suce le sang de petits enfants ;[21] le comportement de l'héroïne est toutefois inversé et sa visée tout à fait opposée : elle venge en effet les enfants en s'en prenant aux

20 « Selon les croyances ancestrales, les personnes âgées s'affrontent souvent la nuit par les rêves interposés, chacun pénétrant par effraction dans le rêve de l'autre. La bataille est sans merci dans ce monde parallèle […] Le sommeil du vaincu peut lui coûter un billet aller simple pour la tombe » (Mabanckou 1998, 46).

21 « À Port-au-Prince les *zobop* sont souvent désignés sus le nom de loups-garous, mais à Marbial ce terme est réservé à des femmes-vampires qui font mourir les enfants en bas âge en leur suçant le sang […] les loups-garous, aussi appelés 'sucettes' sont toujours de sexe féminin […] nous retrouvons la même croyance en différentes régions de l'Afrique occidentale » (Métraux 1958, 266).

pédophiles. Si d'un côté elle s'avère un personnage positif, les personnages féminins étant pour la plupart fort positifs dans ce roman qui condamne la « masculinité dysfonctionnelle » (Trapenard 2022)[22], d'un autre côté la Femme Corbeau se trouve doublée d'un autre référent folklorique, littéraire et religieux : la sorcière. La femme est finalement accusée d'hérésie par plusieurs membres de l'Administration publique, cibles désignées de sa vengeance, et finit ainsi par être brûlée vive sur un bûcher. Le dénouement relie le destin de l'héroïne à celui d'une autre femme illustre et en même temps négligée des historiens : la « prophétesse du royaume du Kongo qui luttait pour l'union de sa terre natale » (217), Kimpa Vita,[23] « la Jeanne d'Arc congolaise » (Fruchon-Toussaint 2022). La superposition du personnage romanesque avec la figure mythique, patriote, martyre et chantre d'une nouvelle religion, investit la Femme Corbeau d'un côté spirituel qui se révèle de la plus grande importance. Elle est, selon les propos d'Alain Mabanckou, « la femme la plus puissante […] qui laisse la parole plus forte du roman, […] elle est un élément capital » (Trapenard 2022). Elle livre en effet un message à Liwa, repris à la fin de roman, qui se conclut donc sur ses paroles :

> La chose la plus noble que tu puisses faire ce serait de te rendre dans le monde des vivants afin d'accomplir une action qui te grandirait pour l'éternité, c'est-à-dire insuffler de la vie et de l'amour à ceux qui en ont injustement été privés… (218, 290)

C'est ce que Liwa se chargera de faire : au début de la troisième partie, le héros sort du cimetière pour mener à terme son « objectif » (222) ; il s'empare de l'épieu « qu'utilise le gardien du Frère-Lachaise pour se protéger la nuit contre les esprits ou les vivants » (225). Toujours sapé, il part vers la ville, en tenant dans ses mains l'arme dont « la lame à double tranchant […] scintille même en cette nuit profonde » (225) ; derrière lui, « le portail [du cimetière] se referm[e] […] dans un bruit grinçant de machine vétuste » (225) (Mabanckou reprend encore une fois les clichés du fantastique gothique avec ironie). Bien que l'ambiance convoyée ne soit pas inquiétante, le ton de la narration se fait sérieux à cause de la détermination silencieuse de Liwa. Le héros reparcourt dans son esprit les événements qui ont précédé sa mort : l'achat des vêtements voyants, la rencontre dans la discothèque avec une jeune fille toute de noir vêtue, « 'la seule à être seule' » (243) qui, après une longue séance de danse, lui demande de l'accompagner à la maison et de revenir la voir le jour

22 Je reprends l'expression 'masculinité dysfonctionnelle' des paroles de Léonora Miano dans son intervention pendant l'émission.

23 Cf. Thornton 1998.

d'après. Il s'avère qu'il s'agit du fantôme de la fille d'Augustin Biampandu, l'homme le plus influent de la ville et du pays (258), et « un des disciples les plus fidèles et les plus généreux de ces sociétés magico-religieuses de sa région » (260). Ce dernier avait sacrifié sa fille Samantha sur la Côte Sauvage pour se garantir un succès professionnel bien achevé. Il commet pourtant l'erreur de ne pas écouter les conseils d'Angelou, sa « sorcière de maison »[24] qui l'avait mis en garde sur son ambition immodérée et qui l'avait prévenu du danger de s'en prendre à un tel jeune homme qu'il aurait rencontré lors d'un déjeuner, pendant lequel Biampandu s'adonnait à la dépravation de trois adolescentes (257) :

> Les présages sont très mauvais, ils n'ont jamais été aussi mauvais… Je vois un jeune homme drôlement habillé et qui danse avec Samantha dans une discothèque… […]
> Nous pouvons encore détourner les choses, mais il faut que tu sois tolérant à l'égard du jeune homme à l'accoutrement bizarre…. […] Si le jeune homme meurt, la prophétie se réalisera, Samantha indiquera à l'esprit de cet homme où se trouve celui qui l'avait précipitée dans la furie des vagues. […] Je ne cesse de voir les parties du corps de Samantha qui avaient échappé aux créatures de la mer. Ces restes et l'esprit de Samantha errent dans le quartier et ne seront en paix qu'après ta disparition. (275-6)

N'étant pas au courant de l'identité de la jeune fille, dans l'espoir innocent de retrouver celle avec qui il avait dansé la veille, Liwa s'était rendu à la maison d'Augustin Biampandu où il a été empoisonné : Biampandu, qui avait bravé les interdits moraux et familiaux de toute société civile en commanditant le meurtre de sa propre fille, n'hésite pas à se débarrasser de cette petite entrave sur le chemin de son affirmation personnelle que peut représenter Liwa ; aucun avertissement ne peut le mettre en alerte. Il finit donc par être le responsable de sa mise à mort. Dans le présent de la narration, Liwa revient en effet à la villa, et cette fois les rôles s'inversent : il « plant[e] l'arme au milieu de [la] forme massive » (285) d'Augustin Biampandu pendant le sommeil. Liwa transperce, les yeux fermés et les dents serrées (285), une *forme* qui n'a pas, n'as plus le statut et la dignité d'un homme ; le mot 'corps' n'est pas mentionné pour désigner cet individu qui n'avait eu le moindre respect pour la vie et pour les corps de ses victimes, même pour celui de sa fille. L'action meurtrière du héros apparaît nécessitée par la conduite de ce politicien et père infanticide, ainsi que l'avait annoncée la prophétie, ce qui dégage Liwa de

24 Mabanckou prend soin d'expliciter les caractéristiques de ces femmes-devineresses-guérisseuses qui diffèrent des sorciers et des féticheurs, cf. 270.

toute responsabilité : l'assassinat s'inscrit dans la fatalité inévitable des actes d'un homme insouciant des avertissements de sa 'sorcière de maison' et s'explique dans la mimésis romanesque d'un contexte culturel et sociétal magico-religieux.

Le meurtre accompli, Liwa tremble enfin « de satisfaction et d'apaisement » (286), mais pas pour une hypothétique vengeance menée à terme : le héros ne montre ni indignation, quand il découvre la vérité, ni rage pour l'injustice subie ; il n'éprouve ni rancune, ni haine, ni envie de faire du mal à cet individu abominable. Liwa ne lui en veut même pas de l'avoir empoisonné, comme il n'en veut pas à Samantha de l'avoir impliqué dans sa sombre histoire. Le spectre ne revient pas pour se venger : Liwa vient au secours de Samantha, afin de délivrer son esprit d'une errance douloureuse, après une vie privée de l'affection familiale.

6 Conclusion

Sans que Liwa s'en aperçoive, Samantha assiste à sa dernière visite, où il prend congé de sa grand-mère dans une scène émouvante, et le suit au Frère-Lachaise : « je veux vivre avec toi » (289) lui dit-elle tout simplement. Et le couple s'achemine vers un avenir ensemble en « remont[ant] la rue du Repos » (290).

Le final est donc heureux, bien que les deux jeunes gens soient morts, puisque les adultes les ont empêchés de vivre leur jeunesse. Le dénouement ferait penser à une lecture romantique de Roméo et Juliette, qui vont rester ensemble après une mort prématurée et injuste ; en réalité, ce n'est pas le grand amour qui est évoqué ici. Mabanckou semble vouloir suggérer qu'il n'est pas nécessaire que le grand amour, le vrai, l'unique se produise : les jeunes sont faits pour vivre leur vie dans la complexité hasardeuse des rencontres et avec le soutien des affections de la famille et de la communauté avoisinante. Quel avenir est-il possible pour un pays qui entrave toute possibilité d'une vie heureuse et épanouie aux jeunes ?

Dans cette œuvre où l'on n'hésite pas face à l'apparition des revenants, c'est le réalisme magique qui inquiète pour ses imbrications avec une réalité redoutable. Le grand scandale ce n'est pas la mort, qui finalement ouvre à une nouvelle vie où les spectres montrent plus d'humanité que les vivants. Dans ce roman de Mabanckou, on ne craint pas les fantômes, mais les hommes et leur égoïsme aveugle, lâche, inhumain.

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Preserving Cultural Heritage in Indigenous Pandemic Fiction: "Coming-to" Stories of Resistance in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*

Elena Bastianoni
Università di Pisa, Italia

Abstract This study intends to investigate Indigenous pandemic fiction through an analysis of *The Marrow Thieves* by Métis writer Cherie Dimaline. By depicting the journey of the Métis protagonist Frenchie, the novel explores Indigenous identity in a dystopian scenario where non-Indigenous people have succumbed to a plague affecting the ability to dream. Taking into consideration Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory and N. Scott Momaday's depiction of the power of language, the paper would focus on the role of storytelling and linguistic heritage in the process of 'survivance' of Indigenous identity. The novel outlines dreams as spaces of resistance bound to the protection of cultural identity, by also revisiting the history of forced assimilation through the Residential School System. Frenchie's journey presents the act of dreaming as the ultimate symbol of hope in a posthuman scenario where humankind has lost control over the Earth.

Keywords Cherie Dimaline. Indigenous pandemic fiction. Cultural heritage. Storytelling. Dreaming.

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1 Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*: A Story of 'Survivance'

In 1996, Gordon Residential School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan – the last federally-funded residential school in Canada – was permanently shut down, closing one of the most horrific chapters in Northern American history.[1] For more than a hundred and sixty years, Indigenous children all over Canada were forcibly removed from their families to eradicate their cultural identities. Since then, the trauma inflicted by the schools has become a central trope in Northern American Indigenous fiction, as a way of promoting resistance against genocide and forced assimilation.

The aim of Native American narratives of resistance is perfectly exemplified by the term 'survivance', which was coined by Gerald Vizenor, a member of the White Earth Nation of the Anishinaabeg in Minnesota:

> Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivancy. (Vizenor 1999, vii)

As a blend of 'survival' and 'resistance', survivance describes "an active resistance and repudiation of dominance" (Vizenor 2008, 11). The importance of preserving cultural identity as a form of rebellion against colonialism was highlighted by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who focused on Indigenous resurgence, namely "a set of practices through which the regeneration and reestablishment of Indigenous nations could be achieved" (Simpson 2017, 16). Resurgence is outlined as a means of severing ties with colonial thought, as it "maps a way out of colonial thinking by confirming Indigenous lifeways or alternative ways of being in the world" (Simpson 2011, 31). The Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar further stressed the importance of storytelling as a decolonizing practice, an escape from cognitive imperialism

1 Residential Schools were religious government-sponsored boarding schools imposed on Indigenous children to eradicate their cultural identities through assimilation into Euro-Canadian culture. The students were forced to renounce their linguistic heritage and to convert to Christianity. More than 130 residential schools operated in Canada between 1831 to 1996, and an estimated 150,000 children – of whom approximately 6,000 died due to abuse and neglect – were forced to attend said institutions (Miller 2024). Between 2007 and 2015, the Government of Canada financially supported The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, providing those affected by the legacy of the Residential School System with an opportunity to share their stories.

that outlines new spaces of resurgence, this being a matter that the present study will explore at a later stage.[2] Resurgence is inextricably linked to the protection of cultural heritage. Whether they are transmitted orally or preserved in literary form, Indigenous stories of resistance assume an educational function by passing on cultural values to the knowledge-keepers of the future. Moreover, the idea of remembrance further outlines memory as a compelling force that empowers oppressed cultures to react in moments of crisis.

As was underlined by Jan Assmann, the importance of cultural memory goes beyond mere historiographical research. This specific kind of memory is linked to collective experience, shaped by society, and ultimately passed on through ritual ceremonies:

> Just as an individual forms a personal identity through memory […] so a group identity is also dependent on the reproduction of shared memories. The difference is that the group memory has no neurological basis. This is replaced by culture: a complex of identity-shaping aspects of knowledge objectified in the symbolic forms of myth, song, […] even whole landscapes. Cultural memory circulates in forms of commemoration that were originally bound up with rituals and festivals. (Assmann 2011, 72)

Storytelling and language preservation can thus be highlighted as forms of resistance to assimilation, as they outline a safe space of dialogue and remembrance.

The process of drawing from past trauma to provide narratives of resistance to the survivors of the present clearly outlines the strategy chosen by the Indigenous author Cherie Dimaline. In her young-adult dystopian novel *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), Dimaline offers a rewriting of Canada's colonial past by addressing the traumatic experience of the Canadian Residential School System. As a member of the Georgian Bay Métis Nation of Ontario, Dimaline is a writer and activist dedicated to sharing stories of her community to promote Indigenous survivance.[3] Storytelling plays a vital role

2 As Leanne B. Simpson clarified, "storytelling then becomes a lens through which we can envision our way out of cognitive imperialism, where we can create models and mirrors where none existed, and where we can experience the spaces of freedom and justice" (Simpson 2011, 33).

3 As Dimaline clarified in the Author's Note to *Hunting by Stars* (2021), she refuses to envision herself as a spokesperson for the entirety of the Northern American Indigenous Communities, as the latter are complex, differentiated cultures, each of them with their own separate identity. However, her novels display a wide range of different Indigenous cultures to promote inclusion and representation: "I am from a specific community with a specific history and an ongoing culture. I cannot and do not speak for all of us–no one can. The fictional characters in these books come from a diversity of land, families, backgrounds, languages, teachings and identities. I wrote it this way

as a culture-preserving practice in the Métis community, as Dimaline addresses remembrance as a strategy to prevent future oppression. When referring to the forced relocation that shaped her community,[4] Dimaline points to the bond between cultural memory and storytelling:

> These removals and relocations of a culture are specific to my community, although experienced in different ways by all Indigenous people. It's part of our stories. And it's a huge piece of why we share stories and keep that history intact, just as we've kept our culture intact. There must always be connection to nation when we tell stories. (Dimaline 2017b)

Relocation is a distinctive trait of Métis cultural memory, a fragment of history that it is imperative to remember.[5] "We're generally raised in story. We have traditional stories that hold our teachings. A lot of our culture is held within our stories" (Dimaline 2017c). With this statement, Dimaline defines storytelling as a political act, "a process of reclaiming the story, to own the story, rather than be defined or storied by others" (Chan 2021, 171). As the author observed in a recent interview, storytelling is paramount in order to cope with the darkness of the past and to overcome the crisis of the present. While referring to the Covid-19 pandemic, Dimaline explained:

> Stories are the nomenclature by which we categorize and understand our world. Stories are the language of truly understanding who we are, in this place, at this time. It's like dreaming. It's the way we process everything that's swirling around us […] we are experiencing this pandemic, a new time of plague, and selfishly, I'm excited for the stories that are going to come out of it and that are already coming out of it. I know that they will help me process and really figure out the impacts on myself and on the world of what we've just survived. (Dimaline 2021b)

to include as many of us as I could, to show us together resisting and holding one another close through a dark time, to reflect the readers who deserve to see themselves in print. If I got something wrong, I am truly sorry and will try to do better. If I got something right, please accept it both as a gift and a responsibility to honor our ongoing cultures" (Dimaline 2021a, 386).

4 The author refers to the relocation of the Métis Nation on Georgian Bay from their ancestral lands on Drummond Island.

5 Native American remembrance is closely connected to a sense of belonging to the land, the latter being seen as a living entity provided with agency. When referring to the bond between the land and Indigenous cultures, Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday defined the Indigenous oral tradition as "an utterance that proceeds from the very intelligence of the soil" (Momaday 1997, 85).

The Marrow Thieves is an example of dystopian fiction which explores an imaginary pandemic phenomenon, and it is the first volume of a trilogy that comprises a second novel at present, *Hunting by Stars* (2021). In a posthuman scenario[6] where humankind has been deprived of control over a planet devastated by climate change, the environmental decline caused by the exploitation of nature has led to a degeneration of the mind, "a plague of madness" (Dimaline 2017a, 53) to which Indigenous people are immune. As a matter of fact, humanity no longer retains the ability to dream, unlike Indigenous people:

> Years ago, other people, not us, they kinda got sick. Really the whole world itself got sick […] After the rains started and the lands shifted so that some cities fell right into the oceans, people had to move around. Diseases spread like crazy. With all this sickness and movement and death, people got sad. One of the ways the sadness came out was when they slept. They stopped being able to dream. (29)

As the world's most powerful countries are wrecked by war for the control of the remaining resources, by famine and plague, the suffering of humankind clearly echoes the affliction endured by the Earth during thousands of years of abuse. As was pointed out by Chiara Xausa, the dystopian scenario portrayed by Dimaline discloses "the processes of colonial violence and dispossession that have culminated in the eruptive event of environmental catastrophe" (Xausa 2020, 94).

The Marrow Thieves is set in Canada, where the Residential School System has been reopened and readapted to a new purpose, namely 'harvesting' Indigenous people to provide a cure for the pandemic: "We go to the schools and they leach the dreams from where our ancestors hid them, in the honeycombs of slushy marrow buried in our bones" (Dimaline 2017a, 90). Noticeably, in the novel the ability to dream is said to be harbored in the bone marrow. Indigenous people all over Canada are being forcibly taken to the schools for the extraction, a process that culminates in the death of the person 'harvested'. By revisiting history, Dimaline exposes the cyclical presence of violence, tracing a parallelism between the horrors of the past and a fictional future devastated by greed, hatred, and genocide, that has much in common with our own present.

When referring to the residential schools, the novel never ceases to point at Indigenous resilience: "We suffered there. We almost lost

6 The term 'posthuman' hereby refers to humanity's loss of centrality in a scenario marked by the rise of non-human agency, and the subsequent elaboration of "alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject" (Braidotti 2013, 37), based on the recognition of the interconnectedness between the human and the non-human 'other'.

our languages. Many lost their innocence, their laughter, their lives. But we got through it […] We returned to our home places and rebuilt, relearned, regrouped" (24). Likewise, residential school narratives usually convey an idea of "survival, resistance, and continuance of cultures against colonial policies aimed at the annihilation of Indigenous presence" (Eigenbrod 2012, 280). The tropes of survival and apocalypse are crucial to understand the extent of the repercussions of past trauma on the present. Indeed, the main characters of the novel seem to have "a blueprint for surviving the apocalypse" (Dimaline 2021b), as their cultures have already survived another apocalyptic event, namely settler colonialism. Despite the incessant reemergence of trauma, the novel is a "healing story of survival" (Xausa 2020, 97) addressing the exploitation of Indigenous bodies and cultures to trigger an inter-generational and inter-cultural dialogue.

2 Frenchie's Journey

In a dystopian scenario where Indigenous people are constantly on the run from the Recruiters – the government officials appointed to pursue Natives – the teenager Métis protagonist of the novel Francis Dusome, alias 'Frenchie', tries to resist along with other survivors. As a young man who has never had the chance to grow up in a safe environment where Métis culture can flourish, Frenchie struggles to hold on to his heritage. Apart from his nickname, a reference to his mixed European ancestry,[7] Frenchie's knowledge about his heritage is limited to general information about his ancestors, despite his longing to hold on to a culture that has been silenced for a very long time:

> I was nicknamed Frenchie as much for my name as for my people – the Métis. I came from a long line of hunters, trappers, and voyageurs. But now, with most of the rivers cut into pieces and lakes left as grey sludge puckers on the landscape, my own history seemed like a myth along the lines of dragons. (Dimaline 2017a, 21)

Following the disappearance of his parents and the loss of his brother to the schools, Frenchie is rescued by Miigwans, an Anishinaabe

7 The Métis are one of the officially recognized Aboriginal peoples in Canada, along with Inuit and First Nations. The term 'Métis' is used to refer both to a specific community, the Métis Nation, and to communities of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry in Canada (Gaudry 2023). The term is controversial and complex, as it refers to a unique blending of Indigenous and European traditions and ancestry. Most of the Métis descend from French-Canadian fur traders and Native women, usually Cree, as the fur trade was an important business in the early stages of Canadian history (Lobo, Talbot, Morris 2016, 37).

man who welcomes the young boy into his family, an intertribal group of Natives. Non-Indigenous people are depicted throughout the novel as predators hunting Natives to preserve their ways of life. As human society crumples under the pressure of climate change, Indigenous people are living the nomadic life of the hunted:

> After the cities crumbled off the coastlines, after the hurricanes and earthquakes made us fear for a solid ground to stand on, even now we were waiting for the planet to settle so we could figure out the ways in which we would be safe. But for now there was just movement, especially for us: the hunted trying to hunt. (46-7)

The Earth has been poisoned by the reckless actions of humankind, and the latter has been punished in return with plague and madness. The starting point of this never-ending cycle of suffering can be located in humanity's failure to recognize the land as a "system of reciprocal relations and obligations" (Coulthard 2014, 13), as a gift and not as property subjected to human will. This vision is exemplified by 'grounded normativity', namely a "place-based foundation of Indigenous decolonial thought and practice" (13) theorized by the Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard. Grounded normativity refers to Indigenous ethics and values that are inherently shaped by a profound connection to the land, and which recognize the reciprocity between Indigenous cultures and non-human subjectivities. Moreover, it promotes a nonexploitative relationship between the human and the more-than-human, as it indicates "the modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (13).

Through Frenchie's voice, the novel explores the protagonist's journey as he passes from innocence to experience. Gwen Rose classified *The Marrow Thieves* as an "Indigenous Bildungsroman" (Rose 2022, 8) that stresses the importance of connectedness and reciprocity.[8] Frenchie's journey towards adulthood is marked by the adoption of Indigenous philosophies and ways of knowledge which point at "the value of […] land-based practices both for their protagonists and their readers" (15). One of the pivotal moments in Frenchie's life that defines his relationship with the land is a hunting session that involves

8 On the discrepancy between the European conception of Bildungsroman narratives and the Indigenous Bildungsroman, Rose clarifies: "Indigenous Bildungsromane integrate a specifically Indigenous theory of ethics through which cultural values which stress the development of the collective, as opposed to the European emphasis on the individual, are integral to the journeys to adulthood that otherwise qualify certain narratives as Bildungsroman" (Rose 2022, 9).

the presence of a moose. As the protagonist is hunting in the woods, he becomes aware of the vitality of nature:

> The world out here was quiet, like the land was holding its breath. But if you listened, really put conscious action into listening, things began to sing. Insects with wings pirouetted somewhere above my prone head. From the hole where the tree had once held on to the earth came the sound of deep movement, maybe just the mud shifting. And a group of small birds chatted with some clipped formality in the pines on the other side of the clearing. (Dimaline 2017a, 48)

In this passage, the act of listening to otherness – that is, the non-human – requires the adoption of an "ethics of care" (Whyte, Cuomo 2015) towards the land, which comprises "approaches to moral life and community that are grounded in virtues, practices, and knowledges associated with appropriate caring and caretaking of self and others" (234). The quiet is suddenly interrupted by the sound of a moose wandering in the woods. Frenchie spares the animal, a prey that could have easily fed his family for weeks, because he realizes that due to his condition as a fugitive, he would have to discard most of the animal's meat to continue his escape. The protagonist resists the temptation of self-gratification, though he imagines himself, even if just for a moment, as "a long-haired warrior" (Dimaline 2017a, 49) returning to his family carrying the prize of victory:

> This was me, the conquering hero, marching into camp with more meat than all of us could carry, taking the others back to field dress this gift. […] This was my chance. But could we travel with this meat before it rotted? No. […] So we'd be leaving half, at least half, behind to rot. (49)

Frenchie spares the moose because he understands the difference between sustenance and exploitation. The protagonist also rejects the western conception of the conquering hero, abiding instead by the protection of the delicate balance upon which the natural world rests, humankind included. The moose here appears as a symbol of endurance and survival, and its encounter with Frenchie moves the latter one step closer to adulthood.

3 Memory, Knowledge and Survival: Miigwans' Storytelling

> We go to the schools and they leach the dreams from where our ancestors hid them, in the honeycombs of slushy marrow buried in our bones. And us? Well, we join our ancestors, hoping we left enough dreams behind for the next generation to stumble across. (90)

With these words, Miig – short for Miigwans – introduces the theme of continuity. As one of the Elders of the family – along with Minerva, a character who will be thoroughly analysed in a further section of this study – Miig's responsibilities are not limited to ensuring the well-being of the community, but also comprise the protection of Northern American Indigenous cultural memory.

Every week the family gathers around Miig for a ceremony called 'Story', during which the Elder recounts the events leading to the environmental collapse of the planet and the rise of the plague. While also reminiscing on the history of Northern American Indigenous peoples with a specific reference to Canada, Miig establishes an intergenerational dialogue, thus confirming continuity as a fundamental part of survivance. Storytelling acquires such importance for Frenchie's family that every member is encouraged to share their own 'coming-to story', meaning the recollection of the events leading to the characters' estrangement from their families and the way they connected to their adoptive one. Through storytelling, everyone can claim ownership of their past and identity: "Everyone tells their own coming-to story. That's the rule. Everyone's creation story is their own" (79). With this statement – which recalls the tradition of Creation stories –[9] Miig highlights the generative power of words, and storytelling as an act of resistance against oppression. 'Coming-to stories' are "an act of agency as each person shapes and shares themselves without interference from others" (Horner, Muñoz, Petrone 2021, 13).

The Marrow Thieves outlines storytelling as a sacred act that requires intimacy, trust and respect, as "the story and the story teller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story" (Smith 1999, 145). 'Story' is a moment of recollection during which the community gathers new strength:

9 As Kovach clarified, there are two kinds of stories in Indigenous epistemologies: "There are stories that hold mythical elements, such as creation and teaching stories, and there are personal narratives of place, happenings, and experiences as the *kókoms* and *mósoms* (Aunties and uncles) experienced them and passed them along to the next generation through oral tradition. Both forms teach of consequences, good and bad, of living life in a certain way" (Kovach 2009, 95).

> We needed to remember Story. It was his job to set the memory in perpetuity. [E]very week we spoke, because it was imperative that we know. He said it was the only way to make the kinds of changes that were necessary to really survive. (Dimaline 2017a, 25)

Memory, knowledge and survival: this triad exemplifies the intentions underlining Miigwans' storytelling, and it also highlights the role of remembrance in the survival of Indigenous lives and cultures. Noticeably, Paul Harland pointed out that "storytelling provides human beings with an evolutionary advantage. By passing on valuable information in a memorable and therefore repeatable form, humans can enhance their chances at survival" (Harland 2016, 594). Furthermore, Margaret Kovach highlighted storytelling as an intercultural practice, since it is not restricted to Indigenous knowledge systems: "Story is practised within methodologies valuing contextualized knowledge, such as feminism, ethnography, phenomenology, and narrative inquiry" (Kovach 2009, 96).[10]

In *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages* (1997), Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday explained the role of language and storytelling practices in the preservation of Northern American Indigenous cultures. The storyteller is a creator, and storytelling is outlined as an innate trait of humankind:

> To tell a story in the proper way, to hear a story told in the proper way – this is a very old and sacred business, and it is very good. At that moment when we are drawn into the element of language, we are as intensely alive as we can be; we create and we are created. That existence in the maze of words is our human condition. Because of language we are, among all the creatures in our world, the most dominant and the most isolated. Our dominance is supreme, and our isolation is profound. That equation is the very marrow of story. It is a story in itself. We have no being beyond our stories. (Momaday 1997, 169)

Words retain strength, and those who engage in storytelling hold a position of power which exposes them to the danger of indifference or misunderstanding on the listener's side. The power of stories as spaces of resistance in further outlined in *Hunting by Stars*, where Miig confirms that "Story is a home, it's where we live, it's where we

10 About the Indigenous oral tradition, Kovack further clarifies: "Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships. In oral tradition, stories can never be decontextualized from the teller. They are active agents within a relational world, pivotal in gaining insight into a phenomenon. Oral stories are born of connections within the world, and are thus recounted relationally. They tie us with our past and provide a basis for continuity with future generations" (Kovach 2009, 94).

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hold everything we'll need to truly survive – our languages, our people, our land" (Dimaline 2021a, 21).

4 Minerva and the Power of Language

"Dreams get caught in the webs woven in your bones. That's where they live, in that marrow there. […] You are born with them. Your DNA weaves them into the marrow like spinners" (Dimaline 2017a, 18-19). The exploitation of Indigenous people's bodies echoes the violence of colonization, as Natives are seen, once again, as a "resource to be exploited" (Xausa 2020, 95). According to Dimaline, dreaming represents the ability of holding onto hope, as it outlines spaces of survivance:[11]

> When I started writing about dreams […] I learned about the science behind them, oneirology, the study of dreams. We really can't process our thoughts without that secondary layer of dreams – I hadn't realized that. We literally need that safe space within ourselves to be able to process life. What a great metaphor for holding onto hope. (Dimaline 2021b)

In the novel, dreams outline spaces of resistance to colonial exploitation where Indigenous identity can flourish. Without the ability to dream, human beings are reduced to their corporeality, as indeed "a man without dreams is just a meaty machine with a broken gauge" (Dimaline 2017a, 88). The act of dreaming is presented as a "communicative sacred activity" (Million 2011, 315) that is linked to resurgence, and that also highlights the bond between the Canadian land and Indigenous peoples. As Dian Million clarifies, dreaming is linked to Indigenous survivance: "If we as the myriad Indigenous peoples have a gift to give the world, it may be our ardent belief and practice of dreaming, dreaming intensely and brilliantly against all odds" (331).

The studying of dreams as sources of knowledge on the inner life of individuals can be traced back to Freudian psychoanalysis, which presented dreams as products of the unconscious. It was then with psychoanalytic anthropology that dreams were finally perceived as gateways to understanding culture, linking the studying of dreams to ethnography (Plane, Tuttle 2014, 918). In *The Marrow Thieves*,

11 Dimaline also highlighted the role of dreaming in relation to the creative process, as the author declared that many of her stories have sprung from oneiric activity: "I do like to keep paper by my bed, because I don't want to lose the dreams. They start to dissipate quickly when you wake up […] There are stories I've written that have started with snippets of dreams" (Dimaline 2021b).

dreaming is closely related to otherness, an element that can be traced back to the first colonial encounters between the European settlers and Indigenous peoples. As a matter of fact, the communal organization in the interpretation of dreams among Natives was a cause for concern for the first explorers of 'The New World', as was clarified by Mary B. Campbell:

> Not only did the Jesuits regard the task of overcoming this belief as paramount to conversion, but they seem to have regarded it as an important first step in accomplishing that task to influence the *content* of these dreams, so that the sleeping Montagnais and Huron people they encountered in the earliest years of the mission would limit their nocturnal vision to visions of 'God, Mary and the angels' – that is, of purely spiritual substances. (Campbell 2013, 41)

In *The Marrow Thieves*, the bond between dreaming, memory, and language is exemplified by Minerva, the eldest of Frenchie's family. This character is described as the spiritual guide of the group, a wise woman and a connoisseur of "the language" (Dimaline 2017a, 38). The specific language spoken by Minerva is never explicitly identified, as was pointed out by Anah-Jayne Samuelson and Vanessa Evans, who argued that the words spoken by Minerva can be traced back to Anishinaabemowin (Samuelson, Evans 2022, 279).[12] Throughout the novel, language is characterized by duality: it can be a world-shaping tool and an instrument of non-violent resistance, but also a potential weapon. Frenchie perceives "the language" as both soothing and empowering. As the protagonist is saved by Miig, he notices the comforting musicality of "the language": "Voices. Voices with the pulled vowels and cut lilt of my father. Voices with the low music of my mother. […] This was too beautiful a dream, even just in audio" (Dimaline 2017a, 15); and then, again: "The words from our language, like a prayer" (16).[13]

Just as Miig leads the group with courage, compassion, and wisdom, Minerva is the backbone of the family, not only because she is the eldest, but also for her knowledge of "the language". This character highlights the bond between femininity and the transmission

12 Anishinaabemowin is an Indigenous language spoken from Manitoba to Québec, especially in the Great Lakes area, and it is part of the Algonquian language family (Horton 2023). As was suggested by Turner, Dimaline's decision to not explicitly label the language is intentional, to highlight "the language's ability to resonate across time and space" (Turner 2021, 121). On this matter, also see Samuelson, Evans 2022.

13 On the other hand, English often conveys a negative rendering of the power of words, as it is linked to the forced assimilation of the residential school system. When referring implicitly to the Bible, Miig describes it as "a book that was like a vacuum, used to suck the [Indigenous] language right out of your lungs" (Dimaline 2017a, 107).

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of knowledge, as she decides to teach 'the language' to the girls of the group. After initially deeming Minerva's lessons to be uninteresting compared to Miig's teachings, Frenchie recognizes language as a repository of culture and an instrument to hold on to his heritage. When thinking of a word in the language taught by Minerva, Frenchie points to the salvific power of words:

> I turned the word over in my throat like a stone; a prayer I couldn't add breath to, a world I wasn't willing to release. It made my lungs feel heavy, my heart grow light. (39)

Minerva ultimately sacrifices herself to the schools to save her family, but, unexpectedly, she manages to survive the deadly process of bone marrow extraction. Her story becomes legendary, as she manages to resist the procedure in an astonishing way, by singing in the language:[14]

> When the wires were fastened to her own neural connectors, and the probes reached into her heartbeat […] she called on her blood memory, her teachings, her ancestors. She sang. She sang with volume and pitch and a heartbreaking wail that echoed through her relatives' bones, rattling them in the ground under the school itself. Wave after wave, changing her heartbeat to drum, morphing her singular voice to many, pulling every dream from her own marrow and into her song. And there were words: words in the language that the conductor couldn't process, words the Cardinals couldn't bear, words the wires couldn't transfer. [E]very dream Minerva had ever dreamed was in the language. It was her gift, her secret, her plan. She'd collected the dreams like bright beads on a string of nights that wound around her each day, every day until this one. (172-3)

Minerva's song is so powerful that it sets the entire building on fire, interrupting the extraction process.[15] The Elder is ultimately killed by government officials, despite her family's heroic attempt to save her

14 When underlining the role of storytelling in promoting cohesion and continuity, Kovach points at the different forms for transmitting knowledge, including singing: "Stories are vessels for passing along teachings, medicines, and practices that can assist members of the collective. They promote social cohesion by entertaining and fostering good feeling. In times past, as now, stories were not always transferred in lexical form, but through visual symbols, song, and prayer" (Kovach 2009, 95).

15 The power of words is further remarked on in *Hunting by Stars*, where Minerva's sacrifice underlines the dual function of language, that of salvation and of destruction: "The words were powerful. After all, Minerva had used the language to escape the machinery of the school, the one that had ended up burnt to the ground" (Dimaline 2021a, 141).

life. While providing an analysis of the element of water in *The Marrow Thieves* under the lens of 'wahkohtowin' – a specific Métis and Cree conception of kinship –[16] Christina Turner argued that "Dimaline combines blood and water in metaphor to invoke the power of Minerva's song" (Turner 2021, 117). The words in the language, spreading like waves of power across the walls of the school, destroy a colonial symbol of oppression and underline the importance of remembrance.

In a study on the critical production of N. Scott Momaday, Anna M. Brígido-Corachán highlighted the "performative power of language" (Brígido-Corachán 2012, 64) in many Indigenous storytelling practices. Indigenous storytelling is seen as an act of creation in which words "have the potential to release certain sacred energies" (61), as they are "intrinsically powerful" (Momaday 1997, 15). As Momaday further clarifies, "language is the context of our experience. We know who we have been, who we are, and who we can be in the dimension of words, of language" (87). Minerva undoubtedly expresses herself through "speech acts that have the power to intervene in surrounding realities" (Brígido-Corachán 2012, 56). As Momaday suggests, words are powerful and magical, and both of these elements shape Minerva's song:

> Our stories explain us, justify us, sustain us, humble us, and forgive us. And sometimes they injure and destroy us. Make no mistake, we are at risk in the presence of words. Perhaps the greatest stories are those which disturb us, which shake us from our complacency, which threaten our well-being. It is better to enter into the danger of such a story than to keep safely away in a space where the imagination lies dormant. (Momaday 1997, 169)

With these words, Momaday once again presents storytelling as a sacred act of creation. Cherie Dimaline employs storytelling as a decolonial instrument of awareness against the perils of the Anthropocene, the latter being the expression of the colonial and ecological violence affecting both the natural world and Indigenous communities and cultures. As a geological era marked by human influence over the planet, in which "people and nature are dynamically intertwined and embedded in the biosphere" (Andersen, Hulgaard 2023, 301), the Anthropocene exposes the human threat to the planet's ecology by means of the commodification of the non-human. In this prospect, storytelling practices promoting forms of place-based solidarity which highlight the reciprocity between the human and the more-than-human can spread awareness of the danger of an anthropocentric, colonial way of perceiving the Earth and its custodians.

16 Wahkohtowin is defined by Turner as "the Metis and Cree concept variably translated as 'kinship', 'family', or 'relation'" (Turner 2021, 98).

Moreover, the novel highlights the importance of preserving memory through taking ownership of one's own story. Frenchie, Miig and Minerva embody the role of cultural memory in the process of survivance of Indigenous peoples, also emphasizing the restorative power of telling stories. *The Marrow Thieves* is a celebration of Indigenous identities and cultures, which comes to an end with a hopeful message of resilience, as Frenchie decides to fight for his future:

> I understood that as long as there are dreamers left, there will never be want for a dream. And I understood just what we would do for each other, just what we would do for the ebb and pull of a dream, the bigger dream that held us all.
>
> Anything.
>
> Everything. (Dimaline 2017a, 231)

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"That Light Beyond Metaphor": Derek Walcott's Ekphrases

Roberta Cimarosti
Università della Calabria, Italia

Abstract This article looks at Derek Walcott's ekphrastic writing, i.e. its combined use of poetry and painting, from a twofold perspective: 1) the primal employment of a densely visual language for descriptive purposes which carries out the proverbial Walcottian 'naming' of the Caribbean reality, often in conjunction with the memory of Walcott as a young painter; 2) the transforming dialogue with actual paintings of the European canon in mature works like *Tiepolo's Hound*, *The Prodigal* and *White Egrets*. I will especially explore the dramatic figure of the 'failed painter' that first emerges in the poetic autobiography *Another Life* as a 'self-portrait' of Walcott's ekphrastic writing itself and the ways 'the failed painter' subject evolves assuming a functional role to accomplish an overall dismissal of the received 'colonial visuality culture' and the establishment of an Antillean aesthetics.

Keywords Walcott. Ekphrasis. Caribbean. Painting. Failure.

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1 Introduction: Derek Walcott's Radical Ekphrasis

All readers of Walcott's poetry know that his writing is deeply infused with painting, from themes to form. The function of his 'painting lines' is to contribute to the expression of Caribbean reality, starting from "that light beyond metaphor" (Walcott 1990, 271) that pre-exists material expression. The weaving of 'seeing and saying', of images and words, enacts an antique wish for utter mimesis and Walcott's astounding realisations derive from the fact that he has always been a trained and active painter with a visceral attachment to the Caribbean. Open his poetry books anywhere, and you most likely enter a meticulously organised space filled to the smallest details and defined to the slightest nuances. Typically, ultra-accurate descriptions project a Creole view so vertiginously transcultural in its blends and mixes of the various strands of Caribbean cultural legacies that, especially if you are from the so-called Western world, they display insights that often urgently concern us. The reasons why this is so and the way Walcott's poetry creates this vision is this article's main theme.

The founding reason is better defined by Walcott himself who in 1957, at the dawn of his artistic life and of his country's political independence, has no doubt that the future of the Caribbean lies in a thorough reconception (that reminds him of ancient Greece) that can only be fully accomplished through the arts. Paradoxically, freedom is in the hands of those that the state leaves on the margins anywhere, but more intolerably so in a country that is liberating itself from the ways it has been 'looked at' for centuries:

> Where history is being made now, in these islands, is not in the quick political achievements, […] but in the deepening stream of the way we are now learning to think. To see ourselves, not as others see us, but with all the possibilities of the new country we are making. […] a people who possesses the land in thought and share it. All except the inevitable minority, their artists. […] Without them Greece would have been a tourist resort, and these islands will be beautiful but dumb. (Walcott 1991, 15, 17)

A few years later, as an art commentator for the *Trinidad Guardian*, Walcott laments that Caribbean artists and educators have assumed the posture of a declined age not their own, since they actually live in a new renaissance with the same "vigour for exploration" and "sense of discovery" that characterised early-modern Europe:

> the new world that England itself helped to discover, and of which, spiritually, she is still part, is not offered as an alternative. […] But in small, germinal cultures, unformed because they are so new,

> the process has to begin again. [...] The artist in the West Indies [...] has a strong urge to re-create the visible world, which is, in terms of art history, undocumented. (Walcott 2013, 69-70)

Walcott's words contain in embryo the large project that he was working on and which he would develop in the following decades. It entails a direct engagement with present and past visual representations of the Caribbean, along with its cultural legacies especially in Europe, Africa and the Americas. This constitutes the visual-epistemic space whereby Europe first imposed its so-called "visuality complex", starting from the colonial plantation that was the originating space of a 'visuality surveillance system' that would vary and interweve in its main forms over the centuries (Mirzoeff 2011, 1-31).

Relatedly, one important aspect of Walcott's poetry's engagement with art, is the historical record it offers of the ways in which the Caribbean has been seen by artists who have provided liberating means to face and gradually obliterate the heavy burden of the European 'visuality complex'. Such Caribbean art history is especially on display in *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), which opens with the Caribbean sea-scape joyfully depicting itself as it is beginning to portray the parallel stories of Pissarro and Walcott's artistic lives. They will take us to see the formation of a Caribbean aesthetics, its role and relations with European art, from contemporary through early-modern painting. In *Tiepolo's Hound* this large scenario is tellingly defined as a 'fresco', and so also in other poems, like *The Prodigal*, where painting has a primary role. The image of painting as a 'fresco' renders the idea of art as a shared ongoing activity where each epoch is like a frescoist's *giornata* and like a happening comparable to an *al fresco* feast, an open-air convivial event. Still, inside this art world the air may get heavy, for instance when one's gaze falls upon 'European black portraiture' or on Pissarro's sketches of Caribbean 'subjects'. However, a readiness is always there to capture a deeper creative intention, to understand the artist's condition of servitude to historical times (as we can see, for instance in *Tiepolo's Hound* where the narrator comprehends Tiepolo's acritical service to Venice). This openness to review and change one's biased perspective is depicted in the essay "On Hemingway", where Walcott greets the American writer's rendering of the Caribbean in his novel *Islands in the Stream*. The essay features the shift of perspective, the pivotal change of the Caribbean reader's preconcept as reading discloses a surprisingly unprejudiced prose, where the representation of the Caribbean mirrors the existential relief that Hemingway found in its environment, "in the service of the natural world" (Walcott 1990, 113). This is how the essay begins with an ekphrastic description of the socio-political difference between the U.S. Virgin Islands and those of the southern Caribbean, which reports the kind of racialist view that Walcott expected to find in Hemingway's writing:

> The light in the Virgin Islands is almost temperate and the islands' flatness intensifies the glare. Their hills are not as lush as the islands to the south, and there is a Dutch sanity to their architecture that has nothing of the ramshackle adventurousness of the Catholic islands. Such differences are as imperceptible to the tourist as distinctions between the shires of England or the New England states. But the difference for me may have been more political than anything else. After all, they were American territory and their history was as recent and simple as American history. The low bare landscapes and white houses guarded by wispy trees, the marshes and the brightness of the coral-bottomed water *were* the climate of the Gulf Stream, *were* the territory of Hemingway. (Walcott 1990, 69; italics added)

The single tiny word 'were' marks Walcott and Hemingway's changed point of view. And the essay, in a final ekphrasis, describes the new scenario in which Hemingway's prose takes this difficult reader by surprise as his prose did perfectly catch the sense of his islands and to the point that reading feels like being there in the early morning light:

> 'You know how it is in the morning …' […] and you not only know how it is, it resembles what he wrote if you have gotten up before the sun comes over the hill-roofs of Christiansted, and the light then begins to paint the closed shacks and the harbour with its white yachts and the reef line beyond the harbour make you believe that you are walking in the same light that comes off his prose. (Walcott 1990, 114)

This deeply conceptual and identity-involving engagement with the visual-verbal expression of the Caribbean makes Walcott's poetry 'ekphrastic' in the twofold sense that this term has had in European culture since ancient times. Ekphrasis was first theorised and employed in classical rhetoric for composing effective 'mimetic descriptions' and only later became a poetic genre in which poetry, competitively, relates to and renders artworks, especially paintings (Krieger 1992; Verdonk 2005; Neumann, Ripple 2020, 13-33). Also, Walcott's writing's eagerness to grasp reality by creating illusive sameness in which life and its artistic expression transparently overlap, resembles the typical 'miracle-mirage' approach in Western aesthetics. This has been described as the concept and practice by which poetic writing makes use of artworks to maximise semblance, to create the illusory correspondence between language and reality, to make the poem be what it is saying. Poetry's perennial aspiration to become palpably real via a fusion of language and painting has led critics to define ekphrastic writing as "the poet's marriage of the two within

the verbal art" (Krieger 1992, 22). Ekphrasis theory defines this as a tendency to stop the temporality and arbitrariness of language in order to bestow upon it a spatial stillness and a plastic presence that only belong to the applied arts (Krieger 1992). This does not quite apply to Walcott's 'pictorial writing' because it often inscribes the paradoxical realisation of this very illusionary aim. As we read in an early essay, also reminiscent of his juvenile work, this time in the theatre, "Imitation *was* pure belief" (Walcott 1970, 6; italics added). In Walcott's ekphrastic writing the concomitance of space and time never stops the temporal dimension of the linguistic sign. Quite on the contrary, a performative use of language, which often features painting as underway, opens the doors to the live dimension of the ongoing discourse traversing the edge of the page to involve us. This twofold radical engagement with ekphrasis has perhaps been taken for granted by the several major studies of Walcott's ekphrastic writing, whose scholarship may be divided into two main trends. One is based on postcolonial and world literature critique and mainly focuses on the poems' engagement with actual paintings and artworks, especially as rewriting genre that counters the European pictorial canon (Mitchell 2015; Neumann 2016; Neumann, Ripple 2020; Herbertson 2024). One is specialised in Walcott's entire work and mainly explores the way his ekphrastic writing developed out of the specificity of Caribbean culture (Baugh 1978; 1980; Hamner 2000; Fumagalli 2006; 2018) and through Afro-American affiliated contexts, as exemplified in its latest must-read monograph (Fumagalli 2023).

In what follows, I will linger on two aspects of Walcott's ekphrastic poetry in approximate chronological order. I will first focus on what I call its primal ekphrasis period by reading some passages from the poetic autobiography *Another Life* ([1972] 1992) to explore how the poem portrays the topical moment when the young Walcott seems to be quitting painting for poetry. I will then explore the development of the 'failing painter' motif as it re-emerges in *The Prodigal* (2007) and in *White Egrets* (2011) in further and amusing dramatisations of 'failure'. The 'failing painter' comes to display a problematic relation with European art and history, to feature a related psychologic condition and especially the way they have been transformed to play a part in a reconceived 'Antillean visuality'.

2 Primal Ekphrasis: Memories of an Apprentice Painter

Since the juvenile poetry collections through the mature work, Walcott's poems embed memories of Walcott in his teens training to become a painter in the St Lucia of the early 1940s. That early experience meant a full immersion, a deep contact, with the territory and the society, a perception that would root and nourish poetic writing,

in the way we can see in the early poem *Solo*. The poem displays the primeval formation of Walcott's ekphrastic language as it takes place in conjunction with the memory of his apprentice years. The "villa" of his teacher Harry Simmons, where Walcott along with his bosom friend and future painter Dunstan St Omer studied painting, is literally embedded into the lines through the word "mention" whose sound allows the 'villa' as 'mansion' to flow into the lines, so that the cherished time and place coincide with the poem in progress. The memory of early painting that it represents has extended its creative life into the poetic remembrance which has realised their conflation.

> but o the *mention*
> Of easy days of light, when
> You, my friend, armed with a calm brush,
> Long past lunchtime, in the lightning
> Sketch, flattened the landscape from ambush.
> […]
> So recollecting this
> The white and green *villa* on the dry hill
> […]
> How I see all that *villa* hurt with leaves.
> (Walcott 1949, 31; italics added)

In *Tiepolo's Hound* the memory of the continuity between art and reality as experienced in those apprentice years is declared to be the energising motivating force of writing. The reminisced early days when the young painter saw the St Lucia environment look like the landscapes and the scenes of Renaissance and Impressionist paintings is nourishing the composition of this very poem:

> especially if, across the harbour, noon
> struck its rings of waves, and the ochre walls
>
> of the old cantonment in the still lagoon
> reflected their Italian parallels.
>
> Hill towns in rock light, Giotto, Giorgione,
> and later the edges of Cézanne's L'Estaque,
> not for these things alone, and yet only
> for what they were, themselves, my joy comes back.
> (Walcott 2000, 10-1)

This bifocal vision that poetic language absorbs and that came so natural to the young painter is the legacy of his father's work. Warwick Walcott, an amateur poet and painter, would imitate and take inspiration from European artworks and, "joining by division" (30) paint the

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St Lucian reality. The same range of vision literally defines that of the two young painters: "as pupils we need both worlds for the sight" (34).

We learn in the poetic autobiography *Another Life* that, as the apprentice years draw to an end, this unconditioned belief in art's power to redefine the Caribbean soon crumbles and the disenchanted ex-student begins to feel the weight of colonial history, to see its seemingly unstoppable massive episteme overwhelm his artistic ambitions, "the sea's huge eye" with its "pelagic eyelid" (Walcott [1973] 1992, 198). Yet, while the poem makes us hear the promise of the disenchanted apprentice, "Never such faith again, never such innocence!" (203), the mature artist is already at work forging his ekphrastic writing that seems better equipped than painting to face the huge challenge. *Another Life* is the depiction of this fusion that is represented through a synaesthetic intensity and a scope that remain, arguably, unmatched in Walcott's work (Burnett 2006).

> Verandahs, where the pages of the sea
> are a book left open by an absent master
> (Walcott [1973] 1992, 145)

Another Life opens with the shocking display of the colonial vision as system of knowledge inherited through colonial history, rendered through the combined effect of 'the verandah reading the book of the sea'. Verandahs were among the first architectural elements built by European settlers to protect themselves from the heat and whose view-capturing expanse represented the centre of the plantation surveillance system. The poem's first word, therefore, compresses the colonial worldview which immediately afterwards the poem convincingly starts to demolish, starting from the young painter's persistence to depict his position at the end of empire. This is rendered through the repetition of the word 'begin', whose present tense unifies young painter and mature poet showing them together at work: "I begin here again, | begin […] | Begin with twilight" (145). The demolition and replacement of the 'verandah vision' and knowledge structure, "a landscape locked in amber" (145), is the poem's central theme. It features as the enterprise taking place in front of us, resulting from the joined forces of apprentice painter and mature poet's mind and craft. So, if the young painter in the mid 1940s is shown as failingly trying to draw the declined colonial epoch he lives in, the Walcott of the late 1960s can forge that vision in detail, as "transfigured sheerly by the student's will, | a cinquecento fragment in gilt frame" (146). The two words closing the second line a master stroke that captures the sense of modern history also from the perspective of those who suffered it.

The poem depicts the epochal transition as occurring through the merging of contemporary local life and European paintings in which

e-ISSN 2499-5975

Caribbean and European history are made to blend. In one of these emblematic episodes, the death of a girl named Pinkie is associated to that of a wealthy Jamaican girl of the eighteenth century who died in England where she was sent to school and who became famous for the full-body portrait done by the Thomas Lawrence:

> But was it her?
> or Thomas Alva Lawrence's dead child
> another Pinkie, in her rose gown floating?
> (151)

What the uncertainty of the lines performs is the vision of Caribbean-English history and culture that is brought about by the same sense of loss and felt absence that strike the community across the racial divide, forming the new picture of the still unexpressed transcultural reality. It is the time and space of this unacknowledged reality that the poem has set out to represent through lines that join painting into poetry.

However, the blending takes place hiddenly, to the point of misleading readers.

> There are already invisible on canvas,
> lines locking into outlines. The visible dissolves
> into benign acid.
> (197)

These lines show the apprentice painter disappointingly looking at his just-finished landscape and noticing how his version of it is strangely continuing off the canvas, sliding into a poetic space. Then, as ambiguity widens, we are made to follow all stages of his growing disappointment until we reach the most tricky lines of all, where the young painter speaks of "this failure" (200). Understandably, this passage has led most scholars to see the episode as Walcott's capitulation, as representing the turning-point moment that saw Walcott choose poetry as his privileged expressive means:

> Where did I fail? I could draw,
> I was disciplined, humble, I rendered
> the visible world that I saw
> exactly, yet it hindered me, for
> in every surface I sought
> the paradoxical flash of an instant
> […]
> I hoped that both disciplines might
> […] cohere
> and finally *ignite*,
> but I lived in a different gift,

e-ISSN 2499-5975

its element metaphor.
(200-1; italics added)

The fiasco consists in the executioner's gaze that sees reality as many-sided and which his brush strokes indulge on, led by the wish to capture that complexity, thus failing to accomplish a realistic depiction of the actual landscape. To express the multidimensional world he lives in, the student has to combine poetry and painting and adopt a metaphoric approach, of the kind we saw before, which allows him to capture all aspects of his complex reality in one stroke through an uncompromising figurative, realistic, rendition. In this respect, the poem subtly shows us how painting has not failed but is being combined with poetry, where the boy's vision of the subtleties composing the Caribbean reality can be expressed metaphorically and in ways by which 'the two disciplines can in fact ignite'. The poem shows this in a previous passage that closely renders the metaphorising process as taking place in the young artist's mind and in the mature poet's language:

April *ignites* the immortelle,
the leaf of a kneeling sapling
is the yellow flame of Lippi's "Annunciation."
Like the scrape of a struck match, *cadmium orange*,
evened to the wick of a lantern.
Like a crowd, surrounding the frame,
the muttering *variegation of green*.
(1992, 197; italics added)

The first three lines show the way metaphor works by joining seemingly disparate elements, in this case an immortelle tree with its sapling and a Renaissance "Annunciation". The metaphor seems an image of poetic creativity, of the way it can blend poetry and painting. 'April' is a mythical word in Walcott's language, emblem of his art's imaginative union with that of his father who died on that month leaving his son with the sense of having the mission to complete it (Walcott 1990, 68). It indicates Walcott's primal imaginative formation, here rendered through the image of the 'immortelle tree' in full bloom, as vividly illumined by the April sun, traditionally a symbol of rebirth, of a new beginning, that is also the book's main theme. The two following similes explain how the imagination makes the 'leaf of a young tree' correspond to 'the flame of the Annunciation': both are representing the exceptional birth of a third 'term', a new 'word'. The first simile compares the equation to the flame produced by "a struck match", which along with the several meanings of 'match' (suitable correspondence, competitive relation), renders the idea of a third element emerging from the friction, i.e. of the vision rising through the combination of poetry with painting as ignited by the father's

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art. The nature of this friction is qualified in terms of painting, as "cadmium orange", which is also the colour of the immortelle tree in bloom. The resulting flame is then "evened" as if it were inside of a lantern whence it diffuses its light as if to form 'a sunlit background'. The second simile shows the vision as it continues outside the picture as a nativity with people come to see the newborn, which also inserts a temporal development into the space of the representation. This too is then rendered in pictorial terms as "the muttering variegation of green", which may refer to the grown-up sapling as well as to the community inside of which it is developing.

Furthermore, details of the 'failed painting' take us to see how its 'devious representation' is informed by elements that compose a previous epiphanic episode (when at fourteen the boy first senses that he belongs to his country and people) and which we also see in a following sequence where the young Walcott is discovering the complexity of Caribbean history.

In the epiphany (1992, 184-5) the boy is at "the edge" of a hill, standing by a steep cliff where he can see the "smoke" from people's cooking and therein "dissolved into a trance", "seized" by the sense of ordinary life as constrained within a heavy past that is simultaneously going on: "climbed with the labouring smoke", "drowned in labouring breakers of bright cloud". Anticipating the image of the "kneeling sapling" that we saw above, the boy "felt compelled to kneel". Relatedly, in anticipation of the "cry" audible on the 'failed canvas', the boy can hear "above the labourers' houses like a cry | for unheard avalanches of white cloud". The 'cry' is the mute shout of history into which he feels to be as imprisoned as anyone: "but in that ship of night, locked in together, | through which, like chains, a little light might leak." All the key elements contained in the 'failed painting' episode are part of the epiphany. The boy 'dissolves' into a 'trance' and in the failed painting episode the visible also does, indicating that they are the same. Similarly, key elements like 'cloud', 'smoke', 'cry', 'silence', are present in both scenes which so joined indicate the boy's vision that is being projected onto the canvas, causing the impossibility to draw a realistic two-dimensional landscape.

In the 'failed painting' episode, the poem describes the young artist to 'be' the landscape: "The mountain's crouching back begins to ache". As we saw, the landscape moves outside the canvas – "lines *locking* into outlines. The visible *dissolves*". Although "the *cloud* cannot go further", "eyes sweat, small fires gnaw at the *edge* of the canvas", and "a bird's *cry* tries to pierce the thick *silence* of canvas" (197-8; italics added). We can but deduce that it is poetry that can effectively render the deepest vision which the epiphany describes in ways that figurative painting cannot.

Similarly, following passages that recount the young Walcott's discovery of local history and the way he reconnects it to that he

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is learning in school, contain words that link the broadened understanding of the past to both the epiphany episode and to that of the 'failed painting'. Evidently, the poem exemplifies how the new comprehensive vision is being formed through the blending and the metaphoric accretion that poetry can afford. The poetic representation of reality can include history. For instance, the boy studying history is depicted as "Tranced […] Redcoat ruminant", so as to remind us of the 'epiphanic trance' and to further expand his mind's vision in progress. Furthermore, as the student explores local history, and so its several courses and perspectives, the boy's will to fuse and forge a veritable sense of reality is described in terms that remind us of the 'failed painting' episode, as here too he enters a "green furnace" as "smoke climbs" (211-12). The poem makes the connection even clearer when it employs the same word 'translucent' to define both the boy's sense of history and his painter hand: "Deep in the trees a glowworm army haunts | […] | translucent yeomanry" (215); "my hand […] shared […] the translucent soul of the fish" (201).

The 'failed painter' episode ends on the same ambiguous lines by which it had begun: "Nothing will show after this, nothing | except the frame which you carry in your sealed, surrendering eyes" (200). The 'frame' is the just formed vision, the new perspective whence from now onward reality would be looked at. The newly forged complexities have replaced the colonial visuality complex.

3 The 'Failed Painter' Self-Portraits

By the time several decades afterwards another dramatisation of the 'failed painter' appears in *The Prodigal* (2007), the 'frame' that Walcott developed in *Another Life* has broadened to explore its relations with the European tradition and with Afro-American and Caribbean art, through the study and use, primarily for the stage, of Watteau's series *The Embarkation for Cythera*, the paintings of Horace Pippins, Jacob Lawrence, and Romare Bearden's collages (Fumagalli 2023, 138-289). At this later stage, the 'failed painter' self-portrait contains the scope and the knowledge gathered through this research and experimentation. They must have helped form the sense of the Caribbean as connoted by European 'visuality complexes' and by their 'countervisualities' which for centuries have shaped the epistemologies of the Atlantic world (Mirzoeff 2011). The 'visuality complex' comprises visual forms that are imbricated with deep-seated cultural meanings and procedures that compactedly render the sense of the real from a specific authoritarian perspective that is disciplined in the Foucauldian sense.

> Visualized techniques were central to the operations of the Atlantic world formed by plantation slavery and its ordering of reality.

> The plantation complex as a material system lasted from the seventeenth century until the late nineteenth, and affected primarily those parts of the globe known as the Atlantic triangle: the European slave-owning nations, Central and West Africa, the Caribbean and the plantation colonies of the Americas. (2011, 10)

Crucially, this highly connoted space comprises both material exploitative processes but also their interiorisation that further weighs upon the oppressed, in the ways theorised by Fanon. Mirzoeff explains, that the first European 'visuality complex' as developed in the Caribbean plantations consisted of three main elements: 1) "naming, categorising and defining, a process that Foucault calls 'the nomination of the visible'"; 2) the utter separation of human beings into segregated groups that impedes alternative meanings; 3) the visual planning of space and its aestheticisation, i.e. the sense of this imposed order as correct and desirable, and as such ideally reproduced, "the aesthetic of the proper, of duty, of what is felt to be right and hence pleasing, ultimately even beautiful" (3-4).

It is this massive body of 'visuality knowledge' that Walcott faces and tries to change in some passages of *The Prodigal*. Here he makes use of a new version of the 'failed painter' figure to create new surprising pictures whereby to read the European painting tradition and European history from his new world's perspective.

3.1 The Prodigal's 'Diptych' of Rembrandt's *Syndics of the Drapers' Guild* and Velázquez's *The Surrender of Breda*

In *The Prodigal* among the several paintings used to describe Walcott's travelling experiences in Europe, where as a Nobel Prize winner, he has now become an authority, Rembrandt's *Syndics of the Drapers' Guild* and Velázquez's *The Surrender of Breda* are made to form a sort of 'diptych'. Through the two paintings the poem translates Walcott's sense of his presence in Europe, the way he initially perceives it and the way he comes to review it by changing Europe's 'visuality frame' and its notorious exclusion and diminishment of Afro- and Asian-European people.

Rembrandt's *Syndics of the Drapers' Guild* shows the startled faces of the guild's executives supervising the cloth business and being interrupted by the arrival of a clearly unexpected newcomer that they all turn to look at. The bad surprise is the main subject along with the intruding newcomer who, outside of the painting, and based on the directors' gaze, coincides with the painting's viewers. In her acute analysis of Rembrandt's oil and of its relation to Walcott's ekphrastic version in *The Prodigal*, Fumagalli has explained that the newcomer must have discovered some kind of secret of which, perhaps, even

the directors are unaware. This must be their indirect involvement in the slave trade and the plantation system from which the cloth business that they are supervising derives. This removed reality suddenly emerges with the newcomer's arrival, unsettling the scene (Fumagalli 2023, 398-407). The painting may also indirectly depict Rembrandt's own view, along with the projection of a wish for laying it bare and bring about a change. We can imagine it as provoked by the figures that are acting in the invisible (but very material) space that joins the Atlantic world to a room in the heart of Europe. Rembrandt's painting, therefore, challenges viewers to see the wider reality in and on which they live, as well as the painter's own position about it.

In *The Prodigal* the Walcott-traveller has just arrived in Europe when at the formal lunch in Lousanne, most likely given in his honour, he sees the convenors as the congregation of directors in Rembrandt's oil: "Then the old gentlemen at lunch in Lausanne | with suits of flawless cut, impeccable manners, | update of Rembrandt *Syndict of the Drapers' Guild*" (Walcott 2007, 16). The guest imagines them as beheaded, their heads like that of St John's the Baptist laying on the tray of their starched collars, which, as Fumagalli explains, may symbolise the announcement of an upcoming message of truth (Fumagalli 2023, 398-407). Meanwhile, in the live picture in Lousanne, the guest is straining to see, but in vain, if the marginal figure of an ancestor from the Dutch plantations appears, "greeting me | a product of his empire's misgenation | in old Saint Martin. I could find no trace" (Walcott 2007, 16). Importantly, a master stroke at the beginning of the Lousanne episode indicates that it occurs 'after' Walcott arrives in Europe with a load of preconceived knowledge that has haunted him since childhood: "*Then* the old gentlemen at lunch in Lausanne". The haunting presence and interiorisation of Europe's 'visuality', both at personal and collective level, is vehicled through the reference to a popular fairy tale and a poem that feature the glacial snowy world which terrifies him: "polar rigidities that magnetized a child | these rocks bearded with icicles, crevasses | from Andersen's "Ice Maiden", Whittier's "Snow-Bound," | this empire, this infernity of ice" (14). The fairy tale and the poem seem to be used as narrative metaphors that allow us to visualise Europe's cancellation of its Atlantic history and identity. We can see it, if we are curious enough to read, or if we remember, the fairy tale and the poem and notice how they relate to the traveller's European journeys, including the vertigoes that Walcott shares with Andersen's Rudy. And the fact that both Rembrandt and Velázquez's paintings are contained in Thomas Craven's *Treasury of Art Masterpieces* (Fumagalli 2023, 398-407), Walcott's primary art book during his apprentice years, a conservative-traditionalist guide that excludes and discourages any interest beyond the 'western canon', broadens the picture rendering the sense of cancellation that the poem is addressing.

It is only several pages afterwards that Rembrandt's painting reappears. Significantly, it does at a moment when the Walcott-traveller reflects on the way the poem is translating and merging actual and imaginative facts through a relentless grinding of references to European paintings which de facto appropriates them. The poem depicts its sweeping passage and the logic whereby its apparent defeat is 'the feat' of re-drawing the scenes that Walcott is experiencing. "It is only afterwards that these things are ours: | […] | Complete possession. And Europe? | Surrender it as the waves render the idea" (2007, 32-4). To some extent, the poem is saying, this pictorial writing victoriously depicts, reframes and appropriates everything that is being seen and re-presented. However, it then looks critically at its conquering enterprise and addresses it. It first limits its poetic conquest to what it can legitimately claim from historical descent, "from illegitimate or legitimate blood" (34). Then, as the lines go through an endless list of things that they are getting hold of, as a reverberating self-image, Rembrandt's oil (the guild's executives and the missing Caribbean-Dutch ancestor) comes to mind. And right here the poem changes it: "a young blackamoor brought in my ancestor's head | to the orange-fleshed burghers of the Drapers' Guild | at that luncheon in Lausanne" (33). So, finally, the sight which Walcott had hoped to see at the lunch in Lousanne and in Rembrandt's oil does enter the picture and does materialise, if through poetry.

Still, this does not satisfy the traveller who starts brooding over a sense of vacuity that his artistic transactions and 'sur-rendering' technique arise. He compares it to the vanquished expression of the Dutch governor in Velázquez's oil *The Surrender of Breda*, "the deeper truth of failure, deeper than triumph" (34). Not by chance does the poem conflate the serene expression of the surrendering governor with that of the conqueror of Breda, although it is for the Spanish victor that Velázquez's oil is famous, for inaugurating the theme of fair play in war painting (Fumagalli 2023, 405). The poem seems to be considering that in the large picture, there is no difference between winner and loser, that there is a deeper truth that needs to be seen. What really attracts this viewer of Velázquez's oil, and so comes to the foreground, is the battle that is still being waged at a distance. He identifies this far and apparently insignificant fight with that going on in the making of his own work, where he shares the field with Rembrandt and Velázquez. The battle is now shown as infuriating in a "fresco", which, as I mentioned earlier, stands for the live collective effort of art, which here is depicted as pursuing justice, regardless of one's cultural lineage: "Meanwhile, on the high corner of the fresco, look – | […] | another battle is waging its own business, | inaudible and tiny, negligible | […] | We fill the same perspective, Mantegna, Uccello, Signorelli, | in the central mass and meaning of the world" (2007, 34). In this war one is always defeated by the executor's

intransigent gaze, present and past. "And no smile of encouragement from della Francesca" (35). The fact is that painters' political opinion has played but a very small role on the stage of world art history. We only need to think that we are still organising art exhibitions around the presence or the portraitures of Afro-Europeans, that we still consider these as 'special events', where museum experts downplay the reasons why a Rembrandt may have wanted to do *A Portrait of Two African Men* at all (see Jones 2021 about a recent exhibition at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and his conversation with the museum's head historian). Along similar lines, Velázquez's portrait of the painter Juan de Pareja (on display at the Metopolitan Museum of Art in New York) is still considered as enshrining the exceptional story of the Spanish artist's life-like portrait of his African-Spanish artist mate, which so intensively renders the humanness of the portrayed to reach its purpose and liberate him from bondage. However, as the exhibition's co-curator claimed, the value of de Pareja's paintings that the show has made a bit more known, has been questioned by experts in ways that would never happen for a white artist. Also, she pointed out, we still know too little about Afro-European artists and their actual contribution to the making of 'European' art (Kassam 2023).

3.2 Poems "18" and "19" of *White Egrets* (2011)

Poems "18" and "19" contained in *White Egrets* are two more portraits of the failed painter. The first poem depicts Walcott as a Dorian Gray facing the portrait which mercilessly returns his actual age. The poem intends 'to be' this very portrait and as such it shows the irreparably "scabrous surfaces" (2011, 51) of the two canvases that Walcott has worked on for a long time. These are 'a landscape and a portrait' (in all likeness representing Walcott's entire artistic oeuvre) appearing in all their 'ugliness' the moment "the late afternoon light" (51) falls upon them, that is to say, as soon as the artist's gaze looks down upon his work. But Walcott's drama surpasses that of Dorian Gray's picture, since the declining light shows both canvases as more than decrepit. They have reached the stage of putrefaction, a view that mirrors the painter's paranoia: "were like some dread disease the paint had caught | […] | that shows the self for what it is" (51). The poem thoroughly revels in this revelation. Its actual subject is the accomplished way whereby the drama is performed, the way it makes us smile. It includes the implacable depiction of the painter's self-indulgent excuse which follows his bleak 'realisation of failure': "At least the grief I felt was my own making, | determined to find purity in putrefaction, | still one that cracked the heart and left it aching" (51).

In the second poem Walcott exits his studio gasping for "blue air | that has no edges", upset by "still another failure" (52). The poem tells us that the cause of the flop was a sudden 'hinder' that withheld the brush from following instinct and whose imitative turn also blocked the pleasure of self-expression: "The usual bristling halt, my joy upset | by some rhetorical passage in the painting" (52). This very much resounds like the 'hindrance' of spontaneity and the concomitant 'circuitous' course that caused the young painter's 'failure' in *Another Life*. The reference to Walcott's apprentice years – "with faith that youth had once | that it would soar" (52) – sends us to think of his brush's "circuitous instinct" proceeding "sideways" in a "classic condition of servitude" (1992, 200-1).

These self-portraits depict the 'failed painter''s ekphrastic work, its exhilarating self-irony, its power to move us, and its subtle poetic accomplishment. However, the second poem also points at the 'halting tendency' which was his art's weak spot and which the fusion of painting and poetry turned into magnificent artworks making good use of that very 'hindrance'.

3.3 The Pond Picture in Tiepolo's Hound

In *Tiepolo's Hound* this blockage is depicted in pictorial lines that translate Antillean history and its psychological effects in naturalistic terms. The pictorial lines show a river whose course, interrupted by a sand bank, turns on itself forming a pond, or a lagoon, which at times, woven in heavy rains and tossed by a strong wind, breaks onto the shore:

> At that point where a river, straining to join the sea,
> submerges itself in a sand bank, though its surface
>
> corrugates from the eddying wind, it contentedly
> nibbles the mangrove roots (this is Hunter's place).
>
> At high tide in the rainy season they both bear one
> into the other, to share the thundering shore
>
> but now the wind-grooved lagoon, ark of the heron
> […]
> is damned by the sand bank to a circular motion
> (Walcott 2000, 174-6)

It may be that 'the failed painter series', as I have called the dramatic self-portraits that occasionally appear in Walcott's work, exemplifies a poetry that blends with painting in ways that express and speak

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to a collective aesthetic response to 'European visuality' in the extended material-historical sense of this word. The 'hindering' may be read as the psychological side of the 'visuality complex' and represent the repression of self that the plantation system exercised and handed down as a form of interiorised violence that entailed a self-imposed block to the free course of self-expression.

> Authority thus counters desire and produces a self-conscious subject who experiences both internal desire and external constraint as 'reality. […] I take the existence of this doubled complex to be the product of history, as opposed to a transhistorical human condition, specifically that of the violence with which colonial authority enforced its claims. From the dream-world of the Haitian and French Revolutions and their imaginaries to the imperial investigation of the 'primitive' mind and Fanon's deconstruction of colonial psychology, producing and exploring psychic complexes and complexity was central to the labour of visualization. Needless to say, visualization has in turn now become part of the labour of being analysed. (Mirzoeff 2011, 10)

More important, however, is the liberating externalisation of this blockage and the way it has broken new ground and opened a new horizon. As we saw in the quote above, this perspective, literally sited at the centre of *Tiepolo's Hound*, is translated into an emblem: "(This is Hunter's place)" (2000, 174-6). The parentheses stand for the pond's breaching movement and "Hunter" is the realist American painter R.D. Hunter who is evoked here for his paintings of the low marshy course of the Stop River in Massachusetts. Together they figuratively render the idea of European history and its psychological impact. However, this is far from being a remissive vision. It is an icon of the poem itself, specifically, of the victorious conclusion of one of its two main plots, in which the Walcott-protagonist tries to track down the elusive and alluring white hound, across the forest of European masterpieces and their variations of the same 'visuality complex', from Renaissance through Neoclassical times, from Veronese to Tiepolo. The failed chase in *Tiepolo's Hound* and the failing painter are the same: their achievement consists in questioning and shifting the constraining continuity of the European 'visuality complex' which has perdured well past its historical end. Both the 'failed chase' and the 'failed painter' reframe it by reading its parable in contemporary terms, so that it may definitely look like, and so result to be, a thing of the past.

To conclude this brief survey of Derek Walcott's ekphrastic writing, it is worth noticing that his most recent poetry book, *Morning, Paramin* (2016) is fully ekphrastic, culminating a lifetime spent perfecting the combined use of poetry and painting. It features 51

paintings by renown contemporary artist Peter Doig and 51 poems by Walcott which variously read the pictures while creating their own plots and stories, all along making a transgressive use of 'paragon' by which traditionally ekphrastic poetry has challenged its sister art. As Fumagalli explains, here, instead, the world of Glissant's 'poetics of relation' applies (Fumagalli 2023, 408-32). The book, as the title suggests (with its pun on 'morning' and the reference to 'Paramin', a place in Trinidad, which the book uses for the fun and the cherished memories its sound brings), marks a strange new beginning. It contains and irradiates with Walcott's 'new world's renaissance'. In one poem, referring to his lifelong ekphrastric enterprise, he even defines himself as "some renaissance master" (2016, 101). His Antillean renaissance 'visuality rules' are: 1) ordinary life realism; 2) ongoing conversation with the reader-viewer; 3) imaginative narratives that combine autobiographical reminiscences and 'descriptions' of Doig's paintings; 4) a minimalist vision of European history; 5) a love for the Caribbean and a gratitude for having lived there.

The closing poem relates to Doig's *Cave Boat Bird Painting*. It is a self-portrait of Doig sitting in a boat inside a cave, wearing a thrust pink cap worn backwards covering his eyes, a big bird passing over his head – a mirror image of himself, and not the object of the painter's gaze. The poem ties in with the idea of the artist as identified with the bird, opposite to the typical anthropocentric posture whereby the artist captures the bird's image (sometimes, in the past, the bird was literally caught and killed, to better paint it as a still sitter). A sense of equality, of mutual *laisser-vivre* ordinariness 'dominates', with all the excitements that this brings, and which the poem relentlessly expresses. The poem transforms the painting's simile – the artist is like a bird – into a realistic live metaphor. It first describes the "open life of birds" which it starts to name until, perhaps to portray the message in Doig's painting, the namer stops short and says he has used up all of the words he knows: "(then I run out of words)" (2016, 103). It also depicts Walcott's past flop as a 'bird-namer'. We are clearly assisting at a last failing scene: "Before our new craze for bird-feeding, I once thought I'd | take up bird-watching in Petit Valley, in Trinidad, | but the furthest name I got to was "the fork-tailed flycatcher" (103). Then the birds 'become' the writers and artists that over the years have been guests at the Walcotts': "on the balcony's edges or on the hot concrete path | to the cottege where (did you ever stay there?) some famous | others have, Arthur Miller and, indelibly, Seamus" (103). What the poem seems to be saying is that no language can portray either art's ineffable nature or the human forms it takes. The unquenched urge to catch "that light beyond metaphor", whatever its achievements, can only ultimately, and even happily, fail. The good thing is that this always leads one to a new start.

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Recensioni | Reviews | Comptes rendus | Resenhas

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Mina Gorji *Arte della fuga*

Maria Paola Guarducci
Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Italia

Recensione di Gorji, M. (2024). *Arte della fuga*. A cura di J. Wilkinson. Roma: Fuorilinea, 162 pp.

Forse il filo conduttore di una raccolta di poesie densa e corposa, composta di cinquantasei liriche di diversa lunghezza e argomento, si ritrova, a lettura ultimata, nella breve prosa autobiografica con cui Mina Gorji (Teheran, 1975) chiude il suggestivo volume *Arte della fuga*, presentato nella traduzione italiana a più mani con testo inglese a fronte per l'editore Fuorilinea (collana Rosso Sospeso), a cura di Jane Wilkinson (13 €). Senza titolo, le pagine conclusive abbozzano la storia della famiglia di Gorji e del loro paese d'origine, l'Iran, per frammenti che mischiano i ricordi personali dell'autrice agli aneddoti sui suoi avi e, ancora, a sporadici tasselli d'ispirazione biografico-letteraria su Tagore, W.B. Yeats, John Keats. Il principio guida di questo mosaico narrativo sembra essere il movimento dei Gorji a ritroso nel tempo attraverso terre disparate e talora disperate: Gurgistan, Yazd, India, Inghilterra, Scozia, con significativi transiti che diventano permanenze a Hong Kong e Singapore, e poi ancora, brevemente, Teheran, di nuovo (e forse infine) Londra. Tante dislocazioni coinvolgono in modo differente i membri dell'esteso albero genealogico di Gorji (che in Inghilterra arriva a cinque anni), sia per motivi smarriti nella memoria familiare, sia per assai comuni questioni di opportunità, come la ricerca di ricchezze, spinta propulsiva di molte migrazioni, che qui porta i suoi trisavoli, commercianti, ad

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avventurarsi dall'Iran all'India, poi a Hong Kong e di lì fino a Singapore, dove nasce la nonna di Gorji. Una famiglia cosmopolita e colta, in cui una giovane donna negli anni Trenta del secolo scorso poteva studiare medicina – almeno fino al matrimonio, traguardo sociale ma anche capolinea culturale, in quell'epoca e lì come altrove, di buona parte del genere femminile. Una famiglia crepata a più riprese dalle irruzioni della Storia, che ovunque le impone inversioni di rotta, tracolli finanziari, minacce coloniali, nuove fughe fino, per Mina, all'approdo a Londra: luogo di esilio, di estraniamento, ma anche, per molti versi, di nuovo radicamento e di rinascita.

L'impellenza della fuga è una costante che scompiglia le carte degli ordinari ménage domestici dei Gorji e della stessa Mina: fuga dalle persecuzioni, dai regimi, dalle invasioni, dall'imposizione di condizioni di vita restrittive, dalla violenza. Questa famiglia è al centro di vicende che dimostrano che non c'è separazione tra il vissuto privato e la Storia collettiva, e i suoi membri diventano rappresentativi di diaspore che, ieri come oggi, coinvolgono generazioni, etnie, paesi diversi. Per molti, infatti, il trauma sta sempre in agguato ed è pronto a trasformare via via terre e case un tempo accoglienti in spazi ostili, nei quali si è costretti a un certo punto a difendersi, a nascondersi, a mascherarsi. Terre e case che alla fine, con paura, vanno abbandonate perché diventano minacciose e tossiche. Case, nello specifico, che perdono il loro aspetto protettivo e intimo per convertirsi in luoghi violati o violabili, il cui trascorso pacifico, un tempo fatto anche di pregnanze materiche associate a tradizioni e abitudini, si fa, con la perdita, subito ricordo. Ricordi che per necessità si sedimentano nel profondo e che è complicato, doloroso e, al contempo, come per tutti i lutti, necessario e struggente rievocare. Difficile per Gorji, come per i suoi familiari, associare la parola 'casa' a un luogo specifico escludendo gli altri, perché il sentimento dell'appartenenza s'insinua in fulminee e fugaci sensazioni che, scatenate da un odore, un balenio, un rumore, si distribuiscono quasi a casaccio in una estesa geografia che va da Oriente a Occidente e viceversa. Un mondo le cui mappe politiche, nell'arco di tre/quattro generazioni, deflagrano in un pulviscolo che si ricompone su carta in foggia di poesia, effetto collaterale di molti dissesti. Tutto, anche il caos, messo in versi sembra rispondere a un disegno.

Docente universitaria, quindi anche studiosa, l'iraniana e britannica Gorji ricopre una cattedra di Letteratura inglese a Cambridge e, non a caso, è un'esperta di poesia romantica, la lirica più squisitamente 'musicale' di tutto il corpus letterario inglese, nonché elemento fondante del suo canone moderno. Nel titolo di questa ricca raccolta, *leitmotiv* di gran parte delle poesie e al cuore del suo racconto conclusivo, sta la fuga, che è anche, appunto, forma musicale. Fondata sul contrappunto, cioè su una pluralità di melodie capace di stare insieme pur nell'indipendenza sostanziale delle sue singole parti,

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la 'fuga' per Gorji non è solo 'tema' di tanti componimenti, ma anche chiave di lettura per avvicinarsi a questo mondo di versi, organico pur nel suo variegato insieme. La fuga, però, rimanda prima di tutto all'idea di 'movimento'. Si muove allora il vento, sulla scorta delle odi di Percy Bysshe Shelley e di John Keats e, da questo spinte, volano le spore attraverso gli oceani ne «L'impero del dente di leone»; si insinua nella terraferma il mare («Tarabuso»); cadono rapide le stelle in «Lungo il fiume»; sembrano muoversi, nelle loro forme sinuose, le galassie («Oggetti del cielo profondo»); sfreccia la lucertola in fuga sulle pietre di Persepoli («Persepoli»); ondeggiano le alghe mosse dalle correnti in «Pescatrice di Perle»; arrivano a riva, portati dalla risacca, i molluschi e le piccole creature marine («Sulla battigia»); una balena sbaglia direzione e si infila tragicamente nel Tamigi (è cronaca: «La casa di osso di balena»); avanza invece cauto e guardingo il polpo, grandioso nella sua complessità insondabile di forma, intelligenza e movenze («Polpo»). Volano anche le parole, soffiate a foggia di preghiera dalla madre sulla figlia Mina che si addormenta, costituendosi come ritualità rassicurante in un quotidiano evidentemente infestato da tracce di paura e di ansia («Segni»). Migra tutta la natura, sempre e da sempre, a partire dalla vespa che, introdottasi negli interstizi di una quercia di Aleppo, arriva nel rigido clima inglese dove a modo suo, come tutti, come Mina Gorji, si adatta («La vespa»). Migrano i cespugli di *Senecio squalidus* dalla Sicilia a Oxford (dove Gorji si è laureata), e poi di lì verso Londra, puntellando di verde e giallo il tragitto della ferrovia, come a voler rimarcare la resilienza della natura nel panorama tetro e avvilente della modernità postbellica inglese («Senecio di Oxford»).

Anche la prosa finale, in cui si riprendono alcuni dei movimenti di cose, persone, idee disseminati nelle poesie, si chiude (e chiude la raccolta) con tre parole – tre toponimi – che abbozzano un viaggio, un itinerario preciso con una destinazione storicamente e culturalmente rilevante: Wapping, Greenwich, Tilbury. Il percorso va dai *docks* sul Tamigi nell'est di Londra verso il mare, passando per il meridiano sinonimo del tempo occidentale, fino ad arrivare al porto di Tilbury, reso celebre nel giugno del 1948 dall'approdo dell'*Empire Windrush*, la nave che portò il primo consistente gruppo di migranti dalle Indie occidentali in Inghilterra e che nell'immaginario collettivo segnò l'inizio della multiculturalità contemporanea del paese (per quanto sappiamo che le migrazioni sono flussi perenni, senza inizio preciso né fine). Tilbury-Londra: prima ancora di diventare il destino di questa importante diaspora, raccontata peraltro in tanta narrativa (V.S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Sam Selvon, Andrea Levy, Caryl Phillips, per citare solo alcuni tra i nomi più significativi), nel corso dell'Ottocento il Tamigi fu il canale attraverso il quale i mercantili in arrivo dalle colonie inglesi trasportavano i loro carichi esotici nel cuore dell'impero dopo le traversate oceaniche. Tragitto, di merci e

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umanità, coloniale prima e postcoloniale poi, il Tamigi è qui percorso a ritroso, cioè verso il mare aperto, dai germogli di grano gettati in acqua dai Gorji dopo il capodanno persiano come pratica scaramantica tradizionale; un'usanza che là dove nasce non necessita spiegazioni, ma che traslata nelle acque del fiume londinese può destare sospetti, e quindi va messa in atto con una certa circospezione.

Su questi difficili versi, lapidari ed essenziali, ma allo stesso tempo giocati su un lessico eterogeneo che spazia tra vari campi semantici (soprattutto quelli scientifici che rubricano flora e fauna), ha lavorato un gruppo del collettivo del «Laboratorio di traduzione poetica Monteverdelegge», qui rappresentato da Marta Izzi, Paola Maioli, Giselda Mantegazza, Fiorenza Mormile, Anna Maria Rava (scomparsa prima dell'uscita del volume) e Anna Maria Robustelli, con il coordinamento di Jane Wilkinson, curatrice della raccolta, docente di Letteratura inglese e postcoloniale nonché traduttrice lei stessa. Tante diverse competenze e sensibilità hanno operato di concerto per riportare in italiano l'equilibrio delicato di un verso sciolto che in originale ogni tanto non disdegna la rima. Le traduttrici sono riuscite a restituire anche l'effetto straniante ottenuto dall'uso di sostantivi che vengono da lessici specialistici e che qui, anch'essi, 'migrano' in un ambito, quello poetico, nel quale certo non sono di casa: «a volte una filigrana / di foglie e ossa, a volte il vento / si modellerà / in isotopi, / la vita intera in un lampo / di termoluminescenza» («Emivite»); «patella pantofola / cappalunga / flustra foliacea, salicornia» («Sulla battigia»); «troverai / che scorre sangue azzurro rame – / unico. / È l'emocianina. Che talento per i fatti» («Crustacea»). Osso dermico, *pis-en-lit*, pissabet, *bittera tzelaut*, tarabuso, epilobio, giaietto, *cinquefoil*, grongo strabico, *kharboozeh*, clinker, Pioppini, *Web-cap*, glicosidi, falena wainscot, abaloni, Pitseolak: non sono pochi i lemmi che devono aver presentato dubbi a volte impossibili da sciogliere per le traduttrici, che si sono avvalse anche dell'aiuto di Mina Gorji stessa nella scelta della resa (spesso rimasta tale e quale all'originale per l'inesistenza di un corrispettivo italiano).

L'arte della fuga è perciò una raccolta complessa, accurata, affascinante. Si inserisce in quel panorama sempre più ricco di poesia anglofona sulla diaspora, sul radicamento, sull'abbandono in grado di dare linfa alla straordinarietà di vicende umane mai uguali a se stesse che forse solo nella letteratura possono trovare lo spazio per 'raccontarsi' senza appiattirsi, vedendosi restituire, grazie all'alta figuratività e polisemia della parola poetica, la propria specificità.

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À petits pas avec Kathleen Gyssels

Jean-Louis Cornille
Université de Cape Town, Afrique du Sud et à Antsiranana, Madagascar

Compte rendu de Gyssels, K. (2023). *« A ti pas » avec l'antillectuel Léon Damas. Vers une France décoloniale ?*. Leiden ; Boston : Brill, 469 pp. Collection Francopolyphonies 32.

On nous présente généralement la Négritude comme un ensemble homogène et compact, formé d'un trio d'amis inséparables s'étant retrouvé à Paris dans les années 1930. Kathleen Gyssels met en doute cette apparente unité – d'emblée bancale, selon elle, puisque Léon-Gontran Damas n'a jamais été considéré que comme le 'troisième homme' de la Négritude. Soucieuse d'inverser la perspective, de redresser une injustice, l'auteure vise ni plus ni moins à détacher Damas de la Négritude, à le sortir du « triangle dans lequel, de toute manière, il cadrait mal » (Gyssels 2023, 18). De fait, Damas a toujours joué les troisièmes violons : issu de la Guyane, ce parent pauvre des Antilles, il n'a rien fait pour, à peine acquise, asseoir sa position, encore moins pour assurer sa situation posthume, ses inédits restant inaccessibles. Face à la réussite éclatante tant politique que poétique de ses deux compères, Senghor et Césaire, il a la mine grise : 'député dépité', non réélu après un premier mandat, il connaît un parcours semé d'embûches, empli d'amertume. Alors qu'au départ, il semble en avance sur les deux autres, il finit toujours à l'arrière, bon dernier : ses *Pigments* balayés par le plus tardif *Cahier* de Césaire, son anthologie effacée par celle postérieure de Senghor. Non seulement apparaît-il le moins 'sympa' du trio, il fait tout pour déplaire, sa propre posture 'antipa' rendant sa canonisation problématique.

Si pendant longtemps Damas n'a pas bénéficié d'autant d'attention que les deux autres, sa renommée ne peut sensément que

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grandir – notamment grâce aux travaux de Kathleen Gyssels, qui n'en est pas à son premier essai sur Damas. Car dans cette malédiction initiale réside peut-être sa chance d'être relu aujourd'hui, hors Négritude. N'a-t-on pas tout dit sur ce mouvement dont on s'accorde au plus à souligner l'importance toute historique, mais à présent dépassée ? Les oppositions binaires, telles qu'entre Noir et Blanc, se sont effacées devant la célébration de zones floues, hybrides, d'espaces tiers de migration et de métissage où n'ont plus cours les notions d'authenticité, de pureté raciale ou de retour au pays natal. 'Ithyphallique', Senghor s'est vu reléguer aux enfers ; Césaire, auquel on reprocha d'avoir préféré la langue française au créole, finit au purgatoire. L'actuel mouvement 'décolonial', né sur le continent sud-américain, semble favoriser l'émergence du seul Damas, en dépit de l'absence de toute lecture de la part de Chamoiseau ou de Glissant : et c'est tout le travail de Kathleen Gyssels de nous montrer comment rêver/révéler/réveiller son œuvre afin qu'elle finisse par nous parvenir entière, fût-ce 'à petits pas'. S'il ne fut jamais pleinement reconnu au sein de la Négritude, c'est sans doute qu'il était d'emblée quelque peu différent, naviguant entre post-négritude et pré-créolité, toujours dans l'entre-deux : *in limbo*. On aura reconnu la thèse que défendait déjà, non sans faire quelques remous, Gyssels dans un précédent ouvrage – publié chez Passage(s) en 2016 –, consacré au plus homogène des recueils de Damas, *Black-Label*.

Avec son dernier ouvrage, comptant plus de quatre-cents pages, elle jette un gros pavé dans la mare atlantique noire. Une somme, sorte de « fourre-tout » fluide (354), forcément répétitif, fait de flux et de reflux, qu'il nous est impossible de couvrir ici en entier. Composé de cinq chapitres de longueur inégale, il ambitionne, en vue de déconnecter Damas de la Négritude, de multiplier les connections hors ce champ étroit, tant avec les intercesseurs que furent Apollinaire, Gide et surtout Desnos,[1] qu'avec celles et ceux qui le suivront (comme Taubira, ou comme Gherasim Luca pour le bégaiement poétique). À regret, on laissera de côté l'un des aspects les plus intéressants et les plus fouillés de ces mises en relation : ses liens avec les auteurs de la Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes

1 Avec *Mines de rien*, ultime recueil récemment paru, dont Gyssels regrette et dénonce à plusieurs reprises le changement de titre en *Dernière Escale*, apporté par Sandrine Poujols, qui lui apparaît comme une « véritable violation du droit d'auteur » (250), c'est bien à Robert Desnos que Damas rend hommage en inversant le rapport pluriel/singulier au sein du titre desnosien, *Mine de riens*, dans lequel le surréaliste avait ludiquement su dissimuler ses initiales ('Mdr'). Et que non moins habilement Damas s'approprie, fait sien ('mine' en anglais), comme il dit sienne la « Terre ferme / aframérindienne / mienne » – « de rien » pouvant sournoisement s'inverser en « dernier ». Par un jeu sur les initiales semblable, *Névralgies* venait compléter et achever ce qui n'était encore qu'un *Graffiti*, leurs premières lettres associées donnant ce syntagme fédérateur du projet poétique damassien : NE/GR.

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et McKay, avec lesquels Damas partageait un même attrait pour les ambiguïtés genrées.

Ce souci prévalant de reconnecter Damas à d'autres, mené 'tambour-ka' battant par Gyssels, se fait toutefois au détriment des mécanismes de déconnection auxquels Damas a recours dans ses rapports avec Senghor, avec Césaire surtout. De fait, une lecture approfondie des textes permet de détecter très tôt de petites fissures, des dissensions mineures, de sourdes rivalités, d'imperceptibles tensions, et même des règlements de comptes à l'amicale au sein de la triade. Concentrons-nous sur le poème le plus fréquemment cité dans cet ouvrage – à juste titre, d'ailleurs – « Solde », étant considéré, avec « Hoquet », comme l'un des textes phares de *Pigments*. L'édition originale du recueil, comme l'auteure le fait observer, était accompagnée d'un frontispice de Frans Masereel (représentant un homme noir jaillissant nu hors d'un smoking au faux-col muni d'un plastron) qui illustrait très précisément le scénario de ce poème. Or « Solde » y est précédé de « Un clochard m'a demandé dix sous », poème que Gyssels rapproche judicieusement d'un des passages les plus commentés du *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, celui du tramway parisien dans lequel a pris place un « nègre comique et laid » – piteux bonhomme dont Césaire prend soin de se distancier au point de se rendre complice du rire alentour des commères françaises. De fait, Damas semble y donner la parole à un sosie de ce « nègre comique et laid » : « Moi aussi un beau jour j'ai sorti / mes hardes / de clochard ». Sans cesse répété, ce « Moi aussi » constitue une parole de *challenger*, qui fait écho à « Et moi, et moi » sur lequel s'ouvre le passage du « nègre comique » – à cette réserve près qu'aussitôt Damas se révolte face aux moqueries dont on l'accable : « jusqu'au jour où j'en ai eu / marre de les voir se gausser de mes hardes de clochard » (Damas 2005, 40).

Mais Gyssels omet de ranger « Solde » sous cette même bannière (fanion ou fanon), alors que les deux poèmes consécutifs vont de pair : il convient de les lier en les lisant d'un seul souffle. Et ce n'est certes pas un hasard si « Solde » comporte cette dédicace : « Pour Aimé Césaire ». Ne commence-t-il pas par ces mots, répercutés sur l'ensemble des sept strophes : « J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule », face à une assemblée anonyme de bourgeois (désignée par « ils », « leur ») ? Or qu'est-ce qu'être ridicule, sinon être comique sans le vouloir : l'être à son corps défendant. C'est, à coup sûr, une réplique à ce passage du « nègre comique et laid », lui-même emprunté à « L'Albatros » de Baudelaire (mais sans doute aussi à l'un de ses poèmes en prose, « Le vieux saltimbanque »). On pourrait objecter que les sépare une question de dates : *Pigments* fut publié en 1937, alors que le *Cahier*, entrepris dès 1936, était encore en chantier. Qu'à cela ne tienne, puisqu'entre poètes amis l'on échangeait les productions les plus récentes, des poèmes pouvant circuler entre eux de

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manière confidentielle. Pareillement, le fait que la dédicace ne figure pas dans l'édition originale, mais qu'elle n'ait été ajoutée qu'ultérieurement, ne contredit en rien l'intention première : assurément la dédicace ne fait que rendre manifeste le discret brin de dialogue avec Césaire d'emblée voulu par Damas. Ce n'est toutefois pas à Baudelaire, jugé trop conformiste, que Damas fait ici référence : « Solde » est un titre rimbaldien, tiré des *Illuminations*, dont les strophes commencent également par un même syntagme sans cesse répété : « À vendre ». L'implication est lourde de sens : Rimbaud s'y moque des faux poètes, vendus (*sold*), prêts à répudier leurs idéaux.[2] Choisir Rimbaud en l'opposant à Baudelaire s'avère un choix hautement significatif. C'est privilégier l'intransigeance au lieu du compromis ; préférer à la modernité subie la modernité désirée.

Amical en apparence, « Solde » s'adresse en vérité directement 'à' Aimé Césaire : non pas tant 'pour' que 'contre' lui. Voyons de plus près le tableau que Damas brosse de lui-même, dans ce qui pourrait passer pour un portrait du poète en exilé parisien : « J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule dans leurs souliers / dans leur smoking / dans leur plastron / dans leur faux-col / dans leur monocle / dans leur melon » (Damas 2005, 41).[3] Portrait inversé puisqu'allant des pieds à la tête, à rebours de celui que dressait Césaire, dans lequel Damas lui répond point par point : à la « veste élimée » du Nègre il oppose son « smoking » ; aux « orteils » puants qui sortent des « souliers » de Césaire, correspondent des « orteils qui ne sont pas faits pour transpirer ». C'est peu dire que Damas lui règle ses comptes, il le prend littéralement à contre-pied. Car ce n'est plus un autre (son frère, son semblable) que le poète trouve comique, c'est ici le poète lui-même qui se trouve ridicule aux yeux des Blancs. De plus, en se disant « parmi eux complice » – mot par lequel Césaire désignait sa « lâcheté », il admet avoir aussi un instant trahi sa cause. Ce n'est donc pas un hasard si « Solde » est précédé de ce titre : « Un clochard m'a demandé dix sous ». En se succédant de la sorte, ces deux poèmes se complémentent, au miroir du texte césairien : dans l'un, contrairement à Césaire, Damas s'identifie, mal vêtu, à la « négraille ». Dans l'autre, trop bien vêtu, il finit par rejeter les signes de la « ci-vi-li-sa-tion » (Damas 2005, 41) à laquelle il a un moment cédé, sans toutefois jamais s'être « blanchi » pour autant.

De deux amis, l'un est toujours le prétendant, l'autre son rival, selon une proposition de Deleuze relative à la pensée grecque. « Solde » ne se dédie pas tant qu'il ne se dédit, Damas agissant bien moins qu'il

2 Dans « Hoquet », autre poème phare de *Pigments*, Damas revisitait déjà « Les poètes de sept ans » : « Ma mère voulant d'un fils mémorandum » y répondant à « la Mère fermant le livre du devoir » (Damas 2005, 36).

3 Damas, L.-G. (2005). *Pigments*. Paris : Présence africaine.

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ne réagit, éternel second, toujours en retard de quelques longueurs malgré son avance initiale. Sous l'apparence d'un hommage, se cache une véritable correction. Un amical pugilat entre poids plumes, en somme, à l'issue duquel l'adversaire finit 'sonné'. Sandrine Poujols n'évoque-t-elle pas dans sa présentation de *Black-Label* « une parole directe, en crochets courts et uppercuts dirait-on, puisqu'elle adopte souvent un rythme de boxeur au combat » (Damas 2011, 148)[4] ? La page pour lui a la forme d'un ring où viennent s'entrechoquer les syllabes. Toujours en mouvement, il va droit au but, et rend un à un les coups reçus. Le nez en sang (Damas 2005, 19), il valse autour de son adversaire. Lui décoche un gauche. L'envoie au tapis, tel Joe Louis, légendaire boxeur noir américain, qui était son strict contemporain : il devint champion du monde en 1937, l'année même où paraissait *Pigments*.[5]

Autre combat que nous rappelle Gyssels (2023, 158) : la vieille forme du sonnet constitua brièvement un enjeu poétique, lorsque Louis Aragon le resuscita dans les années 1950. Le Haïtien René Dépestre lui ayant enjambé le pas, Césaire le tança vertement. Damas devait se lancer à son tour dans la bataille, en déconstruisant la forme du sonnet dans son dernier recueil poétique *Black-Label* (1956) par ce vers récurrent : « Sonne et sonne ». Ce vers inaugure un poème-refrain de huit lignes, à sa première occurrence, mais qui à chaque réapparition va s'amplifier d'une ligne, le poème ainsi se complétant ainsi sous nos yeux : à la fin de ce mouvement, il en comptera quatorze, tel un sonnet qui sonne et résonne d'un son net.[6] Sonné.

4 Damas, L.-G. (2011). *Black-Label*. Paris : Gallimard.

5 Césaire n'est pas le seul à faire les frais de l'opération damassienne. Gyssels rappelle que Senghor aussi en pâtira, auquel Damas reproche d'avoir rendu hommage aux « tirailleurs », alors qu'il aurait mieux valu « commencer par envahir le Sénégal ». Ce sont les derniers mots de *Pigments* : ils font écho au poème qui ouvre le recueil, dédié à Senghor, né à Joal et donc jugé trop joaillier, orfèvre en grammaire, dans *Black-Label*. Mais celui qui, dans les années 1950, se sentira le plus visé, c'est le Malgache Jacques Rabemananjara que Damas présente comme un dilettante absolu dans son anthologie *Latitudes françaises* (1947).

6 Un début de vers que Rabemananjara, autrefois ridiculisé par Damas pour son académisme, s'appropriera des années plus tard, en le réinsérant dans un sonnet tout à fait classique, plus de vingt ans plus tard : « Sonne et sonne avec moi la conque du réveil » (*Ordalies*, 1978). Peut-être, Rabemananjara le fit-il en se souvenant des derniers mots de son maître sur le point de se suicider – mots que Damas ne manquera pas de reprendre dans son anthologie lorsqu'il y évoque longuement la mort de Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo : « Ça sonne, ça sonne ».

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Bio-bibliographies

BANGA Harjot | harjot.banga@unito.it Harjot Banga, a PhD Candidate at the University of Turin and Genoa, specialises in English Postcolonial Literature in the field of Digital Humanities. He has a wide range of academic interests, including ecocriticism, gender, trauma, urban, subaltern, and cultural studies in English-speaking countries' literature.

BASTIANONI Elena | elena.bastianoni@phd.unipi.it Elena Bastianoni is a PhD student in English Literature at the University of Pisa, in the Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics, where she obtained both her BA and MA. She is specializing in Anglophone Literature with a dissertation focusing on Anglophone Pandemic Fiction. She is currently focusing on the narrative production of Margaret Atwood, Cherie Dimaline and Emma Donoghue, with a special attention to the link between damaged ecology and the pandemic phenomenon in dystopian fiction. Her research interests range from Postcolonial Literature to Ecocriticism, Canadian Literature and Indigenous Literature.

CIMAROSTI Roberta | roberta.cimarosti@unical.it Roberta Cimarosti is a tenure-track researcher at the University of Calabria. Her Research fields are: World Englishes and anglophone postcolonial literatures, translation studies, critical applied linguistics, stylistics of nonfiction and literary texts. Her publications include articles on cognitive poetics, English language literacy, counter discourse analysis of J.M. Coetzee's essays and novels, Shakespeare's plays and postcolonial rewritings, the theme of language and power and identity in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and contemporary multimodal rewritings, Édouard Glissant's creolization and chaos theory, two monographs on Derek Walcott's poetics.

CORNILLE Jean-Louis | jean-louis.cornille@uct.ac.za Jean-Louis Cornille is Emeritus professor of French literature at the University of Cape Town. He currently teaches at the University of Antsiranana in Madagascar. Author of several books on Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Jarry, Apollinaire, Bataille, Céline and Sartre, he more recently published on Chamoiseau and on Malagasy writers. His latest publication, *L'Anté-Livre. Pour revenir à Raharimanana*, was published in 2023 by Anibwe.

DE CAPITANI Lucio | lucio.decapitani@unive.it Lucio De Capitani is a postdoctoral researcher at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. His research interests include colonial and postcolonial literatures (especially Indian writing in English, the work of Amitav Ghosh and Robert Louis Stevenson), theories of world literature, the connections between anthropology and literary studies, and ecocriticism (with a special focus on cli-fi and solarpunk). He has co-edited the collection *Venice and the Anthropocene. An Ecocritical Guide* (wetlands, 2022) and published *Ethnographic Narratives as World Literature. Uneven Entanglements in European and South Asian Writing* (Palgrave, 2023).

DEHOUX Amaury | amaury.dehoux@uclouvain.be Amaury Dehoux earned his PhD in comparative literature from the Université catholique de Louvain. He currently serves as a postdoctoral fellow at UCLouvain, contributing to the NarraMuse project, which is dedicated to examining European literary works by postmigrant authors of Muslim descent. His primary expertise lies in Francophone literature, with a particular emphasis on contemporary novels. His comparative approach extends to novels in English, and delves into themes related to postcolonialism, globalization, interculturality and transculturality. In addition to papers published in journals such as *Poétique* or *La Revue canadienne de littérature comparée*, he has authored four books, one of which is *Le Roman du posthumain. Parcours dans les littératures anglophones, francophones et hispanophones d'aujourd'hui* (Honoré Champion, 2020).

DELLA VALLE Paola | paola.dellavalle@unito.it Paola Della Valle is associate professor at the University of Turin. She specializes in New Zealand and Pacific literature, postcolonial and gender studies, environmental humanities, drama. Her articles appeared in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Textus*, *NZSA Bulletin of New Zealand Studies*, *Le Simplegadi*, *Il Castello di Elsinore*, *RiCognizioni*, *English Studies*, *Anglistica Pisana*, *Semicerchio, Altre Modernità* and *Loxias*. She has published the monographs *From Silence to Voice: The Rise of Maori Literature* (Auckland, 2010), *Stevenson nel Pacifico: Una lettura postcoloniale* (Roma, 2013) and *Priestley e il tempo, il tempo di Priestley* (Torino 2016). She has recently contributed to the volumes *Antroposcenari: Storie, paesaggi, ecologie* (2018), *Trees in Literatures and the Arts: HumanArboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene* (2021), *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film* (2023).

GALLI MASTRODONATO Paola Irene | paolai.galli@unitus.it Paola Irene Galli Mastrodonato, PhD in Comparative Literature from McGill University, is a retired faculty member of Tuscia University, Viterbo. She has published several books, articles, and essays on eighteenth-century studies and the novel of the Revolutionary period (*La rivolta della ragione*, 1991; *Storia della vita e tragica morte di Bianca Capello: Genesi di un racconto di successo del Settecento*, 2009; "Romans gothiques anglais et traductions françaises: L'année 1797 et la migration des récits". *Neohelicon*, 1986, quoted in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic*, 2020,1). She has translated from English to Italian the plays of Anglo-Québécois playwright David Fennario (*Balconville/ La morte di René Lévesque*, 2005; *Bolsheviki: Una commedia mortalmente seria*, 2014); she is the author of *Il teatro politico di David Fennario* (2002). She has edited volumes on emerging literatures (*Ai confini dell'Impero: Le Letterature emergenti*, 1996) and geographical inscriptions of the imaginary (*Geo-Grafie: Percorsi di frontiera attraverso le letterature*, 1999). She has dedicated a volume to the revaluation of a glorious woman of the Italian Renaissance, *Bianca Cappello: Dalla damnatio memoriae alla verità* (2020). She has inscribed the adventure novels of Emilio Salgari into the wider web of postcolonial and contemporary culture studies, as author of several articles

and of the first full length study in English, *Emilio Salgari The Tiger Is Still Alive!* (2024), as well as editor of two collective volumes (*Il tesoro di Emilio: Omaggio a Salgari*, 2008; *Riletture Salgariane*, 2012).

GUARDUCCI Maria Paola | mariapaola.guarducci@uniroma3.it Maria Paola Guarducci teaches English Literature at Roma Tre University. Her interests focus on relationships between the British literary canon and the empire, South African literature, women writing, Black British literature. She is author of articles on various British authors, of a book on post-apartheid South African novels, *Dopo l'interregno. Il romanzo sudafricano e la transizione* (2008) and she co-authored with Francesca Terrenato *In-verse. Poesia femminile dal Sudafrica* (2022), on women's poetry in English and Afrikaans. She has translated and edited two short stories by Joseph Conrad, *The Idiots* and *Domani*, released under the title of *Domani* (2023).

TARONNA Annarita | annarita.taronna@uniba.it Annarita Taronna is Associate Professor in English Language and Translation at the University of Bari "Aldo Moro". In her courses, as well as in her research, she has always privileged readings and analyses that are part of the contemporary debate on language, languages, English-speaking cultures, translation, language mediation as an intercultural translation practice generated by borders, in emergency migration contexts (i.e. ports, CARA, CIE, SPRAR) in contact with liminality/marginality, race, gender, multilingualism, hospitality. Recently, she has published a monograph, *Black Englishes. Pratiche linguistiche transfrontaliere Italia-USA* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2016) and the following essays: "Lost and Regained in Translation: Cross-Border and Intersectional Practices Between the Black US and Black Italy". *Ágalma: rivista di studi culturali e di estetica*, 43(1), 2022, 38-50; "Shaping Translingual Writing and Translation as Intersectional Practices: Nadeesha Uyangoda's *L'unica persona nera nella stanza* and *Sulla razza* as Case Studies". *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 58(5), 2022, 684-97; Cazzato L.; Taronna, A. (2023). "Decolonial Mediatic Artivist Engagement and the Palestinian Question". Blaagaard, B.B.; Marchetti, S.; Ponzanesi, S.; Bassi, S. (eds), *Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media in Europe*. Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari.

TODESCO Francesca | francesca.todesco@uniud.it Francesca Todesco teaches French and Francophone Literature at the University of Udine. Her research interests are eighteenth-century literature, in particular the work of J.-J. Rousseau and, within contemporary French literature, the novels and *livres d'artiste* of M. Butor. She has also participated in the production of a repertory of the personal writings of religious women at the time of the Counter-Reformation. A specialist in the Francophone literature of the Maghreb and the Middle East, she is the author of numerous essays, in which the variety of content of this literary production is explored through stylistic-rhetorical, semiotic, enunciative and intertextual critical approaches. She is a member of the Scientific Steering Committee of *Interfrancophonies. Revue des littératures et cultures d'expression française*, of the Advisory Board of *Il Tolomeo. Rivista di studi postcoloniali*, and of the Scientific Editorial Board of kournal *TecloưYa*. She is also responsible for the Maghreb Section of the journal *Ponts/Ponti. Langues, littératures, civilisations des Pays francophones*.

TOSI Valérie | valerie.tosi@phd.unipi.it Valérie Tosi is a PhD student in English Literature at the University of Pisa. Her thesis focuses on Charles Dickens as a character in Anglophone Literatures. Valérie's research interests range from Anglophone Literatures to Australian Indigenous Studies. She is member of AIA, COMPALIT, AISCLI, and the Dickens Fellowship. Her publications include: "Decolonising the Mind of The Antipodean Author: Gothic Tropes and Postcolonial Discourse in Peter Carey's My Life as a Fake". *Il Tolomeo*, 23, 2021, 153-67; "Fantastic Tropes and Indigenous Female Gothic in Alexis Wright's The Swan Book". *ContactZone*, 2, 2021, 3350; "Mimetic Mechanisms and Indigenous Vulnerability in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*". *Altre Modernità*, 2022, 165-79; "Fatto, finzione e contaminazione in *True History Of The Kelly Gang*". *Interazioni e contaminazioni*, 2023, 9, 295-315.

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