Postcolonial Theory and Crisis

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Edited by
Isabel Capeloa Gil, Catherine Nesci
and Paulo de Medeiros

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1 See NWO link: https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/ig18014.

2 See NWO Link: https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/236-98-006-0. More general info about the past events of the PIN and PEN projects can be found here: http://www.postcolonialstudies.nl/p/mission-statement.html.

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Postcolonial Theory & Crisis: Contemporary Interventions

The age of crisis

Just as Hobsbawm designated the nineteenth century as the Age of Empire, and the twentieth as the Age of Extremes, the twenty-first century might well be on its way to being seen as the Age of Crisis. It is not that past ages were not themselves marked by profound crisis. However, the sense of crisis in the present has come to dominate, so that instead of being perceived as an exception, or as a catalyst ushering in historical change, crisis now rather seems to be perpetual. In the wake of the anti-colonial struggles that culminated in most cases in independence for former European colonies all over the world, postcolonial theory succeeded, or so it seemed, in breaking through the colonial mindset with its obsolete, toxic, and endemic categories designed to perpetuate inequality. Yet inequality, in all its forms, has only increased, and in giant leaps, instead of being reduced as once seemed possible. Since the Covid pandemic started spreading through the world, reducing most polities to a generalized *de facto*, and not infrequently *de jure*, state of exception, the concept of crisis has been on everyone's lips. But its ubiquity was already clear, at least since the global financial collapse of 2007. In the millennial transition, the prefix 'post' had come to signify more and more not just the realization of a 'coming after' but also the impossibility of not seeing the present as still very much dealing with the wounds of the past. Yet, with the appearance of pseudo-concepts such as 'post-truth' after an equally imaginary 'death of History,' the logic of the 'post,' itself always already being questioned, may appear to have outlived its usefulness.

We also wanted to write this book in conjunction with the larger European PIN project on "Postcolonial Intellectuals and Their European Publics" (funded by the Dutch Research Council)[1] which investigates the role of postcolonial public in-

1 The network was a collaboration between Utrecht University in the Netherlands and the Universities of Leeds and Warwick in the UK, Münster University in Germany, Ca' Foscari University in Italy, Aalborg in Denmark and the University of Lisbon in Portugal (https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/ig18014). See: https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/ig18014 and http://www.postcolonialstudies.nl/p/missionstatement.html.

The network, which was coordinated by Prof. Ponzanesi, has held several conferences and been publishing the results of the research developed by an international team of scholars over the past few years, in the forms of edited volumes, special issues and digital projects.

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tellectuals as crucial actors in renewing the function of the humanities and of democratic participation in Europe (Ponzanesi 2016). The network generated very productive exchanges because: (1) it included figures that are not strictly postcolonial but are seminal for the postcolonial legacy (Ponzanesi and Habed 2018); (2) it rethought the category of the 'intellectual' by including not only migrant academics and political spokespersons but also writers, artists, activists, organizations, and social movements (Ponzanesi 2021; Ponzanesi and Mendes 2022); (3) it addressed uprisings, protests, marches, and commemorations as acts of citizenship; (4) it accounted for the shifts in "publics" through social media and citizen media activism and artivism (Baker and Blaagaard 2016; Blaagaard, Marchetti, Ponzanesi and Bassi 2023).

More interestingly for the concept of crisis, the project explored the idea of the "intellectual" as being in crisis, and waning in popularity, visibility, *and* authority. No longer iconic and titanic figures that solitarily speak truth to power (Foucault and Deleuze 1977; Said 1996), on behalf of silenced and subaltern communities, but more "agonistic intellectuals" who are not enemies but adversaries whose task is to create conflictual consensus, in order to enhance democratic participation. The project looked at the idea that by distinguishing between "antagonism" and "agonism," it is possible to visualize a form of democracy that does not deny radical negativity (Mouffe 2013: VII). Therefore instead of upholding the widely shared idea that intellectuals are in decline and bound to disappear any time soon (Posner 2001; Kristof 2014) there seems to be a return of the intellectual in the renewed form of collective movements, activism, and participatory social media engagements that promote not the death of the intellectual but its transformation, democratization, and pluralization into different communities, genres, and media expressions. As Helen Small claims (2002: 10–11), the notion of crisis might be a Western cliché, informed by a universalistic bias that equates the conditions of all intellectuals regardless of their specificity or social groupings (see Ponzanesi and Habed 2018). Therefore intellectuals are becoming more visible and invisible at the same time, hard to locate and identify. But their apparent evanescence and unlocatibility create a sense of anxiety, for who should now address the urgent issues of our times and critically tackle crises, emergencies, and conflicts using their lucidity, wisdom, and capability? Who can speak to wider audiences and constituencies in an influential, effective, and affective manner that can bring change, solidarity, and impact? For these reasons, it is important to rethink the very notion of crisis, as it is often used and abused for political fearmongering and spectacularization of disasters.

For example, the notion of a "migration crisis" that emerged in the media from 2015 as an aftereffect of the civil war in Syria signals the mobilization of media publics towards either the fear of the "refugee" Other as a mass invasion

in faceless waves and the surge of the politics of pity and solidarity that mobilize humanitarian responses and welcoming infrastructures. The status of Europe, which is supposed to welcome so-called "legitimate" refugees, is itself so very precarious at the moment; instead of identification with the needy, this has led to antagonism, ambivalence, and fear, often erupting into pure xenophobia, expertly manipulated by right-wing demagogues and anti-immigration parties – what Zygmunt Bauman has called a "moral panic" in his book *Strangers at Our Door* (2016).

The recent refugee crisis in Europe is the first of its kind in a fully digital age. This has meant that migrants have been able to use new digital affordances to aid themselves in risky transnational crossings, keeping in touch with the loved ones left behind but also with their peers who have successfully arrived in the destination countries. But the combination of technology and migration deserves further scrutiny as it has not only allowed for geographical distance to be bridged through digital proximity but also created new anxieties and fears. The tools that speed up this passage provide many benefits, but they are also used to exploit refugees, and they raise questions about surveillance. Mobile phones and messaging services like Viber, Snapchat, and FaceTime are primary means for smugglers to organize illicit crossings via trucks, rubber boats, and dinghies. Refugees are therefore also particularly vulnerable to manipulation or crimes enabled by digital connectivity (Ponzanesi 2019; Ponzanesi and Leurs 2022).

Furthermore, technology use, in particular among non-elite migrants, is treated with suspicion, whereas hyper-mobile global nomadic expatriate groups are commonly celebrated (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2018). Recent media images of refugees reaching dry land and taking selfies, for example, have sparked heated debates on whether these refugees are worthy of aid and support (Chouliaraki 2017; Risam 2019; Ticktin 2016). Images of refugees as technologically savvy and digital natives have instead generated fear and anxiety about an invasion of bogus refugees feeding into "high tech orientalism" (Chun 2006: 73).

In her book *Crisis and Critique: A Brief History of Media Participation in Times of Crisis,* the media scholar Anne Kaun asks in her opening whether new crisis situations enable or require new forms of critique (Kaun 2016: 1). This is a valid question for our volume. The very notion of critique has undergone serious "critique" and it had been subject to a rethinking in its own right (Habed 2021). This is especially related to Latour's warning that "critique has run out of steam" (Latour 2004), followed by scholars such as Felski (2015), Anker and Felski (2017) and K. Sedgwick (1997) moving towards the notion of post-critique as a way to recuperate the affective and holistic engagement of literary creativity and participation beyond the nihilism of critique for the sake of critique. Critique is often automatically equaled with political relevance and engagement, for this see the

debate of Robbins (2017) on Felski discussed more in details in this volume in the chapter by Colpani and Habed.

In her specific case, Kaun investigates how media technology plays out in activism as a form of critique. Referring to Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht's idea of *Krise und Kritik* as a form of transition that enable new forms of critique, Kaun writes that Brecht and Benjamin "saw intellectuals and artists as the driving forces of this process of critique as they had the aesthetic responsibility to speed up the critical juncture. Through their engagement, critique would lead to a fundamental social change" (Kaun 2016: 1). This is much in line with the above discussion about intellectuals becoming "democracy helpers" (Misztal 2007: 1), but also more democratized and less elitist, including writers, artists, and activists, and tending towards more spread-out protest movements that combine media and social change as a response to deep political crisis and the endangerment of democracy. In addition to the Arab Spring, social and digital movements such as Black Lives Matter, the #MeToo movement, and Occupy Wall Street share the need to address a societal crisis in which technical savviness leads to new forms of collective, global, and intergenerational activism for change.

Much of this discussion has also to do with the crisis of Europe. Now more than ever the very notion of Europe is daunting and dangling. One of the most acute thinkers on the question of Europe, Étienne Balibar (2004 [2001]), has for quite some time now been alerting us to the crisis of Europe, meaning both a crisis of the idea of Europe as a transnational identity, and a crisis of the very concepts of citizenship and democracy. With the resurgence of far right movements practically everywhere and the European Union's forced tolerance for illiberal, autocratic, even dictatorial, regimes either within its borders or close by, the notion of a crisis of democracy cannot be ignored, nor can it be dismissed as yet another folly of radical intellectuals who are forever discontented. At the same time, a crisis of citizenship makes itself felt not only through the massive disengagement with politics in general, but also in the full-fledged cynicism about politics as another name for corruption, as Wendy Brown, for instance, has duly analyzed in her recent book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (2019). She notes several ways in which we, and particularly those on the Left, have failed to properly take into account what has been happening:

> [the Left] does not register the intensifying nihilism that challenges truth and transforms traditional morality into weapons of political battle. It does not identify how assaults on constitutional democracy, on racial, gender, and sexual equality, on public education, and on a civil, nonviolent public sphere have all been carried out in the name of both freedom and morality (2019: 7).

Such assaults also tend to go hand in hand with a pervasive xenophobia that conveniently ignores not just ethical issues, but even economical reasoning, in its tar-

geting migrants as the (old) new convenient scapegoat for society's ills. The figure of the migrants, originating from outside Europe but often also from within some of its regions, be it from the South or the East, continues to be instrumental in channeling fears so many of us experience in a world rent by multiple, successive, and often simultaneous crises. Twenty odd years ago, this is how Balibar reflected on his own intervention: "During the interminable discussion over the situation of immigrants and 'undocumented aliens' in France and in Europe, I evoked the specter of an apartheid being formed at the same time as European citizenship itself. This barely hidden apartheid concerns the populations of the 'South' as well as the 'East'" (2004 [2001]: 22). It is no surprise that intellectuals practically everywhere have sought to engage with, and reflect on, what crisis means in the present, how it has become instrumentalized, normalized, and consequently, to some extent trivialized.

At Leiden University, for instance, a group of scholars formed the "Crisis and Critique Network." As they put it:

> This network approaches crisis not as an objective condition but as a framing through which specific narratives of the present gain valence while others are excluded. Making crisis an object of interrogation, our network brings together scholars whose work explores how different frameworks of crisis produce experiences of the present, rest on or disrupt established narratives of the past, and broker specific outlooks on the future ("Crisis and Critique Network" n.d.).

Another pertinent example from the many that could be given, specifically from a materialist perspective, is the international journal *Crisis and Critique*, started in 2011 and publishing its first issue the following year. Its editors, Agon Hamza and Frank Ruta, note the journal's aim and focus on its website:

> "Crisis and Critique": concepts are of immense importance for philosophical, yet also for political thought. But, especially today it is crucial not too hastily assume one already knows what either means. Both concepts are obviously related to concrete but also rather abstract practices. Both crisis as well as critique are practical concepts that, as we assume, do not have any transhistorical or transcendental status and thus do neither come with a pregiven unchangeable content. Crisis as well as critique must be thought from within a specific contemporary time frame. This frame is the frame of the present ("About us" n.d.)

How to make sense of postcolonial theory in Europe in the present? One way might be to renew its significance as world conflicts have entered a new "post-imperial phase" with the return of ideologies of empire in various parts of the world no longer so much as the active forces that propelled European, or Western, attempts at global domination, but more as reactive, largely nostalgic, but no less corrosive and destructive impulses, be it the rapid spread of open xenophobia throughout most of Europe or the particular form that "Empire 2.0" has been

taking, most visibly in Britain, the erstwhile dominant imperial and colonial power of the late nineteenth century, with Brexit or in Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and ongoing Palestinain-Israeli conflict and staggering ensued humanitarian crisis. The present volume aims at a conceptualization of the relations between Postcolonial Theory and Crisis as well as the crisis of postcolonialism and the ways in which it can respond to contemporary issues in the present, trying to understand, situate, and analyze postcolonial theory in the face of neo-liberalism, neo-imperialism, and neo-colonialism. Indeed, the relation between "post" and the increasing use of "neo" is in itself part and parcel of the question. The essays in this volume address those questions both at a conceptual theoretical level and through the analysis of specific case studies.

The volume is organized into four sections, divided thematically and reflecting different aspects of crisis in relation to postcolonial emergencies, be they critical, environmental, cultural, or imaginative. Even though all the chapters present a reflection on Postcolonial Theory and Crisis, some focus more specifically on certain aspects of the crisis from a global perspective. Section 1, concerned with "New Approaches to Postcolonial Studies and Crisis," looks at current and urgent issues in Postcolonial Studies from various contemporary angles, from humanitarian crisis and the role of the mediatization of conflict to issues related to human rights, refugees, migrancy, and the Anthropocene. Section 2 follows on from this and focuses on the urgent questions posed by the environmental crisis in direct relation to postcolonial issues and questions of capitalist extraction, violent ecosystems, and ecotopias. Section 3 moves the focus to the current debates in the humanities concerning critical theory and the questioning of critique and representation, engaging variously in the theoretical concerns while also providing specific studies of both literature and the media. Section 4 opens up debates to other areas and focuses on questions of memory and postmemory as well as the critique of art and utopian thought.

Section 1 opens with a chapter by Sandra Ponzanesi on post-humanitarianism and the crisis of empathy. What is signaled with the notion of post-humanitarianism is not only the death of the grand narratives and the breakdown of the notion of a "common humanity" as a universal and shared value, but also a change in attitude towards the suffering of the Other. This implies a more fragmented, volatile, and opportunistic form of engagement, which is also caused by the constant mediatization of conflicts, violence, and suffering, which in turn has created a feeling of "compassion fatigue" (Möller 1999; Sontag 2003) among viewers who consume images of "distant suffering" from the safe space of their own living rooms (Boltanski 1993; Chouliaraki 2006; 2013).

The chapter attempts to reinstate the connection between the distant sufferer and the viewer through the analysis of a series of Virtual Reality (VR) productions made by the United Nations, artists, and major media organizations, in efforts to

use new technologies to break down the "compassion fatigue" or apathy generated by the exposure to too much crisis. VR is heralded as an "empathy machine" par excellence, because of its innovative technology that allows the user/spectator to experience another person's point of view through immersion and embodiment. In this chapter the author explores the enthusiasm, but also the ethical reservations, surrounding this new media genre of post-humanitarian appeal through the analysis of some VR projects dealing with migration and refugee issues, namely Nonny de la Peña's *Project Syria* (2012), Gabo Arora and Chris Milk's *Clouds over Sidra* (2015), Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail's *The Displaced*, (2015), and Tamara Shogaolu's *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration* (2020).

The crisis of migration is also central to Alessandra Di Maio's chapter on "Coming of Age Across the Central Mediterranean Route." It analyzes the work of E.C. Osondu's *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear,* which deals with the Mediterranean crisis and the dangerous crossings of mostly young people hoping for a better life in the West. Facing border control, racism, and pushback operations, the narrative analyzed here is that of a coming-of-age novel about an initiation journey. The book *When The Sky is Ready The Stars Will Appear* shows how these crossings are not only dictated by desperation, conflict, and fear but are also a way to fulfill the young migrant's dreams, hopes, and ambitions. The protagonist is an orphan from an unspecified African village who decides to leave home to reach the city of his dreams: Rome. Alessandra Di Maio has written extensively on the notion of the "Black Mediterranean" and this story of discovery and arrival is testimony of the need to revisit and rethink the notion of the Black Mediterranean not only as a sea of death but also as a fluid and enabling contact zone that constructs migration as a right to have rights (Arendt 1973) and as a way to trespass.

Charlotte Spear continues to elaborate on the issues of human rights for migrants in her chapter on "Crisis and the Postcolonial State: Human Rights and Contemporary Emergency." This essay aims to explore the "Age of Human Rights" as a discursive device enabling the neo-imperial situating of the state of emergency within the peripheral zones of the world system. It shows how countries from the Global South are exposed to a unique form of crisis: one which not only traverses national borders but also consolidates the displacement of the state of emergency away from the capitalist core and into distant regions. Spear also describes the twenty-first century as the Age of Crisis, but "crisis" in the peripheries of the world system is actually linked to a protraction of the colonial state of emergency which came about with colonization, whereby external powers install arbitrary dictatorial rule as theorized by Fanon and Césaire. This state of crisis comes about also through an instrumentalization of discourses surrounding human rights. This chapter, like Ponzanesi's chapter on VR and humanitarianism,

shows how neo-imperial humanitarian interventions actually fail to solve ongoing crises. On the contrary, they succeed in reinforcing some forms of colonial cultural hierarchies identified by several postcolonial theorists. Inspired by the work of the Warwick Research Collective (2015) and other thinkers such as Fanon and Césaire Charlotte Spear uses critical analyses of the colonial state of emergency to analyze contemporary twenty-first-century phenomena. The novel Bofane's *Congo Inc.* (2018) works as a literary registration of the "postcolonial state" as the site of the externally enforced law of arbitrary rule.

To close this section Jesse van Amelsvoort develops the concept of "The Postcolonial Anthropocene" in his chapter, which pleas for an engagement between postcolonial studies and the Anthropocene, in order to address the complexity of the colonial legacy on climate change within Europe itself. If the Anthropocene draws attention to the geological causes of the climate crisis, postcolonial studies make visible the human impact of the crisis in all its depth and complexity. The postcolonial Anthropocene is not only able to think about the long-term causes of the crisis, but also about its possible futures. The chapter makes links with the urgency of the environmental crisis which is unfolding, captured in the new geological epoch of the Anthropocene. The environmental crisis is seen as a "hyperobject" (Morton 2013) which is difficult to make tangible and visible, due to its slowness but also because of "representational concern[s]." The author describes the difficulties of making this crisis observable and present on an everyday and affective level. In particular, the author focuses on the notion of the climate migrant and their increased role and vulnerability. Within contemporary Europe, the effects of the climate crisis are acutely felt at both its northern and southern margins. Rising temperatures threaten both the Sámi way of life in the north, and people in Spain who are increasingly suffering from droughts and extreme heat. From both these apparently extreme peripheries of Europe, the risk of becoming a climate migrant is real, to give an example. It is especially difficult to make changes at the level of biased representations, while also making sure that images continue to make an impact that can change the public opinion, with changes made possible within a foreseeable time. This chapter focuses in particular on the double bind of the Sámi people, as their precarious position vis-à-vis Nordic nation-state policies is compounded by climate change, and on the Prado Museum in Madrid's recent (2019) project with "updated" versions of its masterpieces that show climate change gone awry.

Jesse van Amelsvoort's chapter is a natural transition to the second section, which focuses on postcolonial studies and ecological crisis. In the following chapter, "'None of that shit matters to the Swedes': Venice, Bangladesh, and the Postcolonial Anthropocene," Shaul Bassi discusses the case of the Postcolonial Anthropocene by using Venice as a case study. In particular, the author examines recent literary and

visual texts that represent the Bangladeshi migrant community in Venice as a vantage point from which to observe the postcolonial condition in the context of the planetary environmental crisis. Referring to authors and texts such as Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019), Francesco Dalla Puppa, Francesco Matteuzzi, and Francesco Saresin's graphic novel *La linea dell'orizzonte* (2021), and Emanuele Confortin's documentary *Banglavenice* (2022), Bassi exposes the Anthropocene unconscious of a city that has been traditionally seen as a romantic getaway, or synonymous with apocalyptic scenarios due to rising water and the climate threat. The decadent and moribund portrayal to which the city is often subjected is undermined in the texts analyzed by the author, showing a more complex, living, cosmopolitan, and amphibian Venice where new and old communities interact and reinvent themselves in relation to a fragile ecosystem threatened by rising sea levels. These narratives connect the local city with global dynamics, showing how the long-term effect of colonialism and that of the Anthropocene are intertwined. In times of crisis, new stories can provide alternative views and takes on how migrants negotiate their lives and identities and offer new registers to rethink our environmental and human predicament.

Elena Brugioni continues the investigation of violent postcolonial ecosystems, environmental crisis and eco-critique through her analysis of "João Paulo Borges Coelho's Literary Writing." The work of this acclaimed Mozambican contemporary novelist is characterized by a deep reflection on the relation between violence and the environment, and in this chapter Brugioni offers bio-political and eco-critical readings of his work. The chapter addresses a wide range of issues that could be squarely placed within the postcolonial eco-critical perspective, resignifying bio-political paradigms and pointing to what has been defined as "eco-materialist aesthetics" (Mukherjee 2010). Beyond the necropolitical condition of human and non-human life in Mozambique, the author wants to underline the ways in which Borges Coelho's novels offer the possibility to add further complexities to the entanglement between the "ordered colonial violence" and the "violent postcolonial order" (Borges Coelho 2003). The crisis registered in Borges Coelho's work *Cidades dos Espelhos. Novela Futurista* (City of Mirrors. Futurist Novella) (2011) serves as a paradigmatic example to reassess the meaning of environmental and eco-materialist aesthetics and therefore to grasp his critique of violent postcolonial (eco)systems, in Mozambique and in the world.

In the closing chapter in this section, "Fuel Scavengers: Climate Colonialism in the South African Science Fiction of Alex Latimer's *Space Race*, Henrietta Rose-Innes' *Poison*, and Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*," Peter J. Maurits explores the role of science fiction as rooted in colonialism and how the connection between science fiction as a genre and postcolonial studies has developed in the last two decades with the aim of subverting colonial tropes. In this chapter, the author argues,

however, that the connection between science fiction and postcolonial studies needs further critical scrutiny, in particular as there is now increased attention being paid to the climate crisis and colonial aftermath, to an extent that we could speak of climate colonialism. This chapter suggests that a focus on tropes may be insufficient to demonstrate how climate colonialism operates discursively. Therefore, a Saidian analytical sensitivity is invoked to show how colonialism continues to be a codified presence in fiction. Three South African science fiction works are analyzed as examples: Alex Latimer's novel *The Space Race* (2013), Henrietta Rose-Innes' short story "Poison" (2009), and Neill Blomkamp's film *District 9* (2009), using the Saidian technique of scavenging which makes colonialism and the climate crises narratives overlap in a concern about fuel shortages.

Section three on postcolonial Studies and critical theory deals with the need to rethink and reinvent our theoretical paradigms to address the many crises we are facing and the need to rethink the role of critique in our intellectual engagement. In his chapter, Paulo de Medeiros opens by proposing to look at crisis in conjunction with what he terms "postimperial remains": that which is left in the wake of imperialism and colonialism, or haunted legacies. His essay takes its motivation from a reading of one of Adorno's fragments in *Minima Moralia*, especially its conclusion: "Extreme injustice becomes a deceptive facsimile of justice, disqualification of equality" (2005 [1951]: 194). Starting with a reflection on how the views of Immanuel Kant in his philosophical sketch on *Perpetual Peace* from 1795 are particularly relevant at our present conjecture, he then proceeds to discuss one novel and two films, all from 2019, as examples of how belonging, loss, and justice, or better said, injustice, operate and intersect in our postimperial condition. The novel, Damon Galgut's *The Promise* (2021), is an accomplished narrative that explores how the present in South Africa, after the abolition of apartheid in 1994, is still necessarily haunted by the past. The two films were released in 2019. One, Senegalese, *Atlantique* (2019) is directed by Mati Diop. The other, *Bacurau* (2019) Brazilian, is directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles. Although there are stark differences between them, inevitably given their different contexts, there are strong convergences as well since both films can be said to register the conditions of oppression in the wake of imperialism and to offer ways of resistance.

In the same section, Caitlin Vandertop's chapter is entitled "(Dis)inheriting Stevenson: Inheritance Crisis, Postcolonial Periodization, and Literary Property in the Pacific." It deals with writers from Oceania and the ways in which they complicate existing postcolonial periodization. The chapter argues that Oceanic literature actually intensifies the crisis of periodization in postcolonial studies, as it invites the reader not to follow the traditional patterns of literary "influence" but to focus instead on the "inherited" structures of property accumulation. The focus is not on the aesthetic features or the abstract "transmission" of culture but, as

the author explains, on technologies of textual enclosure. Drawing on Joseph Slaughter's "World Literature as Property," Vandertop focuses on the theme of "inheritance crisis" in the work of Samoan writer Albert Wendt, in particular his short story collection, *Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree* (1974). In this text, a series of formal disruptions to the narrative of inheritance in a colonial context is identified. Vandertop further analyzes how Wendt troubles the "inheritance" of a European literary tradition by engaging in intertextual dialog with R. L. Stevenson, who is a writer considered to be the so-called "father" of Samoan literature. By incorporating oral forms that insist on the collective rather than individualized nature of cultural production, *Flying-Fox* disturbs the sequence of literary genealogy and its underlying property model, Vandertop concludes.

In the closing chapter of this section, Gianmaria Colpani and Adriano José Habed discuss how the past decades have been marked by an accelerating cycle of crises, and propose to think with Stuart Hall about crises and their conjunctures. In their "Critique without Guarantees: Thinking with Stuart Hall in a Time of Crises," Colpani and Habed focus on the crisis of critique, starting with the discussion of a number of discontents voiced by proponents of postcritique. One of these many discontents includes the reduction of critique to a set of theoretical and ideological automatisms and the potential convergences with the structure and content of conspiracy theories. The authors make the theoretical and political move to respond to these discontents by turning to Hall's work, especially the collaborative volume *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978). Here Hall emerges as the quintessential critical thinker of crisis, whose practice of critique is open and "without guarantees." This critique without guarantees addresses some of the problems highlighted by the proponents of postcritique, yet without calling for an abandonment of critical practices. The chapter is intertwined with the readings of two critical and problematic responses to the coronavirus crisis, by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and African American journalist Steven Thrasher, proposed through the framework of a critique without guarantees.

The final section reflects on the consequences and connection of these crises across art, memory, and race. In his chapter on "Traumatic Memory and the Postcolonial: Disruptive Genealogy" Max Silverman asks how postcolonial studies have influenced the development of memory studies, which privilege trauma theory and a vocabulary of wounds and victimhood. Though this approach has provided a much-needed focus on how past violence continues to impact today's present, often in invisible ways, it tends to foreclose, as Silverman explains, the wider international and intersectional analysis of cultural works, where trauma and memory are interconnected with other processes, often of colonial and postcolonial descendants, in paradoxical ways. He asks whether postcolonial theory can open up cultural works to ambivalent encounters in a way that readings

through the lens of traumatic memory rarely allow. The author showcases this approach through a beautiful analysis of the film *Memory Box* (2021) by the Lebanese filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. In this film, the return of the past can be read not only in terms of a genealogical transmission of the trauma of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) but also as a knotted story about time, culture, and media.

In the following chapter, Bolette Blaagaard tackles the issues of legacy media, journalism, and the role of citizen media. Titled "Postcolonial Critique in Practice: A Case Study of Citizen Media Resistance to Mainstream Media Discourses on Race," the chapter focuses more specifically on how postcolonial social movements and their citizen-driven media productions can counter the crisis of public engagement. The chapter deals in particular with the issue of race and racism in Danish society as it is produced in journalistic discourse. Through the analysis of the Danish section of the Black Lives Matter movement, the chapter argues that despite theoretical and academic postcolonial and anti-racist critique, journalistic principles and practices continue to produce a public of racial ignorance and disregard for marginalized and minoritized people. The chapter explores in more detail how the discourses of race in Danish legacy media and journalism are in serious need of postcolonial critique as practiced in this specific case by social movements and their citizen media, which manage to produce publics of postcolonial resistance. This bottom-up practice makes an intervention, disruption, and interruption of mainstream journalistic reporting, throwing journalistic representation into crisis, and confronts legacy media with their inherent perpetuation of racial ignorance. The discussion and analysis are built on a case study of 46 newspaper articles and 37 social media posts from BLM-DK's site about a racially charged murder on the Danish island of Bornholm in 2020 and the subsequent media coverage.

To conclude, Ana Cristina Mendes brings the various discussions in the book about theory, crisis, critique, and the arts to a close with her chapter on "Crisis and Planetary Entanglements: Ai Weiwei's *Pequi Tree* and John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*," This chapter focuses on the works of two global activist artists who have revolutionized the art field with their aesthetic and political provocations. In particular, the chapter examines two visual artworks: Ai Weiwei's 32-meter-high iron sculpture *Pequi Tree* (2018–20) and John Akomfrah's three-screen video installation *Vertigo Sea* (2015). Both artworks contribute to the debate on the planetary "crisis" and concepts related to the Anthropocene, such as the Plantationocene. As in the chapters by van Amelsvoort, Bassi, Maurits, and others in this volume, the chapter aims to further explore the relationship between postcolonial theory and the idea of "crisis" by emphasizing these artivists' impact on a new politics and aesthetics centered on planetary consciousness. *Pequi Tree* by Ai and *Vertigo Sea* by Akomfrah are presented as works of artistic-intellectual and activist expression that boldly speak truth to power

from within the museum and gallery spaces. To frame the analysis in the context of the artivists' engagement with the planetary "crisis," Mendes first discusses the idea of "the contemporary" and its connection to postcoloniality and the interconnected "crises" of the present, which intertwine with the Anthropocene. Secondly, she focuses on adaptation as a creative approach to address representational and epistemic violence in the visual realm. This is realized by transforming authorized, or official "sources" and material, to incorporate the past in an understanding of our current "crises."

Coda

This collective project aimed at addressing different, overlapping crises of our time (precarious and forced migration, climate catastrophes and ecological disasters, human rights violations and ethnic conflicts, media disinformation and crises of trust) through the magnifying lens of postcolonial critique. This has helped to provide an understanding of new or protracted crises as part of past colonial legacies, and their injustices as intertwined with contemporary neoliberal assemblages of inequalities.

Postcolonial Studies cannot be understood in separation from the profound societal changes that it both reflects and reacts against, the heady days of anticolonial struggle and national liberation, the various failures of succeeding regimes, the definite replacement of European hegemony by American power, and its own subsequent decay by the turn of the century. From the beginning of the twenty-first century, arguably the most significant development has been the reassertion of imperial, or neo-imperial, notions under the ideological banner of what one may well refer to as Empire 2.0. Indeed, neither the threat to European stability posed by Brexit and its open celebration of imperial nostalgia nor, in spite of all their differences, the clamour for 'Mak[ing] America Great Again' can be understood without referring to it. This is to stick to the West only, though of course the notion of an East-West divide makes even less sense nowadays than might ever have been the case.

Postcolonial Theory has gone through various iterations and if, to a large extent, it can be said that at heart it was always rooted in a sense of a fight against the oppression of capitalism and imperialism, this at times could feel very vague, as if it were possible to decouple colonialism from capitalism. As Neil Lazarus forcefully put it two decades ago already: "The problem, put simply, is that scholars in the field have tended to pay insufficient attention to the fact that colonialism is part and parcel of a larger, enfolding historical dynamic, which is that of

capitalism in its global trajectory" (Lazarus 2011: 7). Consequently, this interconnectedness has informed all of the essays that make up this volume.

Postcolonial critique as a field, approach and perspective is subjected in this volume to further critique and scrutiny in order to transition from past ossified relations between colony and post-colony to more complex, webbed configurations. This is achieved through the rethinking of classic intellectual engagements, such as coming from iconic thinkers, activists and scholars (Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Aimé Cesaire, Stuart Hall, Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Étienne Balibar, Gayatri Spivak), with more porous and collective forms of resistance expressed by social movements on the streets as well as through digital platforms, avoiding presentism while opening up to new technological challenges and opportunities. Social and digital movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo movement, and Occupy Wall Street share the need to address a societal crisis in which technical savviness leads to new forms of collective, global and intergenerational activism for change.

The volume is also particularly rich and expansive in including a kaleidoscopic range of differentiated case studies and locations (from Syria to the Black Mediterranean, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Venice old and new, the Sami peoples of the European north, Mozambique, Brazil, South Africa, Oceania/Samoa, Bangladesh, the Lebanon and Denmark, among others). It leaves behind the old map of the Commonwealth and Anglophone world and the postcolonial theories of the dominant US in favour of new fluid and relational approaches that challenge disciplinary boundaries, territorial confines and representational dogmas.

Offering a wide range of material, from literature (novels, short stories, graphic novels and poetry), visual culture (films, documentaries, video installations and photo anthologies), and the arts more generally to emerging immersive technologies such as VR projects, the volume explores new avenues of representations that can narrate, visualize and intervene in the notion of crisis without reproducing false binaries or presuming easy solutions. Indeed, in our present time it has become if anything more obvious that there are no easy solutions and never were. As Donna Haraway expressed in her notion of Capitalocene/Chthulucene, "One way to live and die well as mortal critters in the Chthulucene is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition, which must include mourning irreversible losses." (Haraway 2015: 160).

At times crises cannot be represented; they escape representation, as amply articulated in trauma and memory studies. The failure of representation to encompass the incommensurable and the unthinkable does not mean that literature and art in general remain mute. The registration of such incommensurability is often a strong form of denouncement, protest and witnessing. This volume offers several reflections on the connections between trauma and the postcolonial. Max

Silverman's chapter takes central stage here as it both covers the development of such an imbrication and advances it. But other chapters also have occasion to consider how trauma, and traumatic memory, often cannot be ignored when considering postcoloniality, whether one thinks about slavery, the aftereffects of Apartheid, what by now is called the Black Mediterranean as disussed in her chapter by Di Maio, or indeed other places of migration.

As such postcolonial critique is disrupted and renewed at the same time, it is being asked to rise to the challenge of our time and offer new analytical tools as well as epistemological quests to convey the urgency of the present through the prism of the past, while offering possible future scenarios through the creative role of the arts, literature, cinema and media in the wider sense. These innovative creative engagements provide new routes to reimagining the crisis by understanding the very logic which upholds it. As Dominic Thomas writes in the foreword to the novel *Congo Inc.*, discussed by Spear in this volume, "in tapping into this power of reimagination, we can explore modes of interventions that do not enforce and reproduce pre-existing structures of the world-system but begin to move beyond them." (Spear: p. 80). The rise of the field of World Literature, with its presumed global reach, drawing on both the discipline of Comparative Literature and the critique of Eurocentrism at the basis of much of Postcolonial Studies would appear to be one of the more recent, and critical, challenges to Postcolonial Theory. Diverse views on both fields, World Literature and Postcolonial Studies, will mean divergent takes on the question. In many cases, at least on an institutional level, there has been a *de facto* merging of the two, whether for ideological or tactical reasons, as renowned universities such as Oxford and Southampton, and many others offer courses and even degrees that combine both. Fruitful discussions of the intersections between postcolonial critique and World Literature, such as that by Debjany Ganguli in *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form* (2016), have much to offer.

And yet, one would do well to remain alert to the need never to forget about capital if one really wants to engage with the world as a system. Certainly, some articulations of a postcolonial critique of World Literature are well intentioned, for instance, Pheng Cheah's *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (2016). And yet, as much as his claim for the importance of literature in making worlds is appropriate, his vision of 'worlding,' influenced as it is by the thought of Heidegger, raises a whole new set of questions. Ontological perspectives in and of themselves are one option of course. But, at least in this case, it becomes difficult to see how to reconcile such a perspective with other claims. As can be seen from various of the essays in this volume, the emphasis must rather be put on other questions related to capital and the systemic oppression and inequalities it is based on and incessantly reproduces, whether in terms of the

cruelty that often accompanies migrations or the destruction of our ecosystem, our world. That, we argue, is how Postcolonial Theory can continue renewing itself.

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Section 1: **New Approaches to Postcolonial Studies and Crisis**

Sandra Ponzanesi

Post-Humanitarianism and the Crisis of Empathy

Abstract: The constant mediatization of conflict, violence, and suffering has created a feeling of "compassion fatigue" (Möller 1999; Sontag 2003) among viewers who consume images of "distant suffering" from the safe space of their own living rooms (Boltanski 1993; Chouliaraki 2006, 2013). This has prompted not only a sense of context collapse (Marwick and boyd 2011) but also a crisis of empathy. How should we respond to, and continue to engage with, disasters, underdevelopment, pandemics, and political conflicts, as part of multiple competing worlds of short-term and long-term humanitarian crises?

The booming virtual reality (VR) industry has broken new ground as allegedly the "ultimate empathy machine" (Milk 2015; Bailenson 2018; Uricchio 2018; Raessens 2019) which puts the viewer in other people's shoes. VR as a unique and novel form of "immersive technologies" has been postulated as a "technology of feelings," a good technology that promotes compassion, connection, and intimacy by allowing the viewer to experience the lives of those who are distant others, e.g., migrants or refugees. This chapter explores the enthusiasm, but also the ethical reservations, surrounding this new media genre of post-humanitarian appeal through the analysis of some VR projects dealing with migration and refugee issues, namely Nonny de la Peña's *Project Syria* (2012), Gabo Arora and Chris Milk's *Clouds over Sidra* (2015), Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail's *The Displaced*, (2015), and Tamara Shogaolu's *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration* (2020).

Keywords: humanitarianism, Virtual Reality, migration, postcolonialism, mediatization, distant suffering

1 Humanitarianism and the crisis of empathy

This chapter aims at conceptualizing the relations between postcolonial theory and the crisis in the present day. It tries to understand, situate, and analyze postcolonial theory in the face of new 'posts' that signal new crises but also new transitions. These 'posts' require a renewed understanding of the past legacies in the light of contemporary challenges. For example, what is signaled with the notion of post-humanitarianism is not only the death of the grand narratives and the breakdown of the notion of a "common humanity," as a universal and shared value, but also a

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change in attitude towards the suffering of the Other. This implies a turn from cosmopolitan solidarity towards narcissism and self-gratification, often played out by celebrities and influencers via social media (Chouliaraki 2013). What we have now is a proliferation of platforms and media modalities for engaging with distant suffering. These new modalities of engagement, which respond to various consumeristic and branding strategies, do little to change the history of dehumanization of the Other or alter economic structures of oppression and inequality.

This fragmented, volatile, and more opportunistic form of engagement is also caused by the constant mediatization of conflicts, violence, and suffering, which has created a feeling of "compassion fatigue" (Möller 1999; Sontag 2003) among viewers who consume images of "distant suffering" from the safe space of their own living rooms (Boltanski 1993; Chouliaraki 2006, 2013). This provokes not only a sense of context collapse, referring to the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one's social network (Marwick and boyd 2011) but also a crisis of empathy. How should we respond to, and continue to engage with, disasters, underdevelopment, pandemics, and political conflicts, as multiple competing worlds of short-term and long-term humanitarian crises?

This chapter seeks to argue that "compassion fatigue" is not a recent phenomenon, but the mediatization of suffering has changed the modes of engagement and the avenues for response. The advent of digital technologies has brought distant suffering close to home through digital proximity. However, the shock effect is now scattered across different social media platforms which conflate different timelines and geopolitics in the here and now of everyday life. This creates not only ethical issues on how to assess what crisis is worst or most deserving of our attention when prioritizing our response and action, but also a competition of tragedies that severely diminish our attention span, and with it, the commitment to solidarity.

In this chapter, attempts to reinstate the connection between the distant sufferer and the viewer will be analyzed through a series of Virtual Reality (VR) productions made by the United Nations, artists, and major media organizations, in efforts to use new technologies to break down the "compassion fatigue," or apathy generated by the exposure to too much crisis. VR is an innovative technology that allows you to experience another person's point of view through immersion and embodiment. For this reason, it has been postulated as the ultimate "empathy machine," a technology of feeling that promotes compassion, connection, and intimacy by allowing the viewer to experience the lives of those who are distant others, for example, migrants or refugees. It has been increasingly used to this effect in humanitarian appeals to solicit donations and renew public engagement, therefore changing the strategies adopted for humanitarian communication.

2 Humanitarianism in the twenty-first century

Humanitarian communication refers to public practices that take human suffering as a cause for collective action and intervention. It frequently implies the representation of vulnerable others – often "out there" – that Western organizations, such as the UN or NGOs, feel called to protect from harm and alleviate their suffering. Therefore, it is important to underline that humanitarianism has a double narrative of precarity, on the one hand, and human rights, on the other (Barnett 2020). Precarity refers to war zones, famine, natural catastrophes, and the need to alleviate the suffering of the vulnerable through immediate help or more long-term relief actions, which are also part of more systematic development strategies. Humanitarianism as human rights refers more to post-conflict and legal resolutions, a moral commitment to human rights for the whole of humanity.

There is tension between these two takes on humanitarianism. Humanitarianism as precarity is informed by the ethics of altruistic benevolence, which has both Christian and secular roots (Boltanski 1993), whereas human rights seem to stem from a morality of social justice, inspired by anti-colonial struggles and current institutionalized legal duties to protect human dignity (Moyn 2010). As Vestergaard and Chouliaraki write, this tension has given rise to

> long term debates within the humanitarian field between the de-politicized practice of compassionate care inherent in aid and the political character of human rights in grassroots or NGO activism, there is nonetheless a shared premise that brings the two dimensions of humanitarianism together. Both aid and development *and* right-based activism rely on a universal conception of the human being (Edkins 2019). Both, in other words, begin from an understanding of humanity as a shared condition of existential openness to violence – corporeal, social or psychological – and consider every human-life-in-need to be equally worthy of care and protection independently of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. (Chouliaraki and Vestergaard 2021: 2)

This idea of common humanity (Omen 2023) is part of a universalist notion of humanitarianism, which needs precarious bodies to display its rescue operations. This goes hand in hand with images of victimhood that recollect Western iconographies of suffering, often of religious imprints such as the pietas, and the suffering of mothers, mourners, and innocent children (Zarzycka 2017) that inspire the selfless altruism of the Samaritan, based on Christian values of compassion. More recently, humanitarian imageries have mutated towards the secular imperative of doing good without asking for anything in return, which according to Chouliaraki is not only rooted in religious values but also part of Western public life at large. For this reason:

> In this story-telling capacity of its imagery, then, humanitarian communication intervenes in public life not simply as a logic of communication that informs audiences of the unfortunate predicament of people-in-need. Rather, it also operates as a logic of sentimental pedagogy that mobilizes emotions (empathy or indignation) so as to catalyze communities of feeling and socialize these communities into disposition of care towards suffering others within and outside their community of belonging. (Chouliaraki and Vestergaard 2021: 2)

Therefore, as Didier Fassin also expresses, the vocabulary of suffering, compassion, assistance, and responsibility to protect has become central to our political life when it comes to qualifying the issues we are dealing with and the choices we make in that respect (Fassin 2012). The spectacle of bodies in need and its vocabulary of suffering and compassion are central not only to the humanitarian project but also to the idea of a common humanity and human rights that extend across Western society and the Global South.

Humanitarian action is therefore linked closely to postcolonial issues and debates as it rests on the legacy of colonial dominations and global inequalities that emerged from colonization, extraction, and the economic dependency created by post-imperial regimes and developmental practices. Despite the good intentions of transnational organizations such as the UN, UNHCR, UNICEF, FAO, World Bank, and various NGOs – from larger ones such as the Red Cross, Save the Children, the World Food Program (WFP), and Médicins Sans Frontières (MSF), to other NGOs such as War Child and Kiva NGOs such as War Child and Kiva – they cannot escape the neoliberal political economy that shapes humanitarianism, which is also based on funding and recruiting, competition between emergencies leading to the depoliticization of human rights, and the platformization of advocacy with its interconnected datafication of care.

This form of marketization and entrepreneurship has turned issues of morality into issues of utility, moving the sector away from the communities it is supposed to serve and help towards the increased expectations of the Western partners. This reorientation of priorities brings serious tensions in the relations between donors and beneficiaries, now based on measurable outputs and results. This utilitarian approach not only fails to help vulnerable groups but also preserves or reinforces existing hierarchies between donors and beneficiaries. As Sandvik writes, "we are left with a humanitarianism where inclusion is about access to markets, empowerment is about making beneficiaries more self-reliant and about putting the label 'humanitarian' onto the customer concept in innovation theory" (2014: 27).

Large-scale events such as live aid concerts, celebrities as humanitarian ambassadors (from Audrey Hepburn to Angelina Jolie), and fund-raising marathons populated by glamourous figures and media personalities all contribute to turning the humanitarian cause into a commercial one, aiming to nurture a deep emo-

tional attachment to the NGO as a particular brand. This turn to branding is seen as the response of the sector to compassion fatigue (Möller 1999), which desensitizes the public towards the sector's representation of suffering, with problematic tropes such as emaciated children who are to be turned into happy "saved" children (Dogra 2013).

The new politics of humanitarianism is characterized by a weak morality of solidarity reduced to a minimal baseline of protecting lives. This thinly politicized morality of compassionate benevolence is closely linked to the shift of the sector towards corporate strategies of marketing and branding, which promote a light political agenda of consumer activism while also helping its stakeholders to survive the global competition for funding in the humanitarian industry (Chouliaraki and Vestergaard 2021: 9).

3 The platformization of humanitarian communication

The new race for funding and monetization has also involved the digital realms and the increased platformization of the sector, for example in the form of crowdfunding via TikTok, and appeals for donations through social media platforms (van Dijck et al. 2018), which have replaced the telethons and charity concerts of the past. Connective platforms, big data and artificial intelligence (AI) have drastically changed not only the interventions and management of NGOs' structure and organization but also their communication strategies and campaigns, see the recent studies on and developments in digital humanitarianism (Johns, 2023). The platformization of humanitarianism is not without ambivalence, as digital innovations tend to take big leaps, and often technological quick fixes are chosen above understanding deeper socio-cultural implications.

The use of technological experimentation, as a laboratory involving more vulnerable groups, has often been seen as creating more harm than benefits (biometrics, fingerprinting, and iris scans for example), as Mirca Madianou has described in more detail in her notion of technocolonialism (2019a, 2019b). Tazzioli (2022) talks of extractive humanitarianism, whereby refugees are asked to be good citizens by actively participating in these digital experimentations, which are meant to make their management more efficient, turning them into data and making them complicit in this imposed regime of governmentality.

An example of this is the incremental use of AI, biometrics, and blockchain technology as a governmental practice to monitor, sort, and classify refugees. This way of outsourcing human management not only to machines but also to

third parties (e.g., Palantir) has been heavily criticized for using vulnerable groups as testing ground for digital innovations without considering the risks and damage done to these groups such as infringement of privacy, data breaches, and function creep, which means the use of these data for other purposes than planned, without consent (Pugliese 2010; Ajana 2013; Madianou 2019a; Jacobsen 2015).

To critically assess the potential and limits of these new technological developments is not to be the killjoys (Ahmed 2010) who spoil the enthusiasm for new technological possibilities, but to make sure that we are not pouring old wine into new bottles (Uricchio 2018). What is meant by this is that we should not attribute to new technologies innovative potentials that are not so new, but which stem from a long tradition of media development and show more signs of a continuation than a real break, with the reproduction of all the implicit problems and bias of the past.

4 VR as an empathy machine

AI innovations and virtual reality technologies, for example, have been increasingly used to develop computer-generated simulations that place the viewers in three-dimensional environments that reproduce war zones, disaster areas, or refugee camps. A break with the previous two-dimensional imagery through an immersive experience as proposed by VR promises to defeat compassion fatigue and reactivate the connection between donors and beneficiaries by letting donors step into other people's shoes and experience through affective and immediacy strategies what it is like being a refugee, from the safe space of technology.

VR is an innovative technology that allows you to experience another person's point of view through immersion and embodiment (Milk 2015; Bailenson 2018; Uricchio 2018; Raessens 2019). For this reason, it has been postulated as the ultimate "empathy machine," a "technology of feeling" or a good technology that promotes compassion, connection, and intimacy by allowing the viewer to experience the lives of those who are distant others, for example migrants or refugees (Boltanski 1993; Chouliaraki 2006, 2013; Ong 2019). It has been increasingly used to this effect in humanitarian appeals (by UNCHR, IOM and the Red Cross for example) to solicit donations and renew public engagement.

Examples are VR productions by UNHCR (e.g., *Clouds over Sidra*, 2015; *Life in the Time of Refuge*, 2017), NGOs, and artists (e.g., Nonny de la Peña's *Project Syria*, 2012; Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail's *The Displaced*, 2015; Alejandro G. Iñárritu's *Carne y Arena*, 2018; Martijn Kors' *A Breathtaking Journey*, 2016), aimed at sensitiz-

ing the public to the plight of refugees and migrants, offering new "platformed" interventions in humanitarian campaigns (Omen et al. 2021; van Dijck et al. 2018). Many examples of VR on Migration and Displacement can be found in the excellent mediography of VR produced by Bevan and Green as part of the Immersive Documentary project (2018).[1]

This chapter, therefore, explores more closely the enthusiasm, but also the ethical reservations, surrounding this new media genre of post-humanitarian appeal through the analysis of some VR projects dealing with migration and refugee issues, namely Nonny de la Peña's *Project Syria* (2012), Gabo Arora and Chris Milk's *Clouds over Sidra* (2015), Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail's *The Displaced*, (2015), and Tamara Shogaolu's *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration* (2020), all projects that could be considered part of VR for humanitarian action.

Humanitarian VR refers to specific projects that make documentary claims to the real, claims that are intended to bring the spectator-participant into a space of collective consciousness about existing states of crisis, suffering, and emergency (Wilson 2010; Pedwell 2012; Bujić et al. 2020). Therefore, humanitarian VR presents tremendous opportunities, but there are also major pitfalls. While advocates of humanitarian VR emphasize the value of the embodied presence simulated by this advanced technology, critics point to the inherent bias of the technology itself, as "humanitarian VR is an ambivalent sensory experience of bodily absence triggered by its technological limits" (Zimanyi and Ben Ayoun 2020). Humanitarian VR should seek to move beyond provoking *feelings* on the part of the spectator to raising the possibility of tangible action *outside* of the representative space.

VR risks becoming personalized and flexible media consumption, leading to forms of "ceremonial humanitarianism" (Chouliaraki 2013: 13) and "compassionate consensus" (Fassin 2012: 176). Chouliaraki for instance describes critiques of the "dark side" of humanitarianism where "solidarity may be claiming to be a manifestation of benevolence in the cosmopolis, yet it ultimately contributes to reproducing an unequal world order founded on the colonial legacy of the West" (Chouliaraki 2013: 35). In this sense, solidarity is attacked in its logical relation to hierarchy. "A critique of compassion," Fassin states, "is necessary not because of the attitude of superiority it implies but because it always presupposes a relation of inequality" (Fassin 2012: 4).

On the other hand, VR offers tremendous opportunities not only for the tech industry and the humanitarian sectors but also for artists, refugees, and activists. They can use the new affordances to reach new publics but also to create differ-

1 *VR Nonfiction*: *A Mediography* was created with funding from the UK EPSRC as part of the Virtual Realities – Immersive Documentary Encounters project (EP/P025595/1). University of Bristol.

ent forms of storytelling and interactive techniques to emphasize empathy and generate attention, interest, and support for the plight of the many migrants and refugees who seem to have fallen under the radar of urgent crisis though they are now considered here to stay.

VR is considered to be a game changer with many useful applications and is expected to have an impact in many different areas. Let us have a look at some of the productions that have generated wide responses among viewers, critics, and policymakers.

5 VR – migration and displacement

Nonny de la Peña's *Project Syria*[2] was originally commissioned by the World Economic Forum and was created at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts. It is an immersive piece of journalism that focuses on the plight of children in conflict zones. Nearly half of Syria's 23 million people have been displaced in its civil war and no group has been as severely affected as children. Children make up more than half of the three million refugees living in camps or makeshift housing, and some news reports indicate that children are being specifically targeted in the violence.[3] By coupling pioneering virtual reality technologies with audio and video captured at a tragic event, *Project Syria* transports audiences to the scene as the story unfolds.

Gabo Arora and Chris Milk's *Clouds over Sidra*[4] is an eight-minute virtual reality film created by Chris Milk and Gabo Arora and directed by Gabo Arora and Barry Pousman in partnership with the UN Millennium Campaign, UNICEF Jordan, and VRSE Hollywood production studios and the UN. The 360-degree documentary allows us to peek into the life of 12-year-old Sidra, a Syrian refugee housed in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, which is home to 130,000 Syrians fleeing violence and war, half of whom are children. The film follows Sidra, who has lived in the camp for over a year and a half, through a typical day in her life: you see her school, her home, the gym, and even the soccer field where she plays with the other children in the camp. *Clouds Over Sidra* is the first ever film shot in virtual reality for the UN, and it was followed by many others. It uses the medium to generate greater empathy and new perspectives on people like Sidra,

2 See interview with Nonny de La Peña ("Project Syria: An Immersive Journalism Experience" 2014).

3 Watch VR: http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/detail/49/.

4 Watch VR: http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/detail/8/.

who live in conditions of great vulnerability. The film has a powerful capacity to allow anyone to see what life within a refugee camp looks like and the ability to inspire a message of hope among not only displaced Syrians but also global citizens motivated to act.

Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail's *The Displaced*[5] was created by *The New York Times* and focuses on the 30 million children who have been displaced from their homes because of war. This powerful VR production tells the stories of three of them – from South Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine. It puts the viewer in refugee camps and desolate villages, where you can witness first-hand the lives of the displaced refugees – their limited options and their extraordinary, heartbreaking resilience, as the promotional material announces.

Tamara Shogaolu's *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration*[6] is a multi-platform project (film, VR experience, and interactive web application). It follows the journeys of LGBTQ refugees from the Middle East across continents and cultures – from the 2011 revolutions to the world today. It is an animated transmedia series consisting of *Another Dream*, *Half a Life* and *They Call Me Asylum Seeker*. *Another Dream*, a hybrid animated documentary and VR game, brings the gripping, true love story of an Egyptian lesbian couple to life. Faced with a post-revolution backlash against the LGBTQ community, they escape Cairo to seek asylum and acceptance in the Netherlands. An accompanying installation allows audiences to reflect on what they have seen, heard, and felt in VR.

What these different productions have in common, besides the focus on the plight of refugees, is the consistent use of VR across the span of a decade to promote empathy and foreground immersive experiences to generate public interest and renew engagement. They target different kinds of audiences, to be reached through the print media such as *The New York Times*, exhibition venues as in the case of *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration*, and at the more institutional level through the commitment of the UN and collaboration with the World Economic Forum.

Initially commissioned by Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab of the World Economic Forum, *Project Syria* uses new virtual reality technologies to put the audience "on scene" and experience the plight of these children in a truly visceral way. Nonny de la Peña is considered to be the godmother of VR and *Project Syria* is one of the very first productions to engage with VR to create an immersive journalistic experience of the war crisis, migration, and refugees. It is linked to the Syria uprising and civil war and consequent exodus, which has displaced more than four million Syrians across the Middle East (especially Lebanon, Jordan and

5 Watch VR: http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/detail/102/.
6 Watch VR: https://filmfreeway.com/ANOTHERDREAMVR090.

Turkey) and Europe. Some news reports indicate that children are being specifically targeted in the violence. As the maker reports:

> The World Economic Forum initially commissioned *Project Syria*, an immersive journalism piece that conveys the plight of the child refugees in Syria. It has also been selected for the 2015 Sundance Film Festival. *Project Syria* uses virtual reality technologies to put the audience "on scene," enabling people to feel as if they are truly witnesses to the violent events in Syria. This piece was requested to be displayed at the World Economic Forum by the Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab, in Davos on January 21, with the idea of compelling world leaders to act on this crucial issue. ("_Project Syria", 2014).

Figure 1: *Project Syria* by Nonny de la Peña (2014). Symbolic figures were injected into the piece to represent the number of children affected by the war. © Emblematic.

The first see Fig. 1 scene replicates a moment on a busy street corner in the Aleppo district of Syria. In the middle of the scene, a rocket hits with dust and debris flying everywhere. The second scene dissolves to a refugee camp in which the viewer experiences being in the center of a camp as it grows exponentially in a representation that parallels the real story of how the extraordinary number of refugees from Syria fleeing their homeland have had to take refuge in camps. All elements are drawn from actual audio, video, and photographs taken on scene. Utilizing the real-time graphics of the Unity game engine and the sense of presence evoked

through high-resolution virtual reality goggles and compelling audio, *Project Syria* lets the audience experience the real events "as they transpire."[7]

In an interview the maker, Nonny de la Peña, speaks about the importance of VR as putting you "on the scene" and making you feel like you are an actual witness to the event; rather than being separated by the television or screen, you feel like you are there ("Project Syria: An Immersive Journalism Experience" 2014). She talks about the process and the selection of the material, audio and visual. She explains that more than one-third of the population of Syria has been displaced by the war and that 52 percent of the refugees are children. The preference for VR and the recreation of the scene, rather than showing a normal video, is the astonishing sense of presence that the technology affords. You feel you are there; you feel like you are witnessing this event and, argues the maker, if we can make people understand how difficult these circumstances are, perhaps they can start to think about what kind of change they too can help bring about.

The VR *Project Syria* itself, which foregrounds the term VR recreation, is highly impactful as you feel immediately that you are at the center of a war zone, with bombing and buildings collapsing all around. This is not a video game. Nonny de la Peña specializes in creating virtual worlds based on real life. As the maker explains, the bomb is from an actual event, and they had to collect multiple sources to figure out both what the building looked like before the bombing hit and what happened in the aftermath. This included mobile phone videos, films from a video camera, and various audio recordings that people at the scene had made. The material was gathered from a refugee camp at the border. This sense of being there, this sense of empathy, this sense of deeper understanding of the story makes this footage valuable for the future of journalism. It may not look like reality just yet, but the scenes the maker recreate can still have a very powerful effect on those who experience them.[8]

The unique quality of VR as an empathy machine is also the main argument put by Chris Milk, the maker of *Clouds over Sidra*, in his extremely popular Ted Talk "*How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine*," in which he states that:

> VR connects humans to other humans in a profound way that I have never seen before in any other form or media. So, it is a machine, but through this machine we become more compassionate, we become more empathetic, and we become more connected. And ultimately, we become more human. (Milk 2015)

7 See MIT open documentary lab: https://docubase.mit.edu/project/project-syria/.

8 See BBC special on project Syria 'BBC Click, Immersive Journalism' from July 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugmFP4UfnRY.

Figure 2: *Cloud Over Sidra* by Gabo Arora and Chris Milk (2015). The Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan is home to over 80,000 Syrians fleeing war and violence. Half of these are children. © UNVR, United Nations Virtual Reality.

Milk says that we can change minds with these machines. *Clouds over Sidra* see Fig 2 was presented at the World Economic Forum in Davos, with the aim of influencing powerful people who might not otherwise be sitting in a tent in a refugee camp in Jordan, but who through this experience – of going through the frame and of suddenly being there – were affected and solicited to take actions. The different VRs made for the UN were shown to the people who can change the lives of those in the films. This is the true power of virtual reality, which is not peripheral as in video games: it connects humans to other humans, as Milk continues, in a profound way that we have never seen before in any other form of media. It can change people's perception of each other and that is how Milk thinks that virtual reality has the potential to change the world.

The belief in the extraordinary power of VR also reached public news media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and the BBC, which started to create their own VR sections. In November 2015, *The New York Times* launched its virtual reality application "NYT VR," distributed one million disposable Google cardboard VR headsets to its subscribers and published its first 360 video: *The Displaced* by Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail. In an observational documentary style, the 360 video tells the story of three displaced children: an 11-year-old

boy from eastern Ukraine named Oleg, a 12-year-old Syrian girl named Hana see Fig. 3, and a 9-year-old South Sudanese boy named Chuol.[9]

Figure 3: *The Displaced* by Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail's (2015). Hana Abdullah left her home in Mabrouka, a small Syrian town, and now lives with her extended family in a makeshift tent settlement in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. © New York Times.

The children allow us to become guests in their lives for a few minutes; they speak about how they escaped war zones, about their memories of their homes, and their hopes for the future. *The Displaced* portrays the impact of war and displacement on children with heartbreaking, immersive realism. As the makers say:

> Nearly 60 million people are currently displaced from their homes by war and persecution – more than at any time since World War II. Half are children. This multimedia journey in text, photographs and virtual reality tells the stories of three of them. (Silverstein 2015)

In *The New York Times Magazine* issue introducing the VR project, the journalist Jake Silverstein writes that in the current migration crisis nearly 30 million children worldwide have been driven from their homes by war and persecution.

9 See Oleg: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/magazine/the-displaced-oleg.html; Hana: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/magazine/the-displaced-hana.html; Chuol: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/magazine/the-displaced-chuol.html.

Media coverage has lately focused on the Syrian dimension of this tragedy, but the crisis impacts children from all over the world, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, Libya, Nigeria, Honduras, El Salvador, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. The *New York Times* has chosen to build a portrait of three of them: all three have seen their homes destroyed; two have lost family members. Yet they carry on. Their stories are told in a multimedia documentary project, comprising a feature story, interviews, three photo essays and, for the first time in the history of *The New York Times*, a virtual-reality film. As Silverstein (2015) writes:

> We decided to launch The Times's virtual-reality efforts with these portraits because we recognize that this new filmmaking technology enables an uncanny feeling of connection with people whose lives are far from our own. By creating a 360-degree environment that encircles the viewer, virtual reality creates the experience of being present within distant worlds, making it uniquely suited to projects, like this one, that speak to our senses of empathy and community. What better use of the technology could there be than to place our readers within a crisis that calls to us daily with great urgency and yet, because of the incessancy of the call, often fails to rouse us at all?

Tamara Shogaolu's *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration* (*Another Dream* is the VR production within the multi-platform project) was on show at the Amsterdam Museum and is available to tour museums, galleries, and educational institutions worldwide see Fig. 4. The VR production starts with animated images of female asylum seekers, with the caption that since 2019 there has been a 400 percent rise in the number of LGTBQ+ people asking for asylum. The VR is presented as an immersive story of love across continents.

Tamara Shogaolu realized that new and immersive media tools allow stories not just to be told and heard, but to be felt as well. She asserts, like the other VR makers, that mediums like VR have the power to make the political personal and the personal universal. As the director writes in her statement:

> I believe that sharing these stories in innovative and engaging ways is all the more urgent today. Politically and in the media, we hear so much 'us' versus 'them,' but because of technology, our world actually now has the potential to be more 'we' than ever. [. . .] Ultimately, I hope that ANOTHER DREAM gives audiences the experience to truly live within the stories we represent, as well as the opportunity to reflect on their own values and beliefs after experiencing another person's intimate memories in VR" (Tamara Shogaolu n.d.)

The project is part of an animated documentary transmedia series, *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration*, which brings the interviews Shogaolu has recorded with LGBTQ asylum seekers over the last eight years to life through film and mixed reality storytelling. The maker chose animation to protect the identities behind the voices of the people who opted to share their stories, but also to emphasize the personal nature of their accounts and to encourage new ways of witnessing their

journeys. The maker writes that they realized that new and immersive media tools underline the fact that stories don't just need to be heard – they need to be felt.

Figure 4: Tamara Shogaolu's *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration* (2020). Multi-Platform Project (Film, VR Experience, & Web Interactive) Follow the journeys of LGBTQ refugees from the Middle East across continents and cultures – from the 2011 Revolutions to the world today © Ado Ato Pictures.

Tamara Shogaolu hopes that her work can prompt a productive discussion about identity and promote inclusivity and diversity in what it means to be an inhabitant of Amsterdam – an "Amsterdammer" – by allowing Amsterdammers of all colors, genders, sexual orientations, and cultural and socio-economic backgrounds to see themselves represented.

6 The empathy machine and its discontent

There seems to be a consensus among the different makers about the unique qualities of VR and the advantages of using this new technology for humanitarian crises. As Nonny de la Peña states, VR technology, which was first developed in the 1980s and 1990s, is now hailed as "a visceral empathy generator. It can make people feel in a way that nothing, no other platform I've ever worked in can." (Volpe 2015). And Chris Milk in his influential TED Talk calls VR "the ultimate empathy machine" (2015) as it allows us to step into other people's shoes and feels what it is like to be a refugee and be there with them; "It is a machine but inside

it feels like real life, it feels like truth" (Milk 2015).[10] For Silverstein, VR creates the experience of being present in distant worlds, making it uniquely suited to projects, like *The Displaced*, that speak to our sense of empathy and community. And for Tamara Shogaolu, maker of *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration*, new and immersive media tools allow stories not just to be told and heard, but also to be felt. This is why VR experiences are better understood as "actual experiences" rather than "media experiences" because they "feel real" (Bailenson 2018: 46). VR reduces the imaginative work required when reading a book or watching a movie as the viewer can "feel" what it is like to be there (Bailenson 2018: 84).

As Moi Suzuki summarizes so well, VR can be defined as a computer-generated virtual environment in which the user can interact:

> Key features of VR include immersion (various properties of the VR experience such as visuals, sound, compelling narrative, and haptics that create a sense of deep engagement with the virtual world) and presence (the user's subjective sense of 'being there' in the virtual environment) (Bailenson 2018; Evans 2019). These features are said to make VR film superior in cultivating empathy, compared with other types of media like literature or television shows (Engberg and Bolter 2020). VR experiences are therefore not only visual but visceral. The sense of presence undergirds claims about privileged access to truth. (Suzuki 2022: 6).

All this enthusiastic embracement of VR as the ultimate tool for stepping into other people's shoes and experiencing other realities that might be different and unknown to us, such as the distant suffering of migrants and refugees, is, on the one hand, exciting but, on the other hand, extremely problematic. Numerous VR documentaries aim to immerse the audiences in the full experience of distant suffering (Chouliaraki 2013) as crafted for the spectators of the Global North. Between 2015 and 2019, the United Nations released at least 21 VR documentaries covering crises around the world.[11] As Bimbisar Irom writes, this raises questions about the use of VR for humanitarian advocacy which may end up flattening the real differences between sufferers and spectators, who stay comfortably in their safe zones and get a kick through the experience of temporary "co-suffering" that can be interrupted at any time. This creates what Nash has described as "im-

10 Milk is not the only one who believes that in VR we have the potential to become better listeners, caretakers, and global citizens, using pixels and haptic technology to tap into a shared universal experience. As enthusiasm for VR's gaming capabilities wanes, curiosity about its applications to the fields of mental health, rehabilitation, and community-building has only grown. Dozens of projects and research studies currently under development are breaking ground in areas ranging from opioid addiction and substance abuse to physical therapy and PTSD, all of which have the cumulative effect of potentially overhauling the entire field of patient care.

11 https://unvr.sdgactioncampaign.org/vr-films/#.ZZM5NJpBxbg.

proper distance," by translating the irreducible alterity into familiarity and intimacy (Nash 2018).

This is part of a larger trend in the humanitarian sector, which is moving into "feel good" activism (Chouliaraki 2013: 14), tapping into a market that prefers the "emotionality of the donor" as a monetizable item over the "vulnerability of distant sufferers" (Chouliaraki 2013: 17). This self-centered politics of authenticity contributes to the undermining of cosmopolitan solidarity, as the voices of distant sufferers are marginalized in the narcissistic quest for the authentic humanitarian experience (Chouliaraki 2013). This is what leads to post-humanitarianism, the turn from social justice to self-gratification through volatile engagement with the politics of pity that serves to confirm the status of the Western subject as do-gooders, now engaging in "clicktivism," referring to instant activism via social media and donation apps. These easy actions linked to online campaigns offer instant visibility, especially used by influencers for their self promotion. It also let people quickly forget the protracted need of support after the instant "crisis."

VR is based on the assumption that the "emotional knowledge" generated through VR is pure, unbiased, and unfiltered, and therefore a more "real" or legitimate way of knowing or having access to the Other (Pedwell 2012: 83). This felt truth is considered to be more effective than conventional methods of humanitarian campaigning in inspiring actions and incentivizing fundraising. This might be true, as UN Virtual Reality reported that VR is twice as effective in generating donations (UN Virtual Reality, n.d.). For these reasons many non-profit organizations have resorted *en masse* in recent years to VR and 360-degrees productions to solicit donations (Garcia Orosa-Perez Seijo 2020).

However, as Nash points out, VR forecloses the possibility of the viewer reflecting on the unequal power relations in which they are implicated by collapsing the distance between self and other. Without distance, VR productions are just a narcissistic consumption of the Other (2018). VR therefore risks reproducing neoliberal trends in humanitarian communication where Western feelings, instead of structural change, are magnified as the celebrated intervention (Chouliaraki 2013; Grunewald and Witteborn 2020; Nash 2018).

Lisa Nakamura also offers an excoriating critique of VR's claims to be an empathy machine in an article that she aptly titles "Feeling good about feeling bad: virtuous virtual reality and the automation of racial empathy" (2020). She asserts that VR works as a form of identity tourism touring the lives of others, who are the embodiment and spectacle of pain and suffering. VR puts the viewer, often the Western spectator, in the shoes of others, mostly children, women, refugees, minorities and people of color, whose narratives and enforced hospitality in their personal VR domestic space are one more example of digital labor and digital exploitation. The immersive embodied experience, or co-presence, leads to the fur-

ther victimization and appropriation of already disenfranchised people. VR risks becoming just one more form of consumerism and narcissism, a safe way to temporarily experience uncomfortable and confrontational realities without putting yourself at risk (Nakamura 2020; Grunewald and Witteborn 2020; Hassapopoulou 2018; Andrejevic and Volcic 2020).

Furthermore, VR tends to focus on disaster stories, fraught journeys at sea, war and traumas, encampment, and alienation. Pathos is the proof of concept of VR, yet there are many humdrum, everyday banal realities of the lives of women, migrants, and refugees that better represent their daily lives, agency, and resilience. The overwhelming focus on pity, guilt, and disaster deprives many of the characters represented of their dignity, agency, and capacity for self-affirmation (Nakamura 2020; Grunewald and Witteborn 2020).

Therefore, Nakamura concludes that this is "toxic empathy" that enables white viewers to experience digitally mediated compassion from the safe space of their location, where mobility can be navigated as will in contrast to the "stuckness" (Hage 2009) of the people represented, stuck in camps, who have their hospitality towards the Western gazer in their domestic space enforced upon them. This is also the myth always surrounding new technologies, as if they exist in a void without the socio-economic context that produces them. It is a clear merger between big tech corporations and the humanitarian sector, promising new technologies of feeling as able to connect people in unprecedented ways, mobilizing affect, compassion, and identification:

> Virtuous VR does not preclude more useful ways of addressing the real world that it frames as a site of suffering. Psychology experiments in VR labs have demonstrated that users can indeed take on new attitudes from watching titles about deforestation and racial bias; users have scored better on implicit bias tests and used less paper towels after watching titles about beautiful redwood trees and experiencing social exclusion within a raced body. However, trees and people are not the same; fixes for imperialism, hypercapitalism, racism and sexism are more difficult to envision in everyday life. Hence the intense need for these VR titles that tell us how to feel about the suffering of racial other's way of viewing. Feeling takes the place of doing precisely because there seems to be no viable liminal space between the two. (Nakamura 2020: 61)

Nakamura is critical of the automated empathy that these new tools generate when people of color, refugees like Sidra from Syria/Jordan, Oleg from Ukraine, Chuol from South Sudan, and Hana from Syria and other vulnerable people, welcome viewers into their private space, and the way in which the tools "provide absolution framed as information" (Nakamura 2020: 50). Women and children, who represent innocence and an "infantilization of peace" (Malkki 2010), continue to offer "invisible labor" in the form of digital presence in their war-torn homes, refugee camps, favelas, immiserated spaces. Hence the protracted exploi-

tation of women of color, refugee children, and queer people in VR documentaries. Attempts to decolonize the medium, as Nakamura complains, have always required the participation, consultation, and collaboration of these marginalized groups, thereby repeating and reenacting forms of digital labor and exploitation in the name of co-design and the voicing of the subaltern subjects, now used as native informants (Spivak 1999: 342). This can make VR part of the problem that it aims to solve. As Nakamura continues:

> a creator of idealized compassion-enhancing, dream-like 'experience' rather than the nightmare of yet more monetized and surveillant digital media platform and content. [. . .] Virtuous VR documentaries leverage the prestige of the *BBC, Al Jazeera, The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. These platforms have produced hundreds of titles about unfree and marginalized humans: refugees, the disabled, the incarcerated, people of color, and the other bodies that can be virtually occupied by users as a temporary way to feel something 'good' as moral cover during both a move toward regulation and a backlash against the internet and racial terror in the US. (Nakamura 2020: 50)

With VR there was suddenly the idea that tech companies could invert their monetized drive into a more altruistic and humanitarian goal.[12] Developing VR for social innovation or VR for good meant a virtuous turn towards accountability, scrutiny, and reckoning. However, the first phase of VR has the same idealism and blind optimism that was exhibited by developers and critics from the early internet phase (Negroponte 1996; Turkle 1995; Rheingold 1992, 1993) who embraced the techno-utopian promise of the internet enabling access and participation for all, widespread democracy and identity play. Of course, that bubble has been pierced and nowadays both the internet and its extension, social media platforms, are experienced as highly divisive, fomenting extreme content. VR seems to renew the bold gambit of technology and reinstate the belief that it can repair the wrong turn taken by digital media towards distraction, detachment, and misinformation (Nakamura 2020: 49). But VR as an empathy machine, "to learn what it is like" to be a gorilla, a refugee or a tree, simply reproduces many of the toxic forms of appropriation and essentialization (oppression, discrimination, and misperceptions).

12 The VR industry as a whole is growing at a fast pace, with the global VR market size projected to increase from less than five billion US dollars in 2021 to more than 12 billion US dollars by 2024. See: https://www.statista.com/topics/2532/virtual-reality-vr/.

7 Conclusions

This chapter has tried to highlight the possibilities and pitfalls of curating empathy through VR. It remains to be seen whether this turn to VR by humanitarian organizations, journalists, and artists – because of its unprecedented ability to conjure empathy and defy compassion fatigue – will actually lead to sustainable humanitarian actions. Sustainable because the effect of VR may only be temporary or immediate, and the question is whether possible attitudinal or behavioral changes can be guaranteed or established over the longer term.

So far there is no solid scientific proof that 360-degree documentary videos or more interactive, computer-generated VR experiences influence empathy in a different way (Ventura et al. 2020; Martingano et al. 2021, 2022) to previous, traditional media (such as literature, photography, and cinema). Often the empathy and desire to help and donate is experienced at the moment but does not translate into tangible action; in sum, it does not lead to structural change.

VR is a wonderful tool to think about the current crisis and issues of representation, engagement, and civic action. It should certainly be embraced as a new technology of feeling that can bring about change and reach out to wider audiences, who would not otherwise be affected or implicated by the question of global crisis and humanitarian relief. Yet, as with any technology, it is deeply enmeshed and implicated with the tech sector and therefore, like non-profit organizations in a post-humanitarian age, it inevitably follows a neo-liberal model that prioritizes monetization and economic revenues. Furthermore, it taps into a recent trend of self-aggrandizement and narcissistic gratification that Western viewers prioritize through a feeling of empathy and "real experience" that ultimately only further dispossesses and racializes the other, distant sufferer. That sufferer has no choice in the representational format and is often involved without consultation, in productions spearheaded by Western companies and clearly targeted at Western consumers with an ambivalent gesture towards inclusion, equality, familiarity, and intimacy.

VR creators might want to design experiences that are more subtle and ambiguous but either they do not have the critical tools to do so, or the business model behind the quick gains of VR still has the upper hand, as is the case in many tech industries. Facebook was one of the first to enter the race by acquiring VR headset maker Oculus for approximately two billion dollars back in 2014. It has now launched FB Metaverse promising a true transformation which will allow to explore virtual 3D immersive digital spaces which are all interconnected, and will feel like a hybrid of today's online social experiences (Ball 2022). This signaled not only the integration of social networking and VR but also the marrying of visually immersive media with socially addictive networking media. In this

way, social media platforms and VR have become so strongly intertwined and interdependent that an alternative critical model can only be destined for the fringe or marginalized market. Therefore, cultural work needs to be done in order to promote social justice, without engaging in fleeting, temporary, voyeuristic impressions of "other" people's lives.

There is a need to critically understand new technologies not only as empowering and innovative but also as carrying implicit bias and detrimental effects for vulnerable groups who are often not at the table with designers, programmers, and tech companies. What could be realized with the thrust for innovation and making technology achieve the impossible can at times backfire if not understood within a socio-critical context in which humans from different backgrounds are taken into account, avoiding easy universalism and stereotypes.

Firstly, this would imply envisioning VR not as an "empathy machine" but through a reorientation of positionality. "VR as empathy machine" is used for short-term and volatile immersion, geared towards narcissistic self-gratification as a do-gooder. It is important to put the immersive experience of VR to the benefit of migrants themselves, avoiding identity tourism and hierarchies between viewers and actors. Secondly, the focus should be not just on extraordinary experiences but on everyday mundane events. Bailenson (2018) states that VR is too expensive to use for normal things and should be developed to experience the extraordinary (flying above buildings, swimming with tropical fish in the coral reefs, landing on the moon, growing as a tree, etc.).

In VR for humanitarianism, this often involves disaster tourism or poverty porn. It would be worthwhile to focus not on spectacular things but on ordinary problems, the at times negative aspects such as "diaspora boredom," the feeling of apathy, "stuckness," and melancholy that migrants and refugees experience in their daily lives. The representations of migrant women are often limited to gendered roles like cooking, rearing children or providing schooling, with restricted mobility both in space (restricted to refugee camps, ethnic neighborhoods, or the home) and in a social sense (Bourdieu's habitus) with little upward mobility. Thirdly, VR should be deployed not to solicit pity or compassion but to achieve social justice. Therefore, VR has the task to focus not on empathy as pity but on the politics of injustice, in which VR gives insight into the violation of human rights, integration challenges, and social isolation to propose systemic change, not just "feeling what it is like."

Finally, it is important to develop new haptic functions and music scores with the collaboration of migrant artists and co-creators to defy stereotypical representations of pain, fear, danger, or sadness and contribute to the development of alternative VR-scapes and immersive modalities (Nordahl and Nilsson, 2014). Many VR productions have a very discordant soundscape or background music that either

verges towards sentimentalism or is totally disconnected from the cultures and people represented. Therefore, more research is needed to steer the development of VR towards more responsible, accountable, and equitable productions, especially in the field of humanitarianism.

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Alessandra Di Maio

Coming of Age Across the Central Mediterranean Route: E.C. Osondu's *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear*

Abstract: In the past decades, the Central Mediterranean Route connecting Africa to Europe has been crossed mainly by young people who, independently from what they are leaving behind, look for better life conditions and alleged democracy in the West. Concerned with border control and humanitarian policies, Western dominant narratives focus on the migrant vs. refugee categorization (see Hamlin 2021), often neglecting the fact that for these young Africans the "Mediterranean Passage" (Portelli 1999) is also an initiation journey. E.C. Osondu's coming-of-age novel *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear* (2021) reminds us that behind every journey there are individuals with their dreams, hopes, troubles and ambitions. Its protagonist, an orphan from an unspecified African village, decides to leave home to reach the city of his dreams: Rome. In his odyssey, we recognize the voyage of the young people who cross the "Black Mediterranean" (Di Maio 2012) but also the story of any young man eager to get to know the world.

Keywords: Migrant/refugee crises, Central Mediterranean Route, Black Mediterranean, African Diaspora, African literature, E.C. Osondu

1 Beyond binaries: Migrant vs. refugee

Today, the concept of the refugee as distinct from other migrants looms large. Immigration laws worldwide tend to propose a migrant vs. refugee dichotomy by viewing migrants as voluntary, often economically motivated, individuals who can be legitimately excluded by potential host states, while refugees, forced to leave their homeland for political reasons or other force majeure causes, are allowed to cross borders under the protection of international laws. As Rebecca Hamlin argues in her book *Crossings: How We Label and React to People on the Move* (2021), everything we know about people who decide to move from one world region to another suggests that border crossing is far more nuanced, and complicated, than any binary can encompass. By analyzing cases of various "border crises" across Europe, the Middle East, North America and South America, Hamlin contends that the migrant/refugee binary is not just an innocuous shorthand. Indeed, its power stems from the way in which it is painted as apolitical.

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The binary, she argues, is a dangerous "legal fiction," politically constructed with the ultimate goal of making harsh border control measures more ethically palatable to the public (Hamlin 2021: 1–24).

The binary appears even more incongruous when applied to the uncountable, undocumented people who cross the so-called Central Mediterranean Route linking Africa to Europe via Italy.[1] Still talked about as an emergency, the "burning" (Pandolfo 2007) of the Mediterranean has been going on for decades. If Human Rights Watch describes it as "the world's deadliest migration route" and talks about a "Mediterranean migration crisis," other international organizations, including the UNHCR, report that "Europe is living through a maritime refugee crisis." One wonders, with Hamlin, whether the opposition migrant/refugee can be at all applicable in Mediterranean S&R operations aimed at rescuing people at sea, whose legal status is clearly unknown.

The majority of people making the Mediterranean crossing are young, more often than not minors, who, independently from what they are leaving behind – whether dire economic circumstances, ethnic or religious persecutions, or civil wars – look for better life conditions and alleged democracy in Europe. Upon arrival, they are temporarily kept in "reception centers" actually functioning as penitentiaries, and only later, if deemed fit, can they apply for asylum, when they are not repatriated. Several, on the other hand, literally travel off the radar and are not traceable. Focusing on the legal aspects of their experience, in any case judged 'illegal' by Fortress Europe – which hasn't yet found a way to implement humanitarian corridors or legalize the crossing – mass-mediated dominant narratives in the West tend to neglect that for these young people traversing the Mediterranean is also an initiation journey, the beginning of a new life.

2 E.C. Osondu's *When the Sky Is Ready the Stars Will Appear*

Literature comes to the aid, reminding us that those who cross the sea are human beings, not numbers, despite the counting incessantly offered by the media, which often represent them as indistinct masses of nameless, voiceless black bodies, whose life stories begin in the heart of the Mediterranean. In particular, E.C. Osondu's coming of age novel *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear*

1 Formal updated reports on the Central Mediterranean Route are provided by the EU via FRONTEX, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency.

(2021) reminds us that behind every journey there are young individuals with their dreams, hopes, ambitions, troubles. Published first in its Italian translation in 2020,[2] and then in the original English by the Nigerian publisher Ouida in 2021,[3] Osondu's novel tells the fictional story of an orphan who decides to leave his African village to reach the city of his dreams – Rome. In his odyssey, which we follow step by step, we recognize the voyage of the young Africans who cross the Central Mediterranean Route but also the story of any young man eager to get to know the world. Contrarily to what we usually hear from the media, where the focus is always on the receiving end of the voyage, in the novel we follow the story of the full journey – a fictional one, in this case – in first person, through the eyes and the voice of the boy who makes it. Thus, Osondu's novel tells us the other side of the story, from a point of view to which Europeans are not commonly exposed – the point of view of an African boy. Toppling over the dominant Western perspective, the novel reminds us that those who make the crossing leave behind roots, possessions and relationships, but carry with them unique and unreplaceable life stories, made up of dreams, desires, and needs.

The novel recounts in thirty-four short chapters the vicissitudes of an African teenager who chooses to leave his home and country to seek a better future in Italy. Of him we know neither his name, age nor nationality. His village, Gulu Station, a figment of the author's imagination, resembles any small West African village where people live making ends meet, but where the smooth flow of daily life ensures stability. The young man narrates his story in the first person, from his own point of view, with the idiosyncrasies and the sense of wonder typical of his age. Left an orphan, he recounts being placed in the care of Nene, an older lady who welcomes him like a son. Mild-mannered, his strength lies in his ability to ask questions, as he repeats at several points in the story, because "one who asks questions never gets lost." (Osondu 2021: 44). His voice is sweet, innocent, optimistic, sometimes soft and sometimes restless, like that of many teenagers with high hopes. Always ready to ask and above all able to listen, his is a welcoming voice that resonates as a sounding board for the voices of the community, especially for Nene's wise words, which guide him on his journey towards the future. It is Nene who utters the title phrase, indicating that there is a time for everything. Nene offers slightly different variations of the phrase, as befits storytelling: "You will go on your journey but it is not time yet. When the sky is ready that is when the moon appears, never before." (Osondu 2021: 27). The narrative is peppered with

2 E.C. Osondu (2020) *Quando il cielo vuole spuntano le stelle* (trans. G. Guerzoni).

3 Forthcoming in the USA, the novel has been published in the original English only in Nigeria so far. E.C. Osondu (2021) *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear* (Lagos: Ouida). All quotations from the novel in the article refer to this edition.

proverbs, sayings, legends, sounds and smells of childhood in Gulu Station, which stands as a symbol of a continent with ancient traditions, but headed toward a global destiny marked by diaspora. Although the name of the town is a sign of unfulfilled, colonial promise – Gulu Station has never had a train station – life flows in an orderly fashion.

> Gulu Station only has one of everything: one place of worship, one store, one cripple who is also the Gulu Station cobbler. We had a single Madman named Jagga who was famous for his words of wisdom. [. . .] When it was rumored that another citizen of Gulu Station was about to go mad, Jagga warned the man to hang on to his sanity. In Jagga's view, Gulu Station was too small a village to accommodate two mad people. In Gulu Station, we all know each other. We make it a point to mind each other's business. We are not happy all the time but we are not sad all the time either. But then, who in this world wants to be happy or sad all the time? (Osondu 2021: 12)

Everything has a role and a *raison d'être* in the village, but resources are scarce and therefore so is the chance for young people to realize their dreams. This is why the protagonist, like others of his own age, decides to leave in search of a better world. His highest aspiration is to reach Rome, known worldwide for its beauty, whose language he pretends to know how to speak: "Ah, Roma, *bella, bella, bellissimo*" (Osondu 2021: 111). Conversing with his fellow travellers, he repeats: "Rome is *bella*. In fact, Rome is more than *bella*, it is *bellisimo*" (134), making once again the same grammatical gender mistake (*bella* is correctly feminine, its absolute superlative form *bellissimo* is masculine). His lie is short-lived: "'But what about their language?' someone asked. I twisted and turned. What did I know about the language aside from *bella* and *bellisimo*?" (137).

> "See, *bella*, means beautiful in the language of Rome, but not just any kind of beauty. You see, the language of Rome is so deep, everything has a unique meaning. This beauty we are talking about here is not the type of beauty you see, for instance, in the sky when the sun is setting. No, this type of beauty refers to the beauty of a woman. So, Rome is beautiful like a beautiful woman," I explained. (Osondu 2021: 130)

It is the protagonist's older friend Bros, who had moved there years before and made his fortune, who tells him about Rome. Whenever Bros returns to visit Gulu Station wearing the latest fashionable clothes, he brings gifts, money and delicacies for everyone: "Bros brought dance and music with him like we have never experienced before. There was a lot of food. A cow was slaughtered and the aroma of fried meat hit every nose in Gulu Station." (Osondu 2021: 4) Rome is the protagonist's dream city because of its beauty, which in the eyes of a teenager takes on the appearance of a desirable woman, fantastic automobiles and a world champion football team:

> "Everything that you have in other places they have it in Rome. They have cars that fly. When the car gets to a flooded part of the road it merely lifts itself up and flies off to the other side. They make the fastest cars in the world. They have so many football clubs and football stars; they have also won the World Cup four times. Each loss was because the Pope did not bless their team to give other countries a chance to win," I said. (Osondu 2021: 131)

Rome is not only the *dolce vita*, it is also the city of the Pope, second only to God. As a result, the young man imagines it as a heavenly city. "The first time I heard of Rome I thought it was a place in heaven," reads the novel's incipit. "You know those places in heaven like Jerusalem, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Abyssinia and those types of places you only hear their names in the holy books" (Osondu 2021: 3). The narrator seems to suggest that sacredness transcends individual religions, as well as their internal divisions. It unites people, whether they are Catholics like himself, Copts, Muslims, or Jews. Sacredness is a quality intrinsic to man, who reveals it in sacred scriptures and practices it through a set of rituals, building places of worship and holy cities. The protagonist's journey takes on a sacred character and becomes a pilgrimage. Symbolically, it is a journey to heaven – past the purgatory of the crossing, as we will see. The protagonist will embark not only in a dinghy ("This was a balloon with an outboard engine," 152) but also on a spiritual quest that will culminate in his arrival at the coveted papal seat.

> The Pope lives in Rome. Rome is his hometown just as heaven is God's hometown. Now, you all know that after God the next in line is the Pope so, living in Rome is like living in heaven. Everything that happens in heaven, happens in Rome, but on a smaller scale. (Osondu 2021: 135)

Language, too, takes on a sacred, divine dimension, as befits a budding storyteller who, by telling us his story and the stages of his journey, makes narrative one of the main instruments of his formation. For him, Italian is a mystery to explore, a means of knowledge, and the language of faith – in god, in salvation, and in a better, hopeful future: "The language of Rome is no ordinary human language. It is the language that the Pope speaks. It is the language that they speak in heaven." (Osondu 2021: 137).

3 Migration, childhood, human rights

The tone of Osondu's novel is as far removed as one can imagine from that of the international mass media, whose language rages cruelly over the count of the dead and survivors, the policies of so-called reception centers, military operations and repatriations. In this coming of age novel, in which the journey is first and foremost that of a boy like so many in search of himself and a place in the world,

the tone is fairytale-like, the language a melody, the prose terse, the adventure a parable of life. This is not the first literary work in which the author – an established writer of Ibo lineage whose biography has nothing to do with that of his protagonist – takes on the voice and gaze of a young man grappling with the experience of displacement, a notion that encompasses those of mobility, migration, expatriation, asylum, refuge and exile. His multi-award-winning short story *Waiting*, published first by the prestigious journal *Guernica* in 2008 and then in his *Voice of America* short-story collection (2010), tells of a group of young boys who have fled the killing fields of war and are taken into a refugee camp. For a whole day they await the arrival of a photographer invited by the Red Cross to take their pictures so that some foreign families can choose and adopt them. In his debut novel, *This House Is Not for Sale* (2015), the complex figure of a grandfather is observed and told from the point of view of his grandchildren. He is an African patriarch who owns the family home where everyone can find a place and protection but must be subject to his rule. However, in *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear,* Osondu touches chords that resonate closely with us. He does so with a delicacy that reflects the vulnerability of those who make a risky journey from Africa to Italy which not everyone survives. On the other hand, he emphasizes the sacredness of an age – adolescence – that should be protected not only by our common sense of humanity, but also by the international community, as enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). If the latter reminds us that "All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection,"[4] the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, already proposed in 1924 and officially approved by the UN in 1959, reiterates the concept, articulating it in ten fundamental principles that develop the assumption of the Preamble: "Mankind owes to the child the best it has to give."[5] Nationality, which is never indicated in the novel – neither for the protagonist nor for any other character – cannot serve as a discriminator. The first principle of the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* states that: "The child shall enjoy all the rights set forth in this Declaration [. . .] without distinction or discrimination on account of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin." Principle 8 summarizes that "The child shall in all circumstances be among the first to receive protection and relief." In his essay "Cultural Absolutes and Relativisms: The Dignity and Sacredness of Human Life," written in the

4 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), article 25, comma 2.

5 *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (1959), Preamble. The Declaration was the basis of the *Convention of the Rights of the Child* adopted by the UN General Assembly 30 years later, on 20 November 1989, entering into force on 2 September 1990.

wake of the tragic massacre at the Chechen kindergarten in Beslan, Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka asserts:

> The robbery of youth of their humanity is a perversion that the world should no longer be content to tolerate. Of all the crimes against humanity, this, surely, is the greatest perversion, one which, if I were theologically inclined, I would regard as the deadliest of the deadly sins, the sure guarantee the place of the adult world in eternal perdition of its collective soul. (Soyinka 2010)

4 The wake in the Black Mediterranean

When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear is a reflection on the age of innocence and on the collective need to protect it, at any times in history and especially in times of crisis – the Mediterranean crisis, specifically. Through the central figure of its protagonist/narrator on whom the entire narrative pivots, the novel reminds us that it is mostly the young, if not the very young, who cross what I have elsewhere called the "Black Mediterranean" (Di Maio 2021; Di Maio 2012). This definition of mine draws inspiration from the Black Atlantic theory of sociologist Paul Gilroy (1993), who recognizes the triangular ocean route connecting Europe, Africa and America during the slave trade as the foundational basis of modern pre-capitalist society. The Black Mediterranean, traversed by Africans of various nationalities on an extremely risky journey, is the continuation of that history. The crossing of the sea that separates and unites Africa and Europe – a crossing carefully kept illegal by Fortress Europe – perpetuates a history based on what contemporary political, legal and cultural discourse describes as major violations of human rights. Nevertheless, the recent Afro-Mediterranean developments of this history lie at the basis of one of the main economic axes of global capitalism. It is not coincidental that Alessandro Portelli, in a volume on the history of the Middle Passage and its representation in the African American imaginary, introduces the concept of "Mediterranean Passage" (Portelli 1999), later taken up by geographer Russell King in a collective study of contemporary migration in Southern Europe (King 2001). Migration is not slavery, the Afro-Mediterranean Passage is not the Atlantic Middle Passage. However, the Libyan human auctions documented by CNN (2017),[6] the exploitation of African migrant farm workers in the Italian fields, the young victims of sex trafficking who populate European streets are grafted upon the very same history. Iain Chambers clarifies: "Slavery and racial capitalism, as so many modern black writers and

6 See the CNN reportage "Freedom for Sale" by Nima Elbagir et al.

critics teach us, is not back there. It both constitutes and ghosts the ongoing formation of the present where black deaths at sea fold into a time that is still now. We are still in that wave. If there is no longer the juridical recognition of slave property, what today exists runs that system a close second" (Chambers 2021: 299). As in the era of the Black Atlantic, in the era of the Black Mediterranean, Western prosperity is based on the exploitation of cheap labor coming from Africa, and on the abuse of the human and natural resources of a continent first massively colonized by European powers, then partly controlled by U.S. economic domination, now joined by China which does business in Africa reaping staggering profits. The migrations, forced or voluntary, that have marked the African continent are linked to this long historical process unfolding from the modern age to the present day. In this regard, African-American scholar Christina Sharpe speaks of a "grammar" of "wake" as a defining feature of the African diaspora, whose trauma of slavery has not yet been overcome but instead is repeated through contemporary, life-threatening migrations (Sharpe 2016). She proposes multiple definitions of "wake" through her text, making clear they should be all read as "a reminder, a refrain, and more" (135). She explains:

> Keeping each of the definitions of wake in mind, I want to think and argue for one aspect of Black being in the wake as consciousness and to propose that to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding. *To be* "in" the wake, to occupy that grammar, the infinitive, might provide another way of theorizing [. . .]. I argue that rather than seeking a resolution to blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of *consciousness*. (Sharpe 2016: 13–14, Author's italics)

5 Gulu Station

In Osondu's novel, the sense of wake is narratively counterbalanced by the hope that accompanies departure. This burden of expectation on the part of those crossing the sea is perhaps the trait that most differentiates the story of the Middle Passage from that of the Mediterranean Passage – except both, more often than not, end for the unfortunate in the experience of the "abyss."[7] "If you are not setting out with a dream, then you probably will not even leave at all," the writer argued during

7 For a definition of the abyss "three times linked to the unknown" in the Middle Passage, see Edouard Glissant 1997, in particular the section "The Open Boat," 5–9. Not incidentally, one of the chapters of Osondus' novel carries the same title ("Open Boat," 147–152) and describes the final leg of the protagonist's sea-crossing ("We were almost drowning at this point, tossed back and

a public dialog held as part of the Venetian *Afropean Bridges* lectures (Osondu in Di Maio 2023). Unlike most Nigerian diaspora novels, in Osondu's text the action does not take place in the country of destination, but first in the homeland, before the protagonist's decision to leave, and then during the journey first by land and then by sea. Only the last brief chapter is devoted to his arrival in Rome. The choice of destination is inspired by the tales of the "Italian dream" told by Bros, who wants to take to Rome as his wife Miss Koi Koi, the village schoolmistress. He woos her with love letters and gifts, thanks to the intercession of the young boy. However, the urgency to leave is triggered by the death of Nene, when "The Seven Men Army" (Osondu 2021: 39) arrive in the village, trying to recruit children and boys to be trained in guerrilla warfare.

> The people of Gulu Station knew that either way this meant trouble. If you were with them and the government found out that they had recruited people to fight from Gulu Station, the entire village would be punished if not wiped out. If on the other hand we did not join them then, they were definitely going to attack us at some point. The elders put their heads together and told the members of the Seven Men Army to come back in a week's time for an answer (. . .). What the elders decided to do was quite a big risk but it was a third way and the brave thing to do. They called all of us young men together and asked us to take off. We were asked to leave, to go far, to disappear from Gulu Station and go as far away as we possibly could. (. . .) I realized that the sky was telling me that it was ready for the moon to appear. It was time for me to start my journey to Rome. That night I gathered the few items I had in a pillowcase and left Gulu Station. I did not look back. I could not look back because I knew that to look back was to be transformed into a pillar of stone. (Osondu 2021: 42–43)

The biblical reference to the wife of Lot, grandson of Abraham and himself a patriarch, lends a mythical tone to the story. It is recounted in *Genesis* that the woman, never named, as she was fleeing with her family from the city of Sodom about to be destroyed, turned to look at it, disobeying the command, and was therefore turned into a pillar of salt. The young protagonist, nameless like Lot's wife, manages to escape the pressures of the Seven Men Army who have come to recruit the children of Gulu Station thanks to the guidance of the elders – in traditional African societies, they are holders of wisdom, and as such are called upon to adjudicate moral, ethical, religious, legal, administrative and judicial issues. Heeding the moral of Lot and his family's tale, which as a devout Catholic he certainly remembers at the appropriate time, the boy leaves his village behind without looking back, taking part at that precise moment in an exodus that has its archetype in the biblical one. We readers do not witness gory scenes of war, duress or proscription. But we understand the threat of what is about to happen, or

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forth by the angry waters. We thought it was over. Their boats were made flimsy on purpose so boat and cargo could be abandoned without a backward glance." Osondu 2021: 151).

could happen, in Gulu Station. It is at that instant that the young man, already eager to travel to his beloved and idealized Rome, becomes a refugee running away from a looming conflict, and from the imminent danger of slaughter. He is forced to flee from those who threaten his "dignity and sacredness" – as Soyinka (2010) puts it – and that of his peers. However, the young protagonist/narrator never uses the word "refugee," with which, readers can assume, he is not even familiar, just like he never uses the word "migrant" when he dreams to travel to Rome. History befalls on him. Gulu Station, Osondu says in an interview, "is the story of Africa." (Osondu in Oyegbile 2022). His protagonist, the author explains, "represents so many. He represents the legion. He's not only one individual. He represents the sensibility of most of those who have this picture of the other part of the world. He is a representative of this idea of parts of Europe being heaven-like" (Osondu in Di Maio 2023; Osondu in Di Maio 2023: 50).

The indeterminacy of the protagonist's identity is representative of an experience shared by so many African youths, regardless of their nation of origin. In a well-known study on the "fictive states" recurring in many contemporary African novels, some of them now classics, Neil Ten Kortenaar explains that in these texts the narrative horizon moves from the village to the continent, bypassing the nation (Ten Kortenaar 2000). This is a literary device, according to Kortenaar, that, while it allows authors to focus on the universal trait of the story they wish to portray, it also inherently criticizes the arbitrariness of national boundaries born of colonialism and maintained even after independence (236). Whether fleeing from the rumblings of a civil war or responding to a wanderlust that prompts new experiences across borders and inner exploration, or both, the migratory experience of the novel's young protagonist, the central pivot of the story, reveals once again how travel, whatever form it takes, remains a favored literary *topos* of the *Bildungsroman*. The fact that even Gulu Station is a fictional village, a metaphor for a postcolonial and, at the same time, ancient African world, as its name well reflects, emphasizes the symbolic value of the story. The old village of Gulu took on the designation "Station" after the arrival of the white man.

> Gulu Station was named years ago when the railway line was about to be laid by a white man called Surveyor Milliken. Back then, our village was only known as Gulu village. When he stopped by our village, he was asked what he and his team were looking for. He responded by saying they were looking at the possibility of making our village one of the places where the train stopped as it made its journey up north.
>
> "So this will mean that our little village will become Gulu Station and no longer "the ordinary Gulu village that it used to be?," the villagers asked. [. . .]

> "That is a possibility. It could or it could not," he said and put his white helmet back on top of his head. He could not recall a day he was not feeling hot or sweating in this muggy continent. (Osondu 2021: 10–11)

6 The journey

The journey in *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear* is not only an individual but also a collective adventure. The protagonist sets forth alone but soon meets other young people who become his travel companions. There are those who set out on the road out of need, like Ayira. She wants to provide financial help to her family, even though the boys laugh at her behind her back, with typical adolescent cruelty, because she can neither read nor write and they fear that "she will not even get to Europe before she starts selling her body." (Osondu 2021: 74). Those who dream of becoming famous football players, such as Anyi, who aspires to play for a major European team. Those who wish to be reunited with their loved ones who have already left, like Abdu, who wants to join Halima and win her heart, despite the fact that she "had thrown his love back at him as if it was a piece of rotten mango." (64). And those who are fleeing war, like Zaaid, who is trying to escape his traumatic past as a child soldier. Each of the four central chapters in the novel is dedicated to the protagonist's traveling companions, as if to signify that community always plays a central role on any life journey. Although we learn their names, we are not told where each of them comes from, but we do know that they all share the same destination: Europe, whatever the country. For some it is Germany, for others Italy, for still others a large undefined country with its precious metal currency. For all, however, the real goal is the realization of a dream.

> "I am Nene's son. That is what everyone calls me."
> "I am Anyi."
> "I am Ayira."
> "I am Tafiq."
> "I am Abdu."
> "And where are you headed?"
> "The same place as you."
> "And how do you know where I am headed?"
> "How will I not know? Look at your backpack. Look at your cap. Look at your restless eyes. Your eyes are no longer on your head they are on the road." (Osondu 2021: 61–62)

Travel is an initiation rite that marks their growth, the passage from adolescence to adulthood. It is a succession of encounters, gazes, a blur of faces, landscapes, climates, languages, prayers, customs, and names that reveal religious and cultural affiliations. The only one who remains nameless is the protagonist: "Nene's

son." In the face of a person's proper name that is never revealed, his unquestionably African parentage is emphasized – the name Nene, Yinka Olatunbosun explains, is an affectionate nickname for 'mother' in many African regions, and carries literary resonance: "Quite oddly familiar too is the author's character-naming. Nene as a substitute for 'Mother' or 'Mama' is reminiscent of Wole Soyinka's Wild Christian character in the 1981 memoir *Aké: The Years of Childhood*" (Olatunbosun 2022).

To travel is to learn about the world, to cross its borders, to begin to understand its characteristics and even inequalities.

> As I made my way to Rome, I began to notice the differences in the houses I encountered.
>
> You could tell the difference between the houses of those whose sons and daughters had gone through the desert and ocean to the other side of the world, from those who had nobody over there. The first difference was the shiny coat of paint. Their houses were no longer covered with red dust. The colours were never muted, quiet, or unobtrusive. They screamed, proclaiming that there was someone across the ocean who made the old house look younger.
>
> You could also tell from the deep growl of the giant electric generators that usually sat in a shed like a giant male cow. This generator was not the puny type from China that could only power a few light bulbs. It sat there, hunched over, belching out smoke and electricity, casting out the darkness and – spreading light. (Osondu 2021: 48)

Through the eyes and words of the protagonist, who gradually gains awareness of his surroundings, Osondu denounces a neo-colonial, capitalist economic system based on remittances. According to the World Bank, money sent home by migrants working abroad constitutes, along with international aid, one of the largest flows of funds to African countries. However, it is doubtful that these remittances promote social equality, and equal opportunities for all. The Africa traversed by the young narrator reveals deep discrepancies and proves to be very real, despite its imaginary map. The essence of the story is in this dichotomy between a continent at the mercy of a global capitalist system – the same one that produces migratory flows and forces Africa into diaspora – and a fictional village concretely regulated by ancient norms and customs passed down orally. Neil Ten Kortenaar explains that often in contemporary African literature tales from folk tradition combine with Marxist-style allegory – he considers Ngugi wa Thiong'o *Matigari*, a substantial novel set in an East Africa with an imaginary yet recognizable geography, an exemplary case. In the scholar's opinion, this leads readers to believe that the action is taking place in a specific and recognizable post-independence country, with the knowledge, however, that this same story is taking place in all African countries (Ten Kortenaar 2000: 242–243). Osondu's *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear* seems to fit in this genre. While Gulu Station is depicted as a specific, albeit fictional, village, it resembles, and becomes a metaphor for, any contemporary

West African, or even African, village, rooted in local traditions but aspiring to a global future.

7 The power of storyteling

Storytelling is an undisputed tradition in all African cultures. As Chinua Achebe explains by referring to Nigerian author Amos Tutuola, whose works mark the passage from oral to written literature, it is "an ancient oral, and moral, tradition" (Achebe 1988). In African societies, storytelling is an edifying and entertaining activity. It is not surprising, then, that travel in Osondu's novel is also an experience punctuated by storytelling, because it is only by exchanging stories that travelers overcome loneliness, resist, and survive. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the protagonist and his fellows will have to face a series of trials. Theirs is an arduous, albeit indispensable, journey into the unknown. Despite the difficulties, however, their experience is narrated with a delicacy that spares us readers from the accounts of trauma and violence generally described in the media, which tend, consciously or unconsciously, to dehumanize those who undertake the journey, placing the emphasis on the mass migration phenomenon rather than on individual experiences. At each stage, the very human characters of this novel share memories, anecdotes, dreams, true or invented stories to conquer fear, to deceive the waiting, to imagine the inscrutable that awaits them, and to shape hope. Despite the differences, the young travelers feel bound by a single destiny that will nevertheless end up separating them across the sea.

> We were all different. Some were dark. Some were fair. Some were tall and one of us looked like a little old man. We spoke different languages but we all also spoke the common language of the people on the road. We knew that as travelers we must speak kindness and could not afford to make enemies.
>
> And as we waited for the sun to go down so we could start heading up in the truck Ayira, Abdu, Tafiq and me Nene's son began to tell each other the stories of our lives before we got here. (Osondu 2021: 62–63)

Telling stories provides a form of solidarity during the journey. To travel means to cross borders, which in the eyes of a boy from a land-locked village are physical rather than national. Yet the boy has his destination clear in mind. In an attempt to mentally map out the route he needs to follow to get to Rome, he carefully looks back at the map given to him by Bros.

> I looked at the map. It contained roads, mountains, hills, rivers, gullies, sand, more sand, plenty of sand, unending sand and plenty of sand after the unending sand. There were very

> few trees. The sun hung at the center of the sky, constantly looking down angrily. (Osondu 2021: 24)

Although it is never referred to by its geographic toponym, in keeping with the choice of the unspoken that underlies the entire novel, the highly recognizable Sahara is a hostile, fearsome space that must be 'conquered' ("In my imagination, a crowd with cold water and fruit in a bowl would welcome us when we arrived [. . .] and congratulate us for conquering the desert," 97). Crossing it on a truck is as dreadful. The chapter titled "The Desert" opens with a scene from a tale of terror.

> Even before I saw the desert, stories about the desert filled my ears like the desert sand. Many compared the desert to the sea, but made of sand. Deep and mysterious, it was both a way, a road, a passage that sometimes led to death. Many were its terrors and secrets. Its belly was cavernous and huge, always hungry, never full. (Osondu 2021: 51)

The desert, a mysterious landscape that only those who truly know it do not fear, is the keeper of a wealth of stories from African oral traditions. The protagonist relates the tale of the man dying of thirst who is approached by a merchant who tries to sell him a necktie. The man, thirsty and exhausted from his long journey, pushes him away, annoyed by his insistence – "Trust me," the seller tells him, "you need the necktie." (Osondu 2021: 52). But the man does not trust him, until, on the verge of death, he spots the *Oasis Tavern*, where, however, they will not let him in because customers are required to wear ties. The laws of the desert, like its inhabitants, real and fantastic, can be ruthless.

The tie-merchant in the novel calls to mind the "strange creatures" based on the Yoruba folktales that people Amos Tutuola's narratives. In an interview, Osondu tells of Tutuola's influence on his fiction. His own main character, he confesses, is indebted to the palm-wine drinkard of the Yoruba author, whose novel by the same title is now considered a classic of African literature.[8] Tutuola's protagonist, also unnamed, sets out for the Dead's Town to retrieve his beloved and efficient palm-wine tapster, who died falling from a tree while collecting the sap needed to ferment palm wine. The vicissitudes the drinkard will undergo to be reunited with the tapster correspond to those narrated in a very rich body of traditional Youruba folktales and other oral narrative forms. Osondu explains that even the *Bildung* of the young protagonist of his own novel owes much to the stories he hears from an early age in Gulu Station, especially from the mouth of Nene, the nearly blind, big-hearted elderly woman of infinite and graceful wis-

8 Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, first published in London by Faber & Faber in 1952, with a Preface by Dylan Thomas, is widely considered the first African literary text in English.

dom who acts as his mother after he becomes an orphan. Nene is mother, grandmother, oracle, voice of the community. Once she is united with the ancestors, it is the memory of her words that will accompany the boy on the journey, and guide him through the hardships. It is certainly because of the lessons Nene has taught him that the protagonist, despite his young age, turns out to be so wise. In the traditional society of Gulu Station, schooling is not available to all, it is a privilege of the few. But this does not prevent families from providing education for their children.

The "talantolo" episode is proof of this (Osondu 2021: 17–21). At a time when the boy is being particularly grumpy, in order to get rid of him for a while and at the same time teach him a lesson, Nene sends him to a neighbor to ask her if he can borrow a "talantolo," an object the young man has never heard of. The neighbor, taking the hint, sends him to a friend, saying that she has already lent it to another boy. The friend repeats the same excuse to him, until Nene, seeing him return home exhausted and empty-handed, reveals to him that in fact, behind that mysterious object is just an old method of getting rid of a troublesome son for a few hours. "Although E.C Osondu's work is situated in a contemporary African setting," Olatunbosun argues, "it explores the use of traditional encrypted messaging which parents, particularly mothers, use to create a communal system of punishment for a child who has misbehaved. 'Talantolo' has its equivalent in many other African cultures" (Olatunbosun 2022). Asked about this expedient, Osondu further explains that the "talantolo," called by different names in different languages, can be considered a useful tool for soothing adolescent turmoil by childhood psychologists, a means of knowledge with ontological properties by philosophers, but for traditional storytellers like Nene, it is an educational device that can provide a moral lesson. The education of the young protagonist of the novel is imparted by the proverbs of his grandmother, the tales of the elders, and the other numerous forms of the oral tradition handed down by the Gulu Station community. Not being able to receive a proper school education does not mean remaining ignorant when one has access to alternative forms of knowledge whose value is collectively recognized: "Grandparents are usually a repository of knowledge, like a way for people to learn, a way for us to learn stories, to pick up proverbs, to pick up skills. It's not surprising that the novel's protagonist knows so much even at that age." (Osondu 2023).

8 "The Country of Rumors"

Storytelling helps overcome the most difficult trials and survive. It is an age-old literary trope, whether it is defeating the plague (like in Boccaccio's *Decameron*), appeasing the whims of a king (*The Arabian Nights*), or crossing the desert and then the sea, as in this case. Leaving the Sahara behind, the fellow travelers arrive in an unspecified coastal country identifiable as Libya. Fantasizing about the destination of one's dreams – whether it be Germany, Rome, or a yearned for European Union – makes up for a tough stop in a land that seems ruled by violence, crime, and chaos.

> While we waited for the coast to clear, we played a game. In this game, we became the country we hoped to live in and made a case for this country. The rule was to tell a good story about our chosen country and make it attractive for our listeners. (Osondu 2021: 123)

Across the journey, the narrator listens to, and tells, different stories, always succeeding in grasping the meaning of the words of those he meets, even if he does not necessarily know their languages. In the coastal country, instead, he finds himself besieged by voices harbingers of violence that overwhelm him without producing meaning. Bullying, abuse, and blackmail are the order of the day. Along with his fellow travelers, he is approached by a compatriot who turns out to be a drug courier. Later, a group of "thin men with eyes that burned and glowed even in the semi-darkness," who "smelled like The Seven Men Army" (Osondu 2021: 111), try to dissuade the young men from embarking, offering to hire them as mercenaries in a civil war they call a revolution – "Join the Revolution They Said" is the title of the chapter. The young man is disoriented by contrasting voices that confuse him, making him falter ("I was worried that I would be showing ingratitude to my host if I stood up to leave abruptly. I hesitated." 108). Once again, it is Nene's words that suggests the way out, urging him not to give in to the temptation to stay in that transit country a day longer than necessary ("I heard Nene's voice. She warned me against joining a war that would never end. It would only land me in an underground prison where I would be tortured daily. That was not why I had crossed valleys, hills, and deserts." 113). This is the only section of the novel that takes on a realistic, chronicle-like approach, nevertheless rendered fairy-tale-like by the iteration of the same formula at each beginning of the paragraph: "There were rumours." Besides emphasizing the gravity of what happens in the "Country of Rumours" (96), where meaningful, sense-making sound is replaced by cacophony, the repetition of this phrase, as is the case in fairy tales, helps the young narrator to remember, and tell, his story.

> There were rumours of abductions by those who they said did not like the color of our skins and wanted us to work as slaves. These were the most frightening rumours (. . .) There were also rumours of abductors who kidnapped you and handed you a Nokia cellphone to call your family, and tell them to wire down money quickly otherwise they would kill you. There were rumours that they had actually killed people whose family could not pay up. (p. 64)

> There were rumours that giant doors were going to be shut in our faces soon: the routes through the sea from this particular part of the country would soon be closed, we heard. It was rumoured that they would soon build a wall over the sea through which no one could cross. (Osondu 2021: 97)

> There were rumours that the government was going to acquire military ships that would patrol the waters round the clock. The ships were said to be so powerful, they created waves that overturned the smugglers' tiny boats, and drowned all their passengers. They said that unlike the ships on the other side, these ships never rescued drowning passengers. (p. 64)

On the chessboard of the Black Mediterranean, Libya and Italy, linked by a common colonial past and a long history of trade partnership, play a central role, representing starting and ending points of the Central Mediterranean Route. In her book *Guests and Aliens*, sociologist Saskia Sassen explains that migrations never happen by chance, the trajectories do not turn out to be accidental, they are always well structured (Sassen 1999: 155). Although the young protagonist of Osondu's novel has no political awareness of this fact, he has practical experience of it. And he tells us about it.

> We were thankful for the sea; without the sea how could we go to the place with the magical lights, the place with the clean and shining streets? [. . .] We were thankful for the sea because the sea connected all of us. As we used to ask – if the Creator did not want us to go to the place with the shining lights nothing would have connected our world with that world. Not sea. Not sand. (Osondu p. 144)

9 The final passage

Although in the "Country of Rumours" everything is prosaic, material, dreary, the prospect of the imminent crossing to the land of his dreams allows the narrator to recover the spiritual nature and the more intimate aspects of his journey. Upon embarkation, however, the ideal once again gives way to the real.

> When they told me we would have to cross the sea in a boat to get to Rome, I was a little worried. Yes, I had never seen anything as lovely as the blue sea but, I was worried about safety. I became more worried when I saw the boats. In the old World Atlas back in Gulu

> Station, I had seen the huge boats in which the Portuguese came to our land. They were mighty and shaped like giant birds. The boats had faces with noses and mouths and looked like they owned the water. The boat we would use to cross the sea to Rome looked like the kind of thing you poured water into to bath little baby. (Osondu 138)

In the postcolonial, neo-colonial, only partially decolonized world, power structures and dynamics mirror, and continue, those imposed by European colonialism in Africa. One of the most symbolic vectors that connects the history of the Black Mediterranean to that of the Black Atlantic is the boat (Gilroy 1993; Sharpe 2016: 25–62). The ramshackle dinghies and decrepit makeshift boats that – when it goes well – bring migrants to the other side of the Mediterranean have nothing of the sturdy sailing ships with which Europeans had arrived in Africa centuries earlier, sailing in the opposite direction. Nor do they compare to the merchants' slave-ships that brought young enslaved African to the Americas through the centuries. Yet even an old floating wreck takes on an epic dimension when it serves to make a risky, heroic crossing in the name of hope, a better future, and a reunion with the divine. Paradise is awaiting. Except then it remains to be found out whether it is in fact paradise, or merely a new beginning, a new road to walk on.

> The water was cold. We had to get in before we climbed the ladder leading to the rescue boats waiting for us. It did not feel like the same water we had been on during our entire journey. It was soft blue, calm and less angry. We wondered if the people we would meet would be like the water. We were hopeful. If you do not travel with hope, you journeyed in vain. (Osondu 2021: 153)

> At first sight, Rome actually did look like it was in heaven to me. (156)

> I too began to do as the people of Rome were doing.
> I began to walk (167)

The autobiographical fairy tale told by the young protagonist of *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear* can be read as a historically-plausible, realistic, fictional account of the Black Mediterranean – a "fact-fiction (faction) novel", Oaikhena suggests (2022) – but also as a spiritual, moral, mythical, sacred, epic parable. It tells a story that concerns us all closely and that marks, for better or worse, our time, while reminding us that the current Mediterranean crisis is only the last chapter of a longer, unended historical narrative whose central notion remains the wake. In Sharpe's words, "Living in the wake on a global level means living the disastrous time and effects of continued marked migrations, Mediterranean and Caribbean disasters, trans-American and trans-African migration, structural adjustment imposed by the International Monetary Fund that continues imperialisms/colonialism, and more." (2016: 15). Finally, the adventures of the boy from Gulu Station mirror a

global society in which migration, an impulse as old as the world, remains an enigma, and in which every migrant, or refugee, African or not, always seeks a route, oute, a direction, a landing, while carrying a bundle of life lived.

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Charlotte Spear

Crisis and the Postcolonial State: Human Rights and Contemporary Emergency

Abstract: If the twenty-first century can be defined as the Age of Crisis, 'crisis' in the peripheries of the world-system is in many ways a continuation of the state of emergency imposed by colonization, whereby external powers install arbitrary dictatorial rule (Césaire 2000 [1950]; Fanon 1969 [1964]). In this way, countries from across the periphery of the world-system are subjected to a unique form of crisis: one which not only traverses national borders but consolidates the displacement of the state of emergency away from the capitalist core and into distant regions. In the twenty-first century, this imposed state of crisis comes through the instrumentalization of discourses surrounding human rights, enabling neo-imperial humanitarian interventions which fail to 'solve' ongoing crises but succeed discursively in reinforcing the kinds of colonial cultural hierarchies identified by postcolonial theorists (Slaughter 2007; Fanon 1969 [1964]). Employing a theoretical framework inspired by the works of Slobodian (2018) and the Warwick Research Collective (2015), I relocate Fanon's and Cesaire's critical analyses of the colonial state of emergency into the twenty-first century. This provides the basis for an analysis of Bofane's *Congo Inc.* (2018) as a literary registration of the 'postcolonial state' as the site of the externally enforced law of arbitrary rule. Departing from the onslaught of biopolitical explorations of the contemporary state of exception (Agamben 2005), this essay aims to explore the 'Age of Human Rights' as a discursive device enabling the neo- imperial situating of the state of emergency within the peripheral zones of the world-system.

Keywords: crisis, human rights, humanitarianism, Congo, colonialism, state of emergency

1 Introduction

"The algorithm Congo Inc.," states the narrator of In Koli Jean Bofane's 2018 novel, *Congo Inc.*, "had been created the moment that Africa was being chopped up in Berlin between November 1884 and February 1885. Under Leopold II's sharecropping, they had hastily developed it so they could supply the whole world with rubber from the equator" (Bofane 2018: 174). Bofane's novel, aligning with the critiques prevalent in the works of other contemporary Central African

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writers such as Alain Mabanckou and Fiston Mwanza Mujilla, is thus premised on an analysis of the patterns of global exploitation prevalent in the modern world-system. In particular, Bofane concentrates on the idea that Congo is part of a wider "algorithm" which was created at the inception of colonialism and which has maintained Congo's position as a space to be exploited throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods. The newly commodified, *incorporated* Congo is defined by Bofane as a part of a wider formula of accumulation, established "the moment that Africa was being chopped up in Berlin" (Bofane 2018: 174). Taking this historical moment as its starting point, this chapter proposes an analysis of literary representations of colonial and postcolonial interventions in Congo. In doing so, I suggest that, whilst the twenty-first century might be dubbed the "Age of Crisis" (see, for example, Saad-Filho 2021; Vickers 2019), crisis for the peripheries of the modern world-system is in many ways a continuation of that imposed at the onset of colonial intervention. This peripheralized crisis, however, is a very specific form of crisis, one which not only traverses national borders but consolidates the displacement of the state of emergency away from the capitalist core and into distant regions. When referring to the "peripheries" of the world-system, I am of course borrowing from the work of world-systems theorists, particularly Immanuel Wallerstein, and later building on this through the literary-cultural interventions of the Warwick Research Collective (WReC). In particular, in defining the "peripheries," I utilize Wallerstein's discussion of "peripheral states" as those in which mostly peripheral economic processes take place, those processes which "are truly competitive [and thus] when exchange occurs, [those] competitive products are in a weak position" (Wallerstein 2004: 28) as compared to those products from the "quasi-monopolized" core (Wallerstein 2004: 28). As a result, "there is a constant flow of surplus-value from the producers of peripheral products to the producers of core-like products. This has been called unequal exchange" (Wallerstein 2004: 28). This process of unequal exchange, I argue, is vital in enabling both the historical and ongoing exploitation of Congo, facilitating its position within the world-system as the *incorporated* Congo.

The Democratic Republic of Congo becomes a central case study for analysis of colonial and postcolonial crisis because "the DRC has been wracked by internal conflict [and subsequent international intervention] since its independence from Belgium in 1960" (Hultman et al. 2019: 148). As critics have pointed out, postcolonial Congo has faced one of the deadliest conflicts since World War II (Sawyer 2018). Since its decolonization, Congo has thus remained almost constantly in a state of humanitarian crisis requiring urgent and long-term resolution. As a result, the region has been subjected to almost continual foreign intervention from the United Nations (UN), beginning with the Opération des Nations Unies au Congo (ONUC) (Deibert 2013: 21) in 1960, and has consequently been described by

Claude Kabemba as "the land of humanitarian intervention" (2013). Congo can thus be seen as a region in continual crisis from colonization up to today, with Congolese president Félix Tshisekedi only this year requesting support from the East Africa Community "in tackling the dozens of armed groups that have fought each other and the authorities in the eastern DRC for years" (Walle 2022).

I therefore examine the installation of crisis in the peripheries of the world-system through an exploration of the way in which Bofane's *Congo Inc.* presents the neo-colonial[1] logic at the heart of much contemporary humanitarian intervention in the region. I then explore how the text reflects the violence and coerciveness inherent to many of these interventions, drawing parallels with the increasing militarization of the UN's missions in Congo and showing how this serves frequently to reproduce rather than to terminate the conflict and thus the state of crisis in Congo. Finally, I highlight the way in which these interventions are made futile by their economic motivations, showing how Bofane presents crisis itself as a profitable, economic endeavor. To begin, however, I examine the way in which the colonial project ensured that crisis was written into the logic of the world-system from its inception and thus, remains at the basis of the contemporary system.

2 Crisis as a world-systemic project

Both Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, in their analyses of systems of colonialism, originally published in 1950 and 1964, respectively, contend that the colonial state represents the archetypal state of emergency, one of enforced crisis through disruption of sovereign law or, as Bricmont puts it, an "undermining [of] the principle of national sovereignty" (2012: xi). Nazism, for many critics, represents the archetypal state of emergency because of the introduction of the Nuremberg laws which legalized the genocide of millions of Jews under the auspices of the protection of the state and national sovereignty (Agamben 1998: 132). And yet, "before they were its victims," argues Césaire of Nazism, "they were its accomplices; that they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had only been applied to non-European peoples" (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 36). Césaire thus examines the role of European colonizers' activities as horrific laboratory experiments for the later Holocaust in Germany. He contends that the arbitrary installation of rule and dis-

1 I use the hyphenated "neo-colonial" in reference to Kwame Nkrumah's definition of the term as "attempts to perpetuate colonialism while at the same time talking about freedom" (2004 [1965]: 239).

ruption of sovereign governance which is inherent to colonial intervention can be understood as the archetypal state of emergency. Fanon makes a similar point, suggesting that Nazism represents, "the apparition of 'European colonies,' in other words, the institution of a colonial system in the very heart of Europe" (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 33). In a recent theorization of the framework of postcolonial studies in the twenty-first century, the WReC suggest that "it is only in the 'long' nineteenth century, and then as the direct result of British and European colonialism, that we can speak both of the *capitalisation* of the world and of the full *worlding* of capital" (original italics) (WReC 2015: 15). Following this conception then, alongside those of Fanon and Césaire, the modern world-system has at its very inception and written into its very logic the installation of crisis in the peripheries.

And yet, as Fanon and Césaire make clear, these impositions on the sovereign rule of law rely on the discursive situating of the recipient region as somehow inferior and thus either exploitable or in need of intervention. Fanon argues, "it is not possible to enslave men without logically making them inferior through and through" (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 40). He therefore speaks to the linkage between the memory of the Holocaust and the memory of colonialism in terms of "the common wretchedness of different men, the common enslavement of extensive social groups" (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 33), highlighting both of these enforced states of emergency as based first upon an inferiorization – in Fanon's sense of the term (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 40) – of a particular social group. Césaire builds on this in his suggestion that humanism's conception of the rights of man "has been – and still is – narrow and fragmentary, incomplete and biased and, all things considered, sordidly racist" (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 37). "What [the European] cannot forgive Hitler for is not *the crime* in itself" states Césaire, "it is the crime against the white man [. . .] which until then has been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the 'coolies' of India, and the 'niggers' of Africa"[2] (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 36). In this way, the state of crisis experienced by those regions subjected to colonization becomes one in which a state of emergency is imposed on the basis, or with the justification of, a logic of inferiorization.

This particular form of crisis can clearly be seen in Congo's own colonial history. After the Belgian King Leopold II made Congo his own personal property in 1885 to access its huge supply of natural resources (Hochschild 2006: 87), the region was subjected to a 44-year rule so violent that it has been described as "the holo-

2 I quote directly from the source here to maintain Césaire's evident critique and sarcasm, however the terms he uses, both in the original French and English translation, are of course now obsolete and considered offensive.

caust in central Africa," with "burned villages [. . .] mutilated bodies [and] the depopulation of entire districts" (Hochschild 2006: 225). As Kabemba tells us, "Leopold presented the pre-colonial history of the Congolese as backward and uncivilized, operating without any agreed system and values and freely trading their neighbors as slaves. It is this representation which necessitated a humanitarian intervention" (2013: 142–143). He thus highlights the distinctly humanitarian and yet inferiorizing logic which underscored Leopold's intervention. Furthermore, Samuel Moyn argues that "the most notorious humanitarian imperialist of the polite age [the nineteenth century] was probably King Leopold of Belgium, who took the gift of the Congo from the great powers, promising to eliminate vile slavery and bring civilization, then turned the country into his private extraction ranch and nest of untold cruelty" (2017: 53). Importantly, Moyn emphasizes not only the inferiorizing logic of this intervention, but the violent exploitation that it enabled. Colonialism can thus be recognized as an exploitative economic endeavor, reliant on a discursive inferiorizing logic. As such, when in the post-WWII period, a series of anticolonial movements led to the decolonization of the majority of Africa including Congo itself in 1960, there was a need, in Slobodian's terms, to "protect the world economy from a democracy that became global only [through decolonization]" (2018: 4). The global market and natural resource accumulation which previously relied upon the colonial exploitation of regions across the peripheries of the world-system now needed to be protected, for the benefit of core accumulation, by a new form of "world governance" (Slobodian 2018: 5) which would "insulate market actors from democratic pressures" (Slobodian 2018: 4). Therefore, in Slobodian's analysis, continued interventions into national sovereign law, or some form of continued state of emergency, is written into the logic of the modern world-system itself, initiated through colonialism but then maintained through continual interventions following decolonization.

This chapter therefore looks to explore the way in which the writing of a specific form of crisis into the logic of the modern world-system means that the peripheries of the world-system are subjected to a unique form of crisis: a set of discursive, economic and military relations following decolonization in which "every form of coercion is brought to bear to keep [former colonies] under Western domination" (Bricmont 2006: 36). Bofane registers this unique form of crisis in his novel, *Congo Inc.*, a text which examines contemporary resource conflict in postcolonial Congo from the perspective of a young man, Isookanga, whose understanding of the world around him is framed by his playing a fictional video game entitled "Roaring Trade." The text moves smoothly between the actions of the game and Isookanga's own life in Congo, making use of the game's framing to satirically critique the violence of Congo's entrapment in local and global resource conflicts, including a searing critique of the role of the UN in this conflict. In my particular focus on the presentation of the crisis in the Democratic Repub-

lic of Congo in Bofane's *Congo Inc.*, I focus on humanitarian interventions as a case study of the way in which human rights discourses can be co-opted to become an inferiorizing logic which enable interventions which are not only violently exploitative, but which enter into a dialectical relationship with crisis itself. These interventions in fact work to reproduce the very crisis they apparently intend to solve. Although Bofane incorporates analysis of a multitude of forms and valences of crisis into his text, he dedicates the novel, "to the UN / to the IMF / to the WTO" (Bofane 2018). Whilst in his foreword to the novel, Dominic Thomas poses that this may be another example of Bofane's irony (Thomas 2018: xvii), I instead argue that Bofane here directly addresses the United Nations, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization with his text, asking his reader to consider specifically the implications of these organizations. I thus follow his lead in focusing specifically on humanitarian interventions, especially from the UN.

3 The neo-colonial urges of contemporary interventions

In order to understand the way in which human rights are instrumentalized through so-called humanitarian interventions to reproduce crisis in the peripheries, it becomes vital to understand how these discourses are used to discursively reinforce neo-colonial hierarchies. Bofane uses satire throughout his text to highlight this, ironically, and obscenely, presenting the Congolese people as lacking any knowledge to deal with the crises of their region, instead entirely reliant on the "savior" provided by foreign humanitarian workers. We hear how "humanitarians in their immaculate vehicles were distributing rations of sanctified cookies throughout the land and attempting to comfort the poor genuflecting souls, muttering dogmas they'd memorized in the humanities departments in the northern hemisphere" (Bofane 2018: 115). The idea of "poor genuflecting souls" reminds us of Césaire's analysis of "millions of men whom they [colonizers] have knowingly instilled with fear and a complex of inferiority, whom they have infused with despair and trained to tremble, to kneel and behave like flunkeys" (2000 [1950]: 43). Once again, then, Bofane makes use of satire to highlight the neo-colonial inferiority discourse at the heart of the intervention, a discourse which relies on the notion of the periphery as defined by crisis and the core as savior or repairer of that crisis. Furthermore, a semantic field of religious language surrounds the humanitarian workers, with the ideas of "sanctified cookies," "poor genuflecting souls" and "dogmas" creating a relationship between the workers and the Congolese people of a form of Godly saviors

for the masses. More specifically, the "dogmas" these workers share are "memorized in the humanities departments in the northern hemisphere" (Bofane 2018: 115), ironically aligning the "northern hemisphere" to an idea of godliness or extreme superiority, whilst simultaneously emphasizing the inapplicability of this knowledge given its vast distance from the object of its study. Humanitarianism holds a particular discursive power to reinforce ideas of inferiority and saviorism through the specific power which human rights discourses hold. Philip Alston suggests that "the characterisation of a specific goal as a human right elevates it above the rank and file of competing societal goals, gives it a degree of immunity from challenge and generally endows it with an aura of timelessness, absoluteness and universal validity" (1988: 3). In this sense, part of the discursive victory of the so-called "Age of Human Rights" – namely the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century – is that humanitarian intervention (the act of enforcing human rights within the borders of a sovereign state, in its proper definition) itself holds the status of a kind of ultimate savior project. Therefore, as Slaughter contends, in the "Age of Human Rights," "the banalization of human rights means that violations are often committed in the Orwellian name of human rights themselves" (Slaughter 2007: 2). Like the discourse of human rights itself, the humanitarian mission holds a "degree of immunity" which is registered through Bofane's presentation of the workers as almost godly. Their transportation "in their immaculate vehicles" (Bofane 2018: 115) reflects this sense of "immunity" (Alston 1988: 3), as the vehicle represents a physical barrier to those outside, one which remains unharmed and unchallenged as it is described as "immaculate."

However, Bofane pushes his presentation of humanitarianism as encoded with neo-colonial discourses further. Take this description from the text, of a restaurant situated in the Gombe district of DRC, an area which, importantly, houses much of the Congolese elite as well as Europeans living in DRC (Kasongo and Perazzone 2021) and state headquarters of international organizations such as the World Bank:

> The many customers under the large thatched roof consisted of Congolese and Westerners, most of whom were experts in culture, humanitarianism, or conflict resolution – subject matter that the autochthones didn't seem to practice as they should. Consequently, the international community had mobilized and dispatched entire legions of experts to compensate for these serious omissions (Bofane 2018: 114).

The term "experts" is used ironically, reflecting the designation of those with no lived experience of a situation as "experts" and the consequent imposition of that knowledge, valued above the knowledge of local people with lived experience. Furthermore, Bofane's emphasis on those who are "experts in culture" harkens to Fanon's suggestion that, "there is first affirmed the existence of human groups

having no culture" (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 31), an affirmation on which colonial intervention relies. In this sense, humanitarian intervention and conflict resolution are aligned to and seemingly brought about by the same "experts" as is "culture," those who enforce the "adoption of the new cultural models" (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 38). In Bofane's text, the narrator speaks scathingly of this idea of spreading "culture," discussing how, "as for those in charge of conflict resolution, rather than silencing guns, they struggled to identify the acronyms represented in the east of the country – RCD, CDNP, FDLR, FNL etc. – their observers' eyes focusing on a line that an inescapable United Nations resolution had drawn" (Bofane 2018: 115). In this passage, Bofane directly undermines any sense of expertise held by peacekeepers, as their inability to remember the names of key political groups engaged in the conflict in Congo highlights the futility of their efforts, and an utter misunderstanding of the very "crisis" they intend to "solve." By phrasing the sentence in this way, Bofane sets up a direct contrast between the failure of peacekeepers to "[silence] guns" and their focus instead on futile attempts to gain basic knowledge about the conflict. In doing so, he presents a violence associated with this lack of knowledge; the idea that the ineptness of these efforts directly corresponds to the continuation of conflict and violence. Bofane thus seems to critique not humanitarianism itself, but rather the underlying neo-colonial logic which seems to infect humanitarian efforts to the point that they become violently inept.

4 Intervention or compulsion?

Bofane's presentation of the neo-colonial logic at the heart of these interventions thus allows us to explore not only the inferiorizing rationale present in these interventions, but also the violence that exists as a consequence of this. Pushing further his analysis of this inherent violence, Bofane suggests that interventions frequently serve directly to reproduce crisis itself. Césaire argues that there is a "boomerang effect" (2000 [1950]: 41) inherent to colonial exploit in his suggestion that,

> colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other men as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal (original italics) (2000 [1950]: 41).

Césaire's argument rests on the idea that interventions and activities which rely on a logic of inferiorization, "seeing the other men as *an animal*" (original italics),

create within the individual conducting the action itself a sense of violent *animalism*. What Césaire calls *animalistic*, we can understand as somehow violent and exploitative since Césaire later speaks of "relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production" (2000 [1950]: 42). Bofane responds precisely to this idea of the animalistic nature of colonial exploit through various rape scenes in the text, many of which make use of obscene and crude imagery. A key example is the image of a MONUSCO worker having sex with a young girl repeatedly described as an "adolescent" (Bofane 2018: 60) and a "child whore" (Bofane 2018: 60), immediately setting up an uncomfortable power relation between the pair. We are given limited description of the man himself, only of his "stiff sex organ" (Bofane 2018: 60), "pulsing penis" (Bofane 2018: 60) and later how he is "breathing heavily" (Bofane 2018: 60). The sense of abstraction in the description seems to dehumanize the man, defining him only by his sexual organs. Given the repeated emphasis on the girl's age and the power dynamic between them, we are arguably supposed to read this interaction as another extremely crude form of enforced intervention (or intrusion), drawing uncomfortable parallels with the broader interventions which the rest of the text discusses.

The text also highlights the way in which this animalistic violence becomes inherent to military forms of peacekeeping intervention. Humanitarianism in Congo since the region's independence has not only relied on a colonial logic but has also become increasingly militarized and thus increasingly embodied by the violence which Césaire suggests grows from these forms of interventions. After its first post-independence mission into Congo between 1960 and 1964, the UN established the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) in 1999, in an apparent attempt to bring about a ceasefire in the region ("UN Organization Mission" 2000). What was initially mandated for less than 2 months ("UN Organization Mission" 2000) achieved little in terms of ceasefire in 10 years (Hultman et al 2019: 158), and in July 2010, the UN established the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). This mission "ha[d] been authorized to use all necessary means to carry out its mandate" ("MONUSCO Fact Sheet" n.d.), an authorization which, in 2013, was extended to "[enable] 'Offensive' Combat Force" through the formation of the Intervention Brigade ("'Intervention Brigade' Authorized" 2013), shifting to a focus on "enforcing peace rather than keeping it" ("'Intervention Brigade' Authorized" 2013). This gradual militarization of the mission is vital to an understanding of the dialectical relationship between contemporary human rights and crisis because this militarization challenges the UN's own principles of intervention: impartiality, and non-use of force except in self-defense and defense

of the mandate ("Principles"). This, combined with the history of anti-UN protests in the country which reflect a "crisis of consent" (Dayal 2022) – with the irony in language here not lost on our discussions in this chapter – in these operations, reflects the effective abandonment of these principles (Khalil 2018; Russo 2021), and thus, the apparently increasingly coercive nature of this "humanitarian" intervention.

Bofane highlights the abandonment of these key principles by the UN mandates in his text, emphasizing particularly the lack of impartiality and consequent lack of generalized consent from all parties. Instead, Bofane presents the UN as a coercive force, complicit in racialized violence. From the safety of "the thirty-second floor of the United Nations building in New York" (Bofane 2018: 135), a UN official states, "to make peace, it was often necessary to know how to wage war" (Bofane 2018: 137). The logic then stands that violence is necessary to enable a better outcome later, a logic which Michael Ignatieff controversially discussed in terms of, "the lesser evil" (2005). Bofane goes further, however, with his satirical account of this logic highlighting its contribution to a cycle of violence in the region and to the reproduction of crisis on a global scale. The text is premised on the idea of a virtual game played by the protagonist, Isookanga, called *Roaring Trade* (Bofane 2018: 6). To win the game, players must try to build up the most resources and, as Isookanga tells us, "to reach its objectives, the game advocated war and all its corollaries: intensive bombing, ethnic cleansing, population displacement, slavery" (Bofane 2018: 7). Throughout the text, the narrative moves between the game and the (semi-fictional) reality of Congo so smoothly that it becomes confusing to try to tear the two apart. In this sense, the game becomes a mode through which Bofane comments upon the economic, political and military situation of Congo itself. The merging of the irrealist and realist features of the game and the central narrative, respectively, reflect, as the WReC suggest, a registration of "the temporal and spatial dislocations and the abrupt juxtapositions of different modes of life engendered by imperial conquest, of the violent reorganization of social relations engendered by cyclical crisis" (WReC 2015: 72), thus, reflecting the specifically (semi-)peripheral experience of this particular form of colonial and postcolonial world-systemic crisis. The game's "[advocation of] war and all its corollaries: intensive bombing, ethnic cleansing, population displacement, slavery" (Bofane 2018: 7) thus reflects the use of all of these as part of the conflict within Congo. The idea that these are "advocated" reflects in a horrifically casualized way the justification of such violence.

As part of the game, states Isookanga "one could acquire arms as well as foreign allies [and] a 'first aid kit' that included peace treaties to lull the UN – because there, too, as in real life, one couldn't really run a war without being sheltered by resolutions from the international organization" (Bofane 2018: 7).

Once again through the guise of the game, but also making a specific comparison to "real life", Bofane here highlights the way in which UN interventions become contributors to the violence in the region. "Peace treaties to lull the UN" are listed as commodities to be bought alongside "arms as well as foreign allies" (Bofane 2018: 7), immediately militarizing these treaties and reminding us of a sense of their inherent violence. And yet, whilst seemingly presenting the UN's role as passive, emphasizing the ability to "lull the UN," Isookanga states, "one couldn't really run a war without being sheltered by resolutions from the international organization" (Bofane 2018: 7). In this sense, the UN is presented not only as playing a vital role within the conflict (as opposed to taking an impartial position, as per its principles ["Principles"]), but in fact as vital to the initiation and maintenance of conflict itself, not simply a catalyst but rather a basic ingredient of war.

5 Investing in crisis

In fact, as Bofane goes on to show, the violence of humanitarian intervention is underwritten and driven by a profit motive, one which returns us directly to our proposal of reading crisis in the DRC through the lens of the specifically economic and profit-driven modern world-system. For this reason, humanitarian intervention becomes not an attempt at ending crisis but a financial exchange. Of colonial intervention, Césaire argues,

> they pride themselves on abuses eliminated. I too talk about abuses, but what I say is that on the old ones – very real – they have superimposed others – very detestable. They talk to me about local tyrants brought to reason; but I note that in general the old tyrants get on very well with the new ones, and that there has been established between them, to the detriment of the people, a circuit of mutual services and complicity (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 43).

Césaire's description seems to ring true for the type of intervention which Bofane presents in post-independence Congo, as well as during colonial Congo. Once again, there is a return to the colonial logic underlying intervention, that of saviorism in the way in which "they pride themselves on abuses eliminated" and yet, whilst these abuses are "very real" (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 43) – there is no denying the conflict and violence present in post-independence Congo – interventions simply replace old violence with new. The idea of "a circuit of mutual services and complicity" (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 43) is particularly striking given Bofane's presentation of intervention in the text. As we know from Fanon, "war is a gigantic business" (1969 [1964]: 33), and Bofane presents the particular way in which this logic of profit-making impedes any progress towards ending conflict in Congo. In the text's quasi fictional and theoretical style, we hear, "you couldn't have an army

that functioned with troops coming from so many different places under various commands. [. . .] The result was here: catastrophe for a long time to come" (Bofane 2018: 136). In these lines, Bofane reflects much of the critical literature on the ongoing conflict in Congo which highlights the inherent issues with the international interventions in the region. Instead of a singular, united mission to create peace and safety, the mission was and continues to be thwarted by competition between national interests, mostly stemming from interests in the region's rich mineral reserves (Kabemba 2013: 144). As Kabemba has stated, "humanitarianism [in Congo] has always been the mask for economic intervention" (2013: 140). Bofane goes further than establishing the futility of humanitarian intervention in the region as a result of its economic motives. He also emphasizes specifically the role of intervention forces as active agents in "a circuit of mutual services" (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 43). We hear how, "in exchange for gold ore or diamonds, the Blue Berets delivered armaments, ammunition, and a little information" (Bofane 2018: 119), reflecting the contemporary moment in which, "for all the talk of human rights, the imperative for most NGOs that want to remain operational is to cooperate with murderers and torturers" (Rieff 2002: 327). UN forces are presented as engaging not in peacekeeping and conflict resolution but in financial exchange, even providing "armaments, ammunition and a little information" (Bofane 2018: 119), apparent drivers of conflict.

Therefore, through the use of humanitarianism as an aspect of analysis, Bofane highlights a broader system of crisis as a mode of profit extraction and production. We hear how a UN representative, "did some wicked lobbying and has now procured a non-permanent member seat at the United Nations Security Council. He can do anything there. He can acquire depleted uranium arms at market prices, order satellite photos, build himself a steel dome if he feels like it" (2018: 113). The UN becomes an organization built not for the purposes of conflict resolution, but rather a set of individuals using their influence and power to benefit their own private accumulation of resources. The UN, an organization premised on "finding shared solutions" to "common problems" ("About Us" n.d.) is presented instead as a place for individuals to benefit from precisely those problems. In this sense, global crisis governance and resolution becomes a method of profit accumulation, or economic governance. Elsewhere in the text, we hear that, "true power was found in wealth, obtained thanks to infallible pragmatism and firepower that needed to be kept going. Only with these key elements was it possible to conquer vast territories overflowing with minerals" (Bofane 2018: 47). In Bofane's classic half-satirical, half-non-fictional way, he aligns arbitrary governmentality – power through almost dictatorial control over a region – with the accumulation of wealth through resources.

"This is business," we hear later, in a discussion relating to one of the many armed groups operating throughout the text; "when they sign peace accords everything is liquidated, they file bankruptcy like any other company, then they recreate the armed group but with a different acronym; that's how an economic system functions when it wants to forge ahead" (Bofane 2018: 118). There is the same tone of an unstoppable sense of forward movement in the need to "forge ahead," the idea that this economic system cannot possibly pause and instead must keep functioning, despite the human cost. Furthermore, Bofane seems to complete his merging of military and economic systems here, as armed groups literally function "like any other company" (Bofane 2018: 118), the "other," assigning these groups the status of "company" themselves, going further than only making the broad comparison. In doing so, Bofane aligns the continual reproduction of crisis to the cycles of capitalism itself. As Wallerstein has discussed, these cycles work in a continual process in which the system repeatedly reproduces itself under new guises (2004: 30–31), "reacreate[d]" with the same function but "a different acronym" (Bofane 2018: 118), in Bofane's metaphorical comparison. Fanon argues that "the nations that undertake a colonial war have no concern for the confrontation of cultures. War is a gigantic business and every approach must be governed by this datum. The enslavement [. . .] of the native population is the prime necessity" (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 33). Arguably, this is precisely the argument that Bofane makes through his text. Bofane's ultimate project is to link the violence of contemporary Congo to that which begins with the inception of Congo as a colony. Through his satirical account of the inferiorizing logic of much of the humanitarian intervention in the region, Bofane shows how this intervention is frequently encoded with a distinctly colonial logic, meaning that it is not only violent and exploitative, but that its central basis lies in a motive not for peacekeeping but for profit. It is this hunt for profit which, both in the text and, as Kabemba reminds us (2013: 140), in contemporary Congo, result in the reproduction of crisis, not its termination.

6 Conclusion

On 26 July 2022, 15 people died and 50 were wounded in protests demanding United Nations (UN) peacekeepers leave the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Dayal 2022). Whilst these are not the first anti-UN protests in the region, they bring to light a worrying and recurrent pattern in relation to UN interventions in Congo: "the UN mission in the DRC, MONUSCO, has the government's weak consent to operate and wield force, but it has failed to build legitimacy and

consent among the ordinary people who are most affected by the conflict" (Dayal 2022). Prompted by the recent protests, Anjali Dayal argues that UN member states must "authorize [humanitarian] peace operations that build consent and support for peace and for their presence and goals at multiple levels – including both the state and its people" (Dayal 2022). A postcolonial analysis of contemporary so-called "humanitarian" interventions highlights the colonial logic at the heart of many of these interventions in Congo, and thus begins to explain their seemingly coercive nature. Arguably, then, until we engage with the colonial conception of foreign intervention and the form of crisis it brings, we fail to truly understand crisis in the peripheries of the contemporary world. Continual intervention, in its colonial form, breeds only further crisis and further intervention. And yet, in his foreword to *Congo Inc.*, Thomas argues that "In Koli Jean Bofane's novel strives to delineate the contours of a universe in which fiction can address the indignation and gradually pave the way for moral imagination" (Thomas 2018: xvii). If the problem with existing potentially well-intentioned humanitarian interventions lies with an inherent misunderstanding of the crisis itself, arguably we are facing a further crisis: a crisis in the ability to think of crisis in ways other than what we already know, and thus to think of "solving" those crises in any alternative, sustainable way. As Thomas suggests, literature provides a route to reimagining crisis by understanding the very logic which upholds it. In tapping into this power of reimagination, we can explore modes of interventions that do not enforce and reproduce pre-existing structures of the world-system but begin to move beyond them.

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Jesse van Amelsvoort

The Postcolonial Anthropocene

Abstract: There is a widespread sense that an environmental crisis is unfolding, captured in the new geological epoch the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), and that few if any places will remain unaffected. As a 'hyperobject' (Morton 2013), it is difficult to make tangible and visible – which is to say that the environmental crisis and the Anthropocene are 'representational concern[s]' (Badia et al. 2021: 4) *pur sang*. It is difficult for this crisis to become sensible on an everyday and affective level; yet as I argue in this contribution, the combination of environmental humanities and postcolonial studies can do so. Specifically, I focus on the urgent figure of the climate migrant. In contemporary Europe, the effects of the climate crisis are acutely felt both along its northern edges, where rising temperatures threaten the Sámi way of life, and its southern rim, such as where Spain is increasingly suffering droughts and extreme heat. This double bind suggests that, from north to south, everybody risks losing life as they know it and becoming a climate migrant. In this essay, I analyze the double bind of the Sámi people as their precarious position vis-à-vis Nordic nation-state policies is compounded by climate change, as well as Madrid's Prado Museum's recent (2019) project with 'updated' versions of its masterpieces to show climate change gone awry. These cases also make clear why postcolonial studies should engage with the Anthropocene, rather than elide the term altogether (Chakrabarty 2021; Davies 2018). If the Anthropocene draws attention to the geological causes of the climate crisis, postcolonial studies makes visible the human impact of the crisis in all its depth and complexity. The postcolonial Anthropocene is not only able to think the crisis' long-term causes, but also its possible futures.

Keywords: Anthropocene, visual art, Spain, Sápmi, environmental humanities, postcolonial studies

1 Introduction

In May 2017, two white hands rose from Venice's Grand Canal to support the Ca' Sagredo Hotel.[1] Seemingly keeping the hotel walls from collapsing into the water (see Figure 1), Lorenzo Quinn's installation – aptly called "Support" – reflects on the

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damage anthropogenic climate change risks inflicting on one of Europe's, if not the world's, most iconic cities and tourist destinations. Due to its position in a lagoon, Venice is particularly at risk, as the mass melting of ice sheets in e.g. Antarctica and the expansion of water when it gets warmer raise sea levels. As such, Quinn's installation directly feeds into the widespread sense that a planetary climate crisis is unfolding, and that humans are fueling it. "Support" makes visible climate change and its effects encroaching on Europe, showing that here, too, people are vulnerable – that Europeans are increasingly at risk of becoming climate migrants.

In November 2019, two years after "Support" had débuted at the Venice Biennale, a smaller version of the installation moved to Madrid, where, in early December, the 25th United Nations Climate Change conference (COP25) would be held. In this context, the installation gained a new geopolitical relevance: one in which not only the existential threat that is climate change was represented, but where questions of agency, distribution, and planetary solidarity moved to the fore. First organized in Berlin, Germany in 1995, the UN's nearly two-hundred member states meet every year to discuss the politics of combatting climate change during these conferences. Perhaps most famously, the 1997 conference in Kyoto, Japan, the 2009 conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, and the 2015 conference in Paris, France have entered public memory due to the level of ambition displayed, their success, or their failure.

Figure 1: Lorenzo Quinn, "Support" (2017). Courtesy of Lorenzo Quinn and Halcyon Gallery.

The Madrid conference proved a fruitful site of artistic activism. Not only was Quinn's installation displayed in the city, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Museo Nacional del Prado also reimagined four works from the museum's collection as works about climate change and, especially, climate refugees. This latter figure has quickly been recognized as an essential figure in our unfolding historical moment, including in Europe, where the Syrian Civil War that erupted in 2011 and the refugees fleeing the violence have been connected to a drought in the region that is thought to have been at least influenced by climate change. This constellation shows well how climate change can become connected to other conflicts and crises, and how it can become embroiled in Europe's xenophobic imaginary of the Middle East and Arabs (El-Tayeb 2011). The challenges presented by living in a changing climate, which at its core revolves around issues of livability and hospitability, thus connects to older crises of cohabitation, belonging, and difference.

At the same time, it is difficult to conclusively establish connections between climate change and events such as the Syrian Civil War. While climate change – or the Anthropocene, a distinction I will return to later in this chapter – is a "representational concern" (Badia et al. 2021: 4), *how* to represent it exactly remains an elusive task. Most people will encounter it as a discursive topic either "through its symptoms . . . or via abstractions" (Richardson 2020: 340; see also Richardson 2018). It is, in other words, difficult for the crisis that is climate change to become sensible on an everyday and affective level; yet as I argue in this contribution, a combination of cultural analysis, environmental humanities, and postcolonial studies can do so. It is in art and literature – in the realm of cultural production –, after all, where the Anthropocene can be turned into a "structure of feeling" (Williams 1977: 133) that compels us to act, rather than one that overwhelms and arrests.

The urgent figure of the climate migrant – both human and more-than-human – is my entry point in these discussions. Climate-related migration is a topic high on the political agenda, where projects aiming to manage or tackle it are usually framed as being about vulnerable, racialized, and poor populations (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012; Ahuja 2021). Yet as both a victim of a disruptive climate and a potential threat to those who are to receive him, the figure of the climate migrant is a highly ambiguous one (Baldwin 2013). This ambiguity rests in no small part on this figure's racialization, feeding into Europe's historical anxieties of being overrun by those who are not-white and/or not-Christian. From this perspective, "the poor" is nothing more than a phrase covering up white Europe's racism and prejudice – a form of masked Othering.

This chapters offers a different perspective on the figure of the climate migrant. In contemporary Europe, the effects of the climate crisis are felt increasingly

acutely. My examples in this chapter are meant to be explorative rather than all-encompassing, and representative of a number of present challenges the continent is facing today. They are taken from its northern edges, where rising temperatures push white birch trees ever further above the Arctic Circle and threaten the Sámi way of life, and its southern rim, where a country like Spain is increasingly suffering droughts and extreme heat. This double bind suggests that, from north to south, across Europe people risk losing life as they know it and becoming climate migrants themselves. Thus, far from focusing on Europe as the destination of climate migrants potentially coming from elsewhere into the continent, this chapter focuses on Europeans themselves as risking being forced to migrate away from places disrupted by climate change, at the same time also conceptualizing birch trees above the Arctic Circle as non-human climate migrants.

Through my examples drawn from Spain and Sápmi (the name the Sámi use for their region), I also want to argue in favor of the postcolonial Anthropocene, an analytical lens that is not at all self-evident; while postcolonial studies have historically been hesitant to engage the Anthropocene out of skepticism towards that concept's implicit universalism, this need not be. In fact, we need postcolonial theory's political sensibilities to further refine the diagnoses thinkers of the Anthropocene put forward.

2 For the postcolonial Anthropocene

In *Planetary Specters*, Neel Ahuja states that "environmental injustices must be understood as components of longer processes of colonialism and racial disposability generated by extractive capitalist development" (2021: 11). Even if the Anthropocene manifests everywhere and is therefore planetary in nature, it does so in profoundly unequal ways. In addition to being a geological, political, and moral problem, it is also a social problem; and as such, it is best understood with reference to postcolonial studies. Only a postcolonial Anthropocene can be attuned to its differentiated impact and the failure to protect economically weaker and underdeveloped states from climate change's impacts – what we could call, with Robert Young (2012), "postcolonial remains."

In a recent article, the historian Julia Nordblad argued that "the temporal characteristics of the Anthropocene concept renders it unhelpful for thinking critically about how the current environmental crisis can be addressed" (2021: 330). This argument finds it echo in the work of much scholarship by postcolonial critics. For them, too, the idea of "the" Anthropocene is too totalizing and universalizing, which sits at odds with the attention they themselves pay to the variegated,

globally unequal impacts of both climate change and mitigation efforts. The reasons for this are to be found in the concept's origin within earth systems science, in conjunction with its later migration into the humanities and social sciences.

Eugene Stoermer first coined the term in the 1980s, but it was only around 2000 when it gained wider currency in Paul Crutzen's formulation (see Davies (2018) for a comprehensive history). In its strictest sense, the Anthropocene was used to describe the period that succeeds the Holocene, in which humanity's impact on the planet and its ecosystems can be measured geologically. When the concept was adapted by humanities and social sciences scholars, its relatively straightforward geological meaning was complemented, contrasted, and contested by political and ethical interpretations. The wide uptick in these disciplines came with an interrogation of the concept's foundational assumptions, with scholars focusing especially on its supposed universalism. "The" Anthropocene applies to humanity as a whole, an emphasis that sits at odds with critical theory's focus on difference, variation, and historical and cultural specificity. Additionally, the period's supposed starting point became a topic of discussion: if the Anthropocene marks the moment when human influence on the planet is geologically legible, what exactly is this "influence"? Does it refer to, e.g., the Industrial Revolution, the post-1945 Great Acceleration and its heavy use of coal and oil, or traces of detonated atomic bombs? Or, in a different version again, does the Anthropocene start when Columbus and in his wake many other Europeans arrived in the Americas, killing millions of the native population there with their diseases, thus causing forests to regrow and bringing about the Little Ice Age? In this spirit, the Anthropocene has in recent years been rethought as, for example, the "Chthulucene" (Donna Haraway) or the "Capitalocene" (Jason Moore) – to name but two important theorists.[2]

Meanwhile, in a widely noted 2009 article, later collected in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), Dipesh Chakrabarty famously introduced postcolonial studies to the Anthropocene. One of his main points pertains to the challenge Anthropocene thinking poses to historical – and, by extension, humanist – thinking: namely, that the scales with which we work are undergoing profound changes in the current moment of climate change. The separation between geological history, human history, and socio-economic history – summarized as the Earth, the human species, and capitalism – no longer holds, Chakrabarty argues. The universalist bent of this argument, however, has been perceived as going against postcolonial studies' emphasis on particularity, historical inequalities be-

2 Mark Bould (2021: 7–8) gives a more elaborate overview of various alternatives.

tween countries, and, indeed, the wholesale denial of large parts of the global population's humanity.

This clash leaves the discipline in the awkward intellectual spot that while questions of land and environment are indispensable, it also rejects one of the major conceptual nodes with which to think about those questions. Although this might be a reason to prefer Haraway's or Moore's theoretical innovations, I nevertheless stay with the Anthropocene, since its ambiguity and layers of meaning make visible the imbrications of past events, present inequalities, and future possibilities, and allows us to supposedly couple value-neutral planetary developments with their human and civilizational consequences. Indeed, it is exactly Chakrabarty's point that these two levels are now intrinsically intertwined: the intellectual challenge is then not to think them together, but to start from their enmeshment.

One of Chakrabarty's most important critics is Ian Baucom, who in a recent work differentiates between what he calls "forces" and "forcings." Trying to do justice to Chakrabarty's distinctions between the various types of histories and their entanglements while translating them into a perhaps more straightforwardly postcolonial vocabulary, Baucom's binary aims to capture that some pressures are planetary and more-than-human in nature ("forcings") and some are manmade ("forces"). If the former are the purview of the environmental humanities and are thus part of the Anthropocene, the latter are the material of postcolonial scholars. Yet these, as Baucom (2020: 16) asserts, are intertwined: "these new forcings, as they impact the conditions of life on the planet, manifest themselves also as forces of profound violence and unfreedom; as forcing-forces for the reactivation of old and the animation of new modes of subalternality, inequality, and vulnerability." Planetary forcings can reinforce already existing power relations and asymmetries, such as they have been studied historically by postcolonial scholars.

A well-developed notion of "postcolonial Anthropocene" is thus urgently needed. To prevent the engagement with anthropogenic climate change from being subjected to the imperialist and Eurocentric impulses known all too well from the past (Chakrabarty 2021), scholars of the postcolonial Anthropocene have to bring concerns about a fair and just distribution of global resources and responsibilities in dialog with environmental analyses that can at times be blind to them. If the Anthropocene is a representational challenge due to its distributed nature and the complex ecological processes behind it, it does not mean that it is materially invisible. The parts of the world where people have had the luxury to be able to look away and direct their gaze elsewhere, are rapidly shrinking; yet in many of the places where Europeans have historically ravaged the lands in their colonialist and imperialist quests for resources, this option was prevented much earlier than in the old industrial "cores" of the global North.

If the Anthropocene draws attention to the geological causes of the climate crisis, postcolonial studies makes visible the human impact of the crisis in all its depth and complexity. The postcolonial Anthropocene is not only able to think the crisis' long-term causes, but also its possible futures. It thinks through the "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) or "slow catastrophes" (Warde, Robin and Sörlin 2018: 3) of environmental degradation and links the current epoch to its roots in deeper history, whether that of the (neo)colonial and economic system of domination and resource extraction, or of the planet's enmeshed history. The metaphor of "the slow" attests to the difficulty of making the environmental crisis visible and tangible, yet also emphasizes the necessity of bringing for example Chakrabarty's work on historicity in the Anthropocene into view to scrutinize the deeper histories that constitute our present world as both planetarily shared and brutally differentiated.

In this chapter, the figure of the climate refugee is my example of why an integrative analysis of the postcolonial Anthropocene is necessary, also – or especially – within a European context. Sidestepping figurations of the climate refugee as racialized, which echo Europe's racist cultural archive (Said 1993), art works emerging from two sites in Europe where climate change is manifesting itself very clearly imagine a future of climate refuge as not only a possibility, but a likelihood for people across Europe, regardless of race or ethnicity. At the same time, in line with Ahuja's (2021) argument, this future is not brought about exclusively by anthropogenic climate change only, but also by socio-political choices and forces. This is especially visible in Máret Ánne Sara's works protesting the forced culling of reindeer herds due to government policies and COP25 as the institutional backdrop against which the various works around were exhibited in Madrid in 2019.

The Anthropocene is as much a geological concept denoting a specific moment in Earth's planetary history, as it is a political term that brings into view humanity's role in contemporary weather events. The former is, potentially, value-neutral – a mere descriptor –, the latter by definition cannot be. The lens of the postcolonial Anthropocene requires us to keep these tensions and contradictions at the center of analysis; going forward, as the effects of rising CO_2-levels in the Earth's atmosphere will escalate weather events that already disrupt daily life in communities across the globe, the question of historical inequalities between North and South, former colonizers and the formerly colonized, the not-yet-affected and the already-affected, will only grow more important in discussions of global politics and international relations. Postcolonial studies, with its representational sensibilities (both as *Darstellung* and as *Vertretung*), can help rectify the representational void at the center of universalized notions of the Anthropocene by understanding the differentiated nature of who is included, in what way, and by which means.

3 Representing climate change

In a recent overview article, Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra (2019: 229) speak of the "many representational challenges mounted by climate change." Discussing primarily the challenges posed by climate change to realist literature, they engage with a discussion that was given a polemic twist in 2016 by Indian novelist and essayist Amitav Ghosh, in his book *The Great Derangement* (see also the chapter by Shaul Bassi in this volume). The question of how to represent the Anthropocene extends beyond Ghosh's intervention, however, and also beyond the specific domain of realist literature. The classic reference here is Timothy Morton's notion of the climate as a "hyperobject," or those things that are "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (2013: 1). These objects are what Morton calls "nonlocal," meaning they do not manifest somewhere concretely. In the case of the climate, it becomes apparent that the climate is not the weather, but rather the accumulation of weather patterns through time and their relative change over time. It is impossible to point at some concrete object and say, *that* is the climate. Because the climate cannot be felt or seen, individuals also cannot get a sense of what climate *change* is – nor, therefore, what it means to live in the Anthropocene, with its man-made climactic instability.

The climate and climate change as such are, in other words, invisible – or in any case not immediately intelligible to human eyes, ears, and brains. Timothy Clark (2015: 139–155) has called this situation "Anthropocene disorder", arguing that what is needed is an analysis attentive to scales of time and space that extend beyond our human frames of reference. This need to jump scale in order to comprehend climate change is what Ghosh as well as Goodbody and Johns-Putra analyze as the challenge realist literature is perhaps not able to meet: to transcend the time of the human and its generally homely and well-organized plots. It is no wonder, then, that much criticism has focused on more speculative fictions set in dystopian futures where floods, droughts, and fires have remade the world as we know it today – or have known it until yesterday.

In a noticeable exception, Mark Bould takes issue with those critics who in his estimation have too narrow an understanding of what it means for a text to be "about" climate change. Even in realist – or what he calls mundane – fiction, climate change makes itself known. Indeed, Bould (2021: 15, original emphasis) asserts, "the Anthropocene *is* the unconscious of 'the art and literature of our time,'" and he goes on to trace its manifestations in a wide range of novels and films. To read Bould's intervention is to realize how the climate crisis presents a dual challenge: to produce new art works and to develop new reading strategies, attuned to the complexities of the world's ecosystems and the contemporary imbalances brought to them by manmade climate change.

The increasing attention paid to climate fiction and other art responding to the new lifeworlds inaugurated by the Anthropocene, as well as the growing body of such texts and works, speaks to the rising prominence of climate concerns in the contemporary cultural imaginary. Timothy Clark warns that this development should, however, not lead to an overestimation of what such literature and art can do. We can compare Clark's warning to Edward Said's writing in *Culture and Imperialism* that even if "the enterprise of empire depends upon the *idea* of *having an empire*" (1993: 11, original emphasis), the end of empire is not heralded by the emergence of a new idea only. To believe this in the case of climate change, Clark writes (2015: 21), is to "exaggerate the importance of the imaginary" and thus "to run the risk of consolidating a kind of diversionary side-show." The crisis from which this chapter takes its leave – of anthropogenic climate change promising to change life as we know it, in Europe if not all around the world – will not be solved by the artistic and cultural reflections discussed on the following pages; rather, what these will show is an "irreversible break in consciousness and understanding" (Clark 2015: 62; cf. Van Amelsvoort 2023). I continue now by tracing the contours of this break in Spain.

4 Water and drought in Spain

November 2019's COP25 gave rise to various artistic and activist interventions. In addition to the already mentioned sculpture by Lorenzo Quinn, in this section I want to focus on a more institutional (re)imagining of life in the Anthropocene, namely the project carried out by WWF and the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid. Four of the museum's master pieces were digitally altered to become part of an awareness campaign by the two organizations, aiming to show the potential impact of climate change. The four paintings were Joachim Patinir's *Landscape with Charon Crossing the Styx* (1515–1524), *Felipe IV a Caballo* by Diego Velázquez (*Equestrian Portrait of Philip IV*, 1635–1636), Francisco Goya's *El Quitasol* (*The Parasol*, 1777, see Figures 2 and 3), and Joaquín Sorolla's *Chicos en la playa* (*Boys on the Beach*, 1910).

As Figures 2 and 3 make clear with regard to Goya's painting, the WWF and the Prado have forcefully altered the original paintings. What in the original painting passes for a calm, relaxing afternoon and for a "*capricho*," a "pleasingly aberrant" aesthetic element (Dowling 1977: 432), in the digital alteration becomes the portrait of a moody, seemingly hopeless refugee camp. The main characters – the young pair and the dog – remain recognizable (even if her arm is not extended left anymore, but protectively held to the right), but the entire background

is changed. The pleasant green parasol the young man holds in Goya's original becomes a worn-out umbrella with the text "climate refugee agency," spelling out who gave them the item and making clear what they are. Goya was explicitly commissioned to paint cheerful scenes from everyday life for the dining room of the Prince and Princess of Asturias' Royal Palace of El Pardo in Madrid. In the change from the pleasant to the destitute, the WWF and the Prado show how daily life in Europe could change and, indeed, be thoroughly disrupted in the coming years or decades.

Other paintings imagine other Anthropocene effects. In the altered version of Patinir's painting, Charon is unable to cross the Styx anymore, the river having dried up due to declining rainfall. Amidst a barren land with mud cracked by the heat and draught, his boat remains where it is in the middle of the river. Velázques' heroic king Felipe IV risks dying, together with his horse in high water, evoking rising sea levels. Sorolla's sun-soaked boys on the beach, lastly, in the new version are covered by seaweed and surrounded by dead fish, representing the sixth mass extinction event that is said to be unfolding (Cowie, Bouchet and Fontaine 2022).

Figure 2: The original *El Quitasol* (*The Parasol*) by Francisco de Goya, as it can be seen in the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid, Spain. © Wikipedia Commons.

Figure 3: The WWF and Prado's adaption of *El Quitasol*. © WWF and Prado.

The altered paintings thus try to show the type of changes that await us in the (near) future: these images conjure up times in which habits and practices that are common to us, or have historically been so, such as going to the beach and crossing a river by boat, become increasingly difficult – or, in any case, can only remain possible in a different guise than today's. At the same time, these "new" paintings also project their *Verfremdung* backward in time, indicating to the viewer that the originals implicitly reacted to the climate in their time, too. Only now that the climate no longer remains a "background constant" (D'Arcy Wood 2008: 1) can a certain "eco-historical" consciousness emerge in literature and art that brings the climate historically out of the background and onto the foreground.

It is no accident that 2019's UN Climate Change Conference gave rise to these various artistic reflections, as Spain is particularly at risk of climate change. The country regularly sees new temperature records, especially in the south and the country's central plateaus, where the heat coming from North Africa has free rein. As a result of climate change, Spain's summers today start at least three weeks earlier than in the early 1970s (Henley 2022), and they bring increasingly warm and extended heatwaves. A 2019 report on Spain's progress in complying with the UN's and the EU's climate targets similarly admits that Spain is an "espe-

cially vulnerable" country due to its geographical and socio-economic features (Spanish Government 2019: 2; see also Ecologistas en Acción 2007). Desertification and aridification are the main challenges the country faces, with almost three-quarters of the country said to be possibly affected. From this perspective, the alteration of Patinir's *Landscape with Charon Crossing the Styx* most directly speaks to Spain's own situation, with the others representing risks more pertinent in other parts of the world. Taken together, the four paintings thus respond to COP25 coming to Madrid, with conference delegates from each UN member-state – each of them facing their own set of challenges – and in their wake journalists, lobbyists, and activists.

At the same time, desertification is not the only risk Spain faces. Its coasts and coastal towns will likely face rising sea levels throughout the twenty-first century. These include the major Mediterranean ports of Barcelona and Valencia, but also Bilbao, which faces the Bay of Biscay and the Atlantic Ocean. In 2021, the Mexican artist Ruben Oroczo submerged a fiberglass installation entitled "Bihar" (Basque for "Tomorrow") in Bilbao's Revion river.[3] Sponsored by a Spanish bank, this sculpture was part of a campaign to encourage sustainable behavior and discussions on climate change. Weighing more than 100 kilos, the sculpture moved with the tides, being covered by water to a great or lesser extent depending on the time of the day. As such, it shows a girl gasping for air in a world where human behavior leads to melting ice caps and glaciers, which in turn causes sea levels to rise. The dynamism of Oroczo's presentation emphasizes the ebb and flow of life in the Anthropocene: even if global temperatures rise, this does not entail that every day will see temperatures higher than normal – whatever "normal" means anymore. "Bihar" stays in place, never floating away from where it was put in the Revion, its more subtle movements in that place suggesting the potential disruption of looming climate-related migration.

The various artworks surveyed in this section show the multiplicity of artistic responses to the climate crisis. While all share a politically engaged stance and want to call attention to the effects of suggesting, whether (fully) visible already or not, they do not so uniformly. Some, such as Oroczo's floating sculpture, directly engage a more local, circumscribed audience, while other artists target their intervention to a more global audience. Due to their location – Madrid and Bilbao – these works suggest the coming home in Europe of climate-related migration, recasting the climate migrant not as external to Europe and its cultural imaginary, but as the possible future of Europe's own populations, too.

3 See a report on, and pictures of, the installation at https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/drowning-girl-statue-causes-stir-bilbao-2021-09-28/.

5 Birches and snow in Sápmi

Over 3,000 kilometers to the north, in the upper regions of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, the Anthropocene manifests itself differently – although here, too, rising temperatures form the core of the story. Sámi artists take up the representational challenge that is the Anthropocene in a similar, but distinct way from the Spanish examples. My focus in this section will be on the 2022 Venice Biennale's Nordic Pavilion. That year, the Nordic Pavilion was given to Sámi artists by the Norwegian organizers, featuring the performance "Matriarchy" by Pauliina Feodoroff (a Skolt Sámi theater director from the Norwegian-Finnish-Russian borderlands), three art installations featuring reindeer remains by the Sámi Norwegian Máret Ánne Sara, and a mixed media work by Anders Sunna from the Swedish side of Sápmi.

These works espouse Sámi philosophical views while addressing the various ways in which their home territory is threatened, including climate change, altering physical surroundings, but also the Nordic states' colonialist attitudes towards their indigenous population(s). Both Feodoroff's and Sunna's works address the threats posed to the Sámi way of life and territory by state-sanctioned commercial activities and the states' (former) aggressive missionary Christian activities in the region. As such, the artworks contribute to a relatively recent reckoning of the Nordic states with their colonial past (Lehtola 2015; Össbo 2021), which in the case of Finland is complicated by a strong identification as a colonized, rather than colonizing country. Each of these, while not exactly representing climate change as such, nevertheless renders the Anthropocene visible.

Known historically by various names, such as Finnmark or (the now considered pejorative) Lapland, this region today is referred to as Sápmi, and its indigenous population as the Sámi. A historically nomadic people, the Sámi have until recently been able to hold on to their non-sedentary lifestyle; although people do live in towns, cities, and villages, during the summer months reindeer herders follow their herds across the Arctic planes. The Anthropocene seems to threaten this way of life, potentially creating more climate refugees.

In spring 2022, British newspaper *The Guardian* devoted a number of articles to the region and the challenges the local population are facing as the result of climate change. What is striking in these accounts, from the perspective of the present discussion, is how the Anthropocene here introduces a more-than-human climate migration: trees, especially birch trees. Writing from Finnmark county, Norway that they "used to creep forward a few centimetres every year," journalist Ben Rawlence (2022) notes that in recent years this has gone up to a "rate of 40 to 50 metres a year." Buoyed by rising temperatures north of the Arctic circle, the birches not only threaten to warm up the region's permafrost, thus releasing ex-

tremely powerful greenhouse gasses into the Earth's atmosphere, they are also symbolic of how the traditional Sámi way of life is threatened with collapse.

The birch trees will inevitably be followed by other species, such as pine, yet they are miles ahead of them and also move faster (Rawlence 2022). The arrival of monoculture birch forests compounds changes to the Sámi's reindeer's winter grazing habits. With temperatures hovering just below freezing, or sometimes even above it, the snow changes quality and becomes sticky, making it more difficult for reindeer to remove it and reach the grass. Birch forests can trap snow in high hills that make it impossible for reindeer to find food. The leaves left behind on the ground further increase soil life and bring other plants. At other points, melted snow will freeze to become ice, creating a new barrier to the reindeer's food, but also causing increasingly more accidents as the animals' hoofs are incapable of dealing with the smooth surfaces.

The key problem, as Rawlence also notes, is one of scale. Just as oil can be perceived as a renewable resource on a much larger timescale than the one we inhabit (Lovell 2010: 75), since it does form naturally under high geologic pressures, so, too, the changing climate of Sápmi is livable when approached from a more-than-human perspective. Given enough time, lively Arctic forests will develop which can house reindeer. The painful ambiguity of the Anthropocene, however, is exactly that at the same time that this larger scale becomes sensually if not intellectually apparent, it also confronts humans with the confines of their own, limited perspective from which there seemingly is no escape. One of the many challenges the Anthropocene confronts humanity with is, again, representational.

In the rest of this section, I would like to zoom in on Sara's art works, which both address the Norwegian government's colonialist practices towards the Sámi as well as the threat imposed by climate change. For a long time, Sara's family have been in a legal battle with the state about their reindeer herds. At issue was the Norwegian government's reindeer culling policies, which aimed to reduce the pressure of grazing in Finnmark. This environmental measure would necessitate the death of hundreds of reindeer held by Sara's brother, thus constituting a colonialist intervention into the Sámi way of life. Ultimately, the Norwegian Supreme Court upheld the lower courts' ruling that had sided with the government over Sara's family's objections. In an explanation on the website of the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (2022), which is responsible for the Biennale pavilion, Sara remarks that "what happens to the reindeer also happens to us," meaning that from her perspective the Norwegian state intervened into the Sámi way of life. Her artworks were made in response to the various court cases and are largely made of reindeer parts that would not be used by the Sámi for food and clothing, thus representing the reindeer long after their death. In the specific cases of the works

featured in Figure 4, this includes reindeer stomachs and calves, in addition to other materials.

In their materiality these artworks are "a manifestation of cultural critique [as well as] a different way of being in the present" (Buikema 2021: 150). The reuse of animal products suggests sustainability and circularity, while the reference to Sámi philosophy – with the stomachs in "Gutted – Gávogálši" indexing gut feeling, an important concept for the Sámi, for example – grounds these works in the language and ensuing community in which they are created. "Ale suova sielu sáiget" is an elegiac piece, which laments the death of young-born calves, while the dried plants suggest a changing landscape at the hands of anthropogenic climate change. At the same time, as the accompanying note makes clear, the work also responds to the adverse effects on the Sámi of Norway's environmental laws, which at times walk the tight line between environmentalism and internal colonialism. Its circular motion, at the same time, reinforces the sense of sustainabil-

Figure 4: Foreground: Máret Ánne Sara, 'Gutted – Gávogálši' (2022). Background: Máret Ánne Sara, 'Ale suova sielu sáiget' (2022). © Michael Miller / OCA.

ity and continuation, a clear connection between past and present through which the dangers of outside forces are made visible, worked through, and renewed.

In 2017, at documenta14 in Kassel and Athens, Sara exhibited the work "Pile o'Sápmi," which is now in the Norwegian National Museum (Figure 5). This work

also stems from the court cases Sara's brother had with the Norwegian government. It features 400 reindeer skulls, all with a bullet hole in the forehead. Protesting the government's culling policies that affected Sara's family, the work makes visible once more the centrality of reindeer to the Sámi way of life and culture. The skulls reflect the limitation of the Sámi people's sovereignty both within the Norwegian nation-state and due to a changing environment. From this perspective, with the link between their traditional ways of living and challenges of modernity growing ever tenser, the Sámi are close to becoming climate refugees – like the birch trees that are moving up north at an alarming rate.

Yet what these various artworks make clear, is that displacement never occurs solely due to environmental change only. At stake, too, are concrete government policies that prevent the Sámi from continue living the way they were used to. To constitute this as the "unacknowledged 'push' factor behind migration decisions" (Ahuja 2021: 3) fails to do justice to the complexities of historical and politi-

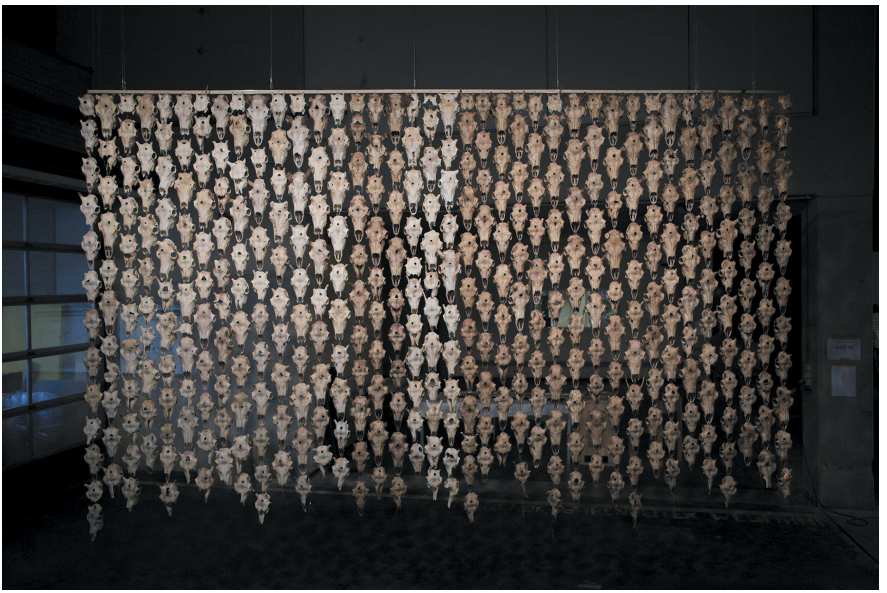

Figure 5: 'Pile o'Sápmi Supreme.' © Máret Ánne Sara.

cal entanglements. This is, in short, why studies of the Anthropocene and cultural imaginations of and responses to climate change must be postcolonially minded.

6 Conclusion: Representation as translation

If the Anthropocene is a representational problem, which cannot be apprehended immediately and in its entirety, we are in dire need of mediators that translate the threatening overwhelm of the climactic hyperobject into more readily graspable units. On this smaller scale, the Anthropocene can be understood to enact a disconnect between past ways of life and new ways that are only just emerging. This problem is not new: Warde, Robin, and Sörlin (2018) briefly pause at the technologies that made it possible already in the 1980s to both signal and solve the thinning of the ozone layer. This example points to the intermediaries necessary to make the environmental crisis legible and enable humans to take action to mitigate its effects, if not prevent them from happening altogether. Yet what Quinn, the Prado/WWF team-up, Oroczo, Feodoroff, Sunna, and Sara show, is not that: their intervention is not a technological shortcut to give an intelligible face to an abstract problem.

Rather, it is through these works that negotiate and imagine the relations between the large and the small, the global and the local, and between cause and effect that we – as a tentatively global, if not planetary, human community – can come to think more productively about limiting and ultimately reversing anthropogenic climate change. Put differently, what is needed, are mechanisms of translation that make the environmental crisis legible and affectively felt in individual lives. As I have shown in this chapter, this imagination must not only be oriented towards environmental concerns, but also take stock of work done in postcolonial studies. Postcolonial studies has a long history of a translational ethics, as its works consists in elaborating historical ties that are often not immediately visible or apparent to a large audience.

Where the figure of the climate migrant often acts as to externalize the problems of migration to other parts of the world, with Europe as the victimized destination, I have instead stressed how the Anthropocene has planetary impacts, including across Europe. Whether this concerns Venice's rising water levels, Spain's increasing problems with water supply, Sápmi's arboreal abundance, or other locations which I have not attended to, life in Europe will change, too. The artists responding to these emergent conditions represent what it means to live in such times of change and make visible especially the effects on individual lives and communities. A postcolonial approach is essential here, to make sense of the

problems of distribution across countries, questions of (internal) colonialism, and the relationship between art and global governance. Collective action is needed to bring CO_2-levels down, yet cultural representations can make the problems more immediate and thus aid the calls to action that resound ever more widely.

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Section 2: **Postcolonial Studies and Ecological Crisis**

Shaul Bassi

“None of that shit matters to the Swedes”: Venice, Bangladesh, and the Postcolonial Anthropocene

Abstract: This chapter examines recent literary and visual texts that represent the Bangladeshi migrant community in Venice as a vantage point to observe the postcolonial condition in the context of the planetary environmental crisis. The texts analyze different forms, genres, and languages: Amitav Ghosh’s novel *Gun Island* (2019), Francesco Dalla Puppa, Francesco Matteuzzi, and Francesco Saresin’s graphic novel *La linea dell’orizzonte* (2021), and Emanuele Confortin’s documentary *Banglavenice* (2022) expose the Anthropocene unconscious of a city that has traditionally been used to represent romantic and escapist fantasies or apocalyptic scenarios. While popular culture still produces countless narratives and discourses that envision a timeless Venice or its mirror image as a moribund, drowning city, the texts under scrutiny show a more complex, living, cosmopolitan, and amphibian Venice where new and old communities interact and reinvent themselves in relation to a fragile ecosystem threatened by sea-level rise. Their stories, which also connect the city with global histories and geographies, show how the long-term effects of colonialism and of the Anthropocene are intertwined, narrate how migrants negotiate new lives and identities, and offer perspectives of postcolonial translators, artists, and intellectuals who connect us to multiple stories for our times of crisis.

Keywords: Anthropocene, postcolonial, environmental humanities, Venice, Migration, Bangladesh

> what euer hath the worlde brought forth more monstrously strange, then that so great & glorious a Citie should bee seated in the middle of the sea, especially to see suchpallaces, monasteries, temples, towers, turrets, & pinnacles reaching vp vnto the clouds, founded vpon Quagmires, and planted vppon such vnfirme moorish and spungie foundations. (Contarini 1969: A3r)

Prefacing *The Commonwealth and Gouernment of Venice* (1599), his translation of Gasparo Contarini’s *De magistratibus et republica* (1551), the English courtier Lewis Lewkenor marveled at the unique interaction of nature and culture, the tension between the human architectural and spiritual aspiration to the heavens and the earthbound pull of the land and the sea that defined this amphibian city. Lewkenor was contributing to the early modern myth promoted by the Republic

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of Venice to describe itself as the ideal polity, in an effort that, as Peter Platt has shown, was rhetorically characterized by the trope of paradox. Venice was divided between land and sea; it was a political paragon for Europe and yet open to trading with Africa and Asia; a Catholic state defiant of Roman hegemony; a republic led by a prince and sustained by a complex system of checks and balances. This "monstrously strange" city had the "ability to astonish, to puzzle, and to challenge cognitive categories" (Platt 2009: 59). In their introduction to the inaugural issue of the environmental humanities journal *Lagoonscapes*, Serenella Iovino and Stefano Beggiora have updated this early modern paradox to our own era:

> Situated in the upper Northeast corner of our warming peninsula, and for centuries at centre stage of the world's attention, Venice plays a key role in both the context of the environmental crisis and of the cultural responses to this crisis. In fact, this hybrid artificial organism of land and water is a planetary kaleidoscope for all the dynamics that characterise the Anthropocene. (2021: 8)

In this chapter I would like to examine this "hybrid artificial organism" from a postcolonial perspective, which is almost invisible in the countless mainstream media representations of Venice but key to appreciate the cultural and symbolic function of the city as a guide to our global environmental crisis.

Venice appears intermittently in Gaia Vince's *Nomad Century. How Climate Migration Will Reshape Our World* (2022), an awe-inspiring portrait of a planet radically transformed by an environmental crisis predicted to displace at least 1.5 billion people over the next thirty years. The author mentions it as one of the cities that have invested substantially in protecting themselves from sea-level rise (43) through the submerged inflatable gates likely to be inadequate by 2050 (142). Her sobering conclusion is that Venice "soon . . . will be solely a museum. Other celebrated cities, or parts of them, will follow" (143). Passages like this in a book that has been described as "optimistic" (Ward 2022) are likely to increase the eco-anxiety of Venetian residents and admirers, but they also prompt the question: if in the worst case scenario there are only a few decades left, what should we do with them? The tourist industry has already offered an unequivocal answer: let's consume Venice as much and as quickly as possible. Before COVID 30 million visitor presences were registered every year, vis-à-vis a resident population that in 2022 declined to under 50.000, and the easing of the pandemic restrictions have made the average number of tourists skyrocket. These statistics are not uncomplicated, but they embody the paradox of overtourism: the same source of wealth that is making the city richer and richer is also crushing its social fabric and civic identity. The coexistence of a substantial ecological threat with a carefree tourist experience is well captured by popular culture, which, to use Marc Bould's cogent definition (2021), manifests Venice's Anthropocene unconscious.

In the first few minutes of the movie *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019), the young superhero travels to Venice on a stereotype-ridden high school trip: the group drives into the city on a van (where cars are not permitted), goes to the non-existent Leonardo da Vinci museum (the artist has a tenuous connection to Venice but he is a conveniently recognizable global hallmark), and Peter Parker replaces the Spidey costume he left at home with a Carnival mask when action calls. No sooner is the company dreamily lost in their meanderings that Venice is attacked by the monstrous aqueous giant Water Elementals, which wreaks havoc on its streets and monuments. Not even the amazing Spider-Man is powerful enough to oppose the overwhelming dominance of the waters over the fragile city: it takes another villain, Mysterio, to avert the devastation. And yet, once the battle is won, the shock is quickly reabsorbed and the unfazed tourists are ready to resume their sightseeing and shopping. The reassuring Marvel script provides a perfect example of what the psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe has called the disavowal of climate change (2021: 137), a form of denial that does not refute the truth of impending ecological catastrophe but distorts it through a number of repeated daily unconscious and conscious gestures: "Disavowal works by finding *any* way to minimize feeling disturbed by a disturbing reality" (138). Yes, the crisis is happening and rising waters are threatening Venice, but some technological fix will take care of that (Mysterio, the MOSE barriers); yes my own lifestyle of conspicuous consumption is bad for the planet but I am just a lone individual and my small carbon footprint should not deprive me of the pleasure of enjoying one of the most coveted destinations in the world.

Fortunately, Venice is also producing counternarratives that, far from disavowing the crisis through tranquilizing cultural tropes, explore its local implications from a global perspective, demonstrating how the city can be a "thinking machine" (Settis 2016) for other cities, an influential laboratory for the environmental crisis. Significantly, these texts hinge on the long tradition of Venetian cosmopolitanism, already described by Contarini/Lewkenor in the usual terms of paradox and amazement: "others exceedingly admired the wonderful concourse of strange and forraine people, yea of the farthest and remotest nations, as though the City of Venice onely were a common and generall market to the whole world" (Contarini 1969: IIIr; 1). Vince mentions Venice as a city "created by migration" and refugees (2022: 46) and Jesse van Amelsvoort (in this volume) points to the climate migrant as the key figure in what he appropriately calls the postcolonial Anthropocene. In concluding his essay he writes: "If the Anthropocene is a representational problem, which cannot be apprehended immediately and in its entirety, we are in dire need of mediators that translate the overwhelming threat of the climactic hyperobject into more readily graspable units [. . .] what is needed, are mechanisms of translation that make the environmental crisis

legible and affectively felt in individual lives" (van Amelsvoort: p. 83). Extending his proposal, I would like to argue that Venice can function as an anthropocene mediator a mediator by examining a number of literary and visual texts that deal with climate migrants and translation processes.

This notion of postcolonial Anthropocene connects two academic and cultural discourses that have had an uneasy relationship, as van Amelsvoort also reminds us. In his influential study *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon identified "four main schisms" keeping postcolonialists and ecocritics mostly apart. Postcolonialists foregrounded hybridity and cross-culturation; displacement; the cosmopolitan and the transnational; criticized nationalism; excavating or reimagining the marginalized past: history from below and border histories, often along transnational axes of migrant memory. Ecocritics celebrated wilderness and preservation; the literature of place; were traditionally nested in "a national (and often nationalistic) American framework"; timeless transcendentalism and "solitary moments of communion with nature" that mythologized empty lands repressing the colonization and genocide of native people (Nixon 2011: 236). There are important qualifications to Nixon's overview. Many postcolonial scholars of settler colonies such as Canada and Australia had always taken environmental exploitation and colonial racism into consideration and many postcolonial authors had developed forms of ecopoetics not corresponding to the American paradigms of nature writing. However, even as the fundamental recent work by critics such as Elizabeth deLoughrey, Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin has gone a long way to bridge the gaps and open new interconnections, the polarity still operates, especially in the larger public domain. The environmental humanities, a more capacious term that has subsumed ecocriticism, have already incorporated many postcolonial themes and concepts (DeLoughrey et al. 2015; Heise et al. 2017). In *The Great Derangement*, the most consequential contribution to this conversation, Amitav Ghosh calls attention to our city:

> Can anyone write about Venice any more without mentioning the *aqua alta*, when the waters of the lagoon swamp the city's streets and courtyards? Nor can they ignore the relationship that this has with the fact that one of the languages most frequently heard in Venice is Bengali: the men who run the quaint little vegetable stalls and bake the pizzas and even play the accordion are largely Bangladeshi, many of them displaced by the same phenomenon that now threatens their adopted city – sea-level rise. (2016: 13)

The persistence of dominant tropes of Venice (Tanner 1992; Doody 2006; Scappettone 2014) is actually such that *aqua alta* (see *Spider-Man*) can be still exorcized and the overwhelming majority of high-brow and low-brow representations remain blissfully indifferent to the Bangladeshi community, community. On the other hand, Ghosh himself and a few Italian authors have made important contri-

butions in the direction of the postcolonial Anthropocene. To contextualize their effort we can start from an unremarkable, liminal, intermedial site: a bus stop in a city famous for not having cars. Venice is in fact a municipality that extends to a vast mainland area where the majority of residents live, where over 3 million passengers per year come through the international airport, and where Marghera, an industrial complex that at some point was the largest in Europe, is located. As Iovino and Beggiora put it, this petrochemical site is a paradoxical "alter ego" of Venice (2021: 8), created a century ago to bring the city up to date with industrial modernity but also provoking ruinous excavations of the lagoon that have made subsidence a vicious ally of sea-level rise, and causing water and air pollution levels that have been toxic for the ecosystem and deadly for many workers, as a historic trial demonstrated. The bus stop, roughly halfway between Venice and the larger town of Mestre, corresponds to Fincantieri, the Marghera shipyard where gigantic cruise ships, the emblem of overtourism, are assembled. At the beginning and end of the working shifts, you can see the stop crowded with long lines of workers: most of them are from Bangladesh. Their community is at the center of Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019), Francesco Dalla Puppa, Francesco Matteuzzi, and Francesco Saresin's graphic novel *La linea dell'orizzonte* ("Horizon Line" 2021) and Emanuele Confortin's documentary *Banglavenice* (2022).

Adding an innovative chapter to the long history of the Venetian literary myth (Bassi 2023), *Gun Island* (2019) is Ghosh's first answer to his own scathing examination of the novel's inadequacy to address the magnitude of the climate crisis. In his sympathetic critique of Ghosh, Mark Bould goes even further by calling *Gun Island* a fictional version of *The Great Derangement* (2021: 66). He persuasively defends the author from himself, not only suggesting how Ghosh had already addressed anthropogenic themes in most of his previous novels, but also showing how *Gun Island* successfully mobilizes a number of literary and cultural codes that function as "hybrid artificial organism" (to quote our definition of Venice) worthy of the tradition of Venetian paradox:

> Exploring the mundane novel's capacity to deal with improbable – which is not the opposite, but an inflection of the probable – [*Gun Island*] produces a census of the uncanny by repeatedly activating then rejecting other genre frameworks that might explain the odd, climate-related events it depicts. It invokes the kinds of rationales provided by sf, fantasy and horror, as well as by the Umberto Eco/Dan Brown/Indiana Jones school of mystically inflected globetrotting conspiracy thriller involving archaeology and exegesis, but refuses to collapse into any of these narrative forms. (Bould 2021: 66)

Gun Island traces the journeys of Dinesh (Deen) Datta, an Indian scholar and antique book dealer, who returns from New York to the Sundarbans in West Bengal, and then travels to Los Angeles and Venice to unravel the mystery and legend of a

seventeenth-century enigmatic character known as "The Gun Merchant". The novel presents the contrast between a contemporary postcolonial and cosmopolitan middle-class individual, a well-to-do Indian intellectual with multiple passports who easily navigates and inhabits different continents, cultures, and languages, and the young Bangladeshi migrants who travel illegally and dangerously to make a better living in Europe. In his global wanderings, propelled by the quest for the mysterious merchant living in the age of Contarini and Lewkenor, Dinesh interacts with many characters who, in different positions and roles, are involved in the experience of global migration. The young Tipu, a young migrant that Dinesh meets first in India and then in Venice, talks to him about "connection men" or *dalals* in Bangla, the people who link the migrants through an intricate system of phone communication to facilitate their perilous transnational journeys. The phone is the indispensable instrument for the migrants to stay connected to their families, to pay for the various services on which the traveling depends, to map the available routes. Less predictably, Tipu explains, once the final destination is reached "it's their phones that help them get their stories straight" (2019: 67). The puzzled Dinesh asks for a clarification, and Tipu's answer illuminates a crucial tension between the postcolonial and the environmental. The stories in question are the fictive ones that the migrants need to provide to the European officers to be granted political asylum:

> It's gotta be a story like they want to hear over there. Suppose the guy was starving because his land was flooded; or suppose his whole village was sick from the arsenic in their ground water; or suppose he was being beat up by his landlord because he couldn't pay off his debts – none of that shit matters to the Swedes. Politics, religion and sex is what they're looking for – you've gotta have a story of persecution if you want them to listen to you. (Ghosh 2019: 67)

The standard story demanded by the enlightened Scandinavian authorities is based on a human rights agenda echoing traditional postcolonial concerns – "politics, religion and sex," issues of identity and persecution that paradoxically make the postcolonial refugee the model victim who can finally enjoy the freedom and relative privileges of the metropolitan West. This script is appropriated and rewritten by the most unlikely postcolonial author, the "connection man" who knows that displacement by environmental disaster still does not merit recognition and hospitality, putting pressure on the postcolonial parameters with which we traditionally look at borders, boundaries and the crisis of Europe. In *The Great Derangement* Amitav Ghosh offers a definition of epic resonance about his migrant family: "My ancestors were ecological refugees long before the term was invented" (2016: 3). However, as also noted by van Amelsvoort in this volume, "ecological refugee" is a not a category officially recognized by the 1951 Refugee Convention, which offers protection to those fleeing war and persecution along grounds of race, religion, nationality, social

group or political opinion. As the group *Climate Refugees* clarifies, significantly using an example from our country of interest, "This could leave the Bangladeshi family displaced across borders by a disaster, the subsistence farmer in Chad with no option but to leave his country because he lacks water for farming, or a mother forced to flee her country because of a climate change-induced resource war, outside the legal framework for protection" ("Climate Refugees" 2022). More recent legal instruments are trying to extend such protection: the Global Compact on Refugees, affirmed by the UN General Assembly in 2018, recognizing that "climate, environmental degradation and disasters increasingly interact with the drivers of refugee movements" (UNCHR 2022), and the UN Human Right Committee ruling in 2020 that climate refugees should not be subject to repatriation (Vince 2022: 69).

> Like if they're from Bangladesh, I tell them to say they're Hindus or Buddhists and are being oppressed by Muslims. And if they're from India I tell them to go at it the other way around – that works pretty good too. And then there's sexual orientation of course, and gender identity – they love those kinds of stories over there. But that's where the art comes into it, Pops – you've got to judge who can carry off what. You gotta know your clients and what kind of story fits each of them. So you could say that what I'm providing is a point-to-point service. (Ghosh 2019: 67–68)

Tipu is a "connection man" with very pragmatic goal-oriented stories, that are called, with appropriate irony, "art." Their instrumentality and efficacy cast an ironical light on the supposed disinterestedness of Dinesh/Ghosh's literary narratives, and perhaps as a caustic comment on certain market-oriented forms of postcolonial writing. But Dinesh Datta, who in the course of the novel gets chased, bitten, drenched, stalked, evacuated, and who is a far more passive individual than most of the other characters in the novel (especially the women – scientists, activists, scholars), is ultimately also a connection man, a collector, interpreter, decipherer, translator of disparate languages and stories. In a world that expects the mass migration of unprecedented numbers of people, the function of cultural and linguistic mediation will be more and more crucial.

Connecting the twenty-first century ecological migrant to the sixteenth-century merchant and Jewish refugees in the Ghetto, *Gun Island* also challenges the stereotype of Venice as a recent city of migration, nurtured by the most reactionary political and cultural forces of a city cultivating a xenophobic and antihistorical notion of autochthonous Venetianness but unwittingly supported in progressive contexts such as the exhibition *Migropolis* (Scheppe 2010). Mounted in St. Mark's square, the heart of Venice's tourist experience, this show meritoriously showcased the lives of recent migrant communities and their invisible contribution to the local economy, but was completely silent on the century-old tradition of Venice as a migrant city and employed a visual and verbal language too sophisticated for the overwhelming

majority of visitors. Making *Gun Island* his most readable and informative novel so far, Ghosh also makes the case for accessible stories.

Two recent Italian texts also focus on the Bangladeshi community, harboring the promise that a new generation of Bangla-Venetian residents may tell their own stories themselves before too long. Both Dalla Puppa, Matteuzzi and Saresin's *La linea dell'orizzonte* (2021) and Confortin's *Banglavenice* (2022) are programmatically ethnographic narratives that try not to treat the community as a traditional object seen through the gaze of the Western observer. Dalla Puppa, Matteuzzi and Saresin make that explicit by problematizing the figure of the ethnographer himself in their graphic novel, which opens with a lone jogger running in the beautiful landscapes of Italy pondering on his existential dilemmas. This romantic overture seems to evoke the tradition of the adventurous, individualistic male hero of many Italian comic books, quickly subverted by the sudden, anticlimactic appearance of the urban landscape of the small provincial town of Alte Ceccato. This turns out to be less the story of Stefano than his sociological exploration of the trajectories of the Bangladeshi families involved in complex migration routes connecting their homeland to Italy and the United Kingdom. If the latter is the desired final destination of their 'onward migration' and Italy is considered an intermediate stage, Stefano discovers that these double migrants try to reconstruct in London part of their acquired Italianness. The story unfolds in typical ethnographic fashion through the interviews of Stefano with several (male) members of the community. Like Gosh's Dinesh, Stefano is also a tormented, accident-prone man, who cannot guarantee his girlfriend the kind of stable relationship taken for granted in the traditional Bangladeshi society that he interacts with, and who gets in turn robbed at knife-point, drenched, snubbed, let down during his research missions.

The standard migrant course he investigates is retraced by Apon, who Stefano meets in London. In 1994 the young man arrived in Rome, was hypnotized by its beauty but could not find a good job and moved north. In their first dialog, we learn that Apon belongs to a middle class that in Bangladesh "could only fall and never rise" and Europe was the destination that promised upward social mobility. In two consecutive close-up shots of Stefano and Apon suggesting an equal and intimate relationship, the latter explains: "We were Italians, but always seen as foreigners, I was always a Bangla factory worker, and my son the son of a Bangla factory worker . . . in theory we had everything, but . . . skin colour . . . ." (Della Puppa et al. 2021: 27). The next page is a spread showing a full-scale aerial view of the promised land of London, the multicultural metropolis that Italy's province cannot (yet) offer. Veneto, the region where Venice is the main city, is one of the regions that have integrated economically and socially the highest number of migrants while also producing the most reactionary political aggrega-

tions. In his accompanying essay, Della Puppa describes the paradoxical situation of the town council meeting where the same politicians who had erected several bureaucratic hurdles to avoid the stabilization of Bangladeshi residents, were now concerned that this community was leaving en masse, depopulating the schools and the shops. And yet, with all this structural and cultural racism, explicit or implicit, Italy had created an emotional space that led the community to build 'a little Italy in London' and constitute there the *IBWAUK*, the *Italian Bangladeshi Welfare Association UK*.

Figure 1: *La linea dell'orizzonte*: the *IBWAUK.* Courtesy of © BeccoGiallo.

London was multiethnic, but remained the old colonial power that had preached British superiority and underdeveloped Bangladesh; Italy, whose colonial past the Bangladeshi had not suffered, had become a place of nostalgia.

We understand why from a second interviewee, the Uber driver Kazi who moonlights as a cameraman, documenting Bangladeshi festivals, an unpaid occupation that allows him to make his community visible and to prepare for his work in the UK. He hosts Stefano in their tv studio, temporarily switching the roles of interviewer and interviewee. Kazi compares the frantic pace of the En-

glish capital with the more relaxed atmosphere of the Italian small town, where work in the tanning factory was very hard but life was quiet and regular, quiet, and weekends were available for the family and the community in the Italian squares conducive to easy socialization. The neoliberal Uber-type economical model grants greater independence but demands a difficult organization and impacts personal relationships. As Kazi reminisces about Italy, in the last table of page 115 he explains: "I used to live in Venice. It is the most beautiful city in the world . . . " Next, the reader finds a spread that, echoing the glorious apparition of London, offers an emblematically split space: the upper part reproduces the classic tourist view of Venice's Grand Canal, while the lower part shows the 'alter ego' Marghera, with its ethylene arc and an oil tanker ironically mimicking the Rialto Bridge and the gondola depicted above. Kazi's experience there is summarized in a single page (Figure 2), where the first spell as a dishwasher in restaurants (and we see once again the architecture of Venice, not the kitchens) is followed by employment in the shipyard, where he is subcontracted by the big company. "In Italy I was only a foreign factory worker, here I have made my dream come true, even if it's a small TV, but I can work and the channel is broadcast worldwide" (Della Puppa et al. 2021: 119). Now Kazi is a cameraman: like Deenesh, Tipu, and Stefano, he is a connection man, a collector of stories.

In *La linea dell'orizzonte* the historic Venice remains a temporary professional stage and a distant horizon for the migrants; for Stefano, who contemplates the fish-shaped city from his plane, is his landing spot as he finally starts a more stable and mature relationship with his girlfriend. In Confortin's *Banglavenice* Venice itself is a protagonist and is seen mainly from the water. This observational documentary that explores and questions coexistence with water in Venice is a poetic, slow-paced narrative inspired by Ghosh's work. It poetically weaves together the voices of Bangladeshi migrants with that of older Venetian residents who experience the metamorphosis of the city. Unlike the graphic novel, where the narrator is part of the story, Confortin never appears or makes his voice heard on or off camera, trying to give the viewer the impression that you (like him) are an invisible witness to his Venetian vignettes. He started from a poetic intuition that Bangladeshi may be attracted to Venice of all places because of the similarity of waterscapes, but he quickly acknowledged that other, more pragmatic reasons (explained in *La linea dell'orizzonte*) had connected these territories. Moving beyond this tantalizing analogy, he then pursues the uncanny changes experienced by Bangladeshi families that have relocated to both sides of the Venice lagoon. Compared to the lives narrated in the graphic novel, this is the next generation, the one that has chosen Italy to stay. "In all restaurants you find one or two Bangladeshi people we work hard" tells proudly to the camera in his basic Italian a man taking a break from his painting job in one of the most important boatyards (Figure 3).

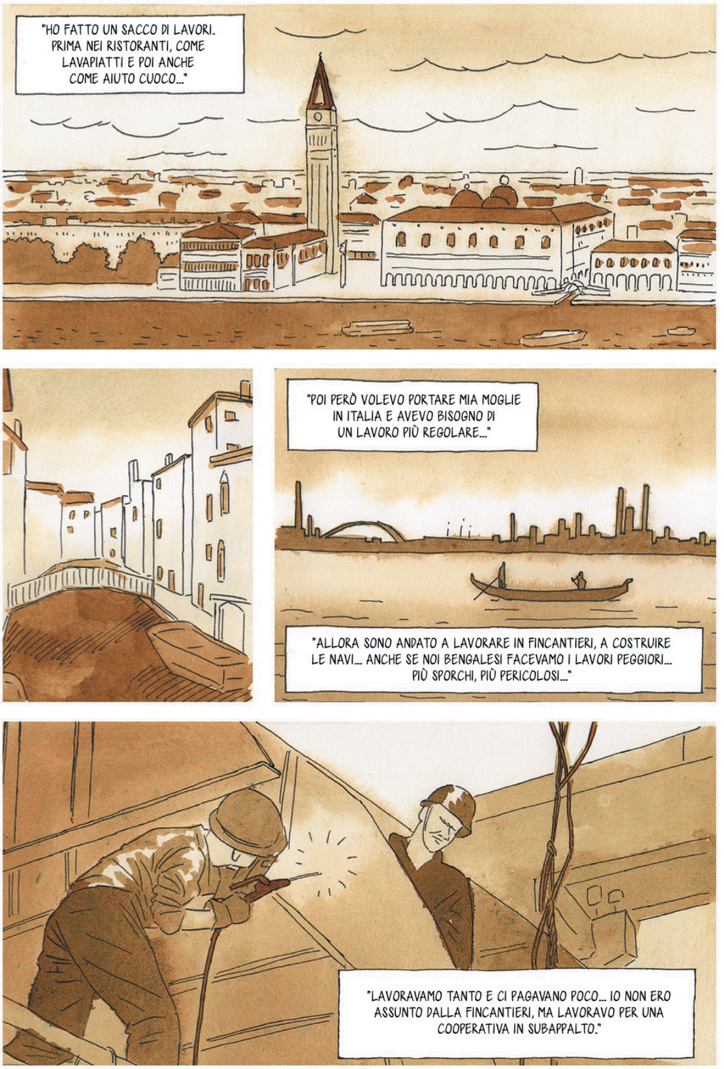

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Figure 2: *La linea dell'orizzonte*: Venice and Marghera. Courtesy of © BeccoGiallo.

"We are never afraid . . . hot . . . cold . . . . We work hard, we don't steal . . . . When the work is finished, a quick shower, and we go to bed . . . family and work, that's it" – a reassuring narrative tailored for the implied Italian interlocutor who, oblivious of our country's past of mass migration, has frequently bought into the toxic

Figure 3: *Banglavenice*: the boatyard. Courtesy of © Emanuele Confortin.

propaganda of the migrants as parasitic intruders. The man's father used to milk a cow and grow vegetables in Bangladesh; now he is proud of having bought a small apartment in Mestre: "Now I'm a Venetian," he laughs. No laughter, conversely, when he explains that he sent an email to the police immigration office to apply for the reunification with his wife and two small children, but no answer has arrived after five months. Like in the graphic novel, once you have gained access to the country, bureaucracy is the main barrier, but in this case the arrival to Italy was not the easy part. A newspaper seller, filmed both at work at his news stand in historic Venice and at home in the mainland, retraces his harsh migration journey. This included back-and-forth forays into Iran and Turkey, travelling on horseback or in the belly of a fuel truck, being locked in a bathroom, stuck in a room or even a cell with eight fellow migrants – "to come here I have been in prison seven times", he laughs, as he enjoys the simple comforts of food and a roof in Marghera. With one exception, all the characters of *Banglavenice*, whether Italian or Bangladeshi, remain nameless until the final credits, indicating Confortin's authorial decision to emphasise everyday life in Venice and typical professional roles, showing the incredibly normal and incredibly unique routine of workers from different generations. He tiptoes into widely different environments, as far apart as possible from the stereotypical glossy romantic images of the city, often travelling in early morning darkness or during fog-enveloped winter days – a far cry from the luminous glory of Venetian painting and postcards.

Long spells of silence accompany the frequent boat trips that alternate with interviews carried out in houses and working places. The Bangladeshi may be the newcomers, but they are portrayed as part of the larger effort of the citizens, seen in their menial daily lives in the early hours on non-poetic motorized barges, negotiating their existence with water and their economic challenges. We meet the

young man who lost his job during the pandemic and sleeps in a sailboat; the old restaurateur witnessing the high water invading his home and alternating a very colorful and scurrilous Venetian dialect to curse the lethal excavations of the lagoon with highly sophisticated explanations in Italian on the dynamics of hydrogeology; we see the famous boat builder who explains the difference between a gondola built fifty years ago, when it also used to transport heavy tourist luggage and navigated longer lagoon routes, and a modern-day gondola, only plying the Venice inner canals for the tourists but braving the furious 'moto ondoso,' the wave motion provoked by the heavy motor traffic. We see a boat full of newly manufactured coffins wrapped in plastic traveling on water towards a storage place near the hospital, where most funeral services operate. The casual conversation and jokes cracked by the deliverers create a funny counterpoint to the illustrious cultural trope of death in Venice. Throughout *Banglavenice* we frequently see Marghera, Venice's 'alter ego,' appearing as a backdrop on the edge of the lagoon, as the urban setting where the migrants gather to learn Italian at the *Venice Bangla School* (see Figure 4) or to pray in their makeshift mosque, or as the politicized space where young activists sprayed the English-language slogan 'TIDE IS RISING, SO ARE WE.'

Figure 4: *Banglavenice*: Venice Bangla School. Courtesy of © Emanuele Confortin.

Confortin seamlessly merges two different genres, the journey of the Asian migrant to Europe and the description of Venetian daily life. They coincide in the character who is the symbolic protagonist of the story, the 15-year-old Raosun Shamimul. In a documentary made mainly of self-contained portraits of people, the only discernible plot is that of Raosun studying the cello with his Italian teacher and seeking admission to the Venice conservatoire.

Figure 5: *Banglavenice*: the Cello lesson. Courtesy of © Emanuele Confortin.

The mid shot where he is standing with his instrument on his back in front of the majestic Baroque palace that houses the prestigious institution, one hour into the 90-minute long documentary, (re)connects the industrial Marghera of Bangladeshi migrants with historic monumental Venice.

In what is arguably the most moving scene of the documentary, we see Rauson and his older brother sitting with their widowed mother in their simple kitchen in Marghera. Here the environmental kinship between the two distant and yet interconnected waterscapes of Bangladesh and Venice, so different and yet both susceptible to ecological catastrophe, suddenly erupts in the narration: "Tell me about the monsoon in your village." Rauson was born in Italy, is a native speaker of Italian, and visited Bangladesh when he was very young; the older Zamir was born and studied in Bangladesh, is basically bilingual and acts as the linguistic and cultural mediator between the mother who survived a lethal flood in the village and the little brother who has only vague memories of their ancestral homeland and a more precarious grasp of Bangla. The two brothers use Ital-

ian with one another while switching to Bangla as they address their mother, who occasionally drops some Italian or English words to help Rauson. "The people would die in their sleep, falling into water." The tragedy of the inundation occasionally gives way to the comedy of the quotidian, as in her anecdote of a cat snatching the chicken that an uncle had amorously cooked for the family visiting from Italy. The rural landscape of Bangladesh gradually materializes in the Marghera kitchen through the stories, the internet images, the sketches of the house drawn by Zamir for Rauson, who tries hard to recognize a place he visited only as a small child. "How could cats move around in the flood?", he asks, striving to make this (un)familiar place his own.

In a later scene, we see Rauson and Zamir on a typical Venetian boat learning rowing skills and lore from a local expert. It is an emblematic, almost stylized version of a process that has characterized the history of Venice for centuries, the assimilation and integration of the "wonderful concourse of strange and forraine people" to renew the city, especially in times of crisis. The documentary ends with the intertitle "Raosun Shamimul Islam is the first student of Bangladeshi background to have been admitted to the Venice Conservatoire," nodding to the classic redemptive narrative of the migrant outsider that makes it to the shrine of Western culture. But in our age of eco-anxiety, where we read in well-informed books like Gaia Vince's that Venice may not be around for much longer, a different symbolic ending is the remark by the grey-bearded restaurateur, himself a migrant from another part of Italy, who praises the Venetian "incredible tendency to *sdrammatizzare*." This untranslatable verb is the opposite of dramatize, namely to play down the drama of life: "you create a city on water: this is a way to sdramatize."

If popular discourse, from Spider-Man to media reports, insists exclusively on the destructive force of waters, *Banglavenice* is both a praise of the connective role of water and of the ability of humans to forge new multiethnic, collaborative communities capable of staying with the trouble of the Anthropocene (Haraway 2016).

The works examined in this chapter represent an alternative Venice. In a city vulnerable to ecological disaster and often represented as a passive, fragile victim in need of aid and assistance, numerous organizations and individuals are engaging with the environmental crisis as agents of change and models for other coastal cities. As shown by Felicity Fenner (2022) and van Amelsvoort (2023), the international art scene, with the Biennale as its gravity center, has made Venice a hotspot of ecologically oriented art. The TBA21 foundation has created Ocean Space, a museum and collaborative platform devoted to marine art and research. The major public institutions have joined forces to proclaim Venice World Capital of Sustainability, through the creation of a foundation by the same name. Ca' Foscari Univer-

sity of Venice has launched a research center in the environmental humanities, the first international master's degree in the field in Italy, and an international journal. In many of these places – museums, restaurants, hotels, factories – Bangladeshi migrants provide essential services through their barely visible labor.

Interrogating the Renaissance myth with which we opened, Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan claims that in these widely circulated stories "Natural calamities were surmounted; oppositions and conflicts were erased. Always miraculously overcome, they hardly ruffled the surface of Venetian life. . . . the city could never know decrepitude or senescence. It had excluded itself from time and becoming" (2002: 190). It also excluded itself from the unsettling and seemingly contradictory elements of which it was constituted. The final paradox is that Venice is at once the place where the most pressing global issues (neoliberal capitalism, migration, climate change, overtourism) are all present and simultaneously dissimulated behind a veneer of beauty, still charming us with escapist fantasies or their mirror-image of apocalyptic catastrophes. It still remains easier to imagine eternal Venice or moribund Venice rather than a living, amphibian Venice that has century-old lessons for the present and the future. The authors examined here have reinscribed Venice in time and becoming, narrating stories where the long-term effects of colonialism and of the Anthropocene are intertwined, where migrants negotiate new lives and identities, and where postcolonial translators, artists, and intellectuals connect us to stories for our times of crisis.

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Elena Brugioni

Violent Postcolonial Ecosystems. Environmental Crisis and Eco-Critique in João Paulo Borges Coelho's Literary Writing

Abstract: The literary work of Mozambican contemporary novelist João Paulo Borges Coelho is characterized by critical reflections of great originality and relevance on the relation between violence and the environment (Nixon 2011), addressing a wide range of problematizations that when situated within a postcolonial ecocritical perspective seem to re-signify bio-political paradigms, pointing to what has been defined as "eco-materialist aesthetics" (Mukherjee 2010: 19). Far beyond a mere metaphorical resource, the environment appears to be an aesthetic – and theoretical – index of the "necropolitical" condition (Mbembe 2003; 2019) of human and non-human life within the Mozambican nation-state. However, Borges Coelho's novels offer the possibility to add further complexities, on the one hand, to the entanglement between the "ordered colonial violence" and the "violent postcolonial order" (Borges Coelho 2003a: 175–193) and, on the other hand, to bio-political and eco-critical readings of his work. The crisis registered in Borges Coelho's work *Cidades dos Espelhos. Novela Futurista* (City of Mirrors. Futurist Novella) (2011) stood out as a pragmatic example in order to reassess the meaning of environmental and eco-materialist aesthetics and therefore to grasp his critique of *violent postcolonial (eco)systems*, in Mozambique and in the World.

Keywords: João Paulo Borges Coelho, Mozambique, African literatures, postcolonial ecosystem, environmental crisis, eco-critique

> *Tal como os animais ganham as feições dos donos, também os moradores vão afeiçoando aos bairros onde vivem.*
>
> Just as animals take on the features of their owners, residents also resemble the neighborhoods where they live. (Borges Coelho 2011)

In the literary works published by Mozambican contemporary novelist João Paulo Borges Coelho, the concept of crisis is a central problematization as well as a strategic aesthetic device in his literary writing. Since the publication of his first novel, *As Duas Sombras do Rio* (The two shadows of the river) in 2003, the idea of *violent (post)colonial (eco)systems* is a central theme of his literary work through-

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out the registration of the impact of (colonial and civil) wars, (human and natural) catastrophes and (political and social) crisis within the vast and diverse context of Mozambican territory in different historical moments. As Paulo de Medeiros puts it in his study of two novels published by Borges Coelho, *Água. Uma novela rural* (Water. A rural novella) (2016) and *Ponta Gea* (2017):

> Borges Coelho goes further than simply continuing his previous use of symbolic references to water or general ecological concerns to present us with a forceful critique of how 'development' has come to threaten not just established ways of life but life itself. In doing so, [. . .], Borges Coelho not only aligns national concerns with global ones but places the national and even individual cases as paradigmatic before the readers. In doing so, I will want to argue, Borges Coelho intervenes sharply on both the socio-political register and on the literary-aesthetic one. The two novels under consideration advance the notion of a Mozambican literature fully enmeshed in global currents and debates, participating fully in the world-literary system, without for a moment losing sight of their responsibility towards local specificities. (Medeiros 2020: 223)

Therefore, his literary work can be addressed as a paradigmatic example of a strategic convergence between global and national/regional crises where the very ideia of crisis is always unfolded through its political, human and environmental dimensions. In this way Borges Coelho's literary project shows an emblematic connection between nature and human history and therefore, paraphrasing Raymond Williams, fosters an original (re)definition of "the idea of man [human] in society, and [therefore] ideas of kinds of society" (2005: 70–71). According to this perspective, Borges Coelho's literary work can be addressed as an example of what Pablo U. Mukherjee defines as "eco-materialist aesthetic" and, thus, a literary work that underlines and addresses: "the essential unity of humans and environment, of history and nature; (. . .) finally, the specific enabling condition that the environment offers to all human cultural activities" (Mukherjee 2010: 63A critical). Reading of Borges Coelho's literary project can certainly contribute to foster "a radically creative alliance between environmental and postcolonial studies" and therefore, "imaginative coalitions that may help redress environmental injustice" (Nixon 2011: 259–260) and thus (re)signifying the very ideia of crisis in its multiple space-time unfolding within a materialist and postcolonial critical perspective.

João Paulo Borges Coelho was born in 1955, in the city of Porto while his family was traveling to Portugal. He spent his childhood between the mining town of Moatize and the Island of Ibo, in northern Mozambique. Then he moved with his family to the city of Beira, capital of Sofala, where he remained until 1973, when he left for Portugal to study Psychology and then History at the University of Lisbon. Without finishing his studies in Portugal, he returned to Mozambique days after the outbreak of the Carnation Revolution (1974), in a move contrary to the majority of Portuguese settlers who abandoned the overseas provinces to return

to Portugal. He caught "an empty plane" (Borges Coelho 2009) and returned to Maputo where he concluded his degree in History at the University Eduardo Mondlane becoming a recognized professor and researcher of the History of Mozambique and Southern Africa. After working in different research environments,[1] in 1994 he obtained his Ph.D. in Economic and Social History at the University of Bradford in the United Kingdom. Although a deliberate distinction between the profession of historian and the profession of writer remains unequivocal (Gallo 2018), the literary work of Borges Coelho shows the potentialities that arise from the intertwining of these two disciplines and intellectual dimensions: science and fiction, history and literature, whose tensions and "telescopic pressures"[2] are the mark of the politics and the aesthetics that guide the author's work. João Paulo Borges Coelho is currently a retired full professor at the University Eduardo Mondlane and lives in Maputo with his wife, children, and grandchildren.[3] His career as novelist started in 2003 with the publication of the novel *As Duas Sombras do Rio* (Borges Coelho 2003b), however before that he published three books of graphic novels, *Namacurra* (Borges Coelho 1987), *No Tempo do Farelahi* (Borges Coelho 1984) and *Akapwichi Akaporo – Armas e escravos* (Borges Coelho 1981), all currently out of print.[4] Since 2003, the author published thirteen books – eight novels, three novellas, and three collections of short stories. Despite his late beginning as a novelist, João Paulo Borges Coelho represents one the most original and outstanding authors of the Portuguese-speaking literary world.[5]

As previously mentioned, the literary work of João Paulo Borges Coelho is characterized by critical reflections of great originality and relevance on the relation between violence and the environment (Nixon 2011), addressing a wide range of problematizations which, when situated within a postcolonial eco-critical perspective, seem to re-signify bio-political paradigms, pointing to what has been defined

1 In addition to teaching, Borges Coelho was deputy director of the Center for Basic Techniques for the Use of Natural Resources (TBARN), which led him to carry out fieldwork in the district of Mavago, in the province of Niassa. He also worked in the School of Marxism-Leninism until writing, in 1983, along with José Negrão and Luís de Brito, a manual on the National Liberation Struggle that would have displeased the party by addressing topics considered controversial, such as hunger and insecurity in the liberated zones, gender inequality, and the place of death of Eduardo Mondlane. After this episode, he was transferred to the University Publication Center and, in 1987, he started to manage the Bulletin of the Archive, linked to the Historical Archive of Mozambique. Regarding the professional trajectory of João Paulo Borges Coelho, see Israel 2020.

2 About the concepts of *telescopic pressures*, see WReC 2015: 17.

3 For an autobiography of the author, see Borges Coelho 2009.

4 For a reading of his graphic novels, see Israel in Brugioni et al. 2020: 37–68.

5 For an overview of his oeuvre, see Brugioni, Grossegesse and Medeiros in Brugioni et al. 2020: 1–8.

as "eco-materialist aesthetics" (Mukherjee 2010). Far beyond a mere metaphorical resource, the environment seems to be an aesthetic – and theoretical – index of the "necropolitical condition" (Mbembe 2003, 2019) of human and non-human life within the Mozambican nation-state. However, Borges Coelho's novels offer the possibility to add further complexities, on the one hand, to the entanglement between the "ordered colonial violence" and the "violent postcolonial order" (Borges Coelho 2003a: 175–193) and, on the other hand, to bio-political and eco-critical debates for the study of contemporary Mozambican and African literatures. The environmental crisis registered in Borges Coelho's literary writing, as Paulo de Medeiros states it, appears as "a forceful critique of how 'development' has come to threaten not just established ways of life but life itself" (Medeiros 2020: 219–248), offering the possibility to reassess the meaning of Borges Coelho's environmental and eco-materialist aesthetics and, thus, to grasp his critique of violent postcolonial (eco)systems, in Mozambique and in the world.[6]

Cidade dos Espelhos. Novela Futurista [City of Mirrors. Futuristic Novella] (Borges Coelho 2011) presents itself as a paradigmatic example to reflect on the eco-materialist aesthetics that guides the author's work. It is a singular work not only within the literary project developed by João Paulo Borges Coelho but also within the scope of Mozambican literature, as well as in the broader field of contemporary African literatures. Among many, two of the main reasons for this singularity: the genre of the novel and the futuristic theme – both explicit in the subtitle of the book –; the two aspects lead to the observation of this work from the perspective of a paradigmatic proposal within the Mozambican literary universe and, more generally, contemporary literatures from Portuguese-speaking contexts. Observing *Cidade dos Espelhos* in contrast to other novellas published by Borges Coelho – *Hinyambaan. Novela Burlesca* (2008) and Uma novela rural (2016) – but also within the corpus produced by the author, several aspects stand out distinctively especially regarding the literary genre of the novella and the realistic dimension that constitutes itself as an aesthetic, critical, and conceptual strategy characteristic of Borges Coelho's work.

In *Cidade dos Espelhos* this aspect seems articulated in the perspective of what has been defined as "critical irrealism" (Löwy 2007; Medeiros 2020) that is: an aesthetic not corresponding "to any depreciation of realism, but to a refinement of it, under the specific circumstances of combined and uneven development" (WReC 2015: 70). Therefore, according to the perspective put forward by the Warwick Research Collective in the essay *Combined and Uneven Development:*

6 Parts of the reflections developed in this chapter are published in Brugioni 2022 and in Brugioni and Gallo 2019.

Towards a New Theory of world-literature: "We are proposing that something of an elective affinity exists between the general situation(s) of peripherality and irrealist aesthetics" recalling to something that "following Michael Löwy (from whom we have derived the term 'irrealism' in the first instance), we might call the 'ideal-type' of realism (2007: 195)." (WReC 2015: 68)

In this sense, this work of Borges Coelho can be defined as a paradigmatic case of "peripheral (ir)realism" (WReC, 2015), that is, a literary work governed by the dimensions of combination and inequality that guide the conditions of life and existence – human and non-human – within the capitalist system in which the "postcolonial environment" (Mukherjee 2010) is also inscribed. In this regard, it is important to highlight that the reading of *Cidade dos Espelhos* that I aim to develop in this chapter establishes a dialog and is, in a way, tributary of the critical reflection proposed by Paulo de Medeiros in his analysis of two literary works recently published by João Paulo Borges Coelho, *Água. Uma novela rural* and *Ponta Gea* (Medeiros 2020: 219–247) According to Paulo de Medeiros, these two works can be read: "Not only as aesthetic experiments that question the boundaries between, on the one hand, History, memory, and fiction and, on the other, realistic and mythical representation, but also as powerful records of a new type of crisis that Deckard, quoting Minqi Li, defines as 'an epochal crisis of the capitalist world economy'"(Medeiros 2020: 232; Deckard 2019; Minqi Li 2008). Therefore, in this sense, the two works: "record – and ask us to reflect on – the history of the combined development that led to the catastrophic moment we are experiencing, to be understood in terms of Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system theory or the ecosophy proposed by Guattari" (Medeiros 2020: 242).

Within the scope of this reading, the aim is to address *Cidade dos Espelhos* not as a work that contrasts opposing and antithetical times and spaces (colony/nation-state, past/future, human/nature, among others) but as a literary form characterized by "dialectical images of combined unevenness" (WReC 2015: 17). The theoretical perspectives that emerge throughout this approach seem to reframe aesthetic and political meanings of Borges Coelhos's literary project as well as to readdress the critical debate within postcolonial theory and environmental studies. On this, as Michael Niblett puts it – drawing on the theorizations proposed by Raymond Williams and Roberto Schwarz – it is important to recognize on the ability of Borges Coelho's literature to "intervene in more creative or critical ways" (Niblett 2020: 4) and therefore to propose new way to read and understand social and political conditions or, rather, as Williams states, to develop "a dramatization of values that becomes an action" (1970: 58–59). Therefore, according to Niblett: "The specific kinds of knowledge enabled by literary works can sensitize readers to the possibility of new types of social practice (including new

ways of organizing nature) and new analytical optics. 'A good novel,' claims Roberto Schwarz, 'is a genuine event for theory' (2012: 22)." (Niblett 2020: 4)

Furthermore, reading Borges Coelho's work through a line of materialist thought – and here I refer to the critical reflection on world-literature proposed by the Warwick Research Collective as well as to theorizations developed within the field of postcolonial theory[7] – contributes substantially to understanding the "unstable mix of past and future systems" (WReC 2015: 72) that guides his literary project, as well as contemporary capitalism, inside and outside Mozambique. Moreover, it is possible to observe the irrealistic aesthetics of (semi)peripheral literatures without "losing sight of the historical specificity of mutations in literary form (and their correspondence to particular social developments)" (WReC 2015: 68). At this respect, the futuristic outline of the *novella* – as a specific literary form – appears to be the most evident aesthetic device in order to address meanings and implications of its irrealism as an 'impure' combination of both realism and irrealism (Löwy 2007).[8]

Cidade dos Espelhos. Novela Futurista is a work structured in 20 brief chapters through a narration entirely set in a "distant capital of an old empire" (Borges Coelho 2011: 7) where socio-political, environmental, and human collapse(s) are the central narrative devices. Beyond the city that is presented as the preponderant spatial setting of the narration – opening to a reflection on what has come to be defined as "Afropolis"[9]– the anti-linear plot is developed around three un-rounded characters, Laissone, Jeremias, and Caia, who despite not having any family or friendship ties between them, together provoke a spectacular terrorist attack towards a religious temple, at the exact liturgical moment, killing hundreds of people. The operation to assault the temple, described in the first chapter of the text – "Bolas de Sabão" [Soap Bubbles] – is perhaps the first and most paradigmatic example of the dimension of *combination* and inequality that characterizes this literary work:

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7 I am referring here to authors such as Edward W. Said, Benita Parry, Neil Lazarus, Robert C. Young, among others, who, despite developing different theorizations, propose critical and conceptual dimensions deeply based on a "consistent criticism of Eurocentrism" (Said 1995), as well as on the observation of postcolonialism from its material, economic, and political conditions.

8 On this, as Michael Niblett states: "Literary form, in working on social (or socioecological) forms, will transform the latter in line with the logic of aesthetic practice. Thus, to take a relevant example, if we were to sift a novel or poem for signs of the ecological antagonisms of a particular commodity frontier, we might not find them at the level of thematic content, but they may well be present in transmuted form as, say, generic or stylistic discontinuities." (Niblett 2020: 4–5).

9 In this regard, see Nuttal and Mbembe 2008 and WReC 2015.

> Jeremiah takes out of his bag the small bamboo cane that always accompanies him, and from his pocket a small handful of tiny metal cones a little larger than grains of coarse sand. He puts some in his cane, puts it in his mouth, and waits for the guards to get their act together. (. . .)
>
> Caia nimbly climbs the bars of the gate to fulfill his part of the mission. He holds himself tightly by the legs while taking out of the bag a small jar and a wire rod with a ring at the end, those that children use to blow soap bubbles. He shakes the bottle of liquid, unscrews the lid, plunges the rod into it, removes it, and blows the ring making a huge bubble grow, which is only not round due to the weight it has, which forces it to stretch at the same time that mysterious forces try to bring it to spherical shape again. (. . .)
>
> In the other hand, now gloved, Caia already has a syringe whose needle he sticks carefully into the soap bubble, slightly pressing the plunger with his thumb to release a drop of the deadly broth of bacteria. [. . .] In a matter of minutes, the daring gestures of Caia produce half a dozen bubbles of the most varied sizes (he stops blowing them to make them grow when a very acute intuition tells him they are about to burst) at the same time that with the syringe he puts a drop of broth inside them. (Borges Coelho 2011: 11–13; my translation)[10]

The dialectical combination between traditional and technological, or rather between archaic and contemporary, not only mobilizes some of the assumptions that guide the (afro)futuristic aesthetics (Paul 2019) but illustrates, above all, a juxtaposed combination of strategies, techniques, and tools that are configured as an emblematic element of a "singular modernity" (Jameson 2002). Without a clear motivation as to the reasons determining the attack, the following chapters dwell on the escape of the "three robbers" whose crossings of urban space take place as assumptions to indicate the atmospheric violence and the human and environmental collapse in which the city and its inhabitants are inserted: "Among the robbers grows a silent euphoria. For Caia, it is a game, while for the other two, it

10 Original quote: "Jeremias tira da sacola a pequena cana de bambu que o acompanha sempre, e do bolso um pequeno punhado de minúsculos cones de metal pouco maiores que grãos de areia grossa. Mete alguns na cana, leva-a a boca e espera que os guardas se ponham a jeito. (. . .) Caia trepa agilmente as grades do portão a fim de cumprir com a sua parte da missão. Segura-se firmemente pelas pernas enquanto tira da sacola um pequeno frasco e uma haste de arame com uma argola na ponta, daquelas que as crianças usam para soprar bolas de sabão. Agita o frasco do liquido, desenrosca a tampa mergulha nele a haste, retira-a e sobra na argola fazendo crescer uma bola enorme, que só não é redonda devido ao peso que tem, que a obriga a alongar-se ao mesmo tempo que forças misteriosa a tentam trazer ao formato esférico outra vez. (. . .) Na outra mão, agora enluvada, Caia já tem uma seringa cuja agulha espeta com cuidado na bola de sabão, pressionando ligeiramente o êmbolo com o polegar para lhe soltar dentro uma gota apenas do mortífero caldo de bacterias. (. . .) Numa questão de minutos os temerários gestos de Caia produzem meia dúzia de bolas dos mais variados tamanhos (deixa de lhes soprar para as fazer crescer quando uma agudíssima intuição lhe diz estarem prestes a rebentar) ao mesmo tempo que com a seringa lhes vai metendo uma gota de caldo dentro."

is a kind of revenge. When taking stock, obviously there is no way not to consider that it was chance that played in favor of the robbers" (Borges Coelho 2011: 14).

Caia, the youngest, goes about his daily life committing violence and dodging the affections of his grandmother, the only person with whom he seems to have any feeling; "for him, reality is almost always the imitation of a film" (Borges Coelho 2011: 10). Laissone, on the other hand, is overwhelmed by a pressing sense of lack that leaves him vulnerable even to the sound of a trumpet, a passage in which the character expresses the desire to put himself into a fetal position in search of a security that is now unattainable; "He wants to renounce his own strength, to surrender to a slow orbit that only as vaguely as possible accounts for gravity" (31). Jeremias, the oldest of the group, experiences the tyranny of power when he is cruelly tortured by soldiers who, while beating him, shout incessantly: "we want the words, we want the words," while he, in the depths of his pain, can only offer his aggressors memories of old friendships and loves: "as if his whole life had accumulated to be able, here and now, to dump" (62). Memories that do not interest their torturers bothered with the fragments offered by Jeremias and from whom they demand: "a torrent of docile words that dissolve into a certain logic, but what the prisoner gives them are words that swallow the act, transform it into something that is no longer an act but some delusional construction. Metaphors?" (62). The three un-rounded characters that play a leading role in the story's opening event, populate the rest of the narration as three appearances whose histories and subjectivities will be getting lost in the unfolding of the novella.

The past, almost completely erased, crosses the entire narrative in a residual way through indicative elements that characterize the urban geography and the environment; first of all, Avenida Louise (Louise Avenue), bumpy and very wide, to which the name Avenida do Escárnio (Mockery Avenue) would better fit:

> Avenue Louise is the main axis, the backbone that allows us to say that the body of a city exists here. Avenue Louise. Without her, the city would be nothing more than an archipelago of alienated villages, caught up in mutual hatred. Its name is a mystery: for use it represents the nostalgia, now in disuse, with which something that existed in the past was remembered, perhaps a *boulevard* identical to that of the distant capital of the old empire. (. . .) In any case, the name Mockery Avenue would suit it best because of the appearance it presents today: a bumpy and very wide strip formed by the junction of three lanes since those gardens disappeared, a width without any purpose given the rarity of vehicles and also because people and bicycles do not need such a space to circulate. As if the inhabitants were saying that this is how they imagine the original Avenue Louise. Assumptions (Borges Colho 2011: 17–18; my translation)[11]

11 Original quote: "A Avenida Louise é o eixo principal, a espinha dorsal que nos permite dizer que existe aqui, levantando, o corpo de uma cidade. Avenida Louise. Sem ela a cidade não passa-

The Avenue Louise – a clear anthropomorphic metonym of the city – is surrounded by amputated busts of stone, without ears and noses; houses ruined by acid rain; fetid canals that were once rivers; trees mutilated into trunks without branches or leaves; high walls. Exemplary, in this sense, is the geographical division of the city between the Zona Alta (Upper Zone) with its "nylon trees," place where the wealthy live – like the general who spends his days "ensuring that others can continue with the war he started" (Borges Coelho 2011: 24) – and the Bairro Colonial [Colonial Neighborhood], where Caia's grandmother lives, transformed by this experience into something that resembles a turtle but that time and modern life have been eating away, turning only into a meaningless shell.[12] In the Colonial Neighborhood the architects gave up greater planning and "limited themselves to mapping the tortuous itineraries of pain, the one that gained the solidity of bones" (Borges Coelho 2011: 29). In this regard, it is worth underlining what the Warwick Research Collective notes when analyzing Vladislavic's work concerning the city and its social imaginary: "the 'dynamism and multiplicity of the city space' (. . .) desperately compromised by the limits set by the dead weight of the past: (. . .) (Graham 2008: 335)." (WReC 2015: 146)[13]

João Cabrita, in his reading of *Cidade dos Espelhos,* focuses on some central themes to reflect on the political and contextual meanings recorded by Borges Coelho's text: the figure of the general – whose body "is the result of the grotesque canon of a mad doctor" (Borges Coelho 2011: 24) – described by him as: "a man who crosses the various cloaks of reality, perhaps the gelatin of time because in the case of a hero – as it is always a general in this Africa that, instead of looking forward and projecting a future, clings to the deeds of his heroes in the independence war" (Borges Coelho 2011: 24). Cabrita also underlines the social and

ria de um arquipélago de aldeias desavindas, entretidas em ódios mútuos. O seu nome é um mistério: para uso representa a nostalgia, hoje cada em desuso, com que se lembrava algo que existiu no passado, talvez um *boulevard* idêntico ao da longínqua capital do velho império. (. . .) Seja como for melhor lhe assentaria o nome de Avenida do Escárnio pelo aspecto que hoje apresenta: esburacada e larguíssima faixa formada pela junção de três vias desde que os tais jardins desapareceram, largura sem propósito algum dada a raridade de veículos e também porque gente e bicicletas não precisam de um espaço assim para circular. Como se os habitantes dissessem que é assim que imaginam, a havê-la, a Avenida Louise original. Suposições."

12 Original quote: "Caia's grandmother paid the price of living for so many years in a Colonial neighborhood that reminds of a turtle: slow rough shell enveloping a surprisingly tender interior. But, given that time and modern life have been cutting this interior, there is only this meaningless shell left, unless for those who know the animal from other eras. That is why it is often said that memory is the hand of meaning." (Borges Coelho 2011: 49).

13 For a reading of the city figure in Vladislavic see also Graham 2007: 67–83.

human geography of the city that is drawn around Louise Avenue, establishing an interesting counterpoint with today's Maputo.[14]

Cidade dos Espelhos appears, as António Cabrita states, as a very "inconvenient novel" being a narrative openly built through a collapse of its (literary) form and language (Cabrita 2011). It is a novel where History is concentrated in its folds, and it can be captured only by those who know the rubble of cities ulcerated by their increasing peripheralization; a futuristic work, where the future is – always and hopelessly – "*posthumous*" (Cabrita 2011; my emphasis). Especially emblematic in this sense is chapter seven – "Procissão dos Pobres" (Procession of the Poor) – where access to the Upper Zone is granted to the residents of the Colonial Neighborhood so that they can use the remains – the garbage – that the suburb produces. A procession that chants inaudible praises to the *God of leftovers* – "the God of perishable things" –:

> They look at the bins arranged in the corners, gaping with routine amazement (look at the strange processions, beyond the garbage and its bittersweet smells, and you don't think it's more than a simple shredding machine). They have long since given up the path that leads them to the heavy and unchanging values. If only the procession would let loose a tune! if only they could rehearse the army's rhythmic breathing! But no. They are here only to maintain the condition of the rest of the world. Were it not for the procession and the suburb would indeed be poor: and the shopkeepers would be the suburb and the Upper Zone beyond the bridge would be populated by the degraded statues of the Colonial Neighborhood; and the sky would be no more than the Upper Zone; and above the sky would be the sky. Were it not for the procession of the poor and the world would live in this astonishing misadventure! (Borges Coelho 2011: 53; my translation)[15]

14 Boulevard Louise, Little Louise in a literal translation, is a nail stuck in the martial project of the city, a macho-city project that dispenses with any other sense of unity beyond fear, embarrassment, meek authoritarian wills. A macho-city is a city where the trail of solidarity and communication has gone astray. In this macho-city mirrors do not return any image and people live in the mutual estrangement that takes place when the threads of affection and reciprocity have been broken; without that tremulous and ulcerated memory of the feminine – boulevard Louise –, the city, it is said, "would be nothing more than an archipelago of disaffected villages, entertained in mutual hatreds." Look, Sommerchield and Xipamanine – hopefully this will all happen in the future! (Cabrita 2011).

15 Original quote: "Espreitam os caixotes dispostos nas esquinas, escancarando de rotineiro espanto (revolvam-se as estranhas procissões, para lá do lixo e dos seus cheiros acre-doces, e não se acha mais de que uma simples maquina de triturar). Há muito que desistiram da caminhada que os leva até aos valores pesados e imutáveis. Se ao menos da procissão se soltasse uma toada!, se ensaiassem o tal respirar ritmado do exército! Mas não. Estão aqui apenas para manter a condição do resto do mundo. Não fosse a procissão e o subúrbio seria de facto pobre: e os lojistas seriam o subúrbio e a Zona Alta para lá da ponte estaria povoada pelas estatuas degradadas do Bairro Colonial; e o seu não seria mais que a Zona Alta; e a acima do céu seria o céu. Não fosse a procissão dos pobres e o mundo viveria neste espantoso desacerto!"

In this way, in addition to an image that seems to echo many of the reflections that have been developed on the urban and social organization of African metropolises – from the postcolonial megalopolis to the Afropolis – in their geometries of economic, social, and racial division, it becomes evident how the socially and economically hierarchical fragmentation of the urban space – "the uneven city" (WReC 2015: 143–167) – is an indispensable condition for the preservation of a world order that is, the capitalist system – "They are here only to maintain the condition of the rest of the world" (Borges Coelho 2011: 53). In this regard, the critical perspective that I intend to subscribe to here, concerning the unequal city recorded by Borges Coelho in *Cidade dos Espelhos*, is tributary to the reflection proposed by the Warwick Research Collective on the convergence between "Afropolitan modernity" and conditions determined by contemporary global capitalism; therefore, it should be noted that:

> Against the suggestion, frequently encountered today, that this casualised and migratory mode of human existence signals a unique African form of modernity, we insist that it instead signals the unfolding of a singular global modernity, however uneven over time and space, and that the lived experiences of the inhabitants of African cities find precise counterparts in the lived experiences of the inhabitants not only of cities elsewhere in the 'global south' but also in certain spaces within cities across the 'global north'. (WReC 2015: 150–151)

The concern to situate *Cidade dos Espelhos* in a perspective not necessarily readable in terms of geographically predefined local particularisms becomes evident in the elusive dimension that characterizes its spatial coordinates – "a distant capital of an old empire" (Borges Coelho 2011: 17) – and particularly in the aesthetic and conceptual theme of the *mirror* as a paradigmatic element for the definition and the specificity of this city. Therefore, a city whose substance is defined, above all, by its surface and where the: "expressions at the level of its surface provide unmediated access to the fundamental substances of the state of things" (Kracauer 1995 qtd. in WReC 2015: 154) pointing to and demanding "a reading of the political unconscious of the surfaces and façades of urban forms" (WReC 2015: 154). However, beyond the urban space and its surfaces, it is also the human landscape, its forms of coexistence, and relationship that is configured as a central aesthetic and conceptual element of the novel.

In the essay *Necropolitics* (2003, 2019), Achille Mbembe calls attention to a daily exposure to violence identified by him as the direct result of the neoliberal capitalism of the twenty-first century, based on profit as a paradigm of existence. In this sense, the construction of walls,[16] the militarization of borders; deadly po-

16 The figure and theme of the wall constitutes a central and paradigmatic element of Borges Coelho's literary project, an aesthetic element that points to the concepts of *durability* and *recur-*

licing; the growth of sexism, racism, and xenophobia are structural symptoms of what the Cameroonian theorist will define in another text as "the end of the humanism era" (Mbembe 2016). In other words: the rational humanistic notion of the containment of the unconscious, fundamental for the existence of sociability, and more or less active in the liberal democracies of the twenty-first century, would no longer make sense. In short, neoliberal capitalism and its multitude of destroyed subjects are inevitably doomed to continuous exposure to violence and existential threat. In *Cidade dos Espelhos*, the mirrors keep nothing, neither history nor memory, but reflect everything: the great metonymic image of a devastated world that can only be redeemed by the emergence of "new herbs" – or "new characters with other political practices" – capable of producing a possible future. And it is perhaps in the image of the mirror that Borges Coelho allegorizes the inexorable condition of catastrophe that plagues the *city of mirrors*:

> Mirrors encompass all things, even other mirrors, mirrors are filled with space inside them, twice as much as infinite space, albeit inverted. Mirrors do not get tired or full because they keep nothing, they are always available to receive more. And a mirror is broken and all that space, already infinite in itself, is multiplied as many times as the fragments that result from that mirror, which are nothing more than new full mirrors that keep nothing. So much space, and yet there is no room within it for what has happened, success or frustrations. (. . .)
>
> That is why the city of mirrors will remain suspended, lost in this game of reflections, while from the failures of the walls and the sidewalks, from the friezes of the buildings and the punished eyes of the statues, new herbs do not burst and from these do not arise the seeds of future characters marching slowly in procession to the temple of columns, with their colors and their rumours (Borges Coelho 2011: 118; my translation).[17]

In his article "If Colonialism Was the Apocalypse, What Comes Next?" Mark Bould (2015) reviews several science fiction literary and audiovisual productions from the African continent, addressing them as "post-colonial documents" to be understood

sion (Stoler 2016) as central categories to dismantle an idea of *continuity* and *rupture* between colonial and post-independence times.

17 Original quote: "Nos espelhos cabem todas as coisas, até mesmo outros espelhos, os espelhos estão cheios de espaço dentro deles, o dobro do espaço infinito, embora invertido. Os espelhos não se cansam nem se enchem porque nada guardam, estão sempre disponíveis para receber mais. E quebra-se um espelho e todo aquele espaço, de si já infinito, se multiplica tantas vezes quantos os fragmentos que desse espelho resultarem, que não são mais que novos espelhos cheios que não guardam nada. Tanto espaço, e, todavia, não cabe dentro dele aquilo que ocorreu, sucesso ou frustrações. Por isso a cidade dos espelhos ficará em suspenso, perdida neste jogo de reflexos, enquanto das falhas das paredes e dos passeios, dos frisos dos edifícios e dos castigados olhos das estátuas, não rebentem novas ervas e destas não surgirem as sementes de futuros personagens marchando lentamente em procissão até ao templo das colunas, com as suas cores e os seus rumores."

from the critical perspective of the science and speculative fictions genre.[18] According to the author, although some of the stories show themes and experiences that appeal more openly and explicitly to the genre of science fiction – time travel, virtual reality, technology –, narratives about the future are key elements to face social and political crises within the "postcolony" (Mbembe 2000). This hypothesis offers the possibility of thinking critically about literary forms that record the conditions of human and non-human existence in "postcolonial environment" (Mukherjee, 2010). In addition, the reading developed by Bould shows in an exemplary way how, contrary to mainstream expectations from the public and critics, science/speculative fiction in African literatures constitutes a genre of long and consolidated tradition, however, scarcely valued in Western editorial and academic networks (Bould 2015).[19] At the same time, the emergence of anthologies and collections in various African contexts – especially in English – since the early 2000s has made evident the strength of a literary genre whose complexities and meanings offer new starting points for a critical reflection on the aesthetics of memory and the future[20] that guide contemporary African literary writing.[21]

Regarding the consolidated tradition of this literary genre in African literatures produced in the continent, it is worth emphasizing that science or speculative fiction can be systematized around two axes of representation: on the one hand, the narratives that unfold around themes related to the so-called world of spirits – which globally has been defined as supernatural or ghost stories –, a genre that is central to the emergence of the modern African novel;[22] and, on the

18 For a critical definition of science fiction and speculative fiction, see Bould et al. 2009. For a critical discussion of theme related with future in literary studies see Paul 2019.

19 In this regard, see Maurits 2020.

20 In this regard, see Brugioni and Gallo 2019.

21 On this, as Peter J. Maurits states: "Afrofuturism is arguably the most widespread form of contemporary futurism. Like its Italian counterpart, it is cross-disciplinary and includes inter alia painting (Jean-Michel Basquiat), literature (Samuel Delany), visual arts (D. Denenge Akpem), and music (Parliament-Funkadelic's *Mothership Connection*, Afrika Bambaataa's *Zulu Nation*). However, although the forms are related, it is unlikely that a direct line can be drawn from Italian futurism to Afrofuturism. The latter draws mainly on the imagery of the space age, which was unavailable to Marinetti, and on science fiction [. . .] and is thought to have started with W.E.B. Du Bois' 1908 *The Princes Steel* [. . .] Ralph Ellison's 1952 *Invisible Man* [. . .] or the jazz musician Sun Ra [. . .]. Most importantly, Afrofuturism does not aim to erase the past, but instead "pull[s] from the past to build [the] future" (Womack 2013, p. 160), for example, by "recovering the histories of counter-futures" (Eshun 2003, p. 301). The instrumentalization of the past is manifest in Afrofuturist works (e.g. Pierre Bennu's techno-ancestral masks) as well as in the politics that inform them. (Maurits 2019: 134).

22 In this regard, think of authors such as Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Mia Couto, among many others.

other hand, literary works that develop around problems of a speculative nature, pointing to themes and aesthetics that fit into the imaginary of the future (Bould et al. 2009). Concerning science fiction, its developments in the literary field evidently point to the category of *magical realism* (Jameson 2002; Quayson 1997; 2004; WReC 2015), giving the possibility to reflect on African literary texts and their tensions with the literary genre of realism (Gikandi 2011; Lazarus 2011; Maurits 2020) and pointing to what can be defined as "peripheral (ir)realism" (WReC 2015). However, regarding speculative fiction, a problem of some relevance seems to arise around the potentialities and impasses that this genre mobilizes in the specific case of literatures that are – spatially and conceptually – situated in the area of African literary studies. In this context, as Bould states:

> Most of the stories [. . .] articulates the relationship between the globalized culture of the First World – with its expectations of fiction, genre, and style – and diverse African localities – with their virtually untouched cultural specificities. Most of these narratives smell like History and seem to be put in a post-apocalyptic perspective. But these stories are not post-apocalyptic in the same way as cozy British catastrophes, Hollywood blockbusters, or die-hard zombies taught us to think about what comes after the end of it all. They are post-colonial documents and, like the Namibian sites of *Mad Max: Fury Road*, we are reminded that this is also, and always has been, the post-apocalypse. They are what comes next. (Bould 2015)

In short, it is a substantial revision that marks the aesthetics of the genre of science/speculative fiction in African texts and contexts, pointing to narrative forms whose specificity contributes to a redefinition of this literary genre in a postcolonial critical and epistemological perspective. Such productions, by moving away from stereotypical aesthetics about the future and the end of the world and distancing themselves from the reproduction of dichotomies between colonial and postcolonial, past and future, archaic and contemporary and should be understood as literary registrations of (semi-)peripheral environment and experiences. As noted by WREC: "In the work of writers from peripheral and semi-peripheral formations, the registration of combined and uneven development through deployment of an aesthetics of anamorphosis is characteristically pronounced and intensified. (. . .) in order to convey the palimpsestic, combinatory and contradictory 'order' of peripheral experience." (WReC 2015: 72)

Thus, *Cidade dos Espelhos. Novela Futurista* seems to correspond to some of the features that characterize speculative fiction, being a literary work that "displaces 'ideal-type' realism backwards and forwards" (WReC 2015: 71), demystifying moments and figures produced within "the script of liberation" (Borges Coelho 2015). Against any aesthetic or conceptual exploitation of the exotic, the text registers a past openly marked by "the ordered colonial violence" and which unfolds into a "violent postcolonial order" (Borges Coelho, 2003a) depicting "a his-

torical condition of intense and continuous exploitation of most humans and non-humans in territories that were once colonies by cartels composed of autochthonous people and European and North American elites" (Mukherjee 2010: 5–6). A city that functions as a broken mirror that "gives us back the image multiplied in many possibilities (a mirror that multiplies the dark sky and the fear)" (Borges Coelho 2011: 30).[23] In conclusion, *Cidade dos Espelhos* registers a discomforting – yet plausible – answer to a question that inevitably haunts the human and environmental condition in the periphery of capitalism: since colonialism was the apocalypse, what can still come next?[24]

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23 It is worth pointing out here a counterpoint, in my opinion quite productive and still unpublished, between the registration of the city in the work of João Paulo Borges Coelho and that of Ivan Vladislavic. This is an interpretative possibility of evident relevance, especially in view of the multiple relations and tensions between Maputo and Johannesburg, cities that are central themes in the work of the two authors.

24 The author thanks Espaço da Escrita – Pró-Reitoria de Pesquisa – UNICAMP – for the language services provided.

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Peter J. Maurits

Fuel Scavengers: Climate Colonialism in the South African Science Fiction of Alex Latimer's *Space Race*, Henrietta Rose-Innes' *Poison*, and Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*

Abstract: Despite science fiction's rootedness in colonialism, a solid connection between the sf genre and postcolonial studies, one that pivots on the subversion of colonial tropes, has been forged over the last two decades. This chapter argues, however, that the sf-postcolonial connection needs further critical attention now scholars have shown the climate crisis and colonialism to be intertwined to such a degree that it necessitates a conceptual shift from climate change to climate colonialism. Particularly, it suggests that a focus on tropes may be insufficient to demonstrate how climate colonialism operates discursively and it instead advocates a Saidian analytical sensitivity to the way in which colonialism is a codified presence in fiction. To this end, the chapter analyzes three South African sf works – Alex Latimer's novel *The Space Race* (2013), Henrietta Rose-Innes' short story "Poison" (2009), and Neill Blomkamp's film *District 9* (2009) – which through this Saidian sensitivity emerge as *fuel-scavenger narratives* in which colonialism and the climate crises overlap in a concern about fuel shortages.

Keywords: Science fiction, Africa, postcolonial, District 9, climate colonialism

1 Introduction

This chapter analyzes climate colonialism in three contemporary South African postcolonial works of science fiction. Despite science fiction's rootedness in colonialism, a solid connection between the science fiction (sf) genre and postcolonial studies has been forged over the last two decades. While this sf-postcolonial link has been beneficial, a brief look at its history reveals that it nevertheless deserves further critical attention, particularly in the context of the climate crisis. In the introduction to her foundational collection of postcolonial sf short stories *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy*, Nalo Hopkinson confessed to struggling with the "unholy marriage between race consciousness and science fiction sensibility" (2004: 7). She clarified that a dominant sf trope has been "that of going to foreign countries and colonizing the natives" (7). In a postcolonial con-

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text, she explained, this is "not a thrilling adventure story; it's non-fiction, and we are on the wrong side of the strange-looking ship that appears out of nowhere" (7). Hopkinson's remark gains further clarity in the context of the history of the sf genre. In his seminal monograph on colonialism and sf, John Rieder wrote that the period of "fervid imperialist expansion in the late nineteenth century is also the crucial period for the emergence of the genre" (2008: 2–3), and that both colonialism and sf are inflected by "[e]volutionary theory and anthropology" (7). This is manifest in many of sf's tropes and motifs, which he argued can be understood as ideological tools to grasp "the social consequences of colonialism" (20), which include the "rationalization of unevenly distributed colonial wealth [. . .], the racist ideologies that enabled colonialist exploitation, and [. . .] triumphal fantasies of appropriating land, power, sex, and treasure in tales of exploration and adventure" (20). Hopkinson, further clarifying her struggles with the sf genre, thus unsurprisingly described the sensation that to be a "person of colour writing science fiction is to be under suspicion of having internalized one's colonization" (2004: 7). And yet, she insisted, sf *can* be used in a postcolonial context. Authors like herself can and do take colonial tropes and, "from the experience of the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it, with irony, with anger, with humour, and also, with love and respect for the genre of science fiction that makes it possible to think about new ways of doing things" (9).

Almost two decades later, postcolonial sf no longer rings as a contradiction. A so-called 'rise' or 'boom' of the genre can be observed in formerly colonized regions from China (Liu 2016) to India (Banerjee 2020), and from Africa (Maurits 2018) to First Nations (Spiers 2021). Moreover, sf from the postcolony has been theorized extensively from a postcolonial perspective (Kerslake 2007; Hoagland and Sarwal 2010; Ellis, Raja, and Nandi 2011; Smith 2012), and in line with Hopkinson's remarks, what could be called a postcolonial sf methodology has crystalized and has become widespread. Thus, Jessica Langer, in her milestone publication on postcolonial sf, argued that "[r]ather than shying away from [. . .] colonial tropes [. . .], postcolonial science fiction hybridizes them, parodies them and/or mimics them against the grain in a play of Bhabhaian masquerade" (2011: 4). Aimee Bahng, less explicit about her postcolonial roots, similarly claimed that "the genre's emergent cultural producers usurp conventional science fiction tropes of abduction, alienation, and teleportation and recast them against the backdrop of slavery, histories of forced migration, and deportation" (2018: 7). Despite the knowledge this theoretical scope created about the postcolonial use of genre fiction, it also created a paradox. As Gerry Canavan has highlighted, it shifted sf from being "empire's propaganda arm, its R&D lab, prototyping the weapons of the future and accommodating us to tomorrow's genocides today," to a genre whose "utopian impulses align it with anti-colonialism's on-the-ground

fight for global justice" (2012: 495). In Amy J. Ransom's terms, postcolonial sf became a genre of "political struggle" (2006: 291). Even though, as Canavan pointed out, some postcolonial sf performs this political work, there is the risk that through the postcolonial theory scope, the "meaning and political import is always safely known to us in advance without our ever actually having to bother to read any of it" (2012: 496). Consequently, he argued, "postcolonial" becomes a "slogan, [and] risks losing its ability to challenge and inspire us – it risks becoming dead theory" (496).

Paradoxically, Canavan's comments come in a moment in which colonialism reasserts itself. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has consistently shown that the climate crisis has irreversible and grave consequences. In the wake of these reports, scholars have foregrounded the coloniality of that crisis. Empire, it was shown, was and is "predicated on coal" and other fossil fuels (Barak 2020: 3); formerly colonized countries are more vulnerable to climate change (Táíwò 2022: 120); current climate mitigation like forestation "enable[es] contemporary carbon colonialism and [. . .] neoliberal land grab" (Lyons and Westoby 2014: 13–14); and planned climate change mitigation "perpetuate[s] colonial inequalities" (Hickel and Slameršak 2022: e628). Doreen Martinez even insisted that climate change and colonialism are intertwined to such a degree that it is "necessary" to conceptually shift "from climate change to climate colonialism" (2014: 79). In light of these studies, it appears important to stress that the postcolonial scope needs not to be limited to the methodology described above. Edward Said observed that "empire functions [. . .] as a codified [. . .], marginally visible, presence in fiction" (1994 [1993]: 63), and he argued that it is therefore the task of the scholar to "draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented" (66). The benefit of the postcolonial scope for him, in other words, lies not only or even primarily in the subversion of colonial tropes or in the analysis of counter-narratives, but in its sensitivity to the way in which colonialism was registered in the margins of works of the creative imagination. This chapter argues that even though Said focused on canonical works of the European nineteenth century, this analytical sensitivity to colonialism has not lost its importance, even in the context of postcolonial sf, particularly relative to climate colonialism. To do so, this chapter analyzes three South African sf works, respectively Alex Latimer's novel *The Space Race* (2013), Henrietta Rose-Innes' short story "Poison" (2009), and Neill Blomkamp's film *District 9* (2009). All of these works are part of what Mark Bould calls "climate catastrophe culture" (2021: v), even if they do not say "climate change aloud" (4). All of them use postcolonialism-associated narrative techniques such as hybridity and the perverting of colonial sf tropes. All three works have been understood from a postcolonial perspective as part of the post-Apartheid and (White) South African post-apocalyptic narrative traditions, which include works like Karel

Schoeman's *Na die Geliefde Land* (1972), Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981), Eben Venter's *Horrelpoot* (2006), Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City* (2010), and so on. As this chapter illustrates, while such a categorization is both understandable and justifiable, it may also displace a focus on the way in which climate colonialism operates in these works. In particular, this chapter will argue that *The Space Race*, "Poison" and *District* 9 are fuel scavenger narratives, in which colonialism and the climate crises overlap in different ways in concern about fuel shortages.

2 Space Race

Alex Latimer's novel *The Space Race* relies both on the apparent postcolonial perversion of colonial tropes and on the justification of colonialization through the climate crisis. In the story, a character called Lindsey goes missing, and when her sister Charlotte attempts to find her, she stumbles upon a nuclear space research and development station in a place called Vastrap. The facility has been developed by White-supremacist Afrikaners aiming to revive and improve the pre-Apartheid status of the Afrikaners on a different planet. They want the project to remain a secret and decide to kill all people involved as soon as the rocket is ready to launch, including the scientists and engineers. When Charlotte finds her sister near the site, two engineers called Eugene and Tertius, who manage to escape their executioners, join them. And when a mercenary attempts to hunt them down and kill them, they eventually get into the rocket and fly to its intended destination: a moon called "Die Tweede Aarde" [Earth Two] (Latimer 2013: Ch. 50), which is "supposedly habitable" (Ch. 1), which they will be "colonizing" (Ch. 1), and on which they will no longer be "fugitives" (Ch. 32).

Like all works discussed in this chapter, *The Space Race* is part of the larger post-2008 boom of postcolonial and specifically of African sf (ASF). Its concern with the Afrikaner legacy is reflective of South African post-Apartheid literature and its particular use of the space exploration trope apparently places it squarely in the realm of postcolonial sf. As with that sub-genre in general, ASF writers typically modify the space exploration trope. For example, Deji Bryce Olukotun' *Nigerians in Space* (2014) and Tade Thomson's *The Rosewater Insurrection* (2018) disable the trope by raising the expectation of space travel without ever satisfying it – no one goes to space. Nnedi Okorafor's "Africanfuturist 419" (2016) and Olukotun' *After the Flare* (2017) sabotage the exploration trope by sending astronauts into space who are unable to return to Earth. Frances Bodomo's 2014 counterhistorical *Afronauts*, finally, focuses on the historical attempt of Edward Mukuka Nkoloso's 1960s Zambian space program, which aimed to beat the USA in the race

to put the first human on the moon. Where that historical attempt failed, *Afronauts* succeeds. *Race* also adopts a counter historical approach and centers on the real South African nuclear test site Vastrap, located in the Kalahari Desert. In the historical account, no launches or even detonations ever took place because a Soviet intelligence satellite discovered the site shortly after its completion, in the summer of 1977. This resulted in pressure on South Africa from the USA to abandon its nuclear (weapons) project, which it eventually did in 1993 (von Baeckmann et al. 1995).

In *Race*, however, people continue the nuclear program in secret, and when the four protagonists manage to launch the nuclear-powered spaceship developed at Vastrap, it is presented both as a defeat of US-American space science and as a victory of the South Africans. As the narrator explains, the Americans have known about the moon "for over three decades [but] kept [it] secret, hoping they'd have the technology to reach it first" (Latimer 2013: Ch. 1). They failed to do so because conventional propulsion provides insufficient speed to reach the moon, but South African scientists outsmarted and outpaced the Americans by developing "nuclear pulse propulsion" (henceforth NPP, Ch. 23), a real technology invented by the Polish-American scientist Stanislaw Ulam in 1947. Ulam's NPP was discarded for risk of radiation pollution and made illegal in the 1963 *Partial Test Ban Treaty*, and the "Americans" in *Race* are equally reluctant to use NPP and "risk [a] nuclear fallout" (Latimer 2013: Ch. 16) that "could affect every corner of the globe" (Ch. 39). Yet the South African scientists, scavenging for the right fuel to reach the moon, "making do with what we could find" (Ch. 39), develop a way to shield the rocket's fuel reserves so that if "anything malfunctions in the blast, it won't vaporise uranium reserves" causing global catastrophe (Ch. 39). Ridiculing the Americans, Eugene adds, "[i]t was just so simple" (Ch. 39). The launch thus successfully puts South Africans on Die Tweede Aarde first, which the protagonists celebrate as a colonial reversal: "it's not 1652 anymore. We're well into the space age" (Ch. 13).[1] In Jennifer de Klerk's terms, "South Africa has won the space race [with] a proudly South African spaceship powered by the nuclear capacity we weren't supposed to have" (De Klerk 2013).[2]

If *Race* appropriates the colonial space exploration trope through a postcolonial reversal, it nevertheless fails to establish a critique of colonialism for two

1 This chapter was written while funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. I am thankful for their support. 1652 is one possible starting point of South Africa's colonization, as the Dutch colonist Jan van Riebeeck landed two ships at what is now Cape Town and fortified that position.

2 I am grateful to Jennifer de Klerk for sending me the text of this article, which is not accessible online.

reasons: its treatment of Apartheid and positioning vis-à-vis colonialism. First, Nedine Moonsamy (2016) has argued that *Race* fails to distance itself from the Afrikaner legacy. She explained that the novel's main approach to Afrikanerdom is ridicule and provides the following example: Character Eugene recounts that the "Afrikaner Space Programme" resulted from the Apartheid-era realization that "the suppression of a majority wasn't sustainable, and out of a desire for a real homeland came this crazy idea to colonise space. [It] would be a monument to their vision and national pride" (Latimer 2013: Ch. 16). When Apartheid ended, various right wing organizations continued working on the program with the same aim of creating a pure volk. The protagonists think of themselves as disturbing these plans. And when Tertius wonders, "we go and colonise a moon? Are we the right people for that? [. . .] I've got eczema and ibs and hardly any social skills" (Ch. 32), Charlotte interjects that they are "exactly the right people" and that in their imperfection they will be "pissing all over the Afrikaner Space Programme" (Ch. 32). In Moonsamy's interpretation, the novel thus seemingly ridicules the Afrikaner fantasy of a "pure or perfect Afrikaner race" by making the reader "bear witness to the pleasurable bastardisation of [that] heinous eugenic fantasy" (2016: 83). However, she contextualizes, the narrative strategy of ridicule is ineffective because in post-Apartheid South Africa, a society which has "rendered lament for the object unavowable," ridicule has become the central way to celebrate Afrikanerdom and express nostalgia for it (89). Citing Russ Truscott, she adds that "[The] technique of self-parody preserves, as a spectacle, precisely what it negates" (89). She continues to criticize the novel and adds that, often, there is not even an "ironic distance nor humorous ripostes to temper the nostalgia" for Afrikanerdom at all (81). She concludes that *Race* oscillates between the unsuccessful desire to be "critical of Afrikaner nostalgia and moments of whimsical indulgence of the *volk*" (82).

Race not only facilitates Afrikaner nostalgia but also embraces and justifies colonial practice. Initially, *Race* justifies colonization through climate apocalypticism. The narrator observes that the "overwhelming majority [of the public] fell in love with the idea [of] humankind colonizing space [because] after years of being told about carbon emissions and global warming and floods and earthquakes and diseases, people were glad to cling on to this one hope for [. . .] humankind's continued existence" (Ch. 1). This justification disappears over the course of the novel, and when the narrator says towards the end of *Race* that news of the successful arrival on Die Tweede Aarde caused the global "realignment of our collective hope" (Ch. 49), this no longer relates to climate change. In fact, the success of the South Africans leads to launches from other countries and because, as the narrator mentions, Vastrap became "radioactive" after the launch (Ch. 1), the reader can extrapolate that more radioactive sites will be created in the future. Rather than prob-

lematizing this from the perspective of the previously expressed concern with the climate crisis, the narrator comments that Vastrap is only "mildly radioactive" (Ch. 49), even though he had earlier specified that both protective gear and "iodine tablets" are a necessity on the base (Ch. 1). Remarkably, then, with climate change no longer being a factor, it is colonization itself that becomes the ground for the "realignment of our collective hope" (Ch. 49). Subsequently, the novel justifies this colonization only implicitly. It suggests that the moon has "oceans [. . .] an atmosphere [. . .] vegetation [and] animals" (Ch. 39), and thus implies that there are no beings to which the moon belongs. This argument is known as the "legal fiction of *terra nullius*," in which "a tract of territory" that is seen as "practically unoccupied" is considered anyone's for the taking, and which was used *inter alia* by the British colonial State to justify the colonization of Australia (Sen 2017: 971).[3] Rather than providing a postcolonial critique of colonization then, *The Space Race* reinvigorates Afrikaner pioneering, revives the colonial trope of space colonialism, and rehearses the classical colonialist justification for it, albeit desultorily dressed in the inventiveness of South African fuel scavenging.

3 Poison

Henrietta Rose-Innes's short story "Poison" (2009) registers climate colonialism in a more complex way than *Race*, by romanticizing colonized land and erasing carbon pollution through a colonial gaze, while creating distance to that position by means of an unsympathetic protagonist. In the story, an explosion in Cape Town causes a toxic cloud of chemicals of apocalyptic proportions to spread over the city and outwards over the countryside. Many flee immediately but protagonist Lynn ignores it at first and leaves "terribly late, despite all the warnings" (182). She finally escapes the pollution and, after some time, her "old Toyota ran dry on the highway," after which she walks to the nearest "petrol station" (181). There, she finds several others stranded, some of whom are "petrol scavengers," who are gathering fuel from abandoned vehicles so they can fill the tank of one car and flee the cloud and its poisonous fallout together (183). Lynn, again struck by apathy, refuses the ride she is offered and chooses to stay at the petrol station. By the end of the story, she hopes that someone will come to her rescue but for the time being, she turns away from the pollution: "She wanted to face clear skies, sweet-smelling veld." (191)

3 International space law explicitly does not consider space *terra nullius*, but *res communis.*

"Poison" can also be understood as part of the post-Apartheid and (White) South African post-apocalyptic narrative tradition. Christopher Thurman highlighted that the different people passing through the petrol station are initially split "into tribes" (Rose-Innes 2009: 182), based on race and class. He proposed that the story thus "entrench[es] racial difference" and that it suggests that in "the near-future [. . .] things will be as they have been" (Thurman 2015: 63). However, over the course of the story, "signs of inter-racial cooperation" emerge in the "pressure-cooker microcosm of South African society" that the petrol station represents for him (63). Aghogho Akpome echoed this point and argued that, even though Lynn's refusal to join other travelers may "reflect the difficulties of post-apartheid national reconciliation" (2020: 8), the fuel scavenging shows "the ways in which social exigencies in the post-apartheid era make social realignments both imperative and possible" (7). Worth highlighting is that, in these analyses, the importance of the explosion is reduced; even Rose-Innes herself commented that "Poison" is not about "the explosion [but about] a breakdown of traditional social divisions and social groupings" characteristic of the "post-apartheid transition" (quoted in Akpome 6). A narratological perspective would confirm the triviality of the explosion, which constitutes what Roland Barthes called a "cardinal function" (1975: 248) and derives narrative importance from facilitating the events that follow rather than from, in this case, its "explosionness."

While, by extension, the importance of pollution caused by the explosion has been reduced in these readings, I want to propose that "Poison" primarily registers anxiety about fossil-fuel pollution, and that this pollution has a definitive colonial dimension. Starting with pollution's importance, it may be observed that aestheticized descriptions of pollution permeate the story, establishing a sense of its ubiquity. Lynn says that it concerns a chemical with a coppery smell, but descriptions of the contamination are strongly suggestive of petroleum: the "oily cloud [was] so black, so large, [with] dirty rain bleeding from its near edge [and with] oil-clogged wings, [it] created its own weather system [and left] black grime [and a] tarry black precipitate" on skin and roads (Rose-Innes 2009: 181–191). Petroleum is also omnipresent in its refined form of petrol: petrol it is the most frequently used adjective/noun (19 times) after "car" (23 times) in a story about a petrol shortage set in a petrol station that the protagonist cannot leave due to that shortage. Petroleum and the pollution that it causes thus shape the backdrop, aesthetics, plot, and stage of the story. And if Patricia Yaeger suggested that "fuel sources tend to 'hover in the backgrounds of texts, if they speak at all'" (2011: 310), in "Poison," to continue her metaphor, they scream from the rooftops.

The colonial dimension of this pollution could be argued for in several ways. We could recall WReC's claim that the "unevenness at the level of [post-Apartheid] economics is coded into the fabric" of South African cities and understand the oily

cloud metaphorically as colonization (2015: 148). We could highlight Max Liboiron's observation that "pollution is colonialism" (2021: 42); that "[u]nevenness is a defining feature of pollution" and "its goal" (78). An obvious way in which this unevenness of climate colonialism is registered in "Poison" is through the unequal distribution of consequences. On the one hand, only those who have the means to do so can escape ("lack of petrol was trapping people in town," Rose-Innes 2009: 182) and the rides on scavenged petrol are not free ("We made a price – for you too, if you want," 184). On the other hand, English-speaking, White, South African, middle-class protagonist Lynn can choose to stay or go. There is, however, a more hidden instance of climate colonialism that I want to draw attention to, found in the figure of the veld [field]. The veld may be understood as a palimpsest of coloniality. They are Southern African grasslands from which indigenous people were mostly expelled through migration and colonization going south from central Africa and north from what is now Cape Town. During apartheid, they were largely divided among So, 'Whites' and 'non-Whites', who, based on several criteria (e.g. suitability to farm) got allocated good and bad parts respectively. This division largely endures post-Apartheid. It has been demonstrated on numerous occasions that the veld is subject to the climate crisis in the form of *inter alia* severe land degradation (cf. Mani 2021). Historicizing this process, M. E. Meadows and M. T. Hoffman specified that, even though the "causes of [. . .] land degradation are varied," it is a "uniquely South African land tenure pattern rooted in its colonial and apartheid past" (2002: 429). In settler-colonialist and later apartheid literature, the veld was romanticized as a pastoral utopia despite the harsh living conditions (e.g. Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, 1883) and it remains an important figure in South African literature even today (e.g. Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*, 2017). The veld figures three times in "Poison," where it has an apparent ambiguous status. Lynn first contemplates that in

> all her years of driving at speed along highways, Cape Town, Joburg, Durban, she'd never once stopped [. . .], walked into the veld. Why would she? The highways were tracks through an indecipherable terrain of dun and grey, a blurred world [. . .]. To leave the car would be to disintegrate, to merge with that shifting world. How far could she walk, anyway, before weakness made her stumble? Before the air thickened into some alien gel, impossible to wade through, to breathe? (Rose-Innes 2009: 185)

Lynn perceives the veld and those associated with it in contrast to the city, through the familiar urban/rural and nature/culture binaries. Through this scope, city/culture is knowable while rural/nature is incomprehensible, alien even, and increasingly threatening. This animosity is enhanced in the second veld scene, in which "an old two-wire fence with wooden posts [is] holding back the veld" (187). The last time the veld is mentioned, however, the narrator says that Lynn "wanted to face clear skies, sweet-smelling veld" (191), thus returning to the romanticized image. In

this last instance, the veld in Lynn's gaze becomes simply a piece of nature, bereft of fully human inhabitants, indifferent to its surroundings, including to earlier and current climate colonialism – a place outside of history. This ambiguous status of the veld in "Poison" – threatening, romanticized – can be unpacked in Said's terms as being of "inimitable foreignness" to Lynn while she can also "mobilize" an "enunciative capacity" about it (1979 [1978]: 222–223). To explicate, Lynn's is a colonial gaze, one that "by seeing names and dominates" (Coetzee 1988: 174). Through it, the veld is emptied of its content and history, allowing her to project her fears and desires on it, to perceive it as pristine even when "dirty rain [is] bleeding" So, (Rose-Innes 185) "black grime" (182) onto it. In "Poison," then, climate colonialism past and present are screened out through Lynn's colonial gaze. However, Lynn's apathy hinders sympathizing with, and creates narrative distance from her, and by extension, from that gaze.

4 District 9

District 9 (2009) is a complex work that consciously formulates a critique of colonialism, transforms it into a colonial redemption narrative, while registering climate colonialism in its margins. In the film, a White clerk named Wikus van der Merwe heads the forced eviction of 1.8 million aliens from their home – the refugee-camp-cum-ghetto called District 9 – and their relocation to a camp 200 kilometers from the city of Johannesburg. The xenophobic motives for the operation are overt. The aliens, derogatorily called prawns, are portrayed as hated by the South African population, and Wikus explains that the aliens must go because "this is our land" (10:38–10:42), and that moving them means that "the people of Johannesburg and of South Africa are going to live happily and safely, knowing that that prawn is very far away" (6:50–6:55). The process is brutally violent and includes Wikus' explicit enjoyment in committing infanticide. However, it is interrupted for Wikus when he encounters a canister filled with alien liquid that he clumsily sprays over himself. The liquid causes him to transform into one of the aliens – a visibly bloody and torturous process – and leads to his immediate rejection from the category of human. When it turns out that he can now use the powerful alien weapons, which can only be fired by those with alien DNA, his (former) employer, the weapons manufacturer MNU, makes him an object of medical experiments. Eventually, he befriends and helps an alien by the human name of Christopher Johnson (henceforth CJ), partly in the hope that CJ can help him morph back. When CJ discovers that humans are doing medical experiments on aliens, however, he

escapes Earth to find help for his fellow beings. Wikus is left waiting in the hope that CJ will bring back a cure.

Like *Race* and "Poison," *D9* has also been understood from the perspective of post-Apartheid and (White) South African post-apocalyptic narrative traditions. Sam Okoth Opondo (2015) claimed that the film allegorizes the forced relocations of the "apartheid-era," and specifically the violent and forced removal of "non-whites [. . .] from Cape Town's District Six to the Cape Flats" (Opondo 117). Rebecca Weaver-Hightower proposed that *D9* is "not simply an allegory of apartheid [but] a vision of *post*apartheid" (2014: 251), that it explores "the struggle of a postcolonial nation trying to reimagine itself" (249). She observed that "Wikus's external hybridity causes an internal transformation as well, for his [. . .] outcast status changes his perspective, making him emphasize with 'the prawns'" (256–257). Yet using the horror technique of gore to depict the transformation, she argued, *D9* demonstrates a "lingering ambivalence about assimilation and racial blending" (249–251). Ewa Mazierska and Alfredo Suppia, finally, preferred an even later social referent, and argued that the film allegorizes the labor migration crisis involving violent xenophobic responses towards migrants from Southern Africa (2016: 121). There is reason to suggest that *D9* deliberately creates resonance with the historical events mentioned above and that this constitutes a conscious critique of the coloniality of the Apartheid and post-Apartheid era. In one interview, director Blomkamp explained that he was consciously aware of the history of District Six while making the film (Fischer 2009). In another, he indicated that the "whole film exists because of" South Africa's "segregationist history" (Itzkoff 2009), and he added that he was also "trying to comment on" how, in the post-Apartheid era, townships "were ravaged by outbursts of xenophobic violence perpetrated by indigenous South Africans upon illegal immigrants from Zimbabwe, Malawi and elsewhere" (Itzkoff 2009). That this "comment" constitutes a critique is evidenced by *D9*'s narrative devices. The eviction's extreme and visceral brutality virtually forces the viewer to condemn Wikus and the operation. The medical experiments and architecture of the camp to which the aliens will be deported have a similar effect because, as Shohini Chaudhuri observed, they appear an equally conscious effort to resonate with the extermination camps of Nazi Germany (2022: 21, 140), which have their origins in South Africa (cf. Kreienbaum 2019).

If *D9*'s historical resonances are of an intentional nature, it raises the question of what is "codified [and] marginally visible" (Said 1994 [1993]: 63). I shall suggest below that what is hidden is climate colonialism, but before doing so I want to consider the possible effectiveness of this apparently intentional colonial critique. *D9* opens with interviews that elucidate the history of the aliens' arrival and the reasons for the eviction. However, already at the seven-minute mark, the narrative forces viewers to focus on Wikus' transformation by making the inter-

viewees raise questions about him – by speaking of him in the past ("he was a wonderful son," 7:38–7:39) or by implying he will do something wrong later in the film ("There was always a hint of something not kosher with Van de Merwe," 9:57–10:02). The narrative thus centers on Wikus' transformation. And while Weaver-Hightower correctly observed that this allows for emphasizing with the aliens, it also rehabilitates Wikus, at least in part. In other terms, the centrality of Wikus' hybridization provides *D9* with aspects of the colonial redemption narrative, a versatile and not seldom problematic narrative form, which has *inter alia* been used, as Kamran Rastegar has noted, as "colonial propaganda" (2015: 41). In the case of *D9* (and leaving aside for now the ethical question if Wikus, whom earlier that day set fire to a nursery, deserves absolution), the redemption of the figure who initially embodied colonial violence, a redemption paradoxically facilitated by the postcolonial device of hybridity, marginalizes *D9*'s concerns about coloniality.

Shifting attention away from Wikus to the aliens, then, I propose that *D9* registers anxiety about climate colonialism not unlike "Poison," although more in line with Yaeger's proposal that fuel sources tend to "hover in the backgrounds of texts" (2011: 310). In the opening scenes of the film, a journalist recalls that there "were literally thousands of theories as to why the [alien space] ship seemed inoperable" after it arrived and that one prominent theory was that a "command module had detached itself from the main ship and then somehow mysteriously become lost" (4:05–4:08). An engineer investigating the case adds that "There's pieces falling off that vessel for bloody months" (4:22–4:25) onto the area that would eventually become District 9. The reason for this inoperability is answered twenty minutes into the film, when the camera shifts from the hectic scenes of Wikus' cruel eviction effort to three aliens – CJ, his earth-born son Little CJ, and a companion – on a garbage heap. The trio is looking for a liquid found only in their technology, which can be refined into a fuel that powers the lost module safely hidden under CJ's home, which in turn can power the spaceship still hovering over Johannesburg. After twenty years, Little CJ finally completes the task by finding the last necessary bit of fuel in the trash-pile. They return home, refine the liquid into fuel, and add it to the now-full fuel canister. However, Wikus then barges into their lab, takes the canister, and sends it to MNU to find out what it is and how it can be of value, thus thwarting the departure. CJ spends the rest of the film recovering the fuel and, eventually, Wikus does, too, when he finds out it can retransform him.

The alien perspective thus highlights the centrality of fuel to *D9*: the aliens stranded and remained on earth due to a lack of fuel, and from CJ's perspective *D9* is a story about mining and refining fuel, having the fuel stolen and taking it back, and finally escaping the Earth-prison, which mistreats the aliens. In the

terms chosen for this chapter, *D9* is a fuel scavenging narrative, in which a fuel shortage, maintained through dispossession, engenders oppression – what Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga calls "energy colonialism," and which is an aspect of climate colonialism, as it implies preferential access to polluting (2014: 6). That it indeed concerns energy colonialism is manifest throughout the film, in the way that it messily entangles and mixes up pollution, land grab, and the extraction of fuel, technology, and alien bodies. It is possible, for example, to understand the eviction from the District, on which alien technology fell down for "months" (4:25), and to which the evacuation will provide unlimited access, along those entangled lines. Further, the extraction of the aliens from their ship at the beginning of the film leans heavily on fossil fuel mining aesthetics: humans in protective suits, helmets, and gloves, faces covered in a black film, objects covered in black grime, people wiping a crude-oil like substance of working surfaces, handling mining tools ("uh, we're gonna need, uh, a drill down here," 2:05–2:06). That *D9* deals with energy colonialism is made explicit when Wikus realizes that CJ intends to leave Earth: Little CJ: "Fuel goes in here! [. . .] Then we fly away." Wikus: "What is he saying about the fuel? Are you little fuckers trying to start this [module] and get away, eh? Yeah, you sneaky fucking prawns, eh?" (57:44–58:07). Wikus, and by extension his (former) employer, do not want the aliens to leave Earth because their presence constitutes a resource to be exploited – in a way *D9* corresponds to what Rieder calls a tale of "appropriating land [. . .] and treasure" (2008: 20), albeit with the exploited subject as the deuteragonist. And even if, to borrow from Mark Bould, *D9* is unable to speak energy colonialism "aloud," (2021: 3), and fails to get away from or even reverse colonial tropes, the messy connections it makes between extraction, land grab, fuel, and bodies, signal the content of energy colonialism.

The cases of Latimer's *The Space Race*, Rose-Innes' "Poison," and Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* demonstrate that (the legacy of) colonialism and the climate crisis are bound together inextricably. Moreover, they show that as Said observed, empire takes on a codified present in the margins of artistic works. Thus, in *The Space Race*, a team of social rejects hijacks a spacecraft from a group of white supremacist Afrikaners who aimed to colonize a supposedly uninhabited planet, but they end up colonizing it instead, using the climate crisis to justify their actions. The protagonist of "Poison" paradoxically romanticizes colonized land and labels it alien and dangerous – a colonial gaze that screens out climate colonialism past and present, even when pollution is raining down on it before her eyes. *District 9* thematizes settler colonialism but its focus on the settler protagonist relegates the energy colonialism that is central to the film, and in which fuel shortages as a mode of domination are maintained through dispossession, to the margins of

the story. Thus, despite contemporary questions about the usefulness of the postcolonial paradigm, these works show the continued necessity of its analytical sensitivity to coloniality.

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Section 3: **Postcolonial Studies and Critical Theory**

Paulo de Medeiros

Crisis and Postimperial Remains: Belonging, Loss, Justice

Abstract: "Extreme injustice becomes a deceptive facsimile of justice, disqualification of equality," says Theodor Adorno in one of the fragments from *Minima Moralia* (1951/2005). This seemingly paradoxical statement comes in the wake of a reflection on the apparent dissolution (and invisibility) of the working class, at least in terms of fictional representations, at mid-twentieth century. Adorno's reflections are prompted by a double sense of catastrophic crisis: on the one hand the destruction of Western civilization and any ethical principles of humanity in the wake of WWII and the Holocaust; on the other, the dissolution of a world order that left a vacuum, an abyss, without any sight of what a new order might be. If the abolition (for the most part) of Europe's colonies was one of the positive outcomes in the wake of WWII, we have long left behind a simple postcolonial phase and, I would argue, have entered rather a post-imperial one, in which nostalgia for the lost "glories" of empire amidst the ruination of neo-liberal policies, abounds. The current crisis is in many ways radically different than the one experienced then, yet it also has significant similarities. If anything, crisis as experienced now assumes more of a perpetual quality, as if enacting a travesty of Kant's notion of a "perpetual peace" for the postimperial age. Drawing on Adorno, the present essay aims to address the question of crisis and postimperial remains by concentrating on the related issues of belonging, loss, and justice and focusing on Damon Galgut's *The Promise* (2021) and two films, Mati Diop's *Atlantique* (2019) and Kleber Mendonça Fillho and Juliano Dornelles' *Bacurau* (2019).

Keywords: postcolonial remains, hauntings, migration, justice, belonging, postimperial inversion

1 Crisis, what crisis?

Hannah Arendt took Kant's minor writings on political theory seriously. Yet, concerning one of the best known ones, his *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, from 1795 she thought Kant must have taken it lightly: "Kant himself called some of them a 'mere play with ideas' or a 'mere pleasure trip.'" And the ironical tone of *Perpetual Peace*, by far the most important of them, shows clearly that Kant himself did not take them too seriously (1992 [1970]: 7). As ready as I am to agree

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with Arendt on the relative lack of importance of those writings in relation to the major philosophical works, I would suggest we take *Perpetual Peace* very seriously indeed, not in spite of the ironical tone the very first few lines have, but precisely because of it. This is Kant's opening statement:

> "Perpetual Peace"
>
> We need not try to decide whether this satirical expression, (once found on a Dutch innkeeper's signboard above the picture of a churchyard) is aimed at mankind in general, or at the rulers of states in particular, unwearying in their love of war, or perhaps only at the philosophers who cherish the sweet dream of perpetual peace (106).

The expression, given its context, is satirical. Kant's observation though, if anything, is nothing but: extremely lucid, it serves as a kind of reality check for himself and for his readers. The irony does not keep Kant from outlining the "sweet dream." On the contrary, it prevents him from falling into too easy a cynicism that often hides under the guise of rationality. And it can do that for us too, as we get confronted more and more with a world which, in spite of the many advances conquered in terms of human rights, has fallen into a deep and seemingly perpetual, state of crisis. Indeed, for quite some time now it no longer even makes sense to talk about a singular crisis, as not only do crises keep succeeding each other, but are simultaneously multiple. As David Harvey bluntly puts it: "Crises are essential to the reproduction of capitalism" (2014: ix). The twentieth century might well be characterized as one of unmatched extreme violence, given the two global wars and the Great Depression, all three of them enormous crises that not only led to unforeseen devastation but also to radical changes in society and institutions the world over. The twenty-first century, on the other hand, has had much less spectacular crises. Nonetheless, even if there really is no point in such comparisons, it could be said that the scale of devastation does not seem to have been reduced and we are still at the beginning. Major crises – economic, financial, political, religious, humanitarian, not to mention the climate crisis, nor the protracted wars waged by Europe and the USA either directly or indirectly a bit all over the world and, more recently, the conflict waged by Russia in Europe itself with the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, and subsequently the further invasion in 2022 – keep succeeding each other without really getting any definitive resolution.

Even if not all, many of these crises can be said to be postimperial. Like all crises, at heart they are, as Harvey notes, essential for capitalism to re-invent itself. An important difference to the crises of the twentieth century though, is that by now they issue and circulate in a world that is postimperial no matter how much the former imperial nations whether European, the USA or Russia, might

be in denial about it. The postimperial condition of these contemporary crises manifests itself primarily in two ways: one, certain crises actually reflect the fact that some formerly imperial nations instead of seeking ways to adjust to their new reality, slide into modes of deep nostalgia, for the imagined halcyon days of their now lost grandeur. This nostalgia expresses itself in various ways, but its self-delusional nature invariably exacts a steep price, be it the economic havoc wreaked by Brexit on the United Kingdom itself, or the high number of own casualties Russia keeps registering since it invaded Ukraine. The other can be said to issue directly as a consequence of imperial and colonial interventions. The actual migration crisis already forced radical changes in the mechanisms and self-identity of most European nations and the USA. "Fortress Europe" or the infamous wall on the Mexican border are but symptoms of a deeper crisis in which the most developed parts of the world essentially abandon their duty of hospitality and thus threaten a basic understanding of what it means to be human.

It was Kant too who defined hospitality as a right, the right of every human being to be received amicably when arriving at a foreign place, to not be treated as an enemy. Such a right was never absolute, and Kant clearly delineates its limitations so that any nation has both the duty to treat any arriving foreigner with the respect due to them by virtue of them being human and preserves the right to refuse hospitality if it feels threatened by the foreigner. Kant was neither naïve nor estranged from reality. As much as he boldly set out a vision for what humanity should be like based on principles of justice, he had no doubts about how people actually behaved in reality and what colonialism entailed: "Let us look now, for the sake of comparison, at the inhospitable behaviour of the civilised nations, especially the commercial states of our continent. The injustice which they exhibit on visiting foreign lands and races – this being equivalent in their eyes to conquest – is such as to fill us with horror" (139). Injustice (*Ungerechtigkeit*), indeed, is a recurring, perhaps even a key, preoccupation of Kant in this "philosophical sketch" especially as he sees it not as an odd, random, or contingent, problem, but rather as a systemic, even defining, characteristic of the most advanced states in their treatment of others and general denial of a common humanity, or as he says, those "nations who make a great ado about their piety, and who, while they are quite ready to commit injustice, would like, in their orthodoxy, to be considered among the elect" (142). When will we finally learn to be contemporaries of Kant?

2 Haunted legacies

Damon Galgut opens his novel *The Promise* (2021), for which he received the Booker Prize, with a seemingly puzzling, and displaced epigraph. He quotes Federico Fellini: "This morning I met a woman with a golden nose. She was riding in a Cadillac with a monkey in her arms. Her driver stopped and she asked me, 'Are you Fellini?' With this metallic voice she continued, 'Why is it that in your movies, there is not even one normal person?'" Before explaining why I want to focus on this opening, I want to bring yet another seemingly displaced book opening into play, Jacques Derrida's dedication in his *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994). In this, as would soon become clear, seminal study, based on a lecture given in 1993 at the University of California Riverside, Derrida works his notion of "hauntology," drawing liberally on Marx as well as on Shakespeare among many other sources. What interests me now though – besides the importance given to haunting and mourning – is how the book is dedicated to the memory of Chris Hani, the political activist against Apartheid, leader of the South African Communist Party and Chief of Staff of the paramilitary wing of the African National Congress, who was assassinated on 10 April 1993. Derrida is careful not to simply invoke Hani's name for one of his complex linguistic plays ("*one should never speak of the assassination of a man as a figure*," xiv). Still, he does employ the proper name as if it were also a metonymy:

> One name for another, a part for the whole: the historic violence of Apartheid can always be treated as a metonymy. In its past as well as in its present. By diverse paths (condensation, displacement, expression, or representation), one can always decipher through its singularity so many other kinds of violence going on in the world. At once part, cause, effect, example, what is happening there translates what takes place here, always here, wherever one is and wherever one looks, closest to home. Infinite responsibility, therefore, no rest allowed for any form of good conscience (xiv).

What Galgut reminds us of in *The Promise* is that responsibility is infinite and that "*no rest [is] allowed for any form of good conscience*." As such, my reference to Derrida's book could be explained also along the line that what Derrida was recognizing, one year before Apartheid finally was abolished, was that its legacies would remain haunting for a long, very long time. Indeed, they still are haunting, and rightly so, in spite of all the success and failures of all the efforts to engage with the past in South Africa on a national, public level. Then, there is the further point that Derrida also calls attention to and that is the extreme violence past and present of a postcolonial society such as South Africa is never just about that society but also always implies many others on either side of the colonial-imperial

divide, and that any notion of evading or forgetting about responsibility, is but a simplistic, though harmful, form of denial.

The Promise unfolds as a succession of family funerals, starting with Rachel after a long period of illness, then her widower Manie, from a snake bite as he performed a stunt at his snake farm, then Anton, their son, who had deserted from the Army after having killed an innocent civilian, and finally Astrid, one of her two daughters, who having failed to receive absolution from her confessor, gets killed in the midst of a hijacking. The other daughter, Amor, in the end is the only direct member of the Swart family left alive, besides Anton's widow and Astrid's husband and two children. Similarly, the promise – initially made by Manie to his dying wife that he would give Salome, their black servant, the small house she lived in at the edge of their property – is deferred for some three decades. Amor, who had witnessed the initial promise her father made to her dying mother, keeps insisting with her family that the promise be fulfilled, but neither her father nor her siblings after he died, have any intention of upholding the promise. It is not difficult to see this failure to keep a simple promise made to a dying wife or mother, as yet another allegory of the nation, even though it has nothing to do with nationalism. Or rather, it does but not in the sense normally attributed to it as ideology.

The lives and actions of the various members of the Swart family all relate in one or more ways to South Africa's postcolonial condition. Their haunted legacies cannot be separated. Apartheid and other remains of colonialism linger on and there is no escaping them, even if one tries to move far away as Amor did by going to London and having nothing to do with the farm or the family until being recalled by yet another death. Likewise, Anton's desertion and his living on the fringes of society for years before accepting his inheritance and trying to carry on only to end up taking his own life. Now, I have no intention to rehash the old controversy stirred by Fredric Jameson's essay on "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986), where he advanced the notion of "national allegory." Even though I very much agree with Neil Lazarus (2011), that, all criticism of Jameson aside – and much of it had always rested on shaky ground – "if Jameson had not postulated his 'national allegory' hypothesis, we would have had to invent it" (107). In the case of *The Promise* the allegorizing, though certainly overdetermined, should neither be seen as unique nor as stemming out of South Africa's particular location, be it in geographical or conceptual, developmental terms. Its semi-peripheral condition necessarily makes for a more acute sense of the fundamental injustice on which the nation's foundation itself rests. But I would maintain that all postcolonial and postimperial societies, whether they happen to be now at the core or the periphery of the world-system (Wallerstein 2004), partake of a similar haunted legacy.

A consummate writer, Galgut, in *The Promise*, combines form and content so that one cannot extricate one from the other. The political impact of the narrative will not escape any reader, even those less familiar with the context of South African history; but its form, the sequence of funerals, as well as the shift in perspective that goes with each chapter, named for each of the deceased in turn, Ma (Rachel), Pa (Manie), Astrid, Anton, "one name for another" has a peculiar, melancholic intensity to it that slashes through any threats of nostalgia. The novel opens with Amor realizing from her aunt's message that her mother has died and her inability to believe it: "The moment the metal box speaks her name, Amor knows it's happened [. . .] But when the words are said to her aloud, she doesn't believe them" (3). The "metal box speaking her name" stands in direct relation to the novel's epigraph, where the woman with a golden nose asks Fellini, in her 'metallic voice' why there are no normal people in his films. The irony of course is inescapable, just as the question of what is and is not normal informs the whole novel. In an interview, Galgut best expressed it when he comments:

> The Promise is also an overused title. It's been used numerous times in numerous disciplines. It was the part of the book that arrived last. I had been working under a completely different title of Dark Love, which was an abstract allusion, too abstract I think, as it turned out, to Amor Swart. But I wanted to tie it in with a parallel sense that if one loves South Africa it has to be a dark kind of love (Galgut in Coovadia 2021).

Loss and betrayal are the two constant poles of the narrative. Besides going together – betrayal in itself always implies loss – each stands out in contrast to the other, thus helping better define their various forms. There is the initial, fundamental, betrayal when Manie breaks his promise to Rachel, followed by the successive betrayals when at every renewed opportunity, Astrid and Anton refuse to honor their father's promise to their mother. But there is of course the larger betrayal if one can call it that of colonialism, the imposed oppression of the people of South Africa by Europeans. Amor, as sole witness of the promise, remains steadfast in asking for it to be honored until when all of her immediate relatives have died, she can deliver it. Yet, that too turns out to be no deliverance at all, not from the haunted legacies of South Africa. Before turning to that I think something else must still be considered. The price Amor has to pay for her isolated decision to stay true to her mother's last wish is exile. Only by removing herself and moving to London can Amor have sufficient distance between her and the rest of the family, the farm, and South Africa. At the same time, she also renounces her inheritance as we learn close to the end, or rather, does not claim it. The money that is due to her after the father's death keeps being deposited into her account although she does not touch it. Instead, at the end of the narrative, Amor gifts it to Salome and her son Lukas, after she has also presented Salome with the

deed to her house, something Lukas dismisses as "nothing," in reference to the house and as a "tiny amount," even though he has no idea of how much it is (286–287).

Of all the moments in the novel, the two concluding scenes come closest, arguably, to exposing the problematics of belonging, the vagaries of justice, as well as the sheer impossibility of anyone winning at all in a broken society. In the first, we see Amor at Salome's house, handing her the deed, whilst explaining that there is also a previous claim on the property that could end up denying her the house again. In the second we have Amor on the verge of leaving for London for good, scattering Anton's ashes from the roof of their house. In between, the walk from one house to another, that lets her reflect on herself and her life in that place, from when she was struck by lightning under a dead tree, to who she is now, the only one left alive of her family. These two moments, or three if we were to count the walk in between them, are in actuality just one. In the first part, Amor is coming to terms with one reality, that of Salome and Lukas. In the second, Amor deals or tries to deal once and for all, with the reality of her own family. In the walk, she looks back at herself as a child when the distance between the two realities might have appeared to her much smaller, even if not quite inexistent, in spite of the fact that everything then looked much larger to the child she was. Amor both knows that she belongs in South Africa and that she cannot stay. The lightning that struck and almost killed her, not only left her with a visible reminder, a scar, but with another kind of memory, the loss of one toe, so that belonging and loss, belonging and barely escaping death are indelibly engraved upon her own body. In that walk between the two houses – houses that no longer belong to her as she has given Salome the deed to hers, and also abdicated any claim to her childhood home in favor of Désirée, her now widowed sister-in-law – Amor goes back to the spot where she had been fulminated. That moment, as we learn, was a "[l]ong-ago event, forever receding, but somehow also sealed inside, nearby, and reachable as the scar on her foot, or her missing small toe, which is starting to throb. Always does, when she thinks about dying" (289). And so, she must run, run away from the tree, from the past too: "Be on your way, Amor, that lightning is coming back for you. Unfinished business, best left that way" (290).

By finally giving Salome the deed to her house Amor thought she finally was fulfilling the broken promise, not only doing right by Salome but also to her deceased mother. What she did not count on, could not count on, was Lukas' reaction, his refusal to see in her 'gift' a final upholding of justice, a sort of closure of 'unfinished business.' In part, that failure of seeing on Amor's part may be due to her own privileged position, which prevents her from quite understanding the reality of black people in South Africa whether before or after Apartheid. But it

also is, and in great measure, due to how she had seen herself belonging in a way that always had included Salome and Lukas, Salome who took care of her as a child just as she took care of her mother when she was dying, who indeed had been born on the same day as her mother, just on different places. In this Amor represents all too painfully the dilemma confronting white South Africans who do feel African and who would have nothing to do with Apartheid. Lukas, however, does not hesitate in letting Amor catch a glimpse of reality from a different, his, perspective:

> It is nothing, Lukas says. Smiling again, in that cold, furious way. It's what you don't need anymore, what you don't mind throwing away. Your leftovers. That's what you are giving my mother, thirty years too late. As good as nothing.
>
> It's not like that, Amor says.
>
> It is like that. And still you don't understand, it's not yours to give. It already belongs to us. This house, but also the house where you live, and the land it's standing on. Ours! Not yours to give out as a favour when you're finished with it. Everything you have, white lady, is already mine, I don't have to ask (286).

What jolts Amor the most in this, is the way Lukas refers to her as 'white lady.' But when she reminds him of that, he makes a dismissive gesture, "throwing her name away" (286). In a sense of course Lukas is right. His assertiveness shatters any complacency one might have for the plight of colonists there or anywhere else. However, by reducing Amor to her race and gender, by denying her a name he goes beyond ascertaining his just claim for equality, for in doing so he would rewrite the past, and deny her singularity as a human being, something that Amor sets straight by invoking memory:

> I have a name. You used to know it. I told you about the house that day I met you on the koppie. Do you remember?
>
> He shrugs.
>
> I often think about that day. My mother died that morning. I saw you and I told you about the house. We were just children walking around. You knew my name then (286).

Amor realizes that even by always having stood up for justice and refusing to compromise herself by profiting from the family's material means, she cannot atone for the past. That no matter how much she belongs to that land, such a belonging will always be tainted, and her but indeed a Dark Love as already inscribed in her name, Amor Swart. Or as Galgut also puts it, "[t]he dead are gone, the dead are always with us" (290).

3 Life and death

The Promise excels at confronting readers with the bitter realization that even when individuals are ready to reject injustice and try to amend for it, it might not be enough, especially as it barely dents the system, which even in its postimperial, or neo-colonial phase, remains basically unaltered. Its conclusion is realistic inasmuch as sometimes the only possible way of dealing with the traumatic past, after all else has failed, is to accept, as Amor does, that there are no winners, only loss, however unequally distributed it might still be. But now I want to turn to two other examples, two films, which, in spite of their significant differences, both take a different approach to the crisis that threatens a community either individually or collectively. Both Mati Diop's *Atlantique* (*Atlantics* 2019) and Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles' *Bacurau* (2019) thus not only confront viewers with the problematics of survival in a postcolonial society, but also show how individuals and communities can resist the often-mortal threats posed by the system and those who still occupy positions of power based on race, class, and gender.

Both films have been very favorably received. In spite of originating from Senegal and Brazil, respectively, have enjoyed wide exposure through streaming platforms such as Netflix and MUBI. That is, even though they can be termed as products from the periphery or the semi-periphery, they still have found their way to audiences at the core of the world-system. Obviously, there are advantages and disadvantages to this. Reaching a wider audience does not mean compromising the directors' visions necessarily and, at least in the case of these two films, it is rather at the level of publicity that one senses how the films get pitched differently for different audiences. Both *Atlantique* and *Bacurau* portray active resistance to neo-colonial forces, yet core audiences get directed to either the romance component in one, or the seeming weirdness and genre-bending of the other. Yet, even in its trailer, *Atlantique* reminds viewers that 'Every love story is a ghost story,' and the supposed weirdness in *Bacurau*, with its motley crew of characters and roads where one may find an overturned truck spilling its load of coffins is more 'real' than some viewers might like to take. In other words, what may appear as 'fantasy' in these films, is much more rooted in the actual societal conditions of both films, be it the desperate need to try to reach Europe from Dakar on small, precarious, little boats, or the need to fight against the domination of both powerful and wealthy foreigners or those from more affluent regions of Brazil.

I want to suggest that *Bacurau* and *Atlantique* perform postimperial inversions. What I mean by this is rather simple. In *The Promise* we already get a bit of this as, in spite of the varied points of view deployed, it is Amor with whom readers identify most. As such the fundamental injustice at the core of society though

not abolished is challenged through her refusal to benefit from the privilege she enjoys by virtue of her birth and race. In both films though, such a challenge is much stronger. In *Atlantique*, even though the group of young men who had been deprived of their wages at the beginning of the film, die attempting to cross the ocean to Spain, in the end, they come back in the form of *Djinn* who, by possessing the lovers they had left behind, manage to avenge themselves. And in *Bacurau*, the people of the eponymous village manage to repel the attack of the foreigners who had thought they would be easy prey, using those guns that were kept in the village's museum that reflected on its violent past. In both thus, we can see a kind of justice being enacted. As fantastical as such justice may appear, it certainly can be empowering for the national or regional audiences the films primarily address, just as it can serve as a chilling warning to those in the audience whose profile might better align with the oppressors.

In their different ways both films show exquisite attention to form. In both, the cinematography is lush even if in one it is the sea separating Africa from Europe that is the focus and on the other the near desert of the Brazilian Northeast hinterlands, the *sertão*. Both of course, sea and *sertão* are simultaneous real and mystical spaces as both signify different forms of desire and both can be and often are deadly. In *Atlantique* the young men who venture across the ocean do not return from their watery grave except as *Djinn* and this is an important element of the film's postimperial reversion. Diop plays with various filmic genres, as her narrative sometimes seems to veer in the direction of romance, at other times includes a detective story element, and in the end assumes, though only partly, characteristics of the horror film. There is a strong irony in that latter, as the zombie trope has customarily been associated with imperialism, colonialism, slavery, and capitalism. As Jennifer Fay succinctly puts it: "[t]he zombie does, of course, have history in the U.S. cultural unconscious that connects it to colonial rule, unpaid slave labor, and the democratic injustices of American empire. The first feature-length zombie film, Victor Halperin's *White Zombie*, premiered in 1932 when the U.S. occupation of Haiti was in its seventeenth year" (2008: 82). Or as Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff argued: "Although they are creatures of the moment, zombies have ghostly forebears who have arisen in periods of social disruption, periods characterized by sharp shifts in control over the fabrication and circulation of value, periods that also serve to illuminate the here and now" (2002: 782–783). A significant departure from the zombie trope in *Atlantique* is that the young men who die at sea return, but not as themselves as undead, but rather in the body of the living women whom they left behind. So, when they rise at night and walk away with the vacant, blind, stare audiences have come to identify with that of zombies, they seek out the builder in charge of the massive tower the young men had been building and for which they had not received their

earned wages. They confront him and make him start digging their graves, the only real, that is, physical labor, he would ever have done. Thus, Diop puts on stage a multi-faceted postimperial inversion as she invests the women of the dispossessed and now dead workers with the agency to exact their form of justice.

Bringing about justice is also the goal of the community in *Bacurau*. The film opens with a scene at a school in which the teacher tries to show the children how to use a map and looks for where Bacurau should be and cannot find it, even when he takes recourse to satellite imaging. This is immediately followed by a shot of a truck on a dusty road approaching and passing a road sign that proclaims not only the name of the village, Bacurau, and how far to go, 17 km, but also includes the following motto: "Se for, vá na paz" (If you go, go in peace). I am focusing on this beginning because it sets the tone for the film as much as it stands in stark contrast to the hyperviolent second part, when the community is forced to actively defend itself or risk being exterminated by the foreigners who had come with the express intent of amusing themselves by obliterating a village from the map. The first thing that must be said is that those foreigners, American and European, but also the couple of southern Brazilians who help them initially before being the first "natives" to be killed, not only ignore but openly go against the basic rule of hospitality as defined by Kant, and which the sign clearly proclaims. The initial contact between the community and the invaders is made when the couple of southerners go to the local store for refreshments in order to place hidden devices to disrupt the village's access to communication satellites and thus, effectively, make it disappear from the map. Yet, they can only do that because the community welcomes them as passing guests. The other point I want to make is that from the very beginning, Mendonça Filho and Dornelles are already staging a massive postimperial inversion for not only the first thing we come to know about the village is that it has a functioning school with a black teacher, who, against possible audience expectations, is not relying on old dilapidated materials, such as a torn map but rather on state-of-the art digital technology. So, from the beginning the directors make one point crystal clear there is no room for nostalgia in their vision.

Before moving on from the question of form I still want to note that the use of digital technology is key for both films. In *Bacurau* the use of satellite imaging is not the only digital technology that is crucial. At one point we see the drone being used to spy on the community and it has, rather surprisingly, the shape of a flying saucer as imagined in countless old sci-fi films. If that was meant to terrify the villagers, it has the reverse effect as they clearly recognize it for what it is. Another effect of that UFO-shaped drone of course is to address the audience who can enjoy yet another play on generic conventions, something the film, much more even than *Atlantique*, relentlessly pursues, even if a dominant one might be

the Western, except that Bacurau very much presents a *sertanejo* version that also plays loose with gender stereotypes and, implicitly, with conventional attitudes of metropolitan, urban audiences towards rural backwaters. Technology might be less obvious in *Atlantique*, yet it is equally, if not more, important as the film heavily uses digital imaging for varied purposes, including the depiction of the ghostly tower the workers had been working on and which does not exist in reality. Katrin Pesch has analyzed this at some depth, comparing for instance the image of the tower with the digital plans for one such colossal and monumental building, so as to make clear that though imaginary, the tower of the film is still grounded in reality: "The soon-to-be inaugurated Burj Mejiza, Arabic for miracle tower, is inspired by a luxury solar-powered tower envisioned by former Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2006" (2022). Furthermore, Pesch argues that the use of digital techniques is a fundamental element of the film's politics in Diop's attempt to register the realities of migration and, I would add, thus perform a postimperial inversion:

> In Diop's case, the loss of film's indexical quality and temporal continuity is not irrelevant because of digital cinema's perceptual realism, but because she seeks to tell a story of migration that captures a 'multi-layered conception of space and time', where the past communes with the present. [. . .] The digital and its epistemological implications are thus well suited for her intervention into contemporary representation of stories of migration. The film's cinematic realism, then, 'does not mourn the so-called loss of indexicality of the photographic image' and temporal discontinuity of digital conversion but rather embraces it." (2022)

Both films also drive the message that in spite of all their material constraints, the communities they depict enjoy a strong sense of belonging. This is true for the inhabitants of Bacurau even in their whimsical ways, with the public distribution of hallucinogenics or the town hall distribution of food and medical items according to need. Yes, this is in many ways a throwback to a past of alternative communes, but it is not romanticized as much as it is used to highlight both the continuities between the past and the present into the near future where the film's action, like in *Atlantique*, takes place. And it is to reinforce the notion of resistance based on collectivity to the relentless push towards abject individualism characteristic of neo-liberal societies. In *Atlantique*, the sea is a symbol of desire, loss, and death. The young men, even when they dream of escaping their abject reality never lose the sense of belonging to their community. Speaking to *Vogue India*, Mati Diop affirmed: "I don't believe there is a migration crisis, but a moral and political crisis. As the daughter of an immigrant, migration is part of my history and identity and so I see it as a complex and existential reality rather than a subject" (Freeman 2019). Diop is of course right, as the notion of crisis applied to the problematics of migration usually tends to serve xenophobic politics

that if anything should remind us all of the fragility of our political institutions and democracies. Here the words of Paul Gilroy, in reference to the catastrophic consequences of Europe's refusal to hold up its duty to hospitality by invoking the supposed threat posed by migrants crossing the sea from Africa, are precisely to the point:

> One challenging message from the charnel houses of the twentieth century was that the struggle against fascists and their imitators did not end with the Third Reich. The political use to which the horrors of the black Mediterranean and the black Manche have been put, require us to attend to the resurgence of racist ultranationalism buoyed by an apocalyptic populism and transmitted across a new communicative ecology. This mobilisation is also a product of the psychographic power that has projected charismatic celebrity surrogates (Berlusconi, Salvini, Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro) for the torpor of democratic political culture (2021: 118).

The Promise, set in the present, spans four decades and leaves no room for doubt that the present and, indeed, the future, are marked by the past. Both films here under discussion are set in the near future but they too are indelibly marked by the past. Yet, there is no nostalgia in any of them. In *Bacurau*, if anything what prevails is the deep irony of having the firearms kept in the museum as exhibits of the region's violent past, being put into use again, to fight the American and European invaders, which, again, is a useful inversion and rejection of the myth of invading hordes from the South into the North. There is also no room for magic. Even if *Atlantique* takes recourse to the *Djinn* and plays and reverses the colonial trope of the zombie, it does not fall into irrationality but merely registers that in its context belief in such phenomena is indeed a reality. Throughout this essay, I have been driven by a thought from Theodor Adorno in one of his fragments (124) from *Minima Moralia*: "Extreme injustice becomes a deceptive facsimile of justice, disqualification of equality" (2005 [1951]: 194). This seemingly paradoxical statement comes in the wake of a reflection on the apparent dissolution (and invisibility) of the working class, at least in terms of fictional representations, at mid-twentieth century. Adorno's reflections are prompted by a double sense of catastrophic crisis: on the one hand the destruction of Western civilization and any ethical principles of humanity in the wake of WWII and the Holocaust; on the other, the dissolution of a world order that left a vacuum, an abyss, without any sight of what a new order might be. Firmly into the twenty-first century we might well feel that the abyss has only gotten deeper and darker. Yet, as the novel and two films I have here considered amply demonstrate, the first step to imagine a different future is to grasp the importance of the past.

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Caitlin Vandertop

(Dis)inheriting Stevenson: Inheritance Crisis, Postcolonial Periodization, and Literary Property in the Pacific

Abstract: This chapter considers how writers from Oceania complicate existing models of postcolonial periodization. Drawing on Joseph Slaughter's "World Literature as Property," it focuses on the theme of inheritance crisis in the Samoan writer Albert Wendt's short story collection, *Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree* (1974), identifying a series of formal disruptions to the narrative structure of inheritance in a colonial context. Equally, it shows how Wendt troubles the "inheritance" of a European literary tradition by engaging in intertextual dialogue with R. L. Stevenson – a writer dubbed Samoa's "Tusitala" or "teller of tales" and the so-called "father" of Samoan literature. By incorporating oral forms that insist on the collective rather than individualized nature of cultural production, *Flying-Fox* disturbs the sequence of literary genealogy and its underlying property model. Oceanic literature, this chapter argues, intensifies the crisis of periodization in postcolonial studies, inviting readers to focus not on patterns of literary "influence" but on "inherited" structures of property accumulation, not on the abstract "transmission" of culture but on technologies of textual enclosure.

Keywords: inheritance crisis, periodization, postcolonial studies, Pacific literature, Albert Wendt

1 Introduction

In recent decades, scholars have called into question the periodizing assumptions that have structured the "postcolonial" as a field. From early studies of textual genetics to the "Empire Writes Back" model outlined by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989), early scholarship in the discipline sought to trace the "influence" or "imposition" of European culture on writers from colonized locations.[1] In contexts marked by the cultural imbalances of colonial education systems, enduring linguistic hier-

1 It is worth noting how the debates over "influence" in Anglophone postcolonial theory have a longer history in literary criticism from Latin America, as discussed by critics such as J. L. Borges, Antonio Candido and Roberto Schwarz.

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archies, and the global inequalities of literacy, there was a tendency to identify colonial-era authors as literary "originators" and "forefathers," while casting postcolonial authors as "successors" or "progeny" – often rebellious, but nevertheless derivative in both formal and temporal senses. More recently, however, critics have called into question these genealogical hierarchies, rejecting what they see as an excessive focus on European "influence" in favor of concepts that emphasize cultural mixing or adaptation, such as "hybridization" or "Indigenization". Theo D'haen (2021), for example, argues that because European authors did not create culture *ex nihilo* so much as "translate" the world for European readerships, the term "intertextuality" is a less hierarchical alternative to "influence."

Rather than offering another conceptual alternative to influence, this chapter reflects on the crisis of postcolonial periodization by exploring how certain material practices have shaped the sequence of literary history. Specifically, it considers how processes of *textual enclosure*, including but not limited to copyright, have consolidated the genealogical hierarchies of the postcolonial. My starting point is Joseph Slaughter's claim, in "World Literature as Property," that despite cosmopolitan ambitions to translate and promote a diversity of literatures, scholars in world literary studies have largely failed to acknowledge the unequal models of copyrighted culture "that are the conditions of its own contemporary possibility" (2014: 66). Discussing postcolonial literature's enmeshment in the property model of creative production, Slaughter focuses on the "second enclosure movement" of the 1980s, during which corporations in the Global North consolidated their grip on international copyright markets. Yet he also traces a longer history of this enclosure back to the nineteenth century, when literature became legally "fixed" as the property of the individual author, citing the Berne convention of 1886 as a moment in which the novel was recognized formally according to the fundamental principle of modern copyright law. For Slaughter, the contemporary form of the world literature anthology exemplifies this logic of literature as property. Reproducing and accumulating the world's textual cultures, it does not simply acquire cultural capital, but also redistributes – and profits from – actual property rights.

Slaughter's concept of literature as property contributes to a broader materialist intervention into postcolonial studies in recent years, one that approaches the object of study – "literature" – not purely as an aesthetic or representational category but as social and economic practice. Recent studies spotlighting the activities of publishers, NGOs and global cultural organizations, such as Caroline Davis's *Creating Postcolonial Literature: African Writers and British Publishers* (2013) and Sarah Brouillette's *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary* (2019), challenge authorship from a materialist rather than poststructuralist perspective by making visible the unequal socio-economic contexts in which authorship is con-

solidated.[2] As Brouillette explains, this focus on the wider field is necessary because, from a Bourdieusian perspective, the "author" is not the sole creator of a work but, rather, an individual "authorized" to take credit for it (2015: 203–204). In this context, Slaughter's intervention reveals the specific legal mechanisms by which rights-holding authors and corporations have individualized, textualized and copyrighted the world's cultural commons.[3] Importantly, as he suggests, the implications of this challenge to authorship throw into confusion "our diffusionist and evolutionary schemes of cultural influence (and imposition)" (2014: 45). What happens to dominant periodizing models when our critical focus lies not on the individualizing figure of the literary "forefather," but on corporate practices of textual enclosure? What happens to theories of the "influence" of, say, European modernism on the African or Oceanic novel, when modernism is understood not as an aesthetic movement but as a system for converting cultural commons into individual property?

This chapter examines how the logic of literature-as-property plays out in post-independence literature from Oceania. Issues of cultural commodification have long been visible across the Pacific, as waves of ethnographic collection saw artifacts, textiles and even Pacific Islander peoples displayed in Europe in the nineteenth century, and as Indigenous sculpture was appropriated in the modernist and primitivist art of the twentieth century. Although imperial copyright existed from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, its function beyond the settler colonies was principally to protect British rather than local artists; meanwhile, complex land tenure systems and collective ownership of resources added layers of complexity in Oceanic societies.[4] What were largely oral cultures prior to missionary-led textuality made copyright difficult, as legal debates over what constituted copyright as the status of property tended, like patents, to emphasize writing as evidence of the "fixing" of a cultural work.[5] Consequently, orature, genealogies, folklore, ballads and diverse local forms of storytelling were not protected under imperial copyright. Meanwhile, even as colonial educators devalued orature, "South Seas" writers such as R. L. Stevenson – with the assistance of mis-

2 Earlier studies include Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), Sarah Brouillette's *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007) and Sandra Ponzanesi's *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry* (2014).

3 There is a difference between the earlier critiques of authorship offered by French theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault – for whom the "author-function" imposes coherence on the text – and Slaughter's materialist approach to authorship as legal fiction.

4 Outside of the settler colonies, in contexts as diverse as Singapore, Ghana and Samoa, internal copyright law remained "a virtual legal reality," as Birnhack notes (2012: 66).

5 For a detailed discussion see Sherman and Bently, *The Making of Modern Intellectual Property Law* (1999).

sionary printers and translators – incorporated Polynesian folklore into their published works. By "fixing" these forms in writing, they assumed the status of father figures in the story of Oceania's literary evolution.

This chapter considers how writers from Oceania reflect on these colonial practices of textual enclosure and their genealogical implications. Focusing on narratives of inheritance crisis, I examine a collection of short stories by the Samoan writer Albert Wendt, *Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree* (1974). Written during the period of decolonization in the 1960s and 70s, the stories in *Flying-Fox* center on the decline of local patriarchs and the disinheritance of their sons, staging formal disruptions to the structures of inheritance binding Samoan genealogy in a colonial context. Equally, they trouble the "inheritance" of a European literary tradition, engaging in intertextual dialogues with colonial writers and, specifically, with R. L. Stevenson – a writer dubbed Samoa's "Tusitala" or "teller of tales" and the so-called "father" of Samoan literature. By reframing anxieties of influence as crises of inheritance, I argue, *Flying-Fox* disturbs the sequence of literary history in ways that reveal – rather than conceal – the underlying property model. Through the stories' incorporation of Samoan orature, genealogy, folklore, song, sermonizing and local storytelling practices such as the *fāgogo* and *talanoa*, moreover, they unsettle literature's property logic, emphasizing the collective rather than individual basis of creativity and cultural production.[6] Writing from Oceania, I argue, intensifies the crisis of periodization in postcolonial studies, inviting us to focus not on patterns of literary "influence" but on "inherited" structures of property accumulation, not on the abstract "transmission" of culture but on technologies of textual enclosure.

2 Wendt, Stevenson, and the crisis of inheritance

In both his fictional and non-fictional writings, Albert Wendt reflects on the impact of colonial education systems in Oceania while simultaneously contesting the idea of this region's culture as derivative. Discussing the aesthetic appropriations of European modernism, he actively questions received cultural genealogies, asking: "When Picasso developed cubism from African art and other influences, was cubism called a hybrid or a new development?" (1999: 411). His work from the 1970s is richly intertextual, weaving together references to a variety of European writers including Camus, Joyce, Eliot and Stevenson. Despite this, the performative story-

6 *Fāgogo* in Samoan refers to a form of performative storytelling; *talanoa* in Samoan (as well as Tongan and Fijian) refers to a participatory dialogue.

telling practice of the Samoan *fāgogo*, and the village tales, moral fables and folklore passed down from Wendt's grandmother, have been identified as his primary source of aesthetic inspiration (Sharrad 2004: 59; Hayward and Long 2021: 219). Yet, as Hayward and Long note, the *fāgogo* was, for Wendt, "already fully transnational," combining Samoan folklore with translations of fairytales and Bible stories that circulated via the textual activities of early missionaries in Samoa (2021: 219). In this context, Wendt's intertextuality is viewed not as an example of postcolonial "imitation" or even a local "adaptation" of European forms, but rather as "a continual reworking of the already reworked" (219). However, the idea that all texts are simply translations of other texts is complicated by a materialist approach to the question of cultural influence. Focusing on inheritance rather than influence makes visible the legal infrastructures and textual technologies that "fix" certain cultural forms as property.

Wendt's collection of short stories, *Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree* (1974), features nine different stories, each centering on a male character whose actions or circumstances lead to his disinheritance, death, or the end of the family lineage. The first story, "Descendant of the Mountain," begins with an epidemic brought to Samoa in the "throats" of white sailors, before relaying the fate of the patriarch, Mauga, who has lost his wife, one of his daughters, and finally his eldest son – the "heir to his name" (1). Reflecting back on the influenza epidemic of 1918, which claimed the lives of one fifth of Samoa's population, the story centers on a theme of patriarchal decline, ending with an image of Mauga's head crowned by the "last rays of the setting sun" (6). Similarly, the following story, "The Cross of Soot," centers on the grief of an aging male prisoner ("He had no future," 12), while the subsequent two tales, "Captain Full – the Strongest Man Alive Who got Allthing Strong Men Got" and "Pint Size Devil on a Thoroughbred," dramatize macho rivalries that end (or begin) with the deaths of their unscrupulous male protagonists. The latter story, which is narrated as a eulogy to the "pint size devil," Pili, links his descent into Apia's criminal underworld back to the actions of his own corrupt grandfather, noting how "the sins of parents becom[e] the bitter heritage of their children" (53). This narrative of patriarchal decline is echoed in a number of the other stories: "A Resurrection", for example, announces the death of a man who has failed to kill his rival, while "Declaration of Independence" begins with a respected patriarch whose wife "blew his brains out with a shotgun" in the opening paragraph (84). Later, we learn that this man's forefathers gave away his land inheritance to *papalagi* (white) settlers ("[this was] the miserable world which had become his inheritance after his forefathers had sold all the valuable land," 92), repeating a trope from previous stories such as "The Coming of the Whiteman" in which sons are "cursed" by fathers (74).

The thematic preoccupation with paternal betrayal and squandered inheritances, found across the stories, is linked explicitly to the actions of previous generations and specifically to their legal forfeiture of inherited land. Written before Wendt's permanent move to New Zealand, *Flying-Fox* directs its anger not only toward European colonizers but also to those elite members of chiefly classes upon whom colonial traders and settlers relied; indeed, the majority of stories indict this class for their betrayal of future generations in Samoa. As scholars have shown, the narrative style in *Flying-Fox* intersects with Samoan modes of storytelling as the stories transliterate oral speech through non-standard English. Yet even as they draw on Samoan oral forms, the stories subvert their conventions by substituting heroic and moral narratives for realist, unflattering depictions of opportunistic male characters, undermining both the colonial trope of the "noble savage" – at work in the paradise myths of the "South Seas" romance – *and* local glorifications of "warrior culture" in Samoa. Just as Wendt's preoccupation with bad fathers becomes a vehicle for criticizing both colonialism and the collaboration of local patriarchs, so the stories undermine the paternalist assumptions encoded into both colonial and local storytelling conventions in the Pacific.

As a compilation of village stories about deceased Samoans and their descendants, the stories in *Flying-Fox* also engage with local storytelling practices through their recitation of island genealogies. Genealogical origin stories – of self, family or *aiga* (clan or extended family) – have long been recognized as central to the transmission of historical, religious and cosmological knowledge in Samoan literary culture, as well as to the extra-literary matters of awarding clan titles, allocating resources, adjudicating land claims and regulating structures of ownership and succession. Yet, while genealogical introductions in the Samoan story form traditionally begin with the events of birth or conception – often proceeding from child to adult and finally offspring (Charlot 1991: 131) – Wendt's stories differ at a structural level. Instead of tracing the heroic deeds of forefathers to the present, Wendt provides readers with snapshots of premature deaths, imprisonment, dispossession, and lineages that end abruptly. His adoption of eulogistic, posthumous, and obituarial narratives styles can be seen to echo but also to subvert traditional genealogical and creationist narratives: "Declaration of Independence," for example, begins by announcing the protagonist's death before moving back in time to recount the events that led to it. Significantly, these narrative disruptions to genealogical progression are linked to fathers who have disinherited their children by participating in the "sins" of the colonial era. It is the irruptive events of colonial history – from epidemics to land dispossession – that threaten the structural coherence of narrative genealogy. Wendt's unrelenting focus on paternal failure, in other words, reflects a colonial crisis in the inheritance structure binding Samoan genealogy.

This narrative crisis plays out in the longest story of the collection, the titular "Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree." Unlike most of the other stories, this short novella centers on the son rather than the father: it is narrated by Pepe, the youthful and rebellious son of a plantation owner in Samoa. While Pepe sets out to become the "second Robert Louis Stevenson, a tusitala or teller of tales," he admits at the beginning of the narrative that his project of literary emulation is a "hopeless case," because he has only a few days left to live and tell his story (Wendt 1974: 105–106). "Flying-Fox," like the other stories in the collection, burns with generational anger about the betrayal of Samoan futures by members of the older generation. Pepe's father, Tauilopepe, lives in a "big papalagi house," having become wealthy as the owner of the plantation "Leaves of the Banyan Tree." He buys a second home in the capital of Apia, a house that had previously belonged to "a palagi plantation owner from Germany" allegedly killed by *aitu* (ghosts, evil spirits) (118). Tauilopepe invests in Pepe's education, hoping to leave his plantation to this eldest son and heir; however, Pepe is expelled from school and begins roaming the Vaipe suburb of Apia, eventually setting fire to a Protestant church. As Pepe's trajectory descends from school to prison to hospital where he lies dying of tuberculosis, he becomes a living skeleton ("I carried my skeleton"), alienated not only from his father but also from his body, which he refers to as "the body" (142–143). As with the other stories in *Flying-Fox*, the theme of "failed" genealogy serves to indict a class of elite plantation owners who, in this case, literally occupy the space vacated by former colonizers. Pepe condemns his father, claiming that "From the world of Saipepe, which my father destroyed by changing it, I came" (144). Here, a genealogical claim about his origins becomes an expression of genealogical crisis: in losing the "world of Saipepe" destroyed by his father, Pepe is disinherited. As with other stories in *Flying-Fox,* this narrative of disinheritance is reinforced at the formal level. Despite his father's ambitions to continue the family line, Pepe's impending death is made apparent to the reader from the beginning. Not only is his narrative told from a hospital bed, but it is also punctuated by coughing fits throughout, with Pepe even addressing the reader directly to ask for permission to pause ("the coughing is killing me," 117). The narrative interruptions of coughing, here, as features that replicate oral transmission, undermine the genealogical structure of patrilineal succession at a formal level, providing the reader with periodic reminders that both the family line and the story itself will come to a premature end.

If "Flying-Fox" stages a crisis of inheritance that responds to a moment of generational betrayal following decolonization, it also engages critically with narratives of inheritance at a metatextual level. Pepe, before meditating on his ambition to become the "second Robert Louis Stevenson," looks out of his hospital window, remarking on how this overlooks the range where Stevenson is buried.

Stevenson is a notably paternal figure in Samoa's history. Between his arrival in Samoa in 1889 and his death in 1894, he involved himself in local politics, delivering speeches to the Samoan council of chiefs about the path to independence.[7] He also assumed the status of head of his Vailima estate, which would later house members of the German and New Zealand colonial administrations. Here, he referred to the Samoans working on his plantation as his "children," anticipating the language adopted by the German colonial Governor a few years later, who also referred to himself as the protective "father" of Samoans (Droessler 2018: 421). This paternalistic identity as both political leader and plantation owner was matched by Stevenson's position as the so-called "father" of Samoan literature, bestowed with title of "Tusitala, the teller of tales." Literary critics have continued to describe him as a father figure: Alessia Polatti (2016) for example, noting how Wendt grew up hearing stories of the great Tusitala, reads Stevenson's image as "a symbol deeply related to the sacred and the figure of the forefather."

In examining Stevenson's paternal identity, it is important to note that while he wrote stories, speeches, letters and even an unfinished plantation novel during his time in Samoa, he also collected, transcribed and borrowed from Polynesian folklore, ghost stories and local orature. His collection *Island Nights' Entertainments* (1893), for example, features village stories gleaned from his time in Samoa, Tahiti and Hawai'i, while individual works such as "The Beach of Falesá" incorporate "graveyard stories" from the forest surrounding his estate (Jolly 2004: 28). Despite the oral roots of this creative work, Stevenson was, as Sharrad notes, "*the* print-English literary model for Samoa" (2003: 73). His story "The Bottle Imp" – which combines elements of Hawaiian folklore and a German fairytale – appeared in Samoan translation in the London Missionary Society newspaper *O Le Sulu Samoa* in 1891, and was described as the "first" work of Samoan literature. If the story's content attests to its own culturally hybrid origins, its print history reveals the role of institutions such as the LMS in transforming the collective commons of world orature into literary property. Significantly, it was through institutional mediators like the LMS that Stevenson could textualize creativity from around the world, from Samoa to the Scottish Highlands. By fixing these oral forms in writing, he transferred them from collective to individual ownership, thereby affirming his own paternal status in the genealogical hierarchy.

In "Flying-Fox," Pepe initially reaffirms Stevenson's symbolic role of "forefather" – for example when expressing his desire to produce a novel as "good" as *Treasure Island* – yet he also undermines his own filial ambitions by embracing a

7 Farrell (2017) discusses Stevenson's identity as kind of clan chief, providing counsel to the chiefs of surrounding districts.

radically different style. Acknowledging the difficulties of becoming the next Stevenson ("I have only a few days to write this novel about the self . . . . I cannot keep the maggots waiting," 106), he decides instead to experiment with English, proclaiming that his story will be fundamentally different: "Here we go English-style, Vaipe-style. My style." (106). Not only does he acknowledge a situation of inequality when referring to his own lack of resources, but he also declares independence from Stevenson at a stylistic level, embracing the episodic, informal and oral styles of Samoan storytelling. Significantly, by combining this oral performance with a recognition of the inequalities of colonial textuality, he brings attention to the collective rather than individual basis of creativity and undermines Stevenson's genealogical position as the "father" of Samoan literature. "Flying-Fox," in other words, does not simply *disclaim* a European literary inheritance, but rather *denaturalizes* it.

3 The shape of literary genealogy: Trees vs. roots

The fraught relationship between Stevenson and Wendt – viewed, in this chapter, through the prism of inheritance crisis – is illustrative of a wider problem concerning the nature of literary influence in postcolonial contexts. What it shows, specifically, is how concepts of literary "forefathers" necessarily overlook the property model of creative production, divorcing processes of cultural transmission from those institutions with the power and resources to "fix" the structure of literary succession by turning creative commons into property. While postcolonial fiction can reflect on these cultural property imbalances, as Slaughter suggests in "World Literature as Property," it can also reveal points of messiness that undo notions of European-derived "origins." Usefully, Slaughter draws attention to the "messy, and largely informal, networks of worldly literary relations and production that cannot be so neatly enclosed" (2014: 53). He invites readers to look closely at the informal processes of cultural exchange beneath the surface:

> When we follow the circulation of language and ideas to the points where they get fixed in recognizable (or, more accurately, recognized) property forms – when original ownership claims are made for them – we get a somewhat different view of a world literary system, one in which the gristly roots of ideas and forms of expression seem to ignore or violate most conventional property lines (53).

The image of "roots" here captures the messy and entangled nature of culture when thinking outside literary property regimes. Slaughter contrasts this with other botanical metaphors, including those of the tree and the plant, which have been used to model linear, hierarchized concepts of cultural genealogy. Impor-

tantly, he notes how botanical names designate not the name of a plant, but the name of the person who committed it to (European) writing:

> [T]he formal botanical name of the plant identifies the first person to have put into print (or authored) its current Linnaean taxonomy, which means, generally, the first European to have identified the genus to which the plant belongs and thereby earned (according to the center's rules of the game) the right to name the species, making it fit for the classification system and for inclusion in surveys of world plants. (63)

Slaughter links the rules of colonial taxonomy, which ascribe names to those Europeans who formally "discovered" or claimed botanical property, to the problem of literary influence. Specifically, he considers the way that evolutionary models of cultural influence such as the "tree" – a model used by comparative philologists to visualize the outcropping of languages and literary traditions – naturalize the erasure of the roots. Slaughter posits the modern novel form, in particular, as an act of *cutting off* the tree from the roots. Evolutionary models such as the tree, which are used by Franco Moretti (2000) to visualize the rise of the novel, can be envisaged as such "only if we cut [them] off at the ground (or property line, where original proprietary claims are successfully made) and ignore what lies buried underneath" (64).[8] As with patenting, the novel fixes a common, pre-existing culture; for this reason, a literary genealogy based on the novel must necessarily obscure the roots – that is, those messy, informal or pre-written cultural exchanges that precede the fixing of knowledge as property.

It is precisely this moment of "fixing" – or the severing of the tree from the roots – that is dramatized in Wendt. Through the motif of the tree and its relation to orature, Wendt's writing alludes to the severing activity of textual commodification. Indeed, *Flying-Fox* can be seen to thematize this process of "cutting off" through its representation of both the banyan tree of Pepe's father's plantation and the titular "freedom tree." The banyan – as a tree whose aerial roots are exposed above ground – is an important image both in Samoan mythology and in Wendt's writing (see Najita 2006; 2010). Notably, Wendt incorporated "Flying-Fox" into the first novel that he began working on, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (1979).[9]

8 Moretti visualizes the novel as "a wave that runs into the branches of local traditions, and is always significantly transformed by them" (2000: 67). Taking issue with Moretti's evolutionary account, Slaughter argues that "the core (like literary anthologies) is the core not because it is the *source* of things, but because it is a *collection* of things" (2014: 52). Moretti, however, does in fact note in "More Conjectures" that "innovations may arise in the semi-periphery, but then be captured and diffused by the core of the core," as the metropolitan culture industry "discovers a foreign form, introduces a few improvements, and then retails it as its own" (2003: 78).

9 *Leaves* spans four generations in Samoa, centering on the period of New Zealand colonial rule from 1914–1962, with reference to the earlier German administration.

In this novel, the "Flying-Fox" episode comprises the second "book" and is framed by the first and third books, which focalize the perspective of Pepe's missionary-educated father, Tauilopepe. Here, the reader is given the backstory to the name of the family plantation, "Leaves of the Banyan Tree." While engaged in a violent act of plantation clearance, during which the spirits of ancestors are purged from the forest, Pepe's father attempts to fell a large banyan tree, but this proves impossible due to its immense size. Persuasively, Susan Najita (2010) has read the banyan as a symbol of a Samoan oral tradition that Pepe's father is ultimately unable to suppress. If the "leaves" of the banyan tree refer not only to the leaves of the physical tree, but also to the leaves of the book itself, the name can be viewed as a metatextual commentary on the novel's own literary genealogy, whose roots reach back to the shared commons of Oceanic orature.

After the "Flying-Fox" episode, however, a hurricane damages the banyan tree, leaving its future uncertain. After this, an interloper – the illegitimate son and/or fraudulent claimant to the family fortune, Galupo – severs the family line through forgery, disinheriting the patriarch's only remaining grandson. This agent of disinheritance is a highly intertextual figure, a missionary-educated bibliophile whose language is peppered with references to Dostoevsky, Borges, Camus, and a host of other European writers. Just as Galupo's final actions constitute a violation of the family tree, his many citations of European literature attempt to reframe the novel's textual genealogy by insisting on the primacy of European modernism. The novel, ending as it does with the severing of the family tree by a character who takes European modernism as his starting point, anticipates the very process Slaughter describes. The representative of European textuality, in a self-serving attempt to secure his own inheritance, manages to sever the family tree and the cultural genealogy it represents.

Wendt also offers a different model of creative genealogy through his vision of the "freedom tree." The titles of both the story and episode refer to the flying-fox, a tree-dwelling fruit bat found commonly in Samoa and other parts of Oceania. Recurring in Samoan and Polynesian mythology, the creature symbolizes the tension between life and death- although Wendt has claimed that its association with death holds no Gothic connotations for him, instead evoking the powers of perspective ("They happen to see the world upside down," qtd in Sharrad 2003: 75). In both the story and episode, "flying-fox" is the nickname given to Pepe's best friend, the dwarf Tagata, who is associated with the Samoan trickster figure due to his ability to see things differently. Although Tagata's body is found hanging from a mango tree, evoking a bleak vision of the "freedom tree" as nihilistic escape, he asks for his body to be transported to the muddy banks of the Vaipe, where, after decomposing into maggots and manure, he plans to give the community diarrhea. Just as Pepe echoes Samoan creation stories by envisaging his return to maggots, Tagata

uses the tree to reject his genealogical destiny in favor of an alternative model of death and rebirth, planning to return to the collective substance that produced him. Both he and Pepe, as the only two young characters to engage actively with Samoan mythology, view their creativity as a force that channels the voices of ancestral spirits. If the "freedom tree" allows for a different perspective for both characters – suggesting an idea of springing from and returning to a collective culture – it facilitates "freedom" not simply from oppressive fathers but from the very structure of the literary "forefather." Read metatextually, the "freedom tree" replaces a vision of creativity centered around the individual with one aligned with Oceanic thought, in which, as Miranda Forsyth notes, "[c]reativity was and still is often regarded as being passed down from spirits or ancestors, and not as originating in an individual" (2015: 367). This model, like Wendt's own writing, mirrors the banyan tree itself, whose aerial roots are on display rather than buried beneath ground, making visible the cultural commons upon which individual creativity is predicated.

4 Conclusion: Genres of property

By emphasizing the oral roots of collective culture, Wendt's fiction does not simply disclaim but rather disinherits its own literary "forefathers." In other words, it does not so much disown a European literary inheritance as generate a crisis in the very periodizing structure that separates (and hierarchizes) forefathers and inheritors in the first place, drawing attention to the colonial textual and legal mechanisms through which these categories are established. Yet, if Wendt's incorporation of orature subverts the privatizing textual logic of cultural property regimes, it is nevertheless worth acknowledging the extent to which his own published works clearly adhere to the international laws of copyright and IP. While we could see this as a (postcolonial) continuation of the business of cultural accumulation, scholars in Indigenous studies have viewed copyright instead as a potentially affirmative force that prevents the appropriation of culture and ensures Indigenous cultural survival.[10] Historically, however, the use of copyright, patents and IP law has differed widely according to the capacity of individual states to enforce them. As Forsyth demonstrates (2015), intellectual property regimes have their limits in small island states and "developing" economies: in countries such as Samoa, the success

10 For different views on the subject, see for example Vandana Shiva, "Biodiversity, Intellectual Property Rights, and Globalization," and Graham and McJohn, "Indigenous Peoples and Intellectual Property."

of local copyright claims are inhibited by inequalities in state legal infrastructure, financing, technical capacity, human resources, knowledge of patents, and the dependency of local populations on non-copyrighted goods – factors which make IP potentially restrictive not simply in the case of culture but, more crucially, in the contexts of healthcare, medicine, agriculture, and genetic materials. From an IP-critical perspective, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* and *Flying-Fox* accrue royalties as well as profits for the New Zealand-based publisher Longman Paul, inserting Samoan culture back into the textual property model.[11]

Despite these real complexities, however, *Flying-Fox* can be seen, at least symbolically, to work against the privatizing logic of the novel as a genre. For Slaughter, the absorption and accumulation of culture as property is something to which the novel is best suited: "[a]s a technology that converts traditional knowledge to intellectual property," he argues, "the novel is an exceptionally hungry genre that has a taste especially for cultural property; it may be the greediest of literary genres, picking up everything in its way (including other genres) and calling it all novelistic" (2014: 23). The problem of cultural accumulation here is not specifically related to the novel's conversion of orature into text, given that the spoken and the written are deeply entwined in any case, as reading aloud or transcribing suggest. What emerges as a key issue, instead, is the novel's individualization of what should be understood as a collective conversation. Through the genre's focus on the individual and its identity as the product of an individual author – an identity that emerges at a specific juncture in European textual and legal history – the novel obscures its own cultural origins in the collective labor of storytellers, knowledge producers and the wider society from which it emerges.

By contrast, the short forms adopted in *Flying-Fox* gesture to their own collective origins. Notably, *Flying-Fox* is dedicated to Wendt's grandmother, whose *fāgogo* storytelling evokes those messy and informal influences that pre-date the fixing of culture as writing. If the dedication exposes the roots beneath the tree, the Oceanic short story form does something similar. Not only do the stories in *Flying-Fox* attempt to translate vernacular oral traditions, but the collection itself echoes the episodic format of the *fāgogo* by weaving together fragments of village tales, genealogies, folklore, ballads, and clan history. Through these forms, they tell the stories of an entire community in a way that makes room for a polyphony of voices – voices which, in revealing their own basis in a collective culture, subvert the individualizing property logic of the novel as a genre. It is through this challenge to colonial textuality, then, that Oceanic literature generates a crisis in

11 This is somewhat complicated by the fact that individual stories in *Flying-Fox* were first published by small presses, including the New Zealand-based literary magazines *Landfall* and *Argot*.

the sequential models of literary history which have shaped the postcolonial as a field, showing how these necessarily overlook the property relations that are its condition of possibility.

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Gianmaria Colpani & Adriano José Habed

Critique without Guarantees: Thinking with Stuart Hall in a Time of Crises

Abstract: The past twenty years have witnessed an accelerating cycle of crises. While this historical moment calls for the deployment of our sharpest critical weapons – first and foremost, to reconstruct the organic and contingent connections that may or may not link each crisis to the next – critique is undergoing its own crisis, most clearly manifested in the debate on "postcritique." In this chapter, we address this problematic by thinking with Stuart Hall. We begin by discussing a number of discontents voiced by proponents of postcritique, including the reduction of critique to a set of theoretical and ideological automatisms and its potential convergences with the structure and content of conspiracy theories. We respond to these discontents by turning to Hall's work, especially the collaborative volume *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978). We read Hall as a quintessential critical thinker of crisis while also emphasizing his insistence on practicing a critique radically open to its objects and conscious of its potential pitfalls: a critique "without guarantees" which already addressed some of the problems highlighted today by proponents of postcritique yet without calling for an abandonment of critical practices. Based on this reading, the chapter ends with a discussion of two critical responses to the Coronavirus crisis, by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and African American journalist Steven Thrasher. In this context, we argue in favor of a critique without guarantees that must remain open to the specific nature of its object and clearly distinguish itself from conspiracies.

Keywords: critique, postcritique, crisis, Stuart Hall, Coronavirus

1 Introduction

The past twenty years have witnessed an accelerating cycle of crises, from the 9/11 terrorist attack on the Twin Towers and the subsequent "war on terror," to the 2008 financial crash, the 2011 wave of revolutionary movements across the Arab world and their contradictory aftermaths, including the Syrian civil war and the so-called "refugee crisis" in Europe, up to the global Coronavirus crisis, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the current Israeli war on Gaza. While these crises, among many others, call for the deployment of our sharpest critical weapons –

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first and foremost, to reconstruct the organic and contingent connections that may or may not link one crisis to the next – critique itself is undergoing its own crisis. In trying to grasp the relation between "the critique of crisis" and "the crisis of critique," Ghassan Hage (2015) argues that critique seems to have lost its capacity to activate change in the face of today's crises, and that such capacity must be recovered. Hage's diagnosis may be right, but it opens other questions. What is the change that critique promises to activate? What is exactly the relation between the experience of crisis, the practice of critique, and the horizon of social and political change? And how can critique be rescued from its crisis, if crisis is precisely the object that critique is supposed to unravel? In this chapter, we propose to tackle these questions by thinking with Stuart Hall.

Our discussion begins by showing how the crisis of critique has been registered and announced – at times even enthusiastically – within critical fields of study. We address Eve K. Sedgwick's (2003) discontent with critique's tendency to rely on automatisms and routines and Bruno Latour's (2004) reading of critique as akin to conspiracy theory, converging in the more recent debate on what Rita Felski (2015) has termed "postcritique." One would not expect Stuart Hall – a key figure in cultural and postcolonial studies and a critical public intellectual *par excellence* – to figure prominently in these discussions. However, David Scott (2017) has offered a "postcritical" reading of Hall that grasps something essential of Hall's critique: a distinct openness and "attunement" to its objects. From this vantage point, we proceed to unpack Hall's critical practice through a reading of Hall et al.'s *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978). We argue that at work in this analysis of mid-1970s British society – a context marked by economic recession, the crisis of social democracy, postcolonial migration and racism, and the rise of neoliberal authoritarianism – is a paradigmatic critique of crisis yet one "without guarantees," that is, a critical practice radically open to its object and conscious of the potential pitfalls of critique. Building on this discussion, we conclude by returning to the present and we critically address two readings of the contemporary Coronavirus crisis, by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and African American journalist Steven W. Thrasher.

2 The crisis of critique

For the past two decades, the opinion has been uttered from many quarters that critique has run its course. Possibly the first and main participant in this debate was Bruno Latour, who famously claimed, in the context of science and technology studies, that "critique has run out of steam." Latour (2004) has been enor-

mously influential in criticizing critique and advocating for a "*stubbornly realist attitude*" (231). Around the same time, queer literary scholar Eve K. Sedgwick (2003) argued along similar lines that those who follow in the footsteps of the "masters of suspicion" – Marx, Nietzsche, Freud – assume "a paranoid critical stance [that] has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant" (126). More recently, Rita Felski has collected these discontents and advocated for the need to rethink or even move past critique, especially in the field of literary and cultural studies. For Felski (2015: 19), all those frameworks that "eventually yield ground to postcolonial studies and queer theory, to New Historicism and cultural materialism" share a number of problems:

> a spirit of sceptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on [their] precarious position vis-à-vis overbearing and oppressive social forces, the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is not critical must therefore be uncritical. (Felski 2015: 2)

Against the protocols of critique, Felski (2020) puts forward "postcritical" modes of interpreting cultural objects that do not rely on "concepts such as ideology, discourse, and representation" (21) and are attentive to "the many ways we can become attached" (27). Felski's project of postcritique encapsulates not only earlier and ongoing discontents with the practice of critique, but also alternatives to it that have emerged in the study of culture and society, such as Sedgwick's (2003) own reparative reading and Latour's (2005) Actor-Network-Theory (ANT).

In the current discourse on the crisis of critique, a dissatisfaction with critique's negative or even destructive force is upfront. But often overlooked are the political preoccupations that underpin such postcritical discourse in the first place. In this respect, it is remarkable that two "inaugural" texts of postcritique – Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2003) and Latour's "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" (2004) – open with a tale about conspiracies. Latour's piece is largely a *mea culpa* about his own career devoted to critically dissecting the activity of scientists and arguing for the social construction of scientific facts. In a post-9/11 era dominated by the distrust toward facts across the political spectrum (from climate change deniers to those trying to locate a US conspiracy behind the 9/11 terrorist attack on the Twin Towers), Latour wonders to what extent the critique that he and his colleagues have long practiced can be truly distinguished from the epistemological structure of conspiracy theories:

> Should I reassure myself by simply saying that bad guys can use any weapon at hand, naturalized facts when it suits them and social construction when it suits them? [. . .] Or should we rather bring the sword of criticism to criticism itself and do a bit of soul-searching here: what were we really after when we were so intent on showing the social construction of scientific facts? (Latour 2004: 227)

Latour's rushed conclusion is that academic critique has a lot to share with conspiracy theories and that in the face of such a troubling convergence, we should thoroughly rethink the very idea of "facts" and its place in our intellectual practice.

Perhaps more cautiously, Sedgwick begins her piece by recalling the words of her friend and activist Cindy Patton about the origins of HIV and the rumours around it in the late 1980s. According to Patton,

> even suppose we were sure of every element of a conspiracy: that the lives of Africans and African Americans are worthless in the eyes of the United States; that gay men and drug users are held cheap where they aren't actively hated; that the military deliberately researches ways to kill noncombatants whom it sees as enemies; that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes [. . .] – what would we know then that we don't already know? (Sedgwick 2003: 123)

Sedgwick mumbles over this last question because it suggests, in her view, that a critique and a politics aimed at unmasking conspiracy plots is not the necessary or only task for the engaged intellectual. Following Patton, her suggestion is for critics to take a different path than the one aimed at determining whether a piece of knowledge is true or not. Thus, while Felski's project of postcritique does not explicitly address the problem of conspiracy theories, this preoccupation is foundational to the debate on the crisis of critique. Even authors who defend and reaffirm the value of critique, such as Didier Fassin (2017) and Lorenzo Bernini (2020), suggest that one contribution of postcritique (or the "critique of critique") is its problematization of the drift toward conspiracy.

Another concern underpinning the current crisis of critique is that, in the eyes of its critics, critique has often become automatic gesture, academic jargon, and void routine. In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour (2005) carries out his most sustained polemic against the "master narratives" p. 189 (social constructivism, critical sociology, poststructuralism, etc.) and "all-terrain entities" p. 137 (society, norms, capitalism, etc.) that pervade critical approaches to knowledge. For Latour, such narratives and entities – let us call them *abstractions* – hinder rather than promote the production of knowledge. Similarly, Sedgwick advocates for the dismantling of "routinizing critical projects" (Sedgwick and Frank 1995: 496) as one of the necessary steps for overcoming paranoid modes of reading. Felski herself denounces the ossification of critical practices that have by now turned, she argues, into quasi-dogmatic protocols. According to Felski (2015), while at an earlier moment "the explosion of literary theories and critical methods was irresistible" (18), today their "spirit of ceaseless scepticism and incessant interrogation" is over and "we are left nursing a Sunday morning hangover and wondering what fragments, if any, can be retrieved from the ruins" (15). Felski questions the

scope of critique by exploring what else it can do apart from rehearsing exhausted tropes and analytical generalizations.

Felski's latest work *Hooked* (2020) focuses on those approaches to literature and culture that escape, in her view, the protocols of critique. Somewhat surprisingly, she identifies one such approach in Stuart Hall's work (148–149) – to be more precise, in Hall's "voice" as discussed by David Scott in *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity* (2017). According to Scott, Hall exemplifies an intellectual disposition that he terms "listening self" and that differs from the "critical self" in that it remains radically "attuned" to unpredictable shifts in culture, society, and politics which might reorient what one thinks one already knows.[1] Scott develops this reading based on Hall's insistence on thinking conjuncturally, his complex (indeed, critical) relation with Marxism, and his engagement with the emerging politics of race, gender, and sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s.[2] As Scott (2017: 54) puts it, in Hall's work we find "more an engaged *disposition* toward the concrete than an abstract set of formal propositions ready-to-hand."

Felski (2020: 148) reminds us that "Scott is less interested in Hall's views than in his way of having views." Yet, as Bruce Robbins (2019) points out in a sharp review of postcritique, a focus on Hall's "way of having views" divorced from its content can be reductive and distorting. Scott's postcritical reading is, for Robbins, a "project of depoliticizing Hall," for it obscures the complex politics informing Hall's work and, in so doing, it gives in to the neoliberal demand to void criticism of its transformative and emancipatory potential. Robbins is right in highlighting the risks and limits of postcritique. Critique has been configured at least since Kant as an oppositional gesture aimed at contesting what a religious or political authority holds to be true (see Foucault 1984). In the face of the present crisis of critique, proponents of postcritique seem unable to fully address the question of what relations between intellectual work and political practice might emerge from a revision of the practice of critique.[3]

At the same time, Robbins is perhaps too quick in dismissing the concerns raised by postcritique in general, and Felski's and Scott's postcritical reading of

1 In *Hooked*, Felski (2020: 41–78) discusses "attunement" at length as one of those forms of attachment, together with "identification" and "interpretation," to which a postcritical mode of reading should pay attention.

2 For a discussion of the relations among these elements in Hall's work of the 1970s and 1980s, see also Colpani (2022).

3 For a discussion of the politics of postcritique, especially in connection to what Roderick Ferguson (2012: 191) calls "minority and minoritized knowledges," such as gender and postcolonial studies, see Habed (2020, 2021).

Hall in particular. Scott's portrait of Hall as a "listening self" grasps something essential of Hall's intellectual and political disposition, which can help us navigate the present conjuncture between the crisis of critique and the need for critique in a time of crises. In the next section, we return to Hall et al.'s early work *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978) to show this peculiar disposition at work in the analysis of a specific crisis. Our reading suggests that the practice of critique deployed in *Policing the Crisis* anticipates and already works through some of the concerns raised today by postcritique.

3 Reading *Policing the Crisis*

In *Policing the Crisis* (1978), Hall et al. analyze a moral panic about mugging which spread across Britain in the mid-1970s. The term "mugging," borrowed from the context of the United States and associated with black male youth, began circulating in the British press in 1972 allegedly to describe a new type of street crime. Hence came a media campaign about "black crime," an escalation of conflict between the police and black communities, and exceptional sentences handed down to muggers by the courts. *Policing the Crisis* interprets this moral panic as the high point of accumulation of multiple social contradictions that could no longer be managed within the frame of the post-war social democratic consensus. According to Hall et al., the fixation on "mugging" at that time signaled, indeed, a profound *crisis* of that consensus.

Policing the Crisis is about crisis and transition in more than one sense. First and foremost, it identifies a crisis of British social democracy and anticipates the imminent transition toward Thatcherism. The notion of "authoritarian populism," which Hall would fully elaborate in the following decade to describe key features of Thatcherism as a political and ideological project, appears here for the first time (Hall et al. 1978: 305). Simultaneously, race is conceptualized as a "relatively autonomous" social relation. This means that neither can race be reduced to other social relations, such as class, nor can be understood apart from them. This anticipates Hall's later work on race and class in postcolonial social formations (Hall 1980) and his analyses of black diasporic popular culture (Hall 1992, 1996). Finally, *Policing the Crisis* marks a turning point in Hall's complex relation with Marxism. For him, the crisis of British social democracy and the emergence of Thatcherism coincided with a crisis of Marxist theory, which he began to address

from this moment onward through a sustained engagement with and reworking of Gramsci's theory of hegemony (e.g., Hall 1986, 1988a, 1988b).[4]

These elements come together in Hall et al.'s interpretation of the mugging panic as a symptom of the crisis of one hegemonic formation – the post-war social democratic settlement – and the attempt to establish a new one. The guiding principle of this interpretation is the notion of the "relative autonomy," not just of race, but of all social elements and all levels of the social formation: the economic, the political, the ideological. Thus, even as *Policing the Crisis* reads the panic about mugging as a complex response to a crisis of hegemony, it emphatically avoids reducing it to a *direct effect* of that crisis:

> The reaction to mugging has its own "inner history," within the juridical and ideological spheres: crime control, the police and courts, public opinion and the media. If it relates to the "crisis in hegemony," it can only be *via* the shifting balance and internal relations between different state apparatuses in relation to the management of crisis. (Hall et al. 1978: 305)

This approach is best illustrated by the discussion of the role played by the police in the production of the moral panic. According to Hall et al., the police – like the media – contributed to amplify popular anxiety and to associate mugging with black male youth. However, this argument is grounded not on the assumption that the police, as an apparatus of the state, simply works as an agent of the dominant ideology, but on an analysis of its internal dynamics and history. Throughout the 1960s, the British police became increasingly specialized, which resulted in the formation of special squads dealing with specific crimes (Hall et al. 1978: 46). From this process, the London Transport Police Special Squad emerged, which was quickly mobilized against mugging in 1972 and helped produce a discourse of emergency that would *later* enter the media and translate into a wave of popular anxiety (39–40). The specialization of the police further contributed to the mugging panic, if more indirectly, by weakening the links between the police and the community (46). This erosion of police-community relations was especially relevant to the moral panic because of the ideological location of mugging within *specific*, black urban communities.

4 As Colin Sparks (1996) critically notes, *Policing the Crisis* was meant to synthesize the past five years of theoretical work at the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Yet, while these were the years that witnessed an appropriation of Althusser's structural Marxism in cultural studies, Althusser's theory plays only a marginal role in *Policing the Crisis*, for "the real centre of attention is on developing aspects of Gramsci's work on the winning of consent" (88).

Thus, the relatively autonomous role played in the moral panic by a transformed practice of policing was further inflected and amplified by the racialization of mugging. But racialization itself has its inner history. Hall et al. observe that the economic crisis and the rise of unemployment in the 1970s had a special impact on the black labor force present in Britain:

> In the early 1950s, when British industry was expanding and undermanned, labour was sucked in from the surplus labour of the Caribbean and Asian subcontinent. [. . .] In periods of recession, and especially in the present phase, the numbers of immigrants have fallen [. . .] and a higher proportion of those already here are shunted into unemployment. (Hall et al. 1978: 343)

While this explanation might suggest a direct relation between the vicissitudes of British capital and the flow of postcolonial black labor in and out of British industry (and Britain itself), Hall et al. (1978: 343) insist on the mediations of that relation: "what has *regulated* the flow is, of course, legislative (i.e. political) action. And what has prepared the ground for this use of black labour as a fluid and endlessly 'variable' factor in British industry is the growth of racism (ideology)." So, Hall et al. suggest that inserting race into Marxist analysis as an element of the structures is insufficient: black labor recruited from the former colonies cannot be simply understood as a structural element of post-war industrial expansion. Political and ideological elements mediate this process without *reflecting* as much as *converging* with one another.

Importantly, this convergence is itself mediated and inflected by struggle, because race becomes "a key element in the class struggle – and thus in the *cultures* – of black labour" (Hall et al. 1978: 347). In a context of economic crisis and widespread racism, racial identification becomes an integral component of the way black communities experience their social position and potentially mobilize to transform it. In parallel, strategies of survival other than wage labor, including crime, begin to emerge in the interstitial spaces of black urban neighborhoods that Hall et al. term "*colony society*" (351), becoming part of the material conditions for the formation of a black collective consciousness. Once again, this process was neither mechanical nor spontaneous, but mediated by the reception of anticolonial and Black Power ideologies as well as black cultural formations such as Rastafarianism (356–357). All these elements articulated the material conditions of black urban life – including the recourse to different types of crime in the face of structural unemployment – and turned it into a potentially oppositional consciousness. Not surprisingly, this contributed to the deterioration of police-black relations.

The analysis thus comes full circle: the formation of a black class fraction within the British working class and the emergence of postcolonial racist ideolo-

gies in the 1960s converged to produce black urban communities peculiarly affected, in turn, by the rise of unemployment in the 1970s. This provided the material ground on which the moral panic about mugging installed itself as an ideological articulation of a more general crisis of hegemony. Different apparatuses of the state, such as the police, helped identify the black neighborhood as a key site of crisis and a threat to law and order, at the same time as the crisis in those segregated urban spaces began to take the shape of an emerging black consciousness and culture. While the analysis comes full circle, Hall et al. do not circumvent but emphasize the gaps and mediations between the different elements involved: the vicissitudes of British capital, the regulation of migration flows, the rise of postcolonial racism, the muggers who mugged, the police who policed, the media that amplified the moral panic, the courts that handed down "deterrent" sentences, and the formation of black consciousness. Each element is located within a relation of relative autonomy and articulation to the other elements.

More than forty years later, Hall et al.'s analysis resonates not only as a genealogy of the present – including the proliferation of new authoritarianisms within the folds of contemporary crises – but also as a response to the crisis of critique. *Policing the Crisis* was consciously written as a critical work that must avoid the pitfalls of critique, notably its potential convergence with the epistemological structure of conspiracy theories and the deployment of theoretical abstractions and analytical routines that obliterate rather than illuminate their object. This is especially clear in Hall et al.'s critical engagement with Marxism. Against a liberal theory of society that uncritically accepts a clear-cut separation between state and civil society and the formal separation of powers within the state as an accurate description of how power functions, a prominent Marxist line of critique has elaborated an "expressive view" according to which the different levels of the social formation reflect each other as expressions of the economic structure. For Hall et al. (1978: 207), this view tends to "exaggerate the *coincidence*, at all times, between the state, the needs of capital, the ruling class and the law" and is "driven back to a conspiracy theory." Against the expressive view, Hall et al. refuse to approach the mugging panic as "simply a ruling-class conspiracy" (182) and *critically* reconstruct the production of mugging as a *real* social fact.

In a later essay, Hall (1986) terms his own critical disposition "Marxism without guarantees." For him, the economic level of society cannot function as a theoretical guarantee for two reasons: on the one hand, because political, ideological, and cultural formations are relatively autonomous from the economic structures, they possess their "inner history"; on the other hand, because of the "necessary 'openness' of historical development to practice and struggle" (43). Hall argues that positing the economic as a guaranteed determination of historical processes has helped cultivate the illusion of predictive capacity and theoretical certainty.

Such an illusion, for him, "represents the end of the *process of theorizing*, of the development and refinement of new concepts and explanations which, alone, is the sign of a living body of thought, capable still of engaging and grasping something of the truth about new historical realities" (43). Thus, Hall et al.'s critical contribution to a Marxist theory of the state in *Policing the Crisis* could also be understood, more generally, as the elaboration of a practice of critique that already addressed some of the discontents voiced today by proponents of postcritique. What *Policing the Crisis* offers in the face of the crisis of critique is not its abandonment but, more ambitiously, a critique without guarantees. Against the incompatibility posited by Latour between critique and "facts," Hall et al. suggest that critique is *necessary* to apprehend social facts in their multiple determinations, provided that critique abandons its investment in the guarantee of stable conceptual grounds and remains open, instead, to the unpredictable social life of facts. In the next section, we further unpack this insight by turning to critical readings of the contemporary Coronavirus crisis.

4 Two readings of the Coronavirus crisis

In April 2020, at the onset of the global pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2, Arundhati Roy (2020) published an opinion piece in which she called the pandemic "a portal." With the novel Coronavirus having already infected more than one million people and claimed over 50.000 lives worldwide in the span of a few months, with most countries caught socially, economically, and infrastructurally unprepared to face the crisis, and with some governments initially unwilling to recognize the magnitude of the crisis – notably, Narendra Modi's in India, Jair Bolsonaro's in Brazil, and Donald Trump's in the United States – Roy argued that the worse we could do is trying to go back to "normality":

> Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy 2020)

Roy's call quickly went viral among those who are critical of the status quo. But what kind of portal was the pandemic for critique itself? Should critics walk through the crisis without the weight of old, "dead ideas"? Certainly, critics sometimes tend to stare into crises looking for nothing but the shiny reflection of what they think they knew all along. In this respect, as we have argued so far, the prac-

tice of critique would benefit from a change of attitude. At the same time, if critique is to play any role in understanding a new crisis, critics cannot afford to simply renounce their ideas. In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss how this tension played out in the context of the Coronavirus crisis, particularly in the interventions by two critics: Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and African American journalist Steven W. Thrasher.

On 26 February 2020, as the first government measures were being implemented in Italy in the hope of limiting the spread of SARS-CoV-2 across the country, Agamben published a short opinion piece on the website of his Italian publisher, Quodlibet, titled "The Invention of an Epidemic." This was the first in a streak of sharp interventions – among them, "Social Distancing," "Medicine as Religion," "Requiem for the Students," and "The Face and the Mask" – which are now collected, with a few additions, in the book *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics* (2021a). Agamben's reading of the crisis overflows with hyperbolic rhetoric, such as his repeated analogies between the pandemic context and Fascism. In one piece, he argues that the only difference between Nazi Germany and the Italian government's management of the pandemic is that the latter established a state of exception not through a totalitarian ideology but through "a sanitation terror and a religion of health" (8). As education moved online, he attacked teachers themselves: "The instructors who agree – as they have done *en mass* – to subject themselves to the new online dictatorship and to hold all their classes remotely are the exact equivalent of those university professors who, in 1931, pledged allegiance to the Fascist regime" (74). Elsewhere, he compares the Italian vaccine pass to the yellow star that Jews were forced to wear under Nazism (Agamben 2021b).[5]

Besides the absurdity of these analogies, Agamben provides a biopolitical reading of the pandemic rooted in his influential concepts of the "state of exception" and "bare life" (Agamben 1998).[6] He argues that the prolonged state of exception established in Italy in the face of the Coronavirus crisis marks a transition out of bourgeois democracy – founded on constitutional rights and the separation of legislative, executive, and judiciary powers – toward a paradigm of "biosecurity,"

5 Only once Agamben suspends this analogy, and spectacularly contradicts himself, in order to question the use of the term "denier" by those criticizing positions like his own: "Those who use it ['denier'] incautiously equate the current epidemic with the Holocaust, demonstrating (consciously or not) the antisemitism that runs rampant in both Left and Right discourse." (Agamben 2021a: 58).

6 To be sure, Agamben's strident analogies between the pandemic context and Nazi Germany should not be entirely divorced from his biopolitical reading of the crisis, for those analogies partly find their logic in Agamben's own conceptualization of the concentration camp as a "paradigm" of biopolitical modernity (Salzani 2021).

which dismantles those rights and collapses those powers (Agamben 2021a). This transition, in turn, is dependent on a partition between social and biological life and a reduction of life itself to its biological dimension, hence humans to "bare life." For Agamben, these shifts dramatically materialized during the crisis when the "right to health" was quickly transformed by decree into "a legal obligation to be healthy" (60) and it became obvious, at least to him, that Italians sacrificed "their life conditions, their social relationships, their work, even their friendships [. . .] when faced with the risk of getting sick" (17). In Agamben's view, this biopolitical transition was well underway when SARS-CoV-2 appeared. The crisis simply accelerated the process and confirmed his own critical theory.

Many have noted that Agamben's critique is virtually indistinguishable from conspiracy theories (e.g., Bratton 2021; Delanty 2020; Salzani 2021). In the book, Agamben anticipates this charge and invokes Foucault to establish a distinction between conspiracy theories and what he calls the analysis of "objective conspiracies." This notion means, for him, that while there might be no identifiable agent behind a crisis, there are agents exploiting it to their advantage: "As Foucault showed before me, governments that deploy the security paradigm do not necessarily produce the state of exception, but they exploit and direct it once it occurs" (Agamben 2021a: 27)[7]. However, the characterization of the pandemic either as an outright "invention" or an "opportunity" exploited by governments remains ambivalent in the book. The reason why Agamben does not clarify this matter, and even seems to take pleasure in contradicting himself and misleading his readers, is probably, quite simply, that he does not care. As he states, "the powers that rule the world have decided to use this pandemic – *and it's irrelevant whether it is real or simulated* – as pretext for transforming top to bottom the paradigms of their governance" (7, emphasis added).

Indeed, even prior to its convergence with the structure and content of conspiracy theories, the main problem of Agamben's critique is a distinct indifference to its object. He admits as much:

> In the Babelic linguistic confusion of our time, each group of people follows one particular logic, disregarding all others. According to virologists, the enemy is the virus; for doctors, the only goal is recovery; for the government, it is all about maintaining control – and perhaps I'm also doing the same, when I reiterate that we must refuse to pay too high a price. (Agamben 2021a: 27)

7 Agamben's deployment of Foucault's ideas should not be taken at face value. As Daniele Lorenzini (2021: S44) points out, "Foucault's work on biopolitics is more complex, rich, and compelling for us today than what it appears to be under the pen of those who [. . .] misleadingly utilize it to talk about the state of exception and bare life."

This rare moment of self-critical reflection reveals a particular view of the critic's task. Agamben suggests that critics can ignore the specific nature of their object, disregard the field of specialized knowledge concerned with it, and use that object to advance their own critical agenda.[8] As Lorenzo Bernini (2020) rightly observes,

> In these texts, the well-rehearsed critical apparatus that [Agamben] has assembled over the years by originally reworking concepts drawn from Foucault, Arendt, Benjamin, and Schmitt (biopolitics, bare life, state of exception), is deployed to comment on the reality of the pandemic yet without really examining it, without participating in it (as if this were possible at all).[9]

Bernini emphasizes that Agamben's pandemic writings betray a troubling indifference not only to the object of critique, but also to the collective human experience of death and grief during the crisis. Accordingly, Bernini (2020) argues that "next to paranoid suspicion and narcissistic arrogance, lack of empathy should be mentioned" among the gravest symptoms of the current crisis of critique.[10]

However, critique *can* and *must* do better than this. On 12 June 2020, as the movement for Black lives took to the streets again in the United States and globally to denounce the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Steven W. Thrasher published a piece titled "An Uprising Comes from the Viral Underclass" (2020). As Thrasher points out, Floyd's autopsy revealed that the novel Coronavirus was present in his body when police officer Derek Chauvin choked him to death, and that Breonna Taylor, killed by the police in her home two months earlier, worked as an emergency medical technician with patients infected by the virus. This is no simple coincidence: "The virus didn't kill either of them; police did. But both Floyd and Taylor are part of the *viral underclass* – a population harmed not simply by microscopic organisms but by the societal structures that make viral transmission possi-

8 Some of Agamben's most generous critics imply the same. One reviewer states that "it seems advisable for us not to ascribe too much weight to Agamben's assessment of the corona crisis as far as it concerns his medical expertise. With regard to the danger of exceptionalism becoming the rule rather than the exception, however, his critique deserves to be taken very seriously" (van den Berge 2020: 5). This could mean, at best, that Agamben's critique of the pandemic has nothing specific to say about the Coronavirus and that its value resides in the reiteration of Agamben's critical theory. If this were the case, one could read Agamben's philosophical work and ignore the poor iteration of the same ideas in his pandemic writings. At worse, the same passage could mean that the value of critique can be recovered by disjoining it from the distorted picture it offers of its object.

9 The translation from Lorenzo Bernini's (2020) piece is ours. See also Bernini (2022).

10 Bernini's (2020) piece acknowledges the crisis of critique yet defends it from a strong version of postcritique, arguing – like we do – that the best arguments advanced by proponents of postcritique should be taken as a measure to distinguish between good and bad critique, not as a reason to abandon critique altogether.

ble." Thrasher's core argument is twofold. On the one hand, there exists a relation of convergence and mutual determination between viruses and social formations: "vulnerability is manufactured for certain kinds of people such that they're susceptible to viruses" while "viruses themselves can [. . .] shape vulnerable populations." On the other hand, the racialized underclass peculiarly affected by the convergence of viral exposure, institutional racism, and class oppression is best placed to lead an expansive political struggle against the combined impact of multiple crises. As the subtitle of Trasher's piece puts it, "the Black Lives Matter movement could be the vaccine the country needs."

As a journalist, Thrasher began noticing in 2014, as he traveled to Ferguson to report on the police killing of Michael Brown and the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement, that the maps recording the spread of HIV/AIDS and the impact of racist police violence in the United States tended to overlap. Through those maps, Thrasher understood that HIV infection and police violence disproportionately affect the same populations, which he began conceptualizing as a "viral underclass."[11] The spread of SARS-CoV-2 was no exception to this rule: "When we follow a virus – HIV, SARS-CoV-2, hepatitis B or C – we find all the fault lines of the society it is infecting." It is precisely the knowledge of earlier and ongoing crises – HIV/AIDS and racist police violence – what allows Thrasher to offer a distinct reading of the Coronavirus crisis. In this sense, when confronted with the new virus, Thrasher, like Agamben, carries the weight of old ideas. Yet, while the pandemic seems to function, in Agamben's account, as a confirmation of what the philosopher knew all along, Thrasher's analysis emphasizes the conjunctural convergence of old and new phenomena which, by virtue of their present articulation, speak to the critic in new ways.

Thrasher's critique is animated by a distinct curiosity about the biological and social life of viruses, which he argues can be best understood from the standpoint of those most affected by them. This standpoint takes center stage in his book, *The Viral Underclass: The Human Toll when Inequality and Disease Collide* (2022). Here, Thrasher expands his discussion of the viral underclass primarily through personal stories: from Michael "Tiger Mandingo" Johnson, a young Black gay man accused of "recklessly" infecting others with HIV, taken to trial in Missouri in 2013, and facing

11 Thrasher also recounts that he first heard the notion of the "viral underclass" deployed in relation to HIV/AIDS by activist Sean Strub to highlight how the state helps reinforcing stigma by incorporating it into the law, producing "a viral underclass of persons with rights inferior to others, especially in regard to their sexual expressions" (Strub qtd. in Thrasher 2020). Thrasher reworks and expands this notion to offer it *both* as a name for the populations experiencing the compounding effects of social marginalization and viral exposure *and* as a theory of how these processes converge and shape each other.

thirty years in prison at the time, to Zak Kostopoulos, the Greek HIV-positive queer activist and drag queen killed in Athens in 2018 by a mob of civilians and police men, to Lorena Borjas, the Mexican-American "mother" of the transgender Latinx community in Queens, New York, who died of COVID-19 in March 2020. Empathy-inducing story telling is the main trademark of *The Viral Underclass*.

Thrasher's deployment of empathy sets his critique apart from Agamben and grants his book much of its beauty and strength. However, at times it seems to curb its analytical power. For example, the book specifies yet simplifies the mutually determining relation that the earlier article had posited between viruses and social formations, so that now "it is social structures that are the *drivers*, while viruses merely amplify" (Thrasher 2022a: 12).[12] In its effort to do justice to those who are made most vulnerable to viruses, Thrasher's critique risks doing less justice to the unpredictable ways in which viruses spread and contribute to the making and remaking of social formations.

Agamben and Thrasher offer two different readings of the Coronavirus crisis. While Agamben's biopolitical critique is indifferent to the specific nature of its object and virtually indistinguishable from the conspiracy theories that spread since the inception of the crisis, Thrasher's analysis is driven by a distinct curiosity about the social life of viruses. Additionally, by focusing on the compounding effects of multiple crises, Thrasher foregrounds their differential effects across stratified social formations. This stratification is foreclosed by Agamben's insistence on a universalizing and abstract partition between bare life and *bios politikon*: between the biological and the social dimensions of humanness (Butler 2004: 60–68; Illetterati 2020). This difference between the two critics is amplified by Thrasher's empathetic privileging of the standpoint of the viral underclass. Nonetheless, we also argue that Thrasher's empathy-driven critique risks curbing its own analytical power by reducing the social life of viruses to the social formations with which they interact.

5 Conclusion

We began this chapter by situating the current crisis of critique – most vocally articulated by proponents of postcritique – in a historical moment characterized by multiple crises. This conjuncture requires that we identify a form of critique

12 In the book, Thrasher identifies twelve social vectors for viral transmission: racism, individualized shame, capitalism, the law, austerity, borders, the liberal carceral state, unequal prophylaxis, ableism, speciesism, the myth of white immunity, and collective punishment.

able to apprehend the crises that confront us while overcoming its own. We turned to Hall for one such form of critique, which we proposed to term "critique without guarantees." We thus returned to the present and discussed two critical readings of the Coronavirus crisis. Our discussion suggests that neither empathy alone nor any specific concept – biopolitics, the viral underclass, or moral panic – can guarantee a "good" critique.[13] What sets different forms of critique apart from each other is theoretical practice itself. Commenting on Marx's method, Hall (2003: 131) reminds us that, for Marx, theory "must 'rise from the abstract to the concrete' not vice versa." In other words, theory should not start from the empirically given and strive to represent it by way of abstraction and generalization, looking for common essences behind concrete differences. Instead, theory should produce concepts that can appropriate the concrete while preserving its differences and determinations. This is why, Hall argues, "we need concepts that *differentiate* [. . .] in the very moment that they reveal hidden connections" (118). This theoretical practice is paradigmatically at work in *Policing the Crisis*, which proceeds by adding layer over layer of determination without ever reducing one layer to another or the mugging panic to any one of them. While Agamben moves in the opposite direction, staring into the pandemic and looking for nothing but the reflection of his own critical categories, Thrasher offers the viral underclass as a concept able to theoretically reconstruct the conjunctural convergence of multiple crises. However, his analysis is partly haunted by a desire to drive that convergence back onto stable ground, reducing the nature of the Coronavirus crisis to the social formations with which it interacts and losing sight of the relations of relative autonomy and mutual determination that exist between them. The best lesson we can learn from Hall, in a time of multiple crises and in the face of the crisis of critique, is how to practice a critique without guarantees that needs no stable grounds – in fact, must *avoid* the search for stable grounds – in order to account for its object.

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13 The opposite is also true. For instance, in response to Agamben's writings on the pandemic, some critics have emphasized that the concept of biopolitics must not be abandoned, but rethought in light of the failures of Agamben's critique (e.g., Bratton 2021; Sotiris 2020).

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Section 4: **Crisis Across Art, Memory, and Race**

Max Silverman

Traumatic Memory and the Postcolonial: Disruptive Genealogy

Abstract: To what extent has postcolonial studies been influenced by developments in memory studies that privilege trauma theory and its accompanying vocabulary of violence, the wound and victimhood? Although this approach has provided a much-needed focus on how past violence continues to affect the present in invisible ways, it tends to foreclose a broader intersectional analysis of cultural works in which traumatic memory, loss and mourning are always articulated with other, often contradictory and paradoxical, processes. I will apply this approach to the film *Memory Box* (2021) by the Lebanese filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, in which the return of the past can be read not only in terms of a genealogical transmission of the trauma of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) but also as a knotted story about time, culture and media. Can postcolonial theory open up cultural works to ambivalent encounters in a way that readings through the lens of traumatic memory rarely allow?

Keywords: Memory, trauma, genealogy, Lebanese film, remediation, the rhizome

1 Introduction

As J. Roger Kurtz (2018: 1) writes in his introduction to a volume on trauma and literature, "(w)e live in an age of trauma [. . .] Indeed, the vocabulary of trauma seems ubiquitous." Trauma theory has certainly become widespread in postcolonial cultural studies and its accompanying vocabulary of violence, the wound, transmission, belatedness, haunting, victimhood and melancholia do, indeed, seem ubiquitous. In this chapter, I will argue that although this approach has provided a much-needed focus on the ways past violence continues to affect the present in invisible ways, it tends to foreclose a broader intersectional analysis of cultural works in which traumatic memory, loss and mourning are always articulated with other, often contradictory and paradoxical, processes. I will apply this approach to the film *Memory Box* (2021) by the Lebanese filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, in which the return of the past can be read not only in terms of a genealogical transmission of the trauma of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) but also as a knotted story about time, culture, media and affect. Is our response to the legacies of the past at a crossroads? Can postcolonial theory

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open up cultural works to ambivalent encounters in a way that readings through the lens of traumatic memory rarely allow?

2 Postcolonial cultural studies, traumatic memory and genealogy

Much has been written about the development of a trauma-based model of cultural memory studies in the 1990s. American theorists Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, Dominick LaCapra and others combined a Freudian approach to trauma with a post-structuralist methodology to analyze, predominantly, cultural works on the Holocaust. Postcolonial critiques of this model of trauma pointed up its Eurocentric bias – focusing on the Holocaust to the virtual exclusion of non-European moments of extreme violence –, its application of "western" theory (Freudian and poststructuralist), and its privileging of "western" modernist techniques as if they were universally applicable (see, for example, Craps 2013).[1] The call, then, was to decolonize trauma studies by adapting, extending and refashioning its remit, especially with a view to questioning the Caruth and Hartman Freudian/post-structuralist understanding of trauma. As Irene Visser (2011: 270) puts it "(i)n the dialogue between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies the central question remains whether trauma theory can be effectively 'postcolonialized' in the sense of being usefully conjoined with postcolonial theory." Visser argues for a "more comprehensive conceptualization of trauma and (. . .) possible directions in which to expand trauma's conceptual framework, in order to respond more adequately to postcolonial ways of understanding history, memory and trauma" (2011: 270; see also Visser 2018). Nicole Sutterlin endorses this observation when she writes "as the scope of trauma studies is expanding, the question arises whether other forms of what is now termed 'trauma' were long developed in non-Western contexts" (2020: 20).[2]

1 The problem with this critique is that it risks viewing the West and its "others" in binary terms. As Gianmaria Colpani, Jamila Mascat and Katrine Smiet (2022: 10) note, using Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Dipesh Chakrabarty as guides, the "critique of the colonial pretension of gaining immediate access to the colonized world is not counterbalanced by the postcolonial affirmation of a native subject armed with self-transparency. Access is not an option for the colonizer, just as transparency is not an option for the postcolonial subject."

2 See Sylvia Martinez-Falquina (2015: 834–838) for a useful guide to the decolonial "emendations" (838) to trauma theory.

Rather than question traumatic memory itself as a useful way of developing postcolonial studies, many postcolonial critics thus saw the need to extend the scope of traumatic memory studies to make it fit for purpose for postcolonial studies. In recent years this call has certainly been heeded. The volume *The Future of Trauma Theory* (Gert Buelens et al. 2013) took a significant step in this direction, as did the more recent *Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* (2020). In their introduction to the Routledge volume, Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja acknowledge this generalized acceptance of trauma theory in cultural works across the globe when they write "(t)here is now a wide recognition of how past violence leaves marks on the present and future, how the past haunts us and how past injustice needs to be remembered and worked through so that we can avoid repeating it" (2020: 3).[3] Despite Michael Rothberg's warning to be "suspicious of over-generalizing the trauma concept" (2014: xiii), it is possible that this is precisely what has happened.[4]

The generalization of trauma theory in postcolonial studies does not mean that it has not had its critics, nor that traumatic memory studies has gone unchallenged (see for example Kansteiner 2004 and Radstone 2007). Anne Rigney (2018: 369) suggests that "it is time to think critically about the cost of [the] apparently natural link between memory and trauma, lest we become definitively locked into it." Heeding Rigney's call, I focus here on two interrelated aspects of traumatic memory studies that might prompt us to rethink the model itself. The first is related to genealogy and time and the second concerns the universalizing tendency of traumatic memory studies, which can reduce complex works to formulaic readings of trauma, haunting, victimhood and melancholia.

The relationship between traumatic memory and genealogy – that is, the way in which trauma is transmitted (often unconsciously) through the family to successive generations – has been central to many cultural works in recent years that deal with the legacy of extreme violence. The French literary critic Dominique Viart (2009) has coined the term "récits de filiation" ["narratives of parentage"] to describe this literature. An accompanying body of critical literature has developed since the 1990s that considers, predominantly, the children and grandchildren of survivors of the Holocaust but also the generations who come after other traumatic

3 The extent of the interaction between postcolonial studies and trauma studies is evident, for example, in the case studies included in the collection *Memory and Postcolonial Studies* (Göttsche, ed. 2019). See Nicole Sutterlin's chapter in the *Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* for a detailed account of the expanding history of trauma studies.

4 For example, Martinez-Falquina (2015: 843) suggests that "it might even be argued that all postcolonial theory – which deals with colonial relations, racism, or gender violence, to name but a few of their main concerns – is always related to trauma in some way or another."

moments of extreme violence and atrocity, such as slavery and the violence against indigenous peoples (see for example Schwab 2010). The most significant contribution to the theoretical debate around second generation trauma is undoubtedly Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, by which trauma can be transmitted from survivors of genocide or extreme violence to their children. For Hirsch (1997), postmemory takes place within the family and photographs are the major triggers for the transmission of trauma to the next generation.

Hirsch modified this model of familial traumatic memory by positing what she called "affiliative" memory, describing the difference between "postmemory" and "affiliative memory" as that between "an intergenerational vertical identification of child and parent occurring within the family, and the intra-generational horizontal identification that makes that child's position more broadly available to other contemporaries" (2012: 36). Although affiliative memory shifts the direction of transmission away from a biological and vertical relation, and also recognizes the role of media in the shaping of traumatic memory, the biological family is, nevertheless, still the primary framing of this model. As Anne-Marie Kramer observes, citing Hirsch, "(i)n both familial and affiliative postmemory, identification with the experience of the previous generation is made possible through the idiom of family, which becomes 'an accessible lingua franca easing identification and projection across distance and difference'" (2011: 431).[5] Thus, although affiliative memory stretches the mode of transmission beyond the family frame to a whole generation, it nevertheless still adheres broadly to the genealogical principle.

Hirsch's formulation of affiliative memory has been expanded further with other transcultural and transnational models of memory that challenge the vertical axis of genealogy and suggest more complex and multilinear modes of transmission (for example, prosthetic (Landsberg 2004), traveling (Erll 2014), multidirectional (Rothberg 2009) and palimpsestic (Silverman 2013). Astrid Erll notes that "(w)ith the transmission from (familial) inheritance to (societal) heritage, the preoccupation with genealogy enters the area of cultural memory" (2014: 396). Even postmemory itself, however, is not a pure and transparent form of transmission from one generation to the next prior to the intervention of social and cultural vectors of memory, as photographs (the primary means of transmission, according to Hirsch) are themselves cultural forms which necessarily disrupt the direct vertical and genealogical line of the family frame. Perhaps, then, Erll's suggestion that the passage from familial inheritance to societal heritage is where genealogy "enters the area of cul-

5 Maria Roca Lizarazu (2018: 172) makes a similar point: "While 'affiliative' postmemory transcends the realm of biology, involving, in theory, any number of individuals and generations born after the event, it still remains indebted to 'the idiom of family', drawing on the family as a symbolic resource."

tural memory" should be modified to account for the fact that genealogy is itself never a pure and unmediated process of transmission as it is always profoundly articulated with history and culture.[6]

The binary oppositions between genealogy and culture, and between vertical and horizontal modes of transmission, certainly need to be deconstructed (see De Cesari and Rigney 2014: 5–6). It is, however, a larger question that interests us here, namely, whether fluid notions of memory challenge the primacy of traumatic memory itself. This is not so much a question of whether secondary witnessing, "prosthetic" memory and empathic identification raised by the cultural transmission of trauma can still be classified as traumatic. It is, rather, the extent to which any definition of trauma (primary, secondary and so on) is sufficient to characterize a complex cultural field. Let us take, for example, the question of time. The belatedness of traumatic memory depends implicitly on a notion of the cyclical nature of time, as the wound of the past surfaces and resurfaces across generations. Yet, as Silke Arnold-de Simine observes (2018: 152) "(i)f the temporality of belatedness and endless repetition that is associated with trauma becomes universalized as the structure of reality itself, it is increasingly difficult to envisage other temporalities, such as time as change and the reparative possibilities that might bring with it." We might add that it is not only the temporality of belatedness at stake; the whole poetics of trauma – haunting, ghosts, victimhood, melancholy and so on – is also universalized so that other aesthetic strategies become difficult to envisage.

The lesson that I would like to draw, then, about the disruption to genealogy of horizontal modes of transmission is not simply that trauma can be transmitted in multiple ways beyond the (vertical) family frame but that the interconnected memory traces thus established go beyond the reductive framing of traumatic memory itself. The composite and hybrid nature of memory cannot be contained by any single explanatory framework, be it that of trauma or any other process. By universalizing trauma as an explanatory principle of memory, traumatic memory becomes a tautology. It is only meaningful if we recognize it as an impure form (Silverman 2019), as the originating wound and the cyclical temporality

6 Lizarazu (2020: 17–18) highlights the problem with viewing the transmission of trauma as a transparent process: "(The) link between trauma, transmission and the (photographic) medium ultimately rests on the common misconception that both traumatic experiences and visual media are somehow realms of the immediate and nonrepresentational because they are not accessed verbally in the first place. (. . .) As such, the visual image and the experience of trauma are essentialized and naturalized as something that stands outside the dynamics of cultural configuration and symbolic representation. Hirsch conceptualizes photographs as transparent carriers of (traumatic) affect across time, space, and subjective boundaries."

of its transmission are always articulated with other non-traumatic processes and temporalities.[7]

3 Disruptive genealogy and remediation in *Memory Box*

The fifteen-year civil war in Lebanon was concluded by the Taef Agreement of 1991. However, the underlying causes of the war – especially sectarian violence, a political system (confessionalism) that fosters communitarian division and competition, external influence (especially Syria and Iran) and corruption – are still in place, leading many commentators to suggest that the official conclusion of the war changed very little. Official silence about the war (there are no official accounts or memorials) and state censorship mean that those years of conflict cannot be properly discussed yet continue to haunt contemporary political and social life. As a subtle and allusive way of challenging this amnesia, experimental film-makers in Lebanon have often adopted the symptomatic poetics of traumatic memory, that Mark Westmoreland (2013: 734) has called an "alternative aesthetics."[8]

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige grew up in Beirut during the civil war and, since the early 1990s, have collaborated on projects that span film, video, photography and art installation. The model of traumatic memory would appear to be a useful way to describe their "alternative aesthetics" in relation to post-conflict Lebanon, as characters in their films often seem haunted by an invisible past and show the affective and melancholic symptoms of trauma (see, for example, *A Perfect Day* [2005] and *Je Veux voir* [2008]). Their pronouncements on their practice, however, demonstrate a certain dissatisfaction with seeing their work solely in this light. In their eyes, the trauma model reinforces the stereotype of the faceless victim:

> Dans les tourments de la région, les médias montrent des visages réduits à une fonction, à une forme de réaction: la victime. Une victime sans nom, sans réelle histoire (. . .) (T)rop

7 It is not possible here to discuss in detail the distinction that needs to be made between Freudian trauma theory used in a psychoanalytic context and the generalization of that theory to inform poststructuralist analyses of cultural memory (see, for example, Kansteiner 2004 and Radstone 2007). Suffice it to say that this conflation has often been responsible for reductive readings of cultural works through the lens of traumatic memory.

8 For critical works identifying this phenomenon in Lebanese cinema, see for example Toufic 1993, Westmoreland 2010 and Rastegar 2015 on ghosts and vampires, and El-Horr 2016 on melancholy.

> souvent, la manière dont (les visages) sont présentés les privent de singularité; ils deviennent simplement un statut, celui de la victime (. . .) Dans notre partie du monde, on a, en quelque sorte, perdu nos visages.
>
> [In the turmoil of the region, the media show faces reduced to a function, a form of reaction: the victim. A victim without name, without any real history (. . .) Too often, the way in which (faces) are presented deprives them of singularity; they become simply a status, that of the victim (. . .) In our part of the world, we have, in a way, lost our faces.] (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013: 105)[9]

Re-establishing the singularity of the face entails detaching the image from stereotypes of conflict and violence, resisting dominant imaginaries, and transforming the image into an open-ended space of potential and possibility. The word they have used consistently to describe the liberation of the image from preconceived ideas is "latency": "Latency is the introduction to the possible, to the state of becoming" (cited in Westmoreland 2010:181). Latency shifts the focus of art from an Orphic obsession with looking back (and hence turning the past into stone) to one rooted resolutely in the unscripted present (Silverman 2021). They have said "(n)ous travaillons peu sur le passé ou les guerres civiles en elles-mêmes mais plus sur les traces et les conséquences de ces dernières sur notre présent" ["We work very little on the past or on civil wars per se but rather on the traces and the consequences of these in our present"] (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013: 103). This is an art of encounter rather than return, one which aims to restore otherness to the world rather than recycle political or ideological dogma.

I will argue that, although, on one level, the model of traumatic memory captures significant aspects of *Memory Box*, the film also displays many features of the directors' familiar aesthetic practice that escape this framing. *Memory Box* draws on the personal experience of Hadjithomas and Joreige as teenagers during the civil war, especially Hadjithomas's notebooks and Joreige's photos of the time. It is a family drama involving three generations of women. Teenager Alex lives with her mother Maia in Montreal. Maia's mother Teta (Alex's grandmother) lives nearby in the city. There are tensions between Alex and Maia and between Maia and Teta, the cause of which becomes clearer when a box of Maia's photos, notebooks, letters, cassettes and other belongings from her teenage years in Beirut in the 1980s arrives at her house. The items in the box had originally been sent by the teenage Maia to her best friend Liza Haber, who had left Beirut with her family to go to Paris to escape the violence of the civil war. Over two decades later, Liza is killed in a car accident and her mother returns Maia's teenage belongings to the adult Maia in Montreal. The arrival of the memory box brings back Maia

9 Translations from French are my own except where stated.

and Teta's past in Beirut, which they have repressed since their arrival in Montreal but which still haunts their everyday lives. Alex subsequently learns about a family past that has never been spoken and, once revealed, allows her to see her mother and grandmother in a new light. But rather than learn about this past as a passive recipient of her mother and grandmother's experience, Alex remediates and reanimates the material in the box by taking her own photos of her mother's original photos and notebooks and sends some of these to her friends. Alex thus becomes an active participant in the (re)creation and transmission of the past and her engagement with an experience she has not lived merges with her mother's lived experience. Maia and Alex eventually return to Beirut to attend the memorial service for Liza and Maia rediscovers the friends she has not seen since she left Lebanon as a teenager.

In many ways, *Memory Box* fits the postmemory, family-frame model perfectly. The inter-generational family dynamics in Montreal involve secrets, silences and lies as a means of repressing traumatic memories from the past. When the memory box arrives, and threatens to disrupt the status quo, Teta tries to hide it from Alex, describing it as "a bad memory" and tells Alex "the past upsets your Mum and will destroy all our hard work." "Let's celebrate Christmas in peace," she adds. Later she messages Maia to say "Don't look at the box, the past stinks, and don't show (the box) to Alex." Maia accuses Teta of not telling her about Liza's death and of hiding her notebooks. "Enough lies," she shouts at her mother. Alex reacts similarly to Maia's attempts to hide the past. "We never share anything," she complains. Later she tells her friend Lynn that her mother never tells her anything about her past: "She lies all the time." And when Maia discovers that Alex has been looking at the contents of the box, despite being told not to, Alex shouts at her "your whole life is a lie, you've never told me anything." Gabriele Schwab's powerful discussion of the "psychic deformations passed on from generation to generation" (2010: 3) at the heart of the haunting legacy of trauma, (heavily influenced by the theory of the crypt by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok), aptly characterizes the inter-generational family life in the film.

The arrival of the memory box brings this life of deceit to the surface and triggers an encounter with traumatic events that have long been repressed. As in Hirsch's formulation of postmemory, photographs play a central role in the transmission of past trauma to the next generation. Other details reinforce the vertical, trans-generational transmission of past moments. Teta arrives at Maia's house with a Christmas tree, a symbol of family tradition (the family tree); Teta teaches Alex how to make stuffed vine leaves, a favorite dish of Maia's father, especially at Christmas; Teta speaks Arabic to both Maia and Alex, despite the fact that she has lived in Montreal for twenty-five years and Arabic is not Alex's mother-tongue; photographs of Maia's father and brother are brought out every Christ-

mas, causing Alex to say to her friend Lynn "we eat with the dead and ghosts"; Alex is vacant when out with her friends, affected by the inherited family trauma; when Maia and Alex go back to Beirut, Teta directs them on the phone to her husband's grave; Alex sends Teta photos from Beirut. On one level, then, the memory box allows each woman to work through the repressed family past and fill in the gap of a broken genealogy in order to come to terms with past trauma and grief.

Alongside the vertical structure of transmission, however, a number of elements suggest a more horizontal principle of connections. Even within the family, the line of communication is not direct but dispersed. Teta's communication with Alex in Arabic, when Alex's first language is French, suggests interpretation and translation rather than unmediated communication. Maia's position is more clearly "in-between" as she is bilingual (talking to Teta in Arabic and Alex in French) and has an English-speaking lover. As for the memory box and its contents, they have circulated in time (from the 1980s to the present day) and in space (between Beirut, Paris and Montreal), constituting a literal example of what Astrid Erll (2011) has called "travelling memory." The journey of this material through time and space crosses political, cultural and ideological frontiers between "East" and "West," and "north" and "south," and between different time-sequences.[10] The hybrid nature of this journey, made up of superimposed times and places, renders problematic the notion of a direct transmission of memory between generations on which the genealogical principle depends. Furthermore, the linearity of genealogy is complicated further when Alex takes photos of the contents of the box on her phone and sends a selection of these to her friend Lynn. Alex's remediation of Maia's original material clearly extends transmission beyond the framework of the family.

How traumatic, though, is the past that returns? And how "authentic" is the material in the memory box anyway? As a teenager in Beirut in the 1980s, the blasts and flares of the civil war, and the fear and anxiety of Maia's parents in

10 Can one say that this horizontal journey connects memories of the Lebanese civil war to memories of other moments of extreme violence too? The intergenerational, "family frame" transmission of trauma in the form of postmemory implicitly recalls the memories of the Holocaust for second and third generations. More importantly, perhaps, "Canada" (or "Kanada") was Auschwitz prisoner slang for the warehouses which stored the stolen belongings of (mostly) Jews murdered in the gas chambers, as these storage facilities resembled "the land of plenty." The French sculptor and photographer Christian Boltanski created an art installation called "Réserve, Canada" in 1988 in which he used clothes to echo the Nazi warehouses. Ernst van Alphen (1997: 113) observes that, for camp inmates, "Canada" "stands for a country of excess and exuberance where one wants to emigrate because it can offer a living to everybody." Teta and Maia have emigrated to Canada to escape the atrocities of the civil war but are haunted by what they have left behind.

their apartment, provide the constant backdrop to everyday life, but Maia is more interested in music, dancing and meeting up (secretly) with her boyfriend Raja. British and American new wave and punk music (Blondie, the Stranglers, Killing Joke, Sigue Sigue Sputnik, Kansas) and "western" clothes (short skirts, flared trousers) are *de rigueur* for these young Lebanese friends. Maia's past life in Beirut is defined more by a mixture of emotions related to teenage life than one determined solely by the violent conflict, and more by cultural hybridity than any sense of a "pure" and "authentic" Lebanese identity. When Maia discovers a packet of cigarettes in the memory box and lights one, it seems to function like a Proustian madeleine, bringing back her hidden youth. However, in the box, there is a photo of her smoking next to a photo of a Hollywood film star also holding a cigarette, whose pose the teenage Maia is self-consciously imitating. The past self that returns is, therefore, not simply determined by the trauma of that period but by acts and emotions that are themselves shaped unavoidably by history and culture.[11]

Family history in *Memory Box* is not a pure and direct line from generation to generation but always a place of convergence for diverse histories, spaces, times and, especially, material practices. For this history is, above all else, shaped through the media that transmit it. Alex's remediation of Maia's photos and notebooks is only one aspect of this. Maia herself spreads the photos, tapes and notebooks of her past life on the basement floor of her house so that they form a sort of fragmented mosaic. When a shape begins to form and her past in Beirut unfolds in (more or less) chronological fashion – going out with friends, her love affair with Raja, arguments with her parents, bomb blasts and violence on the streets, the depression and decline of her father – this history is not presented as a transparent narrative but one that is subject to the tension between the still photos and photo-strips in the box and their speeded-up transformation into moving image, and between the analog technology that Maia uses in the 1980s and the digital technology of Alex's remediation in the present. Family history is, thus, always held between the still and the moving image, between representation and lived experience, and between past and present. It is also shadowed by the histories of photography and film themselves, and the constantly evolving encounter between the amorphous and fleeting nature of life and the demands (both constraining and liberating) of new technologies. Story-telling and forms of representation are inextricably intertwined. Occasionally the image dissolves into light and color, which portrays the night sky

11 Self-referential quotes from other works by the directors (for example, the ubiquitous cigarettes in *A Perfect Day* [2005] or the sunsets in the exhibition 'Se Souvenir de la lumière: Two Suns in a Sunset' [2016–2017]) also subvert the authenticity of the past that returns and disperse it across a broader cultural intertext.

lit up by the flares and explosions of war while, at the same time, highlighting the material pixelations of digital film.[12] The central lie that will eventually be revealed in Maia's back story – that her father did not die a martyr, resisting the armed militias that had forced the closure of the school at which he was principal (a heroic story constructed by Teta) but committed suicide – only emerges through the photos that the teenage Maia took of his corpse, the undeveloped negatives of which are still in Maia's camera that returns in the memory box.[13] And, even then, the line between truth and fabrication, and between reality and fantasy, is blurred. As Maia says to Alex, "Sometimes I invent things. I don't know what's real and false. Sometimes it's as if I've dreamt it."

The recordings of Maia's past life in Beirut that return in the memory box constitute an archive that needs to be read and deciphered to work through the family's traumatic past. The memory box as archive, however, is, like all archives, an unstable guide to truthful recollection. Not only are the stories of the past situated in an intermediary world between Maia's recollections and Alex's re-imaginings, and between reality and fantasy; they are also shaped by the media and technology of the time of recording in the 1980s, the digital remediation in the diegetic present and the techniques of the filmic present, not to mention the historical influences and cultural intertexts between the 1980s and the present. A stable past is always dissolving into a fluid present. The memory box as archive is, thus, not a reliable picture of the past but rather a performative act in the present in which the movement of the body and the movement of the image are in constant dialog. Traumatic memory itself is only a part of this encounter. Its belated temporality intersects with the other diegetic and filmic temporalities established in the film (those of the still and moving image, for example), and the melancholic victimhood associated with the transgenerational wound of trauma is offset by the exuberant acts of creation and imagination, both diegetic – in the form of Alex's reanimation of Maia's original images or the freedom of dance – and filmic on the part of the film-makers themselves.

The instability of the image must also be coupled with the changing patterns of sound created by the sound engineer and film director, Rana Eid. Eid has

12 These images are also an echo of an earlier project by Hadjithomas and Joreige entitled *Wonder Beirut* (composed of multiple installations between 1997–2006) in which their invented photographer Abdallah Farah burns idealized postcards of Beirut from the 1960s to depict the destruction of the city during the civil war.

13 Undeveloped film is a further reference to the *Wonder Beirut* project. In the third part of the project, entitled "Latent Images," Abdallah Farah keeps a number of reels of film in drawers without developing them, thus gesturing to the latent possibilities of film before their crystallization into fixed images.

worked on many films in the recent new wave of Lebanese cinema, frequently building up a multi-layered soundtrack of underground and everyday life in Beirut (see for example her film *Panoptic*, 2017). In *Memory Box*, it is not only the sounds of war in Beirut that return but also the exuberant sounds of the city (hence the importance of music), all of which are in contrast to the other-worldly sounds of Montreal and the constant pinging of incoming WhatsApp messages on phones. Once again, the prism of trauma theory does not capture this multi-layered and highly sensual soundscape.

Although *Memory Box* is certainly a family drama about a traumatic past, a model of traumatic memory does not, in itself, provide a sufficient methodological framework to appreciate the different levels, temporalities and textures of the film. *Memory Box* is more concerned with the multiplicity of performative encounters in the present than with the belated effects of past trauma. As Hadjithomas says about the use of images in the film,

> it's about their temporality and re-activating, today, something from the past to make something new. We're not interested in nostalgia, we are interested in the present, and the effects of the images or events from the past in the context of the present. (Mezaina 2022)

For Hadjithomas and Joreige, to transform the image from a symptom of trauma into a creative performance is "how you can liberate yourself from the past and be able to have another relation to your present" (Hadjithomas 2017).

4 Rhizomatic knots of memory

In our special issue of *Yale French Studies* in 2010, in which we attempted to rethink cultural memory beyond the frontiers of nation and community, Michael Rothberg, Debarati Sanyal and I used the term "noeuds de mémoire" ["knots of memory"] to define the convergence of different spatio-temporal memory-traces (Rothberg, Sanyal and Silverman 2010). This was, in part, a play on words on, and challenge to, Pierre Nora's nation-bound and resolutely non-postcolonial "lieux de mémoire" ["sites of memory"]; but it was also with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's idea of the "rhizome" in mind. In his introduction to the collection, Rothberg (2010: 7) wrote that "'knotted' in all places and acts of memory are rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference that exceed attempts at territorialization (whether at the local or national level) and identitarian reduction." The rhizome is multiple, non-linear and hybrid, and denies origins and dualisms, especially the dualism which opposes verticality and horizontality. The rhizome is about entanglements and encounters that cannot be contained by

chronology, linearity, causality and genealogy. In their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* entitled "Rhizome," Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 11) write "(t)ransversal communications between different lines scramble the genealogical trees (. . .) The rhizome is an anti-genealogy." They later repeat this last statement and describe the rhizome as an "antimemory." It has no beginning and endings, only "middles": "A plateau is always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end. A rhizome is made of plateaus" (1988: 21). A rhizomatic understanding of memory would seem to be incompatible with traumatic memory (despite the fact that, in our collection, most articles did indeed deal with the entanglements of different moments of extreme violence and trauma), given that traumatic memory's belated temporality, stemming from an original wound, is premised on a beginning and a causal effect. At the very least, the "rhizomatic networks" of "knots of memory" propose an understanding of memory that is not simply, and exclusively, related to trauma.

Perhaps the most interesting exponent of rhizomatic networks in a postcolonial context is the Martinican writer Edouard Glissant. Glissant acknowledges his debt to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome in his concept of a "relational poetics" (Glissant 1997) which, as Neil Aller (2019: 2) observes in his interesting discussion of the anti-genealogy of Glissant and Deleuze, "develops most visibly in the creolized spaces of the Antilles." Glissant's critique of origins and linearity suggests that Caribbean history and culture cannot be understood simply with reference to the traumas of the slave trade and colonialism but must be seen through the prism of multiple relations of which those traumatic histories form a part.

Hadjithomas and Joreige have a similar approach in their work on Lebanon. How do you talk about a traumatic past without reducing it to trauma? Hadjithomas addresses this problem directly:

> When one talks about war, it's usually about the trauma; but in my case, I was writing about having fun, dreaming, loving, and living. It was another way to talk about the war, because during a war, you continue to live your life and films don't usually show that. (. . .) We both worked a lot on the idea of what do you do with elements that are not considered traumatic – in the interest of making something different, but without sidelining the trauma. (Mezaina 2022)

The result is a film that does indeed create a space for rhizomatic connections between other elements, processes, temporalities and encounters, "without sidelining the trauma." The final sequences of *Memory Box* leave us in an ambiguous space – between past and present, sunrise and sunset, mourning and joy, still and moving image, and between representation and profilmic life – to the accompaniment of the track "Let There be Light" by The Bunny Tylers. The memory box has, in a sense, allowed Teta, Maia and Alex to work through the previously un-

spoken trauma while still acting it out, not in melancholic fashion but as agents of their own present.

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Bolette B. Blaagaard

Postcolonial Critique in Practice: A Case Study of Citizen Media Resistance to Mainstream Media Discourses on Race

Abstract: This chapter focuses on how postcolonial social movements and their citizen-driven and -producing media bring light to the crisis of public engagement on race and racism in Danish society as it is produced in journalistic discourse. The chapter argues that despite theoretical and academic postcolonial and anti-racist critique, journalistic principles and practices continue to produce a public of racial ignorance and disregard for marginalized and minoritized people. The chapter explores the discourses of race in Danish legacy media and public and in particular the crisis management of the discourses in journalism, suggesting that postcolonial critique is practiced by social movements and their citizen media producing publics of postcolonial resistance. This practice enables on the one hand disruption and contestation towards mainstream journalistic reporting throwing journalistic representation into crisis, and on the other hand a journalistic reassertion of principles and practices which help sustain the criticized racial ignorance. The discussion and analysis are built on a case of 46 newspaper articles and 37 social media posts from BLM-DK's site about a racially charged murder on the Danish island of Bornholm in 2020 and the subsequent media coverage.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter Denmark, citizen media, legacy media, postcolonial critique, racism, murder on Bornholm 2020

1 Introduction

The chair of Black Lives Matter's Danish chapter (BLM-DK), Bwalya Sørensen, recently wrote on her Facebook page that she had lost her trust in legacy media's, i.e., mainstream mass media's, coverage of criminal and crisis situations. She was writing this following a tragic mass shooting in a Copenhagen shopping center in July 2022. But the reason why she doubted the journalistic performance of reporting the news on the mass shooting was grounded in a murder case, which took place two years prior. In the summer of 2020, a Tanzanian-Danish man was brutally beaten to death on the Danish island of Bornholm. It came to light that the white killers were friends of the victim as well as sympathizers of right-wing ideology, thus presenting an ambivalent discourse of racial interactions. Initially,

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the Danish print and television media did not pay much attention to the murder. However, encouraged by the social movement BLM-DK as well as other citizen-driven media outlets, media and journalistic institutions sent reporters to the island to cover the police investigation into the events. Still, even after the murder had achieved public attention the focus of legacy media vexed Sørensen, BLM-DK, and other citizen-driven media producers: The racial underpinnings of the murder, to their minds, were down-played to benefit the more benevolent narrative of friends' quarrel gone awry. The coverage, then, was not only focused on the procedures of policing and carrying out justice but adhering to journalistic protocol the reports gave equal space to the two parties in the story: the victim and the murderers. Citizen-driven and activist media and BLM-DK's push to get legacy media to cover the murder only resulted in the journalistic practice deliberately ignoring the racial aspects of the murder, while focusing primarily on the friendship between the victim and the perpetrators. Moreover, the reports continued to circle back to the implicit as well as explicit critique leveled at the journalists' own practice by BLM-DK and others, dismissing the charges laid at their door. Thus, legacy media's circumvention and dismissal of the accusation by BLM-DK led to Sørensen losing her trust in the journalistic practice's ability to report fairly and suitably to all Danish citizens and residents.

I begin this chapter by relaying Sørensen's doubts and wariness because it speaks to the crisis of journalistic practice in a postcolonial society, which remains largely unacknowledged in Danish journalism. This chapter focuses on how postcolonial social movements and their citizen-driven and -producing media bring light to the crisis of public engagement on race and racism in Danish society produced in journalistic discourse and argues that despite theoretical and academic postcolonial and anti-racist critique, journalistic principles and practices continue to produce a public of racial ignorance and disregard. However, the chapter suggests that postcolonial critique is practiced by social movements and their citizen media producing publics of postcolonial resistance.

Building on a case of 46 newspaper articles and 37 social media posts from BLM-DK's site about the murder on Bornholm and the subsequent media coverage, the chapter explores the discourses of race in Danish legacy media and public and in particular the crisis management of the discourses in journalism. I start by discussing journalism theories of participation in relation to postcolonial critique to frame the analysis and argument. I proceed to present the empirical selection and notes on methodology followed by the analysis and conclusion.

2 Participatory and postcolonial journalism

Journalism has long been defined through the informational, educational, and civic virtues of the practice and profession (McNair 2005; 2013); "the fuel, the raw material of public opinion" (McNair 2005: 26) that as a mediated reality is in charge of presenting the audience with "a version of reality, constructed according to rules, codes and conventions which we associate with journalistic discourse" (30, italics in original).[1] Although the idea of objectivity has long been discussed, disputed, and rejected in scholarship as well as practice (Ward 2004; González and Torres 2011), it remains that journalism achieves accountability and trustworthiness by adopting journalistic or ritualistic objectivity through protocols and principles of telling both sides of a story and ensuring facts are verified by two independent sources etc. Journalism, then, is able to appropriately inform and educate a citizenry that believes the journalistic reports to be true "regardless of their ideology or political bias" (McNair 2005: 32) and thereby produce a politically engaged and common public. This appeal to the largest number and desire to bring people together is what Géraldine Muhlmann (2008: 6) calls unifying journalisms, which "means honouring a pact with the public, which allows journalists to aspire to a collectively acceptable approach" (10). Unifying journalisms may have many faces, but common to them all is that "the gaze of the journalist says 'I' and 'we' at the same time" (23). Seeing through the journalists' eyes means adopting and rallying behind their perspective.

Public and participatory journalism (Glasser 1999; Singer et al. 2011) have intervened in professional journalistic practice with a style of journalism that engages more directly with its audience. Public journalism aims to make journalists activists on behalf of the process of self-governing (Glasser 1999: 3, 15), while participatory journalism refers to the interaction between professional and citizen journalists (Singer et al. 2011: 2). In this way, the collective perspective is sometimes produced through close interactions with local communities and may also present a more collaborative approach supported by technological possibilities that allow citizens to comment and discuss journalistic stories. Participatory journalism retains the journalistic desire to bring people together under a common understanding of the facts and is therefore still a unifying practice despite the citizen engagements. The dissemination of the universally accepted standards of journalistic frames and principles assumes a cultural resemblance and connection among the readers, viewers and listeners of journalistic news and features (Anderson 1991; Carey 1992). These soft structures of storytelling (Papacharissi

1 Parts of this theoretical discussion are previously published in Dindler and Blaagaard (2021).

2016) embedded in journalistic discourse are instrumental to the political understanding of the public. The resemblance among the community members is tested through journalism that presents the audience with a conflict through the resolve of which the common identity as the center of public space is reaffirmed (Muhlmann 2008: 28). The attempts at engaging the community from the ground up, still frame the news using journalistic principles and therefore rarely go beyond the assumption of cultural resemblance. In sum, despite ambitions of universal standards and inclusive and unbiased reports, journalistic principles and practices produce homogeneous communities of people.

The consequence of the journalistic ideology and practice rehearsed above is the topic of much scholarship. In his ground-breaking study of "how racism comes about and how it is perpetuated by the [white] Press," Teun van Dijk (2016 [1991]: 5, emphasis in original) asserts that racism is produced and reproduced discursively, socio-culturally and continuously through talk and text. Because the media and, mainly, the societal elites, who are the primary sources of the press, control this (re)production, they "may be seen as the major inspirators of and guardians of white group dominance" (6). Moreover, in van Dijk's earlier work on news journalism in The Netherlands and the United Kingdom, he finds that the media play a vital role in forming public opinions about minority groups. Thus, "the mass media provide an ideological framework for the interpretation of ethnic events" (7). These sentiments are echoed in work by Danish scholars, exploring the history of representation of visible minorities in the Danish national newspapers and tv-stations (Andreassen 2007), the discursive constructions of racist attitudes in the Danish public sphere (Hussain 2000), and migrant media consumption (Christiansen 2004). These studies position minorities in the role of 'a societal problem' and opposition to a national construction of 'us,' i.e., the white majority (van Dijk 2016 [1991]: 18; Andreassen 2007: 238). Indeed, the stereotypical, criminalized, and peripheral representation of minorities is an all too familiar and long-standing discourse found in communication and media research. For example, Stuart Hall et al. (1978) identify how news-making is an ideology-producing process that constructs newsworthiness according to a supposedly 'objective,' but white perspective; Edward Said (1997) writes about the political discourse of the everlasting Muslim stereotypes in the United States' news; and John Downing and Charles Husband (2015) argue that due to journalism's organizational structures it reproduces (negative) racial relations. Ariadne Matamoros-Fernández (2017) argues that editorial practices and policies continue to be embedded in libertarian ideologies that privilege a white and Western bias. These ideologies, she argues, are moreover extended into the digital realm. From this perspective, journalism is faced with challenges on organizational, discursive, and ideological levels. These challenges of journalistic reproduction of racist dis-

courses, ideology and organization are met with resistance and in turn produce the crisis in trust in journalistic practice.

3 From participation to technological critique

Focusing on the minority press in the United States, Juan González and Joseph Torres (2011) cover an extensive but mostly overlooked part of the journalistic profession. At the turn of the century, the mainstream journalistic profession – challenged by new election laws and wider-spread literacy – re-invented itself in the image of science and objectivity (Schudson 1978). However, underscored by the technological developments of the telegraph, which preferred short and easily digestible phrases, the re-invention resulted in a stereotypical representation of minorities and an exclusion of their voices (González and Torres 2011: 137–160). Meanwhile, the minority press contributed to the history of journalism in wide-ranging but parallel publications, which covered the communities and their political and social struggles for civil rights. The black press distributed its first publications in the 1820s. The newspapers and pamphlets produced news on a range of topics concerning black America, and they were far from all about enslavement and emancipation, writes Todd Vogel (2001: 1). Throughout the centuries, the black press debated diverse topics, such as "trade unions, the Spanish civil war, and cold war consumer culture." In this way, the black press serves to stitch African American experiences into the fabric of the white mainstream. Likewise, in Denmark, David Hamilton Jackson produced and edited *The Herald* in the Danish colonies in the Caribbean (Blaagaard 2018). On the pages of this newspaper, Jackson created a far-reaching community connected to the black press in the north while seeking social reforms akin to the reforms that developed in contemporary Denmark.

While these examples show the powerful social performativity of journalism, Allissa V. Richardson (2020) convincingly argues that in the current context, black journalistic community building takes place on X (formerly known as Twitter) by means of witnessing the implications of societal politics and policing. On Black Twitter, "black people are using smartphones to create video evidence for each other – especially in instances of documenting excessive police force," writes Richardson (2020: 17); however, "[they] are making these videos for external audiences too. They want to set the record straight in many cases." As Houston A. Baker (1994: 15, 31) puts it: "[. . .] there is a continuity in the development of black publicity rather than a recurrent novelty" that focuses on the critical and creative "efforts, strategies and resources for leadership and liberation." As the minority press

and the minority communities that follow continue to insist on having their voices heard and their significance recognized outside the bounded minority press, the white legacy media is challenged from yet another angle: While the reproduction of racial structures persists on the organizational, discursive and ideological levels, white legacy media is also facing the critical memory of minority communities disputing the very legitimacy of journalistic ideology and thus challenging its boundaries and throwing the journalistic practice into crisis. The postcolonial critique of journalistic practice and principles arising from minority communities cannot be seen independently from technological developments and not least their usage.

Arguably, the technological redeployment for the benefit of minority voices is a postcolonial practice. What was once a device for phone calls and connection becomes a tool for political acts of resistance. Rayvon Fouché (2006) writes that Black vernacular technological creativity is "the innovative engagements with technology based upon black aesthetics" (641). The creativity spans a continuum from weaker to stronger expressions. Fouché presents the Black vernacular technological creativity as redeployment in which technologies are being reinterpreted and used beyond their intended or imagined purpose. This is a critical approach to technology that through reappropriations and mash-up's rethinks technology's abilities. Reconception of Black vernacular technological creativity is expressed as a usage which subverts the purpose of the technology. I would characterize this approach as a deconstruction of technology because it shows the underlying abilities of the product, while also re-evaluating its potential. Finally, Fouché theorizes Black vernacular technological creativity as re-creation as a practice which brings about new material inventions on the basis of older and discarded technologies (642). This is the decolonization move in Fouché's theory. In re-creating technology, Black vernacular technological creativity not only reinvents or re-evaluates, but it fashions another and independently positioned technology. If we are to understand Fouché's use of the term technology in Foucauldian terms, Black vernacular technological creativity is broadened to encompass the everyday practices of African Americans (Fouché 2006: 640; Steele 2021: 32). "The move away from the object, to the person or the community, creates new opportunities to study the ways those marginalised engage technology within their everyday lives" (Fouché 2006: 650).

4 Notes on method

Considering the discussion above, this chapter explores the crisis in trust in journalistic practice and the resistance to racist discourse that are present in contemporary Danish journalism. The journalistic and social media coverage of the murder

on Bornholm in 2020, only a few weeks following the murder of George Floyd in the United States, presents us with an opportunity to gain insight and reflect on the discursive formations taking place. I am therefore deploying a discursive reading inspired by Stuart Hall (2002 [1997]) and supported by Gillian Rose (2016) in the cases of visual discourse. The analyses are based on articles in major Danish national newspapers published between 25. June and 31. August 2020. The articles were retrieved by use of the digital archive Infomedia using the search strings: "mord" (trans: murder) and "Bornholm." The digital archive search for legacy media articles produced 46 articles and opinion pieces on the murder on Bornholm. For the social media posts, the time frame was 25. June to 12. December 2020, i.e., from the first post announcing the murder of the Tanzanian-Danish man by link to a newspaper article and six months onwards. All manually retrieved 37 posts related and referred to the murder as the main topic and not only as a side note or example in relation to other issues. The expansion of the time frame when concerning social media posts was chosen to achieve more equity between the empirical data sets collected from respectively legacy and social media.

The selected media posts and articles make up a critical case study (Flyvbjerg 1991) of media discourse in postcolonial societies that will help answer the question of how postcolonial social movements and their citizen media bring light to the crisis of public engagement on race and racism in Danish society produced in journalistic discourse. While the data contain a variety of discussions and themes,[2] this chapter focuses on the discursive formation built around the contention between legacy and citizen media's participation and public engagement with the actors in the crime.

5 A Black man murdered or a tragic tiff among friends

From the beginning, social citizen media and legacy media chose to frame the news of the murder of the Tanzanian-Danish man on Bornholm very differently. BLM-DK's initial post about the murder (25.6.20) is a reference to a national newspaper introducing the linked article with an indignant comment ending with "GET YOUR KNEES OFF OUR NECKS." The comment presents the murder victim as a successful man, who had recently graduated from engineering school. "For

2 For further discussions of the legacy media articles see for instance Dindler and Blaagaard (2021) and for social media posts and discourses see Blaagaard (2023).

Black people or people of African descent it may provoke psychological or physical violence to succeed",[3] writes BLM-DK. The murder is to BLM-DK a part of structural racism that oppresses people of color and punishes them for being "TOO professional. That is not allowed either." Especially three posts by BLM-DK that announce a demonstration against the focus of the police investigations and the media's coverage (17.11.20; 19.11.20; 23.11.20) stand out. Similar to the initial post announcing the brutal murder with the words: "GET YOUR KNEES OFF OUR NECKS," these three posts feature text in English. One post references the last words of an African American man killed by the police in the United States, Eric Garner, before he lost consciousness and later died in a police chokehold in 2014: "I can't breathe." Both "GET YOUR KNEES OFF OUR NECKS" and "I can't breathe" are phrases that have since become associated with BLM demonstrations and resistance internationally. The phrases allude to the suffocating invisibility of racism, argues Apata (2020: 242), which "has shifted its target from the black body as the object of subjugation and oppression to air."

The second post invites people to join the demonstration and catches the followers' eyes with capital letters in yellow spelling out "A man was lynched in Bornholm." Lynching of course was the practice of white people terrorizing, torturing, and killing African Americans with impunity, particularly associated with the United States' white supremacy organization the Ku Klux Klan. Finally, the third post calls for attendees to the demonstration across a black and white photo of people on a bus holding placards with slogans such as: "Freedom's wheels are rolling" and "The law of the land is our demand." The photo is from a demonstration organized by the so-called Freedom Riders, who were part of the United States' Civil Rights Movement in the 60s. The words, concepts and images used in these posts all suggest that racism is a large-scale, transnational problem that is sustained through time and across space as an immovable structure. The images function as intertextual elements which allow BLM-DK to draw on the social imaginary of United States' historical fight against racism, police violence and the prison complex.

In contrast, when reporting on the murder legacy media reject the claims of racism by using Danish authorities to counter argue and by using headlines such as: "Chief prosecutor wants racism speculations about killing removed: – people should have the real picture" (TV2 26.6.20); issuing a "warning against a people's court" (BT 03.7.20); writing "the spokesperson for Black Lives Matter, Bwalya Sørensen, is convinced that the killing of a 28-year-old man on Bornholm earlier this week is racially motivated. The prosecutor, the police and the defense attor-

3 All comments originally in Danish are translated by the author.

neys say that there is nothing to suggest that" (Politiken 26.6.20); arguing that "chief prosecutor, Benthe Pedersen Lund, says that the killing probably happened because of a personal relationship between the two accused men and the victim that went horribly wrong" (DR 26.6.20); and quoting the chairing judge that it is "terrible that people are telling half-truths" (JP 4.7.20) and "the police don't see a racial motive – but online another theory rules" (JP 27.6.20). From these assertions in headlines, it emerges that in the eyes of the authorities, claims of racism is a local and personal 'conviction,' speculation, or a threat to institutionalized rights. Legacy media trump the claim in a collegial interview with a journalist, who wonders "why several [people] have chosen to read a political dimension into a speculative case such as this" (KD 13.8.20). Thus, it could be concluded that, to the journalist, race is political, subjective, and speculative and therefore out of bounds to journalistic factual representation. Moreover, while racism to BLM-DK is a transnational and trans-temporal issue of oppression and resistance to Danish legacy media it is a local and separate incident leading to coverage without much historical and geographical context.

The argument for racism defined by personal intent is carried out by using authority sources such as local police, defense attorneys, and chief prosecutor, as well as friends of the accused's (and later convicted) family. Journalists moreover spoke to researchers and professors of law, ethics, and statistical methods. Only one newspaper found it relevant to talk to a researcher of racism (Arbejderen 7.7.20) and two spoke to people of color from Bornholm with no relationship to the accused and convicted (Zetland 3.7.20; Berlingske 12.7.20). The discursive formation of racism as a field of contention and debate therefore forks into convictions and arguments aligned with legacy media on one side and citizen media on the other. Moreover, the bifurcation underscores the grounded perspectives of which words and sources to use. While legacy media attempted to undermine the credibility of activists such as BLM-DK, by letting them be explicitly contradicted by experts and by arguing for a decontextualized and hyper-local presentation of facts as they were presented by the authorities, BLM-DK connected the murder and a fair media coverage to a transnational struggle for civil rights, arguably pointing to a blind spot in the legacy media coverage.

6 Portrait of a murderer

Given the above, in the following I want to focus on how the accused and later convicted murderers were portrayed by legacy media and by BLM-DK. Taking a starting point in BLM-DK's posts on a possible racist motive for the murder (27.6.20; 28.6.20; 3.7.20), I start by highlighting the particularity of citizen media's

ability to communicate visually and with irony. Following I bring into the discussion three reports by national newspapers *Information* (2.7.20), *Politiken* (6.7.20) and *Berlingske* (12.7.20), which implicitly and explicitly respond to the critique leveled at legacy media by social media. In the articles, the reporters have traveled to the island and written feature articles all including discussions and analyses of the claims of racism and personal portraits of the accused. I argue that the newspapers reinstate a color-blindness through the principle of balanced reporting that erases experiences and perspectives.

Only a few days after the news broke about the murder, BLM-DK posted an image (27.6.20) of the leg of one of the accused, sporting a large tattoo with two swastikas and "white power" written in letters running almost from the knee to the ankles. The image was capped: "There is nothing to suggest a racist motive for the murder on Bornholm. The accused's leg." The first part of the caption referred to the official line, which had already been reported by legacy media. The second part connected the image to the accused and left it up to the viewer of the post to connect the dots laid out by BLM-DK. The following day (28.6.20) another post presented a mash-up of a still from the movie American History X in which the lead role is played by actor Edward Norton. The image is in black and white and shows Norton's character with spread-eagled arms and a smirk on his face. It is a still from the scene in which the character has just killed a Black man and the police are about to arrest him. Norton's character has a large tattoo of a swastika on his chest. In the background posters with the inscription "White Lives Matter" are superimposed onto the image. The image is capped "Bornholm authorities be like . . ." and in the image the text is repeated: "Nothing suggests a racist motive" and 'signed' "The media and authorities."

Along with posts of this kind, BLM-DK initiated a letter-writing campaign in which supporters could write newspaper editors and urge them to cover the potential racial perspective on the case. *Politiken* (6.7.20) mentions this campaign along with the critical remarks from public intellectuals, which made the paper take action. Under the subheading "media come-back," *Politiken* continues in the analysis by laying out what other reporters have found out about the accused. An article by *Information* (2.7.20) is referenced. The newspaper *Information* had gained access to documents and articles stating that the accused and their mother had mental health issues and were diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and ADHD. In lyrical tonality, the article says: "20 years ago a young woman moved to Bornholm. She was recently divorced, and with her she brought three sons." The article continues by narrating how the eldest son was fine and succeeded in life, but things were difficult for the two younger sons, who eventually were diagnosed with a variety of mental health issues and challenges. While the youngest brother was violent and volatile, the middle son, the article went on, told antise-

mitic jokes. Among other things, he knew the lyrics in their entirety to the racist song White Man Marches On, which features in American History X.

Despite these damning portrayals, *Information*'s reporter continues the report by talking to the chief prosecutor, who repeats the ambivalent assertion that there is a "personal motive" to the murder, which apparently rules out a racist motivation to murder. Also, a friend of the deceased and the murderer is interviewed further pushing back against claims of racism, arguing that the victim and the murderer were friends. The friend rather believes the swastikas, the racist and antisemitic jokes and the interest in far-right politics, were merely a ruse to be provoking and funny. She mourns two friends, she says, because she lost both the friend who was killed and the friend who killed him. This narrative of loss is repeated in the newspaper *Politiken*'s article (6.7.20), when another female friend of the accused says: "I have lost three very good friends, but I have no considerations for the two brothers and what they did. Michael [a pseudonym for the victim supplied by the newspaper] didn't deserve that, and not in the way it was carried out."

While the visual discourse of inked swastikas and white supremacy runs across the two media modalities, legacy media clearly make an effort to dig deeper and show a nuanced picture of the accused murderers. Behind this effort, arguably, lies the journalistic principle of showing both sides of a story, achieving balance in reporting if not objectivity, irrespective of the gruesome and visually supported facts of the case. Whereas BLM-DK's visual representation presented the issue with an irony, which assumed an audience in agreement and with the political persuasion that would allow them to understand the suggestions of media and procedural injustice against people of color, the strategy pursued by legacy media resulted in a discourse which at times teetered on the edge of blaming the victim. The lengths to which legacy media were willing to go to humanize the two brothers accused and later convicted of murder rested on their vested interest in supporting the initial editorial decision to not cover the story as a racist hate crime. Despite legacy media's interest in a common public, they produced an audience in agreement but in opposition to that of BLM-DK, de facto splitting the narrative along racial lines and thereby diminishing their own claim to objectivity and giving way to a crisis in trust.

7 Two sides to every story?

Legacy newspaper *Politiken* (6.7.20) explicitly claimed they spoke to no one who believed that it was a racist murder, however, *Berlingske* (12.7.20) and *Information*

(2.7.20) did. Still, all three newspapers underscore the social inequality on the island of Bornholm and the family's diagnoses: "A picture is emerging of a family characterized by social and mental problems, which have been allowed to escalate out of control" (Information 2.7.20). *Berlingske* (12.7.20) writes about "structural reasons for the violence" when referring to social issues rather than structural racism, and *Politiken* (6.7.20) quotes a friend of the murderers' family for saying:

> If we put all the pieces together, all we know, and we were sat at a party and had to tell the person next to us what had happened, then it would be about a family who should have had help. If we make it into a question of racism, nobody sees what may have driven the family to where it ended up. At present, I think it is wrong to use this case as documentation for racism, if it leads to covering up another important problem.

This quote speaks to the collective findings by the newspapers: Racism is political and debatable, while social inequality is a factual, reportable, and relatable issue. Racism is intentional, social inequality is structural. Telling the murderers' life story in details and interviewing their friends gives the story a human face and with it comes sympathy. Indeed, social inequality removes guilt from the perpetrator and places it at society's door. Arguably, however this is good and balanced reporting: showing both sides and keeping to the demonstrable facts. However, it only works if we are all unified in our understanding of perspective and import such as medical records and court documents, on which legacy media drew. In Danish society, racism is clearly not documented and put on record. Indeed, the journalistic process of drawing on institutional experts reaffirms their value and claim to a unifying perspective. As discussed in the theoretical framing section of this chapter, journalistic practices and principles are grounded in a desire to connect to a unified public through the means of factual reporting to which we may all agree. The principles are based on a decontextualized view in which facts cannot and should not be interpreted. Thus, in the discursive production of a unified public, homogenization of experience and perspective inevitably occur.

Citizen media have allowed alternative perspectives to emerge and be heard. BLM-DK's campaign to put the murder on the media agenda succeeded but also hit a wall of self-preservation tactics instigated by legacy media. Authority sources, focus on social issues rather than racism, and a particular linguistic tonality, which rendered racism "speculations" and "rumours" and social inequality a collective responsibility underscore the unified perspective. But inconsistencies in reporting remain. For instance, why is racism in the articles understood to be political and social inequalities not? Why would a mental health diagnosis and social struggles be implicit explanations for the crime committed in the articles and not racism? Why are the murderers simultaneously portrayed as friends of the victim and therefore not racists, and portrayed as friends of the victim and yet

inescapably his killers? The questions point to an unspoken collective experience, which – it turned out – was not shared by all. It is a collective experience in which racism is not present, but social problems, stigmatization of mental illness, and casual racism among friends, are. The questions need interpretations of context and culture to be answered or to be avoided in reporting, which are qualities Danish legacy reporters evidently did not possess in this case.

8 Concluding notes

Postcolonial social movements and their citizen media brought light to a crisis of public engagement on race and racism in Danish society and produced in journalistic discourse, by pushing back against a journalistic coverage which did not take all citizens and residents into account. The response from legacy media resulted in a loss of trust in their ability to encompass the differing experiences of life in postcolonial societies. Arguably, the loss of trust produces a loss of inclusion and inevitably a loss of the unified public. This crisis of journalistic representation and practice in postcolonial societies is grounded in journalistic practices that count on cultural resemblance to report on and simultaneously create a common society and politics through discourse. Social movements and their citizen media produce alternative publics of postcolonial resistance which bring journalistic crisis to the fore. However, if citizens lose their trust in the fact that they are encompassed in the public which is produced by legacy media, citizen media lose their ability to stitch differing and alternative experiences into the fabric of the white mainstream media and publicity – the crisis is then expanded beyond the media to public life itself. In light of this, the case of the murder on Bornholm and the following media coverage and critique shows us the importance of inclusive and race-critical media. Moreover, the case illustrates that while inclusiveness may be common-sense to some Western media in postcolonial societies, others – such as Denmark and Danish journalism – have a long way to go.

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Ana Cristina Mendes

"Crisis" and Planetary Entanglements: Ai Weiwei's *Pequi Tree* and John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*

Abstract: This chapter examines two visual artworks: Ai Weiwei's 32-meter iron sculpture *Pequi Tree* (2018–20) and John Akomfrah's three-screen video installation *Vertigo Sea* (2015). It evaluates how these pieces encourage contemplation on the planetary "crisis" and concepts related to the Anthropocene, such as the Plantationocene. This chapter endeavors to further explore the relationship between postcolonial theory and the idea of "crisis" by emphasizing these artivists' impact on a new politics and aesthetics centered on planetary consciousness. *Pequi Tree* by Ai and *Vertigo Sea* by Akomfrah are presented as works of artistic-intellectual and activist expression that boldly speak truth to power from within the museum and gallery spaces. To frame the analysis in the context of the artivists' engagement with the planetary "crisis," I first discuss the idea of "the contemporary" and its connection to postcoloniality and the interconnected "crises" of the present, which intertwine with the Anthropocene. Then, I focus on adaptation as a creative approach to address representational and epistemic violence in the visual realm by continually transforming authorized, official "sources" and projecting the past into our understanding of current "crises."

Keywords: Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Anthropocene, Plantationocene, artivism, crisis

1 Introduction

Reflecting on the "deep history" of climate change, Dipesh Chakrabarty (see also the chapter by Jesse van Amelsvoort in this volume) notes how "[t]he mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use," and that "[m]ost of our freedoms so far have been energy-intensive" (2009: 208). The "freedoms" that resulted from European urbanization and industrialization in the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries continue to be achieved through the global-scale exploitation of human labor and resource extraction that characterized the Atlantic slave trade, imperialism, and colonialism. The "deep history" of anthropogenic climate change has been identified as corresponding to the geological epoch of the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Crutzen 2002). This chapter presents an

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analysis of two visual artworks, Ai Weiwei's thirty-two meter iron sculpture *Pequi Tree* (2018–20) and John Akomfrah's three-screen video installation *Vertigo Sea* (2015), considering the ways in which they invite a reflection on the planetary "crisis" and Anthropocene-related concepts such as the Plantationocene (Moore 2013; Tsing 2015; Haraway 2016; Moore et al. 2019).

Based on Chakrabarty's idea that our "freedoms" remain resource-intensive and Rob Nixon's (2014) contention that "[w]e may all be in the Anthropocene but we're not all in it in the same way," the analysis of Ai and Akomfrah's artworks aims to further the conceptualization of the relations between postcolonial theory and the idea of "crisis" by highlighting their contribution to a new politics and aesthetics based on planetary awareness (Mbembe 2020). Ai's *Pequi Tree* and Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* are presented as artistic-intellectual and activist works, voicing their creators' truth-to-power speech, or *parrēsia* (Foucault 2010), from the museum and the gallery space. To frame the analysis in light of the artivists' (Nossel 2016) engagement with the planetary "crisis," I begin by addressing the idea of "the contemporary," linking it with our condition of postcoloniality and the "crises" of the present moment, which intertwine with the Anthropocene. Then I turn to adaptation as a creative strategy to play out representational and epistemic violence in the visual field, ceaselessly transforming authorized, official "sources" and projecting the past into our experience of the "crises" of the contemporary.

2 The Anthropocene and the "crises" of the contemporary

In the essay "What Is the Contemporary?" on the meaning and time of contemporariness, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben notes the importance of speaking from an "untimely" position concerning our own moment:

> Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands [. . .]. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time [. . .]. Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. (2009: 40–41)

For Agamben, the loathing of their own time by "those who are truly contemporary" – while acknowledging these individuals are *of* their time and cannot escape it, as they are not separable from it – typifies their rare, singular ability to

see their time (2009: 41). "The contemporary," Agamben states, "is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him" (2009: 45). The "truly contemporary" is "struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time"; the "truly contemporary" responds to the exigencies of contemporariness in that this darkness of the present demands courage and insight as it "infinitely distances itself from us" (2009: 45). Toward the end of the essay, reflecting on how our investigation of the past responds to the interrogations we subject our present to, Agamben summarizes his argument on what it means to be a contemporary:

> This means that the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to "cite it" according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond. It is as if this invisible light that is the darkness of the present casts its shadow on the past, so that the past, touched by this shadow, acquires the ability to respond to the darkness of the now. (2009: 53)

In the sense of the contemporary described above, Akomfrah and Ai are "truly contemporary" artivists and public intellectuals who have honed "the ability to respond to the darkness of the now" through their artwork.[1] Their visual stories attempt to "answer the most basic question: 'What's going on?'" (a question that Lawrence Grossberg sees as the political role of cultural theory [1998: 67]). Akomfrah and Ai's art "cannot not respond" to the exigencies of the contemporary moment – its "urgencies," "emergencies," and "crises," such as those of the Anthropocene.

The narrative of the Anthropocene advanced in P. J. Crutzen's 2002 article "Geology of Mankind" – which contends that the First Industrial Revolution in Europe and the United States led to a large-scale human impact on the Earth's landscape, mainly in the form of climate change, and as such can be understood as marking the beginning of a new geological epoch – has been critiqued for the narrowness of its timeline and even denounced as not only "analytically defective, but also inimical to action" (Malm and Hornborg 2014: 67). Alternative ways of theorizing the Anthropocene have been put forward, such as the concept of the "Capitalocene" (the "age of capital") and the "Plantationocene" (the "age of planta-

1 On postcolonial public intellectuals, see the special issue of *Transnational Screens*, "Screening Postcolonial Intellectuals: Cinematic Engagements and Postcolonial Activism," edited by Sandra Ponzanesi and Ana Cristina Mendes (2022). On Ai as a public intellectual, see Ponzanesi (2019: 216) and Mendes and Ai (2022: 160–161), and Zimanyi (2022: 142–143); on Akomfrah, see Harvey (2022).

tions") (Moore 2013; Tsing 2015; Haraway 2016; Moore et al. 2019). As Donna Haraway puts it in her alternative conceptualization of the new geological epoch of the Anthropocene, the boundary event of the "Chthulucene" captures "a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (2016: 2). McKenzie Wark phrases it this way: "there's a widespread sense that the world, whatever it is, and whatever it may be, is in a lot of trouble. That is the elephant in the room. The most common name for this at the moment is the Anthropocene" (2020: 4).

Most thinkers of the Anthropocene agree that the roots of the climate change "crisis" and environmental displacement, especially in countries of the global south that face intense logging, mining, and pollution, lie in the collusion between capitalism and colonialism, and especially extractivism – the historical process of extracting natural resources led by western empires (Gómes-Barris 2017), materialized, for example, in multiple forms of past and present plantations. Describing our contemporary moment with the Anthropocene-related terms "Capitalocene" and "Plantationocene" aims to capture the extent to which the cause of modern environmental devastation lies in capitalist and colonial extractive systems that have produced enduring racial hierarchies and wealth inequalities, exploitative labor structures, and monoculture development. Haraway observes that the term "Plantationocene" was coined collectively during a talk at the University of Aarhus in 2014 to encompass "the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor" (2016: 206). According to Haraway, for these authors, the Plantationocene has been operating since at least the seventeenth century, and its contemporariness resides in that it "continues with ever greater ferocity in globalized factory meat production, monocrop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like oil palm for multispecies forests and their products that sustain human and nonhuman critters alike" (2016: 206).

To some extent, the multiplication and iteration of "the Anthropocene" and related terms exemplify the "epistemic accelerationism" characterizing current posthuman knowledge (Braidotti 2019). As Wark sees it, our conjuncture is characterized by a knowledge "crisis," as the Anthropocene places specific demands on knowledge production, possibly amounting to a "global crisis of applied knowledge" that calls for "work[ing] out collaboratively, as a common task, some practices of putting parts of the elephant as we sense and know them next to one another" (2020: 4). Framing it in a context of the instrumentalization of discourses of "crisis" and "emergency," and drawing on Janet Roitman's (2013) idea of crisis as a narrative device, Wark underscores the need for taking on a "common task," on various fronts, in the face of an Anthropocene-associated knowledge "crisis":

> crisis focuses attention, but it can short-circuit the common task of producing a knowledge of this world of the Anthropocene. There's a rush to rename it, and in renaming it, call it something that makes it the special property of a particular way of knowing the world, to the exclusion of all others. It becomes an alibi for exacerbating the problem of knowing the world, at a time when not knowing is itself a key part of the problem. (2020: 6–7)

The "darkness of the now," the iniquity of the Anthropocene, which Ai and Akomfrah discern and convey through their artworks *Pequi Tree* and *Vertigo Sea* is complex and multiplicitous. To work towards a "common task," as Wark puts it, to tackle the "darkness" of the Anthropocene entails disjunctures in ways of seeing "the now" and different ways of being in and out of time, to use Agamben's expressions. Echoing Foucault, he claims that "the entry point to the present necessarily takes the form of an archeology; an archeology that does not, however, regress to a historical past, but returns to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living" (2009: 51). Agamben uses the term "dis-chrony" to account for the non-coincidence that he sees as integral to contemporariness: "*that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*" (2009: 41; emphasis added). Instead of looking at the past while being in the present (diachrony), the method of "those who are truly contemporary" is to extract moments from history so that they can intervene in the present moment, bringing the past to act in the contemporary (dis-chrony).

3 Postcoloniality and the poietic work of adaptation

Grounding Ai and Akomfrah's artwork in our condition of postcoloniality is key to understanding their artistic-intellectual intervention in the "crises" of the contemporary moment, particularly the "darkness of the now" of the Anthropocene, its world-ecological crises and the *longue durée* of colonial resource extraction. To speak of the long histories of colonial extractivism and its aftereffects in postcoloniality is to acknowledge that the meaning of the root word "colonial" in the term "postcoloniality" is contingent on the terms of the definition being used. "Postcoloniality" is not a temporal signpost but a critical term; it signifies a position of intellectual inquiry and a theoretical intervention, not a periodizing claim, and is based on an enduring state of coloniality, unapologetically entrenched in global, late capitalism and sustained by racializing assemblages (Weheliye 2014). When using the term "postcoloniality," it must be acknowledged that it foregrounds the colonial experience, which has been seen as problematic, even "dangerous" in postcolonial theory (Chennells 1999: 109). At the same time, "postcoloniality" di-

rects our attention to the enduring "coloniality of power" (Quijano 2010), which requires a disc-chronic perspective, to return to Agamben's concept. Likewise, the understanding of coloniality's *longue durée* aligns with Aníbal Quijano's decolonial thesis on the "coloniality of power," or "modernity/coloniality," which seeks to extend the notion of coloniality beyond the official chronological end of colonial rule. Accounting for the continuity of colonial structures and systems, Quijano's idea of "coloniality of power" grew precisely from a dissatisfaction with the prefix "post" in postcoloniality as signifying the end of a historical process, the "coming after" moment of colonization.

Colonialism is, in many ways, ongoing. Postcolonial studies has been expanding the temporal and spatial scope of coloniality at least since the 1980s, demonstrating that the resistance to European colonial power structures that we associate with the postcolonial as a periodizing marker was already taking shape beyond the strictly defined historical period of political colonization and decolonization (i.e. when colonists administered colonial subjects until the event of political independence). The intellectual project of postcolonial studies has been to examine the lingering legacies of colonialism on both the colonizer and colonized, from the first moment of colonial contact, not just in a historical, clearly marked moment of post-independence. For example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty observed that "colonization has been used to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called the 'Third World'" (1984: 333). Colonization instituted the power structures of colonialism; coloniality is the expansion of economic, political, and epistemic colonization. For Ashis Nandy, colonialism "represents a certain cultural continuity" (1989: 2) – extending the timeframe of political colonization toward colonization as an epistemic project, that continuity is the condition of postcoloniality or coloniality's *longue durée*.

As a creative strategy, adaptation allows for emphasizing coloniality's *longue durée*. Adaptation is always already an iteration and revisiting of the past. One of adaptation's fundamental modes of epistemic redress is its invitation to reread and resignify the past – to bring the past into the present, often in dis-chronic ways, to write from previously unheard perspectives as a way of thinking-acting in the present. Thinking-acting about the present means thinking about the issues that the present projects into the past – precisely the work of postcolonial studies – which emerged out of the need to create knowledge on and intervene in the present systemic inequalities arising out of the past of European colonialism. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) influentially explained the postcolonial work of adaptation through the idea of "the English book." For Bhabha, the postcolonial encounter with the "signifier of authority, the English book" generates meaning because of the postcolonial dissension-desire to rewrite it to disempower the "original" co-

lonial trauma.[2] The image of colonial difference "can neither be 'original' – by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it – nor identical – by virtue of the difference that defines it"; as such, and paradoxically, "the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (1994: 107).

What does adaptation *do* – theoretically, epistemologically, and ontologically – in contemporary image making and circulation? If adaptation as product, process, and hermeneutic is both ubiquitous and protean, it is theoretically unstable and challenging to pin down, given the various definitions and debates that have accrued to it. Adaptation's theoretical instability produces its greatest strengths. The process of adaptation has come to have almost as many descriptors as theorists, academics, creators, readers, and audiences. Descriptors for adaptation can be appropriation, incorporation, transposition, re-situating, re-voicing, and, as described by Lucy Fischer, "translation, performance, dialogue, recycling, ventriloquizing, or decomposing" (2013: 7). Linda Hutcheon points to three distinct but interrelated dimensions of adaptation: a product, a process, and a type of intertextuality reliant on reception (2006: 8). The first dimension corresponds to adaptation as a formal entity or product, according to which the adaptation is "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work" across media, genres, or contexts; the second relates to the process of creation, given that adaptation involves (re-)interpretation; the third underscores the relevance of processes of reception for adaptation (Hutcheon 2006: 12–13). Hutcheon's tridimensional definition of adaptation discloses a tension between the ontological and the epistemological, between the referent of the adaptation and adaptation as a site of knowledge. Adaptation is a key mode of production and circulation of world images; it is a form of knowledge production, of creating new images of the world – of *poietic praxis*. Representation constitutes and co-constructs the world as we see it (Hall 1997). The world we see – social imagery – is shaped through texts. Through this social imagery, "we perceive the 'worlds,' the 'lived realities' of the others, and imaginary reconstruct their lives and ours into intelligible 'world-of-the-whole,' some 'lived totality'" (Hall 1977: 341). The poietic action of broadening the spectrum of representation is one of the many things adaptation *does*: it is part of the *work of* adaptation in postcoloniality.

2 Leela Gandhi similarly noted that the "task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past [. . .] discloses a relationship of reciprocal antagonism and desire between colonizer and colonized" (1998: 4).

In adaptation, engaging in the tradition of *imitatio* to establish an affiliation can serve as an act of *poiesis* ("to create" – the act of creative transformation, of bringing into being that which was not there before). The term *poiesis* tends to be associated with poetry and other forms of verbal cultural making. Still, *poiesis* can be brought into contact with both *praxis* and *imitatio* (in the rhetorical sense of enacting a practice of affiliation) to understand the cultural work of visual adaptation. *Praxis* ("to practice," "to embody" – the act of materializing and representing that which already existed) connects *imitatio* and *poiesis*. This connection of *poiesis* and *imitatio* with *praxis* runs counter to the Aristotelian philosophical tradition that instead links *praxis* to *theoria*, a move that privileges *praxis* over *poiesis*, setting the two in opposition to one another. A revision of an Aristotelian oppositional configuration, attuned to the poietic processes of visual adaptation and resignification, contributes to understanding how adaptation operates in the public sphere and opens possibilities for social transformation and justice. In this respect, Ai and Akomfrah's poietic adaptation in *Pequi Tree* and *Vertigo Sea* push postcoloniality into the public sphere, making visible its various forms of violence (physical, representational, or epistemic) and shaping new worldviews.

Ai and Akomfrah's adaptations are endowed with *parrēsiastic* power, or the power to speak truth to power. Drawing on the ancient Greek practice of free or "truthful" speech, Michel Foucault defines *parrēsia* as a kind of truth-telling necessary for democratic life in the polis (2010: 155). Yet *parrēsia* entails a personal risk, as speaking truth to power is a direct critique of authority. Among visual artists, celebrity artivists have created for themselves a unique platform for parrēsia – the "certain superiority which is also an ambition and effort to be in a position such that one can direct others" (2010: 155) – which connects to having a voice that can be heard more loudly and exert more impact and influence than others. Foucault writes: "For there to be democracy, there must be *parrēsia*; for there to be *parrēsia* there must be democracy" (2010: 155). Yet one of the paradoxes of *parrēsia* is that, while "this true discourse is what will enable democracy to exist, and to continue to exist," it is democracy itself that enables truth-telling (2010: 184). At the same time, the enlightened elite Foucault examines in ancient Greek democracy does not overlap seamlessly with the role and position of contemporary celebrity artivists such as John Akomfrah and, to an even greater extent, Ai Weiwei (here, it is essential to recognize these artivists' privileged access to prestigious art exhibition venues).

4 Ai Weiwei's *Pequi Tree* as crisis-artwork

> I think that an artist's, or person's, concern with attitudes of existence is always related to politics. (Ai 2011: 239)

Living with and through various "crises" as a global, intertwined community is what Achille Mbembe (2021) describes as "planetary entanglement." From a markedly post-humanist perspective, Haraway (2016) pronounces this entanglement as "staying with the trouble," an invocation of tactical optimism and un-melancholic differentiation between the failures of our societies and the failure of theory (connected, undoubtedly, to earlier "crises" of theory and post-theory [Latour 2004; Felski 2008]). Ours seems to be a transitional moment, marked by a perpetual sense of "crisis" and the polarizing dynamics of groupness. On the one hand, this moment is characterized by a sense of an absence of emergency, as if we have been anaesthetized by being surrounded by multiple "crises," and, on the other, increasing uncertainty about how to describe, analyze, and respond to "what's going on" (Grossberg 1998: 67). This ambivalence reflects anxieties concerning whether the intellectual tools and practices of knowledge, in areas such as cultural studies and postcolonial studies, are sufficient and adequate to come to terms with "what's going on." Moreover, these anxieties are not only theoretical, related to the urgency of developing new intellectual practices and widening the existing conceptual frames in the humanities and social sciences, but also connected with a perceived failure to generate adequate political and aesthetic responses to the planetary "crisis."

Planetary entanglement is a continuing concern for the artivist Ai. The iron sculpture *Pequi Tree* (Figs. 1 and 2) is a form of poietic adaptation as visual artivism of a (now) dead Brazilian tree belonging to the endangered *Caryocar brasiliense* species endemic to the relentlessly deforested Atlantic Forest. *Pequi Tree* is a multi-layered work, both in terms of the construction process (the actual physical layers that had to be balanced to create the artwork) and the layers of "deep history" (Chakrabarty 2009: 212–213) that it evokes. Arguing against a "shallow" history of the relationship between human beings and climate change, Chakrabarty underscores: "Without such knowledge of the deep history of humanity it would be difficult to arrive at a secular understanding of why climate change constitutes a crisis for humans" (2009: 213). The historical shift from wild, untamed, "natural" spaces to "cultured" spaces, cultivated by humans via agriculture and enclosed in plantations or plantation-like spaces, is hence central to the concept of the "Plantationocene" (Moore 2013; Tsing 2015; Moore et al. 2019). Being aware of this natural-cultural shift is also important to understanding the role of the tree in the western cultural imagination: the tree, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari remarked before the more recent theorization on the Plantationocene, "has dominated Western real-

ity and all of Western thought," which entails, for the philosophers, "a special relation to the forest, and deforestation" in the West (1987: 181).

Radical imagination is crucial in the face of planetary "crisis." Writing on the interdependence of all living creatures, Mbembe argues that the "history of [humans'] entanglement with multiple other species requires that the reality of objects be rethought beyond human meanings and uses, in their 'thingness' and in their 'animate materiality'" (2021: 19). Responding to planetary entanglement is an ontological-ethical principle, at which the title of Ai's exhibit, *Entrelaçar/Intertwine*, at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art and the Serralves Park (July 23, 2021 to July 9, 2022) explicitly hints.[3] *Pequi Tree* forges a link between "crisis" and the radical possibilities afforded by imagination and critique, asking us to reflect on our condition in postcoloniality as "mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (Haraway 2016: 1). Not only are the ideas of entanglement and interlocal connectivity, of mutualism and "mutuophagia,"[4] key here, but so is that of mortality, of "living and dying." The latter surfaces in how the specter of a dead Brazilian pequi tree is reattached through various technologies of copy (molding, casting, coating, photographing, and filming) in both the sculpture *Pequi Tree* and its companion documentary film *Tree* (2021).

Pequi Tree is the copy, the adaptation of a tree that was both living and dying: a hollow dead tree inhabited by several living species standing in Trancoso, Bahia, a state in eastern Brazil, and now is no more as it collapsed in 2020 following heavy rain. *Tree* meticulously documents, for around four-and-a-half hours, the process of adapting a tree from the Atlantic Forest, painstakingly developed across continents so that *Pequi Tree* could be exhibited in Portugal, in a museum in Porto. The "original" tree, the thing now non-existent in its natural form as a material tree, was adapted (as process and product) through the *poietic praxis* of technological reproducibility (Benjamin 2003). In this respect, the casting of Ai's own body for the plaster sculpture *Two Figures* (2018) is another adaptation: the re-enactment of the process of casting the tree, which is almost a photographic process.

In our new conjuncture (Hall 1996: 230), the double act of interpretation of the old (or the past) and creation of newness (or the future) involved in the process of adaptation (Hutcheon 2006: 25) can be a way of "staying with the trouble in real and particular places and times" (Haraway 2016: 3), living with and through

3 See my interview with Ai on the occasion of his 2021–2022 exhibit (Mendes and Ai 2022).

4 The exhibit *Entrelaçar/Intertwine* also included seven sculptures entitled *Iron Roots* (2015–2021) and the photograph *Mutuophagia* (2018).

Figure 1: Moulding the "original" pequi tree in Trancoso, Bahia, in 2017 (still from Ai Weiwei's 2021 documentary film *Tree*). Image courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio.

crisis and entanglement. To engage in reimagining, or imaginative transformation, conversion, revision, resignification, salvaging, and recovery – strategies of adaptation, or the ability to adapt the form according to the media available and considering different contexts – is part of "learning to be truly present" (2016: 1). Adaptation can help unleash generative possibilities, and even install in us the sense of urgency required to act. To adapt Haraway's expression "staying with the trouble," while circling back to Agamben's idea of the contemporary, staying with the "crisis" of the Anthropocene asks that we respond to "that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living" (Agamben 2009: 51).

5 The "Anthroposcenic" seascapes of John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*

Created for the 2015 Venice Biennale, *Vertigo Sea* (Fig 3), Akomfrah's visual and acoustic artistic manifesto on the planetary "crisis," was inspired by a radio interview with a group of Nigerian migrants who had survived a journey across the Mediterranean, despite facing numerous challenges and obstacles such as harsh weather conditions, limited resources, and the risk of being intercepted by authorities for attempting an illegal crossing. The installation becomes a historiographic

Figure 2: Installation of Ai Weiwei's *Pequi Tree* (2018–20; cast iron; 32.4 x 11.5 x 9.8 m) at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto, for the exhibit *Entrelaçar/Intertwine* (July 23, 2021, to July 9, 2022). Image courtesy of Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art and Ai Weiwei Studio.

project, seeing the vast numbers of refugees as voice-less in the historiography about the refugee "crisis" and drawing a line between this epistemic violence (Spivak 1988) and the violences of the European colonial past that witnessed the Zong slave ship massacre of 1781, in which 133 enslaved people were thrown overboard into the Caribbean Sea to claim their insurance value as lost cargo. Akomfrah's 48-minute film, exhibited on three screens, invites a reflection on the legacies of Atlantic imperial expeditions and Black enslavement as ongoing racial capitalism (Robinson 2000), the remnants of the violence inextricable from the history of Euro-Atlantic modernity and, specifically, "an Atlantic cycle of accumulation" (Baucom

2005: 32), and the refugee "crisis" through images of individuals risking their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean on crowded vessels because they have been designated as "illegals" or "irregular." *Vertigo Sea* conjures a transtemporal necropolitical continuum (Mbembe 2003) through the sequencing of recent news-like images of a capsized boat overcrowded with "illegal" or "irregular" migrants in the Mediterranean, glaciers melting and rising seas, archival footage of nuclear testing and whaling, and a sort of oceanic *tableau vivant* featuring Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797), the formerly enslaved Black person who became a key figure in the British abolitionist movement.

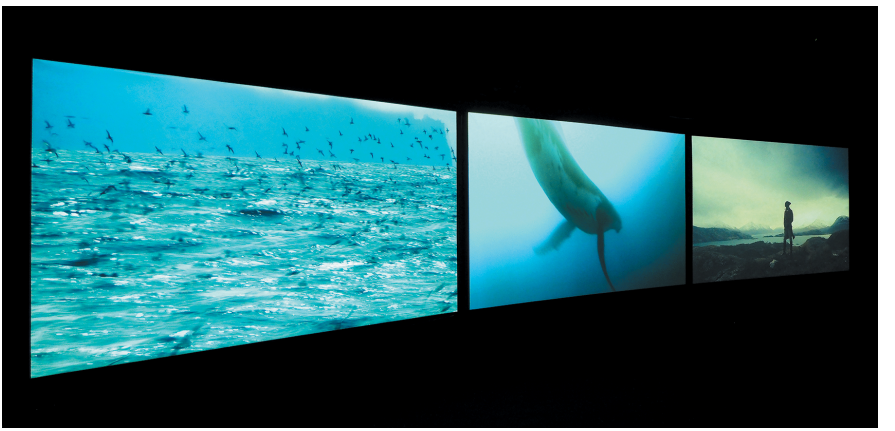

Figure 3: John Akomfrah, *Vertigo Sea*, 2015. Three-channel HD color video installation, 7.1 sound, 48 minutes 30 seconds (Artloveruk, CC BY-SA 4.0) (still).

The "Anthroposcenic" seascapes[5] of *Vertigo Sea* offer an aesthetic reflection on human beings' relationship to the sea, specifically relating to colonization, migration, and climate change. To compose these seascapes, Akomfrah adapts elements of sea narratives in various media. Adaptations "can take an activist stance toward their source novels, inserting them into a much broader intertextual dialogism" (Stam 2000: 64). Akomfrah's use of sea narratives (Mathieson 2016) builds on this dialogical process: he adapts literary texts such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and Heathcote Williams' epic poem *Whale Nation* (1988), re-enacting sections of these works. In turn, Melville was influenced by

5 I am deploying the concept of "Anthroposcenic" (Matless 2017) to reflect on the effective changes in the conditions of visuality in the Anthropocene (Davis and Turpin 2015).

Turner's seascapes and whaling representations (Wallace 1992). The "Anthroposcenic" seascapes of Vertigo Sea, adapted mainly from Melville and Turner, aesthetically convey the entanglements between colonial dispossession, such as the extractive economies of Black enslavement and the cruelty of the whaling industry (an extractivist precursor to fossil fuels), and the contemporary planetary "crises" of illegalized migration and climate change.

Akomfrah's installation reframes and re-engages with Turner's representations of Black enslavement and colonialism to make visible their legacies in the uneven and global effects of the post-industrial anthropogenic footprint, such as human precarity, eco-migration, and environmental displacement. Turner's response to the "end of nature" (McKibben 1989), i.e. to the imposing urbanization and industrialization of nineteenth-century Europe, is manifest in the paintings *"Now for the Painter" (Rope) – Passengers Going on Board ("Pas de Calais")* (first exhibited in 1827) and *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)* (1840). Human vulnerability, a recurring theme in Turner, was often expressed in tempestuous seascapes. *The Slave Ship*, in particular, was a reaction to the atrocities of the Atlantic slave trade, amplifying the moral outrage against Black enslavement, then at the height of controversy in Great Britain.[6] Inspired by the case of the Zong slave ship massacre and its subsequent legal battle, the painting was first exhibited in 1840, fifty-nine years after the massacre. Turner's use of color, shape, and form accentuates the dramatic and harrowing dimensions of the atrocity.

In the "Anthroposcenic" seascapes of *Vertigo Sea*, migration and climate change are entangled: migration has brought on climate change, and climate change has brought on forced, illegalized migration and environmental displacement. The installation asks us to meditate on the intertwined histories of conquest and colonization of lands and people, but also of other forms of life for profit, greed, and rapacious exploitation in the Anthropocene. The "deep history" (Chakrabarty 2009: 212–213) of these seascapes is that of the centuries-old, large-scale translocal interactions and transactions and awareness of the Other that Arjun Appadurai refers to, facilitated by "the long-distance journey of commodities (and of the merchants most concerned with them) and of travelers and explorers of every type," but also warfare and religious conversion (1996: 27). They reflect a historically layered, adaptive and cross-media reading of the centuries-old sea-

6 The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 abolished the slave trade in the British Empire. Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, the Quaker social reformer and advocate for the abolition of enslavement in the British colonies, published the controversial book *The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy* in 1838.

scapes inhabited by sailors and merchants, enslaved and indentured laborers, soldiers and "discoverers," migrants and refugees, tourists and sojourners.

On the transmutations and transtemporal continuities of racial capitalism today, Christina Sharpe (2016) draws a persuasive analogy between Black enslavement (with specific reference to the experience of the slave ship) and global illegalized migration that expands our understanding of how enslavement remains encoded, albeit transformed – a specter even – in the neoliberal discourse about the refugee "crisis." In this respect, Jacques Derrida's (2006) concept of the specter strengthens a parallel between the refugee "crisis" and the specters of European colonialism; the latter contracts the relation of life and death into a central instance of "camp-thinking," an exclusive formation of subjectivity that incites hostility between self and other and undergirds racialized violence. For Sharpe, there is a transtemporal continuum where "the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and refugee" (2016: 21).[7] In this light, Akomfrah's focus on the refugee "crisis" in *Vertigo Sea* highlights a continuum of necropolitical violence, part of the ongoing wake of transatlantic enslavement. Still, as Yogita Goyal queries in her scrutiny of theoretical transtemporal analogies between Black enslavement and the refugee "crisis" – in other words, between the water deaths in the context of the Middle Passage and the present-day Mediterranean: "Does seeing the contemporary refugee as a specter of the Atlantic slave summon up the ethical claim of the past on us?" (2017: 544). *Vertigo Sea* compellingly draws attention to the danger of erasure from the collective memory of those necropolitical regimes. Yet, Akomfrah's deployment of a "logic of analogy" also asks us to consider the limits of transtemporality in the conflation of, on the one hand, "past and present," and, on the other, "a hegemonic global north and a perpetually marginalized global south" (Goyal 2017: 544).

6 Conclusion

> It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (Haraway 2016: 12)

7 Before Sharpe, Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic*, had already deployed a ship metaphor to evoke the Middle Passage and represent the Black experience of forced transatlantic movement: "The image of the ship," Gilroy argues, is "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (1993: 4).

If we return to Agamben's idea of contemporariness and layer it onto Stuart Hall's idea of "unity in difference" (Slack 1996: 122–124), a unity formed by articulation, the "truly contemporary" artivists Ai and Akomfrah usher in a dialectical relationship between the material context and the ideas, concepts, theories, and art forms that arise out of it and respond to it – a dialectical relationship that, as Hall describes, is a constitutive one (1992: 13). Here, the relevance and "strength" of postcolonial theory "is that it provides us with a critical framework that validates the local epistemologies necessary for the formulation of global ethics" (Rao and Wasserman 2007: 34). In this framework, the poietic work of the adaptive artworks *Pequi Tree* and *Vertigo Sea* is vital. The process of adaptation is one of constantly rereading "source" texts regarding their moments of reception and is, therefore, a site where "resistant imaginations" (Medina 2013) are possible. As adaptations that seek epistemic justice and serve as artivist acts of *parrēsia*, *Pequi Tree* and *Vertigo Sea* intervene in public discourse, influencing that discourse by responding to the contemporary "crises" of the Anthropocene and the migrant and refugee "crisis."

As the analysis of these artworks illustrated, adaptation can highlight the transtemporal continuums between the violences exerted on the others of Euro-Atlantic modernity and imperial accumulation, and extractivism on the others of the Mediterranean refugee "crisis" (a continuum and analogy that, nevertheless, need problematizing). At the same time, adaptation voices possibilities that are needed, desired, and might be imaginatively conveyed and politically realized in the face of multiple "crises." Adaptation can be a vehicle for redress by shaping public knowledge and pushing hidden forms of representational and epistemic violence into the public sphere – a strategy of epistemic justice and restitution. On the epistemological and political work of adaptation, the alternative epistemologies and hermeneutics circulated through adaptive artworks in the public sphere shape the political context into which, and because of which, they emerge. *Pequi Tree* and *Vertigo Sea* exemplify this epistemological and political work of adaptation in postcoloniality, encouraging us to think in terms of "deep history" (Chakrabarty 2009: 212–213) and a "thick present" (Haraway 2016: 1). Here, speaking directly to the exigencies of the present political moment, adaptation brings forth, through *poiesis* and in line with the critical tradition of *parrēsia*, an indictment of the entangled "crises" of our contemporary moment.

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