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Introduzione

Cartografie delle marginalità

Giuseppe Capalbo (Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata, IT)
Carla Fusco (Università per Stranieri di Siena; Università degli Studi della Tuscia, IT)
Carla Tempestoso (Università della Calabria, IT)

Il terzo numero di *Margins/Marges/Margini* si articola attorno a una riflessione sulla relazione tra identità, corporeità e spazialità, dove le marginalità sono assunte a categorie privilegiate per osservarne lo sviluppo rizomatico. Esse non sono soltanto il tema che accomuna i contributi, ma ciò che ne definisce la natura interdisciplinare; non a caso, gli approcci metodologici spaziano dagli studi di genere ai performance studies, passando per l'ecologia politica e la *spatial theory*. Il margine diventa, così, una zona di contatto, una soglia dove si incontrano forme di vulnerabilità e strategie di resistenza. Il corpo, dotato di una propria *agency*, occupa un posto centrale in questa riconfigurazione; esso si rivela dispositivo conoscitivo e politico, capace di rendere visibile ciò che le strutture dominanti tendono a rimuovere. In questa riconfigurazione della marginalità, come pratica conoscitiva capace di produrre nuove modalità di percezione e di pensiero ponendosi in relazione critica con le gerarchie e le strutture di potere, trova risonanza la riflessione di Stewart e Ribeiro, quando sostengono che:

> Marginality enables different ways of seeing and thinking. Culture(s) on the margins are linked to hierarchies and power relations. […] Marginality can be something one holds onto, even when moving to the centre, as a means of envisaging alternative worlds, alternative ways of doing things. The insights gained in the margins can be utilised in the centre. (Stewart and Ribeiro 2023, 3)

La marginalità, dunque, è postura epistemica e politica, da cui emergono nuove forme di percezione e di conoscenza: uno spazio dinamico da cui ripensare il centro, un luogo di attraversamento e di contaminazione in cui si elaborano visioni alternative del mondo.

Il terzo numero si apre con il saggio di Enikő Darabos, in cui attraverso la prospettiva critica degli Human-Animal Studies, dimostra come le *Parallel Stories* di Péter Nádas mettano in discussione le percezioni normative del concetto di identità, a partire dalla relazione umano-animale. Sulla stessa linea si colloca lo studio di Esra Öztarhan che legge *The Overstory* di Richard Powers come una contro-narrazione in cui gli alberi cessano di essere elementi secondari rispetto agli esseri umani, configurandosi come agenti attivi. Proshot Kalami si occupa della ricezione del mito in relazione alla scena teatrale iraniana, problematizzando il rapporto tra corpo femminile e performance. Il margine, qui, si fa pratica decoloniale, capace di destabilizzare lo sguardo occidentale sulla performatività del genere. Con un intento simile, quello di indagare e comprendere la sofferenza delle donne al crocevia tra due culture distinte, Simran Kaur si occupa dell'opera poetica di Surjeet Kalsey: tra India e Canada, la poesia di Kalsey restituisce le lotte delle donne migranti contro le soglie domestiche e patriarcali che ne delimitano l'autorialità. Mauli Sanyal quantifica le conseguenze istituzionali della marginalità, sottolineando come essa non sia una condizione "naturale", bensì l'esito di scelte politiche: l'analisi comparativa dei dati NSSO (National Sample Survey Office), in un arco temporale che dal 2004 si estende al 2014, fa emergere come in India i "pilastri" dell'assistenza sanitaria (disponibilità, accessibilità, sostenibilità economica e così via) siano compromessi, soprattutto nelle comunità marginalizzate.

I margini visti come spazi critici e generatori di nuove letture del mondo si rivelano anche luoghi per poter parlare di corpi anomali che interrogano l'ordine simbolico (Luca Baratta), soggettività periferiche che reclamano il diritto alla parola (Ilaria Barbuto), paesaggi cancellati dalla modernità ma ancora capaci di nutrire immaginazione politica e poetica (Marzia Dati), storie intime che diventano atti epistemici sovversivi (Patrizia La Trecchia). Non cercando rifugio nella neutralità, le narrazioni affermano con forza il valore del posizionamento e della riflessione situata: le autrici e gli autori mettono in crisi l'ordine del discorso — sovvertono, ricompongono, trasfigurano. Così, l'anomalia fisiologica diventa strumento di lettura del disciplinamento sociale (Luca Baratta), lo spazio urbano periferico diviene lente per decostruire l'eredità coloniale (Ilaria Barbuto), la *wilderness* si fa luogo di memoria e resistenza ecopoetica (Marzia Dati), l'esperienza biografica diventa atto politico e decoloniale (Patrizia La Trecchia). Ciò che accomuna questi percorsi è la volontà di sostare nella complessità, abitarla, lasciarsene attraversare. Come scrive Donna Haraway, *staying with the trouble*" significa imparare a vivere e pensare nei luoghi di frizione, senza aspirare a una purezza o a una separazione tra categorie: "We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material-semiotic knot of relations is the flesh of the world. Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. We are all compost, not posthuman" (Haraway 2016, 58).

In questa prospettiva, la marginalità non rappresenta un territorio relazionale denso di interdipendenze e di possibilità, in cui l'umano, il non-umano e il più-che-umano si co-producono. Lungi dall'offrire facili consolazioni, le voci raccolte in questo numero invitano a un confronto – o uno scontro – con ciò che destabilizza. Perché è proprio nel disequilibrio, nella rottura della simmetria, che si apre lo spazio per un sapere trasformativo, un sapere che non ha paura di farsi contaminare dalla materia viva dell'esistenza. Sono pagine che, proponendo un ripensamento non neutrale del

sapere, rivendicano l'efficacia del posizionamento, della soggettività consapevole, del racconto a partire da luoghi e spazi (Tuan 2001) che non aspirano a essere assorbiti nel centro, né a conformarsi a modelli dominanti. Si tratta di prospettive, insomma, che pongono la propria alterità come principio generativo. In questi interstizi si gioca forse il futuro del pensiero – non come spazio di rassicurazione, ma come soglia aperta alla trasformazione.

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At the Margins of Identity:

Human-Animal Relations in the *Parallel Stories* of Péter Nádas

Enikő Darabos

(Sigmund Freud University, AT)

Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of literature and Human-Animal Studies (HAS) through Péter Nádas's novel, *Parallel Stories* [*Párhuzamos történetek*]. It examines how the work challenges traditional notions of identity and otherness, particularly in human-animal relationships. Drawing on HAS's interdisciplinary approach, which critiques anthropocentric perspectives, the study analyses how Nádas's narrative through the Jonesian "performativities of bodies" blurs boundaries between humans and animals. Theoretical frameworks from Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway inform the analysis, particularly Derrida's concept of "the other" and Haraway's posthumanist thought on human-animal entanglements.

Focusing on Kristóf's encounter with a black dog in Budapest's hidden gay scene at the Margaret Island, the paper provides insight into the secret gay cruising subculture of the time. This relationship highlights shared experiences of marginality and otherness, uniting humans and animals as outsiders in their social contexts.

Nádas's intense focus on corporeal experiences offers a profound meditation on human existence, reconciling conflicting aspects of flesh and spirit, instinct and reason. By examining Nádas's portrayal of raw animality in human nature, the study contributes to literature on posthumanism and animal studies in contemporary fiction.

Through this analysis, the paper demonstrates how literary works can expand our understanding of humanity in relation to the animal world, reinterpreting concepts of identity and otherness. By engaging with HAS and deconstructive theories, the study offers new insights into how narratives like *Parallel Stories* challenge and refine our perceptions of human-animal relationships.

Keywords: Human-animal-studies; identity construction; otherness; gender and LGBTQA+ studies; body in literature.

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"And now the dog was coming after him on the bridge so he would have to continue to live his life for its sake, for a dog."
(Péter Nádas, *Parallel Stories*, 2005)

Introduction

Human-animal studies (HAS) has emerged as a vibrant and rapidly expanding transdisciplinary field since its inception in the 1970s. Born out of the contemporary animal rights movement, HAS have grown to encompass an increasingly diverse array of academic disciplines, each discovering its own unique interface with the study of human-animal relationships (Trevathan-Minnis and Shapiro 2021, 4). Within this broad landscape, the intersection of literature and HAS offers particularly fertile ground for exploring and reimagining our understanding of the complex interactions between humans and other animals.

Literature, with its power to craft narratives and shape perspectives, plays a crucial role in HAS by providing a medium through which we can re-examine and potentially transform our ideas and terms on human-animal relationships. As David Herman argues, "telling different kinds of narratives about humans' relationships with non-human others has the potential to alter understandings of our place" in the broader ecological context (Herman 2018, 4). This transformative potential of literature extends beyond mere representation, delving into the realm of cultural understanding and ontological frameworks. Herman argues that by investigating "the power of narrative" as being able "to reframe the cultural models or ontologies that undergird hierarchical understandings of humans' place in the larger biotic communities" we engage in "research on cultural understanding of animals" (Herman 2018, ix). This reframing process challenges long-held assumptions about human exceptionalism and encourages a more nuanced, empathetic, and interconnected view of our relationship with non-human animals.

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This paper explores the dynamic interplay between literature and Human-Animal Studies (HAS), examining how literary works contribute to and are informed by evolving perspectives on human-animal relationships by reinterpreting the terms of identity and otherness. Through an analysis of Péter Nádas's groundbreaking contemporary Hungarian novel *Parallel Stories* (Nádas 2011; abbreviated as *PS*), I will explore how literature reflects and challenges societal attitudes towards animals, particularly dogs. This investigation will demonstrate how the novel serves as a catalyst for reconceptualizing human animality by focusing on corporeal experiences, human–human interactions, and human–animal relations. In doing so, I will follow the suggestion made by Owain Jones, who argued that "the performativities of bodies in everyday life (human and animal) can be *mobilised as ways of knowing of animal becoming and personhood*" (Jones 2023, 65). This means I will analyse, through the "performativities of bodies" in *Parallel Stories*, how shared experiences of marginality and otherness emerge between human and animal, which often positions them as outsiders in their respective (social) contexts.

Theoretical assumptions: the animal as "the absolute other"

The most recent literature on human–nonhuman relations extends to the point where the "modelling of animal subjectivity" is now a legitimate area of inquiry in the attempt to develop a narratology "beyond the human" (Herman 2018, 203). The discourse, however, can be traced back to Jacques Derrida's reflection on the moment he found himself naked, being observed by his cat. For the remarkable development of Human-Animal Studies (HAS), it is certainly true that, as Derrida stated: "The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins here" (Derrida 2002, 397).

Derrida's seminal work in animal studies, particularly his 1997 address "The Autobiographical Animal", marks a crucial turning point in the philosophical approach to human-animal relationships. Derrida challenges the traditional anthropocentric view that

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has dominated Western philosophy, calling for a fundamental reconsideration of "the philosophical problematic of the animal" (Derrida 2002, 395). Central to his argument is a critique of the reductive notion of 'the animal' as a singular entity, while he engages in an insightful exploration of the concept of heterogeneity, drawing on the semantic fields associated with terms such as "animal", "*mot*" ("word"), "limit", "tropology", and "chimera". He advocates for a deconstructive understanding that acknowledges animal subjectivity by emphasizing the experience of being looked at by an animal, rather than just looking at animals. This shift in perspective challenges the traditional human-centric view and opens up new avenues for exploring interspecies relationships.

Furthermore, Derrida proposes a radical rethinking of language and communication in relation to animals. He suggests moving beyond the notion of "giving speech back" to animals, instead advocating for "acceding to a thinking […] that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, as something other than a privation" (Derrida 2002, 416). This approach challenges the long-held view of language as a uniquely human attribute and encourages a "limitrophic" perspective. Derrida's concept of "limitrophy" involves not erasing the limit between human and animal, but rather complicating and multiplying it, recognizing "a multiplicity of heterogeneous structures and limits" that exist between various forms of life (Derrida 2002, 415–416). This perspective aligns closely with Donna J. Haraway's work on human-animal relationships, particularly her concept of "natureculture" which, in fact, implies the "joint lives of dogs and people, who are bonded in significant otherness" (Haraway 2003, 16).

Haraway, building on her earlier work in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), which challenged traditional boundaries between human/animal, organism/machine, and physical/non-physical, further developed these ideas in her *Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003). Thematizing the "significant otherness" of the animals, in this later work Haraway introduces the term "natureculture" to emphasize the inseparability of nature and culture, particularly in the context of human-dog relationships. Her concept of

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"natureculture" resonates with Derrida's "limitrophy" by challenging traditional binary oppositions, particularly the human-animal divide, while they emphasize the complexity and multiplicity of relationships between species. Both concepts encourage a reconsideration of how we understand and relate to other species. Haraway's perspective that "[d]ogs are not surrogates for theory; they are here to live with" aligns with Derrida's call for a more nuanced understanding of animal subjectivity (Haraway 2003, 5). This perspective moves beyond viewing animals as mere objects of study or philosophical tools, recognizing them as beings with their own agency.

The concept of animality in the narratives of Nádas resonates with these poststructuralist ideas of otherness, as the author views human existence as part of an uncontrollable, pulsating sensual world that lies in its equanimity throughout his oeuvre, where the condition of identity relies on the acceptance and reflection of the otherness that resides within the self, with animals serving as representations of this 'uncanny' otherness.

Péter Nádas and the *Parallel Stories*

Péter Nádas is a renowned Hungarian writer and photographer who has repeatedly been among the contenders for the Nobel Prize for Literature in recent years. He was born into a Jewish family in Budapest in 1942 and now lives with his wife in a small village called Gombosszeg in Hungary. His 2005 monumental work, *Parallel Stories*, not only offers a scathing critique of various ideologies – including Nazi biopolitics (Görözdi 2018), transgenerational trauma within families, and the aftermath of the Holocaust (Darabos and Tóth 2025; Balint 2018) – but also challenges the linguistic and narrative conventions governing the representation of human corporeality, human-animal relations, and interpersonal dynamics through its carefully crafted and unique form of literary language which positions the novel within European literature (Balint 2018).

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The book offers a kaleidoscopic vision of the twentieth century and is characterized by thematic and linguistic radicality. It is important to highlight the extensive, approximately one-hundred-page sex scene, conveyed through a highly corporeal and vivid language, which, given the typically restrained nature of Hungarian literature, provoked significant critical astonishment (Darabos 2017). *Parallel Stories* is a polyphonic narrative told by multiple narrators, as if the author is metatextually thematizing the role of the narrator by trying to explore as many narrative forms as possible to explore this exciting – and sometimes dissonant – tonality. The stories, which are mostly family histories from the 1930s and 40s or 1960s, are embedded in occasionally dramatic historical circumstances and by no means told chronologically, intertwine, sometimes alternating from chapter to chapter, but later it can also happen in a chapter or even in a single sentence that the reader finds herself in a completely different story from the one she started with. Through this constant but unpredictable alternation, the novel places the reader in a particular state of consciousness, overwhelmed by the experience of the fluidity offered by the narratives.

Parallel Stories opens with a symbolic scene: a crime at the Tiergarten in Berlin during Christmas 1989. A young psychology student discovers a corpse of a man in his fifties and is suddenly haunted by vague self-accusations. This could explain the enigmatic title of the first chapter, "Patricide", though the reader is given no clear answers about the identity of the body or the murderer. The timing is highly symbolic, occurring just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and can be interpreted in multiple ways. Most obviously, it represents a change in the political system and the beginning of a new era. Existentially, it could symbolize the possibility of freedom, alluding to the fall of an ideologically divided world. Metatextually – a level on which interpretation must always operate with Nádas – it could signify how the trilogy breaks with the narrative tradition of presenting stories told by a limited number of narrators, employing instead constant switches in narrative voices.[1]

[1] Metatextual interpretation is a central task in approaching Nádas's prose because his narratives consistently reflect on the act of narration itself, foregrounding doubts about textuality and embedding complex self-

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Following this overture, the narrative shifts to Budapest in March 1960-61, presenting the bourgeois home and family of the Lippay-Lehrs. This thread which I will analyze on the following pages is counterpointed by Kristóf's first-person account of his ambivalent sensual experiences, portrayed as a teenage search for (sexual) identity in which a black stray dog makes his appearance as a lifesaver during the sensual adventures on the nocturnal Margaret Island in Budapest.

Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the novel meticulously examines the instrumentalization of destruction by exploring the *Lebensborn* institutes, created by the Nazis to study 'racially pure' Aryan children. This is done through the story of Hans von Wolkenstein, son of Carla von Thum zu Wolkenstein. Carla, a wealthy and successful researcher, works alongside Otmar Freiherr von der Schuer, a Nazi-affiliated geneticist at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics in Berlin-Dahlem in the 1930s. These characters form the main focus of the German narrative strand in the trilogy.

Kristóf's quest for (sexual) identity

Kristóf, a central character in Nádas's novel, embodies a complex intersection of personal trauma, social displacement, and historical context. His background as a self-perceived orphan, with a mother who left with another woman and a father murdered by communist comrades, establishes a foundation of loss and ideological disillusionment. His personal history represents in a smaller scale the broader historical traumas explored in the novel, which thus indicates a fractal structure of Nádas's novel. The character's residence in his

referential structures across his oeuvre. In *Parallel Stories*, the opening scene of the Berlin Wall's fall epitomizes this poetics of self-reflection: the image of the collapsing wall signals a radical shift in novelistic rhetoric and aesthetics, one that breaks with canonical 'fathers' and literary conventions and asserts a newly autonomous narrative voice (Bloom 1995). Such gestures resonate both with long-standing narratological dilemmas in Nádas's work and with Harold Bloom's agonistic model of literary inheritance, making metatextual reading indispensable to understanding the interplay of history, narration, and literary self-definition in his fiction.

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aunt's house, coupled with his inability to fully identify with bourgeois norms despite their formative influence on his identity, creates a tension between internalized social norms and personal alienation. His internal conflict mirrors the larger societal tensions of post-war Hungary, caught between traditional values and emerging ideologies. His story in the novel represents a prismatic narrative technique, as Nádas deliberately shifts between different narrative voices. He creates a complex textual space where the protagonist's perspective alternates between first-person singular and third-person narration, blending free indirect discourse with intricate inner monologues: "The truth is, I had two interrupted lives, he would say later of himself, one proved to be not enough, the other promised to be too much, and in both I felt very much like a stranger" (*PS* 332). This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of psychological depth, where the narrative structure itself becomes an experimental method of revealing the protagonist's inner world. The constant play between narrative perspectives creates a prismatic view of consciousness, challenging the tradition of linear storytelling.

Narrated from a uniquely reflective retrospective perspective, Kristóf's story offers a sensual account of five nights he spent on Margaret Island in Budapest during the spring of 1960 through acquiring "forbidden knowledge, the city's ultimate secret" (*PS* 325). With it Nádas's narrative delves into the raw, wild, and marginalized reality of the homosexual subculture of the nocturnal Margaret Island. Kristóf's episode serves as a pivotal moment in the novel, showcasing its author's intricate exploration of queerness and liminal spaces. Set against the backdrop of socialist Hungary[2], this section of the novel provides a vivid insight into the secret gay cruising subculture of the time.[3] The public park of the Margaret

[2] As for the historical context, it is important to note that Kristóf's story is set in 1960. It was only in 1961 that consensual same-sex relations were decriminalized in the Hungarian Penal Code; however, the state security forces continued to keep homosexuals under surveillance and, when necessary, used their sexual orientation as a means of blackmail (Takács and Tóth 2021).

[3] David Timothy Aveline describes cruising as "activities geared toward the search for and negotiation of sex with a stranger. This is not only a 'hunt' for a sex partner, but also the attempt to get this partner to agree to sex" (Aveline 1995, 202).

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Island situated "between the two huge arms" (*PS* 332) of the Danube River, becomes a symbolic heterotopia – a space where societal norms are suspended and desires can be expressed if one is aware of the valid sexual semiotic of bodily (gestures, poses, etc.) and vocal (whistles, call-outs, invocations, etc.) signifiers.

Kristóf's journey on Margaret Island situates his self-discovery at a semiotic level inasmuch he explores the gay semiotics behind the bodies, movements and gestures of these anonymous nocturnal actors. His wanderings among these wild naked men, these "formidable tribal warriors" (*PS* 325) serve as a metaphor for his navigation of the homosexual subculture, which is presented as both primal and highly codified. This duality is evident in Kristóf's oscillation between experiencing moments of sudden enlightenment and recognizing the undiminished theatrical, that is, fictitious nature of the situation where for these men "nothing was sacred; the whole world was but a parody of itself, designed solely for their amusement" (*PS* 328). His approach to this "insane game" (*PS* 326) is framed in terms of a semiotic interpretation. He literally reads the gay cruising fiction unfolding before him, treating the nocturnal encounters as a text to be deciphered: "They built their secret language with different dialects of their shared imagination […] It was like a foreign language I'd never heard before yet understood from the first syllable, with all its phrases and expressions" (*PS* 364). The bodies themselves become signifiers in a secret language of theatricalized sensuality, with their interactions forming a grammar and rhetoric that Kristóf must learn to navigate.

The wild sensual rhythm of this nocturnal cruising adventure causes Kristóf to become lost, not only literally and geographically in the dark spatiality of the island, but also mentally and psychologically in the labyrinth of intentions that are inevitably instantaneous in each of his movements and those of his sometimes invisible cruising partners. Kristóf wavered between his curiosity for an irreversible corporeal initiation with these men and his fear of self-disruption, torn between the desire to participate and the urge to merely observe their sensuality, his indecision reflecting the novel's exploration of sexual confusion

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and the fragility of identity. In the nocturnal landscape of Margaret Island, Kristóf's erotic curiosity led him to fixate on an idealized figure he called "the giant", who embodied the freedom of this transgressive homosexual theater mixed with elements of tragicomedy. This figure generates a complex interplay of desire, fear, and self-doubt that Kristóf experienced during his cruising adventure:

> What could this man be, I didn't know. One could guess the enormous configuration of his loins through his overalls; his powerful ass protruded abruptly. He had thick, dense eyebrows that met above his nose, his nose was short and strong, and on his jutting cheekbones the dark brown skin was so taut it seemed bluish. A navvy – this old-fashioned obsolescent word came to mind for him, the weight of dirt and its autumnal wet fragrance. Or perhaps a carpenter, a stonecutter, a cutter of wood or stone or something that must be grasped by hand. I couldn't take my eyes off his head, his limbs, his face, his jaws, while we walked around or pursued each other on the trails. I could not forget, either, his suddenly flashing, suddenly vanishing smile. […] I can't imagine what I wanted from the giant; he too probably had a disgusting life (*PS* 361-369).

He will be the main actor in Kristóf's sensual fulfillment, which will ultimately be carried out in the public urinal on Margaret Island by "these two", namely "the giant with his mustached assistant" (*PS* 369), for the enjoyment of several male witnesses. Although Kristóf fled from the destructive power of the sensual pleasure these men can gave him, he desired the experience just as strongly and it served as the point of culmination of his one-week cruising.

Human-animal relations in two acquaintances

In the narratives of Péter Nádas, animality functions both as an element of the sensual dimension of human existence and as a symbol of transcendental significance, frequently confronted with rich traditions of Christian symbolism. For instance, in his short story "Lamb" (1968), Nádas situates the figure of the lamb at the intersection of the profane – exemplified by the mundane reality of lamb stew – and the sacred, understood through its traditional role as an emblem of purity and sacrifice within Jewish-Christian theology. This

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tension between the mundane and the sacred allows the lamb to serve as a powerful metaphor for pervasive racism in human society. Similarly, in *A Book of Memories* (1986), the hermaphroditic nature of the snail emerges as a central motif that shapes the philosophical architecture of the narrative (Darabos 2020a, 2020b, 2021). In *Parallel Stories*, a huge black stray dog, a Hungarian vizsla, appears as Kristóf's night companion and lifesaver during his cruising adventures at the liminal which are pursued in order to reveal his identity and the structure of human desire.

The dog's first appearance is linked to Kristóf's previously mentioned flight, as he tumbles over the iron fence of the Grand Hotel on Margaret Island, half-blind with fear and sensual excitement beneath the dark trees. Awakening from his sudden faint, Kristóf gradually becomes aware that something is approaching him: "judging by the sounds, it had to be a monster. No human could make such noises" (*PS* 391). The dog is large, black, and smells as if it has eaten "human shit" before (*PS* 394), and it licks the face of the man lying on the ground with relish. Kristóf's initial reaction to the animal is one of choking up: "When animals get too close to him he begins to choke up; he doesn't know why. The roof of his mouth begins to blister, he retches, and he has to pull himself away from the animal. He cannot share anything with them, not even with a lizard or a porcupine" (*PS* 961).

Despite this physical aversion, he reflects inwardly that he feels safe with animals: "Perhaps I felt secure with animals precisely because I could never lower myself to their level" (*PS* 394). Although the original Hungarian text uses the structure *nem közösködhettem velük* (perhaps best translated as "I could not commune with them"), which primarily refers to the lack of common understanding between humans and animals, making conventional communication impossible, the sense of feeling safe with animals can be understood as a bridging sentiment that navigates the gap between this impossible verbal communication and the necessity of a sensual approach.

Encountering the black "monster" amidst the nocturnal landscape of his desires, however, Kristóf experiences a profound sense of otherness, where the boundaries between

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human and animal blur. The dog evokes a visceral reaction, as Kristóf grapples with his "beastly self" (*PS* 331), suggesting a duality within him that resonates with his sexual confusion and existential turmoil. The phrase underscores Kristóf's perception of himself and others in this liminal space, where he is both predator and prey in a field which falls out from the realm of morality. The dog is seen to be also the "Satan's dog" (*PS* 393). Naming him so, the stray dog becomes a symbol of his journey into this dark terrain, representing both companionship in his isolation and a reminder of the monstrous aspects of his own nature.

His second thought is that "the black-haired giant had turned into a monster" (*PS* 391), and thus, through these metonymic chains, the reader can observe Kristóf's attempts to willingly identify with otherness, as well as his efforts to find even the most radical possibilities of rejecting them. In this unfolding narrative, the black stray dog becomes his alter ego – the shadowy, nocturnal side of himself that is desperate for fulfillment.

In his firm decision not to develop any binding sentiments, he wants to get rid of the dog who is trying to be his companion. He remembers his childhood autumns when he and his family moved into the Grand Hotel on Margaret Island while the servants cleaned their bourgeois house in the city (*PS* 395–401). In his existential detachment, he just wants to be left alone to kill himself by jumping from Margaret Bridge on his way home. That's why he takes the dog to the back entrance of the hotel, where the kitchen staff carefully sorts the leftovers and locks him in the garbage bay.

After being diverted from his initial intent of killing himself, Kristóf finds himself in a public urinal together with quite a number of unknown and unidentifiable men. This will be the venue of Kristóf's sensual initiation performed by "those two" (*PS* 964) desired figures, whom he had tried to avoid and after whom he was longing during his whole cruising adventure. After the two men have publicly initiated him into the realm of anonymous satisfaction, they leave him on the floor, covered in human urine and sperm, as a police squad interrupts the nocturnal rite of raw male pleasure. Chaos erupts during the

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police riot as the "somber Roman warriors" of masculine desire (*PS* 407) attempt to vanish into the sudden turmoil, shouting and crying. The police use excessive force to violently put an end to this hidden gathering of these homosexual outlaws (Takács and Tóth 2021, 277–280), while Kristóf finds a way to escape through the open door of the public urinal, ultimately seeking a path to end his own life.

He decided to take a detour to avoid running into the police again and chose to go home via the Árpád Bridge: "He picked this escape route because the surest way of throwing himself successfully into the depths would be from the Árpád Bridge" (*PS* 622). Feeling dirty and humiliated, he resolved to throw himself over the railing in the middle of the bridge, seeking to end his life, which he felt was burdened by the conflicting antagonisms of identification and denial: "His black shirt and black pants, wet with other men's urine and filthy with their sperm, stuck to his back, chest, bottom, and thighs; they clung to him, adhered to him like skin, white-hot with shame" (*PS* 624). It was then that the black stray dog, which had managed to escape from the hotel's garbage bay, reappeared at Árpád Bridge:

> And the black dog on the bridge attacked Kristóf, knocking him against the railing and licking his face again with its huge tongue. The young man instinctively shoved the dog away; the touch of the strange beast inflamed his mouth, but his move came too late. His palate turned blistery, he thought he'd choke to death on the spot, but the dog thought that now they could begin to play. It was snarling at him in happiness (*PS* 659).

This description forms part of Kristóf's retrospective recollection of that night's events during his wanderings with Klára, a young woman unhappily married, who who perceives Kristóf as her soulmate following their conversations. Thus, Kristóf's recollection is deliberately selective; he withholds aspects of those nights – his homosexual explorations and his frantic attempts to escape – while foregrounding his relationship with the stray dog, which ultimately compels him to continue his life:

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> he could not chase it away. The dog simply wouldn't acknowledge that it was being chased away. It was happy, it wagged its tail and barked hideously. Throw it over the railing, kill it – he really couldn't think of anything else. It would have fit between the uprights of the railing, he could have shoved it through, but the dog thought he wanted to play (*PS* 961).

In the English translation, the tension is particularly palpable in the description of the dog, as the text uses the pronoun 'it', reserved for inanimate objects, to refer to the dog, while at the same time reflecting on the dog's emotions and consciousness.

In the Hungarian original, this effect is far less tense, since the grammatical structures do not compel the speaker to use a pronoun reserved for non-personal referents; thus, without any linguistic tension, the dog „egyszerűen nem vette tudomásul, hogy el van zavarva. Boldog volt" (Nádas 2005, 505).

The tension, however, in the Hungarian original and in Kristóf's mind, is an ethical one – how could a living person kill another living being? The linguistic solutions cited earlier make it indisputable that this black stray dog is seen by him as just as conscious and emotional as himself. His ethical dilemma arises precisely from this fact: he identifies with the dog, he wants to kill himself, so why shouldn't he be able to kill this other being, which could be interpreted as a metaphor for his "nocturnal self" (*PS* 330)? Liberation and destruction thus form an irreconcilable conflict in these relationships, which is only slightly loosened by the regret Kristóf feels in his moment of retrospection when he couldn't tell how much he regrets having chased away his nightly savior:

> The dog would not let go of him, it kept barking, jumping, snapping at his hands, in the end they were rolling on the pavement. The dog was literally writhing with joy because finally they were playing together. But he had to get away from it […] He lifted the dog by its forelegs, it wasn't easy, its large body was heavy, but he managed somehow to gather it up and raise it over the railing to hurl it down. The dog didn't know what was happening but looked down and saw the drop. Although it sounds improbable, the dog seemed to understand that this was no game but that someone was after its life, and it jumped out of his arms […] With its hind legs it succeeded in clearing itself of the railing. Pushing me away and whimpering. It stumbled across the sidewalk, I flopped down and it ran away with its tail between its legs. It fled back to safety on the island, whimpering the whole time (*PS* 962).

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The story of the black stray dog he tells to Klára ends with a strange silence: "And he did not tell her how sorry he had been ever since that he had chased away the dog, and how sorry he felt for himself for having to live" (*PS* 962).

In Nádas's novel, the bond between dog and human acquires an intensely emotional resonance. Kristóf encounters the black dog at a moment when he is attempting to delineate the contours of his own hybrid identity. For him, the dog represents both a source of threat and, through its attachment, a form of salvation – at least with regard to his sudden death wish, stirred by the sensual experiences he encounters within the homosexual subculture, and his inclination to enact it.

The dog's story unfolds across several pages and chapters in a fragmented manner: the narration shifts between the first-person voice of Kristóf and a third-person narrator who occasionally assumes control of the narrative thread. The retrospective rendering of events also allows for their subjective evaluation – thus giving voice to Kristóf's regret over the loss of the dog, his inability to accept, to embrace the devotion that emanated from the stray dog towards him. Yet their relationship reflects, above all, his relationship to himself, his own (in)capacity for self-reflection. Whatever he may regret, he cannot admit it to himself, as his upbringing and family background loom over him with overwhelming negativity. It is this inner struggle that is encapsulated in the storyline associated with Kristóf's character.

Conclusion

The human-animal relationship depicted by Péter Nádas in *Parallel Stories* is marked by conflicted identifications and anxious rejections, offering nuanced insights into the representation of animality within literature. However, Human-Animal Studies (HAS) has only recently begun to establish itself within Hungarian literary studies and remains a relatively emerging field. Contemporary Hungarian scholarship increasingly engages with animality and human-animal relations in Péter Nádas's narratives (Selyem 2015).

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This paper has elaborated on how the novel's narrative follows one of the protagonists, Kristóf, who struggles with a profound desire for self-destruction amid the pursuit of sensual pleasure in a forbidden homosexual subculture, yet finds an ambiguous spiritual companion in an abandoned black stray dog. His troubled psyche, however, inhibits full acceptance or surrender to this bond, reflecting the fragile and often contradictory nature of human-animal connections.

I focused on the linguistic and analytical rigor blended with a refined emotional sensibility in representing the intricate dynamics between Kristóf and the dog. Their relationship is part of a broader portrayal of Kristóf's identity crisis, conveyed not only through fragmented narration but also through a sophisticated narratological structure. Kristóf's story unfolds as a cross-chapter narrative – various threads intertwining, echoing, and sometimes counterpointing each other – which reflects not only the complexity of identity formation but also carries metatextual significance. This narrative complexity mirrors the liminal and unstable boundaries of Kristóf's selfhood, while also revealing how Nádas's "multilayered" textuality operates (Túry 2016, 345).

With my interpretation, I aimed to emphasize a critical literary innovation in Nádas's work: a narratological possibility whereby an animal is granted cognition and emotional depth, through which, as Jones suggests, "we can come to know animal becoming and personhood" (Jones 2023, 70). The black dog becomes a metaphor for animality in the novel, understood in the sense that Nádas's monumental work challenges human exceptionalism by placing the animal and human on the same level of sensuality and reversing the criteria governing agency. Through his descriptions, characters, and carefully crafted paragraph-structures, Nádas challenges mainstream anthropocentric perspectives, inviting readers to reconsider the ethical and existential dimensions of animality as central to understanding identity and otherness.

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Bio-bibliographical note

Enikő Darabos, formerly associate professor at Eötvös Loránd University, habilitated in cultural and literary studies (Hungary, 2021). She earned her PhD in deconstructive and psychoanalytical theories at the University of Szeged (Hungary, 2005). She is the author, most recently, of *Testmetaforák a kortárs magyar irodalomban* [Body Metaphors in the Contemporary Hungarian Literature] (Lector, Romania, 2017). Her primary area of research has centered on questions of body representations in literature, corporeal narratology and body theories. Currently she works at the Sigmund Freud Private University (Vienna, SFU).

Email address: enikoe.darabos@sfu.ac.at

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Soudabeh DESIRES:
Gender Performativity and Performance of Gender, from Ancient Mythologies to Present Street Performances

Proshot Kalami

(Norfolk State University, USA; Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, DE)

Abstract

This research investigates how ancient female figures, particularly Soudabeh/Phaedra, inform Iranian artists and activists in the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. Focusing on the myth of Siyavash from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Biblical Joseph and Zuleikha, and Greco-Roman Phaedra and Hippolytus, I challenge patriarchal master narratives to reimagine gender identity and the politics of desire in contemporary protest performances of women. I investigate if the marginalised past is projected in the present creations of a new vision of gender identity and desire from a non-patriarchal perspective. Therefore, the real question to explore is how we may transform deeply embedded systems that currently centre white supremacy cultures and transactional ways of knowing and doing. Adopting a decolonial lens, I critique Western theories of gender performativity, therefore examining how Iranian women disrupt such epistemologies in their performances of gender in their practices of everyday life.

Keywords: gender performativity; protest performance; gender studies; decolonial studies; *The Shahnameh*.

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In 2021 I published a paper on a project I was a dramaturg for; a performance loosely inspired by myths of Siyavash[1] and Hippolytus, put together by a performance group from Iran (2013-2017)[2]. The project was called *Persian Hippolyte* and was informed more than anything by the young performers' thirst for imagining democracy and justice, as a result of a stolen election by the state. After that research I was left with one major question: what happened to the woman? As did our international audiences in Paris, Berlin and Tangier. Inspired by that query, here in this essay, I shall therefore focus on the woman; Phaedra/Soudabeh, and her desire from a decolonial perspective.

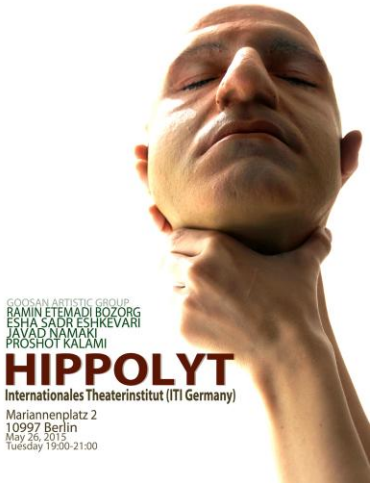


Fig. 1 – Poster.

Persian Hippolyte heavily relied on audience participation. The first 'encounter' between the spectator and performers takes place when the spectators arrive outside the space of the

[1] Siyavash, a well-known and popular name in the Persianate world, has appeared with various pronunciation and spelling in the Avesta, Shahnameh or other literary sources. The spelling I have chosen to use in my research is the closest to Avestan Siyāvaxš. Encyclopaedia Iranica provides more information on myths and stories surrounding this famous name, including a possible meaning; the handsome male with black stallions. Please see Skjærvø, P.O., "KAYĀNIĀN xiv. The Kayanids in Western Historiography", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. (2000), https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kayanian-xiv/, Accessed 1 April 2025.

[2] For more information, please see: Proshot Kalami (2020) 'Persian Hippolyte', Performance Research, 25:6-7, 282-288, DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2020.1900530

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performance, where they are asked to be fingerprinted and signed in. In the initiation, each spectator would be handed the Hippolyte's death mask, to put on and be photographed. A slideshow of these pictures would be played for the duration of the performance, on a monitor visible to the audience. Tehran, Paris and San Francisco audiences each reacted to the process differently—some went through without any question, some rejected it, some questioned it—which resulted in a 45-minutes process in Tehran, 1 hour in San Francisco and 90 minutes in Paris. I will get back to the importance of this flexibility and even its chaotic result in my conclusion.



Iran participants who took pictures with the mask of the dead in the Iranian production of *Hippolyte*
© Goosim

Fig. 2 – Masks.

Spectators were then led to a deathbed. If willing, they would then lie down like a corpse and be photographed and documented. Then they would see a series of pre-recorded performances to which members of the ensemble would react. The main performer would usually wear a mask to hide their identity, at times enacting the character of Siyavash. At the end the audience would be asked to vote whether Siyavash is guilty or not, casting their yellow or green paper ballots into clear blue boxes. Regardless of their choice, the ballots in the box would turn into a similar colour.

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Fig. 3 – Ballot Box.

In a post-show Q&A at the ITI Berlin and after my talk at Sorbonne Nouvelle III, the international performance and theatre scholar community were most vocal about the absence of Phaedra or Soudabeh from the performance, questioning why an Iranian performance group erases the female character from their performance (Kalami, 2020, P,6-7).

This present research, inspired by those reactions on the one hand, and on the other, the Woman Life Freedom movement of Iranian women which was sparked by the murder of Mahsa Jina Amini in September of 2022, is an attempt to address that question. Therefore, I pose the following claim: the corporeal absence of Soudabeh/Phaedra is a performative presence that is brought to the foreground by the very act of erasure. In her absence she breathes an existence that invites an intellectual interaction between the audience and her persona, which is embedded in the history that defines her character. The cultural forces already in existence in that liminal space, in turn give rise to a global (virtual and actual) space of performance—in case of Iranian women—where they reclaim their absent body from the political arena of Islamic Republic (hereafter referred to as IR) in their performances of everyday life practice. In this regard, I would like to argue that her desire,

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her "hair" and her "body" are at once the stage, the corporeal presence, and the signifier of her performance of gender.



Fig. 4 – Soudabeh (*The Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp), ca. 1522. Western sources up until middle of 20th century have chosen to spell the word *Shahnama*. Iranian authors and sources record the title of the book as *The Shahnameh*, as I have done. However, I have respected the spelling of sources I have used or quoted, hence seeing 2 different spellings here.

In order to understand such erasure, I find it imperative to dial back and explore the politics of desire and cultural gender construction in antiquity and ancient times from where the Iranian performance group took their inspiration. Keeping the focus on Soudabeh, therefore, I offer a close study of the myth of Siyavash from Ferdowsi's *The Shahnameh*, Biblical stories of Joseph & the nameless wife of Potiphar, Yousuf & Zulaikha from Jami's poetry, and the Greek myth of Phaedra & Hippolytus in Euripides, Seneca and Racine's plays[3], where all three heroes are seduced in identical manners by a woman of prominence whose desire brings forth cycles of disaster. To explore how the masculine pen manipulates the notion of desire as well as gender construction I shall provide a decolonial reading of these master narratives in hope of creating a vision anew, in which the cultural performance

[3] While I acknowledge that there are other version of the myth/legend in other cultures, for the sake of discussion, I am bound to limit my scope. This indeed invites much needed further scholarship on the matter to free the way these women have been judged from a perspective that is greatly informed by postcolonial theoretical hegemony.

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of gender identity and politics of desire can be accessed from a non-patriarchal perspective. I shall then put this in the context of Iranian uprising in the Woman Life Freedom movement.

It is important to note here that these women are written by men into myths of religion and culture in order to be consumed by men mainly. Soudabeh is the only one of them who may have faintly preserved her roots in history, hence her central importance—for she is based on an actual Yemenite prince (aka Hamavaran)[4] married to the court of Iran, whose land was freed by the Persians from the occupying Abyssinians.



Fig. 5 – "Rustam Overpowers the King of Hamavaran", Folio from *The Shahnama* (Book of Kings).

[4] "Abu'l Qasim Firdausi | 'Rustam Overpowers the King of Hamavaran', Folio from a *Shahnama* (Book of Kings)." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2024. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/446290. Accessed 23 March, 2025.

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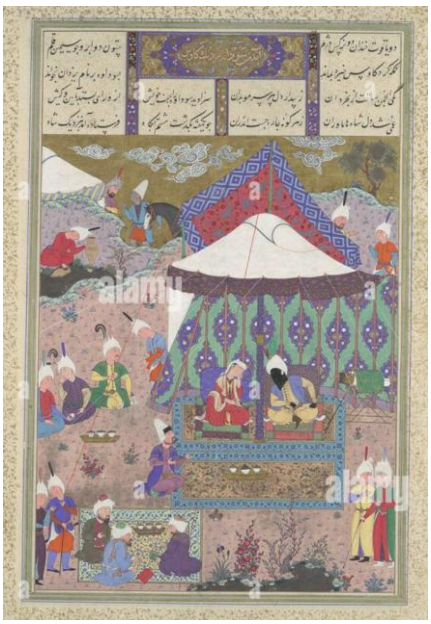


Fig. 6 – "The Marriage of Soudabeh and Kai Kavous", Folio 130r from *The Shahnameh* (Book of Kings of Shah Tahmasp 452129).

Here the performance of desire informs cultural values, religious rules and historical destinies. While the Mesopotamian religious myth elevates the man who defied the intoxicating female desire to the level of a prophet, the Persians and Greeks make the young man an innocent victim of the female treacheries. This complicating twist renders the understanding of gender and desire yet another layer of importance belonging to the fabric of gender performativity, which may help us establish a counter narrative.

If we agree with the observation of Khaleghi-Motlagh in his perception of *The Shahnameh* and Ferdowsi's poetic power, where he states that "[T]he dialogues in *the Shahnameh* are realistic and frequently argumentative, and the poet uses them to good effect as a means of portraying the inner life of his characters,"[5] then we can look at Soudabeh's conversations with Siyavash at a deeper level, beyond the menial interpretation that has so far dominated the way we see her; a seductress.

[5] Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, "Ferdowsi, Abu'l-Qāsem (حکیم ابوالقاسم فردوسی), i. Life," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/ferdowsi-i. Accessed September 21, 2024

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Ferdowsi gives us a glimpse of the trust that is bestowed upon the Queen, by the King:



Fig. 7 – (Abbreviated translation mine: there is nothing but assurance, a mother, a queen who is going to introduce her daughters, Siyavash's half-sisters and other children of the court to him. They meet the prince and leave. Afterwards Soudabeh asks him, while praising his unrivalled beauty, whether he has found any of the women of the royal court a suitable match).

Amongst scholars who have written on the story of Siyavash in *the Shahnameh*, Hamid Dabashi gets closest to the point of view I am trying to offer here. In his summation "we encounter a mother figure who wishes to conspire with a son figure to overcome the father and place the son king over the father king. But the son refuses and ends up going through hellfire. Seyavash's[6] refusal is much less moral than political, all his moral protests (are) in fact a clear indication of 'protesting too much.'" (Dabashi 2019, 91-92). However, I would like to expand on this performative moment of political encounter by pausing on dialogues– and there are many of them–Soudabeh and Siyavash engage with during multiple visits of Siyavash to the Pardeh Saray[7] (aka the innards of the palace). During these conversations

[6] The name has been spelled differently by different scholars in various sources. I have stayed faithful to the spelling from the source where I have sued or quoted from in each stance.

[7] I purposely avoid using the term Harem for the mere loaded connotation that has so far been injected to the term by the colonial "Western", 18th century, Orientalist, middle class morality. Pardeh Saray connotation a private space where public politics are not performed. It is where the dynamic of family, prince and princesses and behind-the-scene affairs, as it were, are in the making. This while Harem conveys a sexually charged meaning that immediately reduces the woman into a mere object of desire by the male / king. Additionally, there has not been any official archaeological / historical document indicating that keeping a Harem was a commonplace affair in courts of ancient Persian dynasties. (Madreiter and Jacobs 1997, 1121–1137).

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we can observe Soudabeh as a Queen, who has not succeeded in producing a male offspring, and now feels threatened by the new prince who is predicted to be the heir of the throne. Naturally she seeks alliance by trying to first seducing him into a marriage with one of the women of the nobility, but Siyavash does not show any interest in that knowing that his position is secured, hence no need of a political marriage through her[8].

اگر با من اکنون تو پیمان کنی — نپیچی و اندیشه آسان کنی
یکی دختری نارسیده به جای — کنم چون پرستار پیشت به پای
به سوگند پیمان کن اکنون یکی — ز گفتار من سر مپیچ اندکی
چو بیرون شود زین جهان شهریار — تو خواهی بُدن زو مرا یادگار
نمانی که آید به من بر گزند — بداری مرا همچو او ارجمند
من اینک به پیش تو استاده‌ام — تن و جان شیرین تو را داده‌ام
ز من هرچ خواهی همه کام تو — برآرم نپیچم سر از دام تو

Fig. – 8 (Abbreviated translation mine: Soudabeh offers any of the women to Siyavash from any family he desires. She promises to make her obedient to him, if when on the throne he treats Soudabeh exactly as she is treated now, a queen. Or even if he desires, she is ready to offer herself to him).

نه من با پدر بی‌وفایی کنم — نه با اهرمن آشنایی کنم
وگر سرد گویم بدین شوخ چشم — بجوشد دلش گرم گردد ز خشم
یکی جادوی سازد اندر نهان — بدو بگرود شهریار جهان
همان به که با او به آواز نرم — سخن گویم و دارمش چرب و گرم
سیاوش ازآن پس به سودابه گفت — که اندر جهان خود تو را کیست جفت
نمانی مگر نیمهٔ ماه را — نشایی به گیتی بجز شاه را
کنون دخترت بس که باشد مرا — نشاید بجز او که باشد مرا
بر این باش و با شاه ایران بگوی — نگه کن که پاسخ چه یابی از اوی
بخواهم من او را و پیمان کنم — زبان را به نزدت گروگان کنم
که تا او نگردد به بالای من — نیاید به دیگر کسی رای من
و دیگر که پرسیدی از چهر من — بیامیخت با جان تو مهر من

"Until now, however, there has been neither written nor archaeological confirmation of a secluded harem.' Likewise there is no evidence for the large number of women, to which the classical sources attest."

[8] See figures 8, 9 and 11 where all indicate that Siyavash is not interested in women Soudabeh introduces him.

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Fig. 9 - (Abbreviated translation mine: Siyavash responds, while reflecting that he will not go against his father, the King. He also has to oil Soudabeh's palm, makes sure that his actions never aggravates her or the king. He reassures Soudabeh that in beautify she has no rival, like a jewel that only kings are deserved. To assure her, he says that you have a daughter that may suit me. He asks that Soudabeh should tell the king that if the day comes her daughter will be the only one that suits him. But if she asked about his heart, it desires no one but Soudabeh.

In "Siyavash" chapter of *The Shahnameh*, Soudabeh is a silent character until she becomes aware that Siyavash may end up on the throne, because the King, pleased by his achievements, has started to prime him for the job. Soudabeh's first invitation is very much for the purpose of getting to know this new heir, possible future king. Right after that initial encounter, when Soudabeh realises that Siyavash is not really concerned with making a pack with the Queen or securing positions for one of the princesses, his half-sisters, or any other matchmaking effort that she seeks to secure future alliances, she performs, like a Queen. Her conversation with the King on how to prepare Siyavash for what the court offers a prince at his level, in knowing the ways of the Parde Saray / innards of the palace, is pure diplomacy[9]. Dabashi also mentions the indifference that Siyavash shows is not by any means the evidence of a passion that is not reciprocated.



[9] Siyavash not wanting to make her an enemy, confesses to his admiration for Soudabeh while rejecting any idea of betraying his father, the King, agrees to make alliance with any woman of her choosing (Dabashi 2019, 91-92).

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Fig. 10 – (Abbreviated translation mine: Key Kavous is impressed by his conversation with Siyavash. He praises the King's court and royal household, declaring King's command is his desire. In an intimate conversation with Soudabeh, the king asks her to keep an eye on the prince and reports pack to him on how she finds Siyavash. This shows his depth of trust in Soudabeh, since he lets her know that his decision on making Siyavash the heir relies on her observation.)

The poem unravels a potent performative moment of history and politics when the Queen becomes an active player in the theatre of diplomacy. Siyavash is as devoid of innocence as is Soudabeh, for both are thinking about the power each may assume in the future of the land. Here the position of Soudabeh takes a considerable distance from the helpless and sinful Phaedra that Racine paints of her (Racine 1910, 57). She is not the nameless wife of Potiphar nor is the seductress Zulaikha who is burning in tameless passionate desire to bed with Siyavash, portrayed by Jami.[10] In his version of the narrative, she is very close to Phaedra[11], except he allows a happy ending by bringing god into the triangle, who helps Yousuf to see her love and take her in. In this iteration, she is at best a property that now has exchanged hands. However, this Queen, Soudabeh, is planning to rule. Whether she is a successful player or not is a different matter. She is obviously not madly in love nor is she helpless. Ferdowsi does not make a victim of her character. Naturally he builds her character in a way that when we get to learn about the demise of Siyavash and his unfortunate end, her death in hands of Rostam becomes justified. For he blames her as the one who puts his misfortune into motion (Jāmī 2018, fol. 224r).

[10] Jāmī, N. ad-D. 'Abd ar-Rahmān. *Trinity Hall: Yūsuf Va Zulaykhā*. *Cambridge Digital Library*, 2018. https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TRINITYHALL-00088/224. Accessed April 2, 2025.
Provenance: The manuscript belonged to the library of ʿAlī Murād Ṭalpur (d. 1894), the second ruler of the Mankani Ṭalpurs state of Mirpur Khas, as seen in the seal dated 1230/1814. Acquisition: Presented to Trinity Hall by Geraldine Essayan in memory of her uncle, Lawrence Strangman (1907–1980), in 1996. Date of acquisition: 1996.

[11] The series of illustration included in this particular edition of Jami's poetry visualises the process of lust, seduction, and submission from page 171 (Folio 80b) to 224 (Folio 107a) very vividly show the process. For copyright purposes, I cannot reproduce images here. They can all be accessed here *Yūsuf Va zulaykhā*, *Cambridge Digital Library*. 2018, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TRINITYHALL-00088/224

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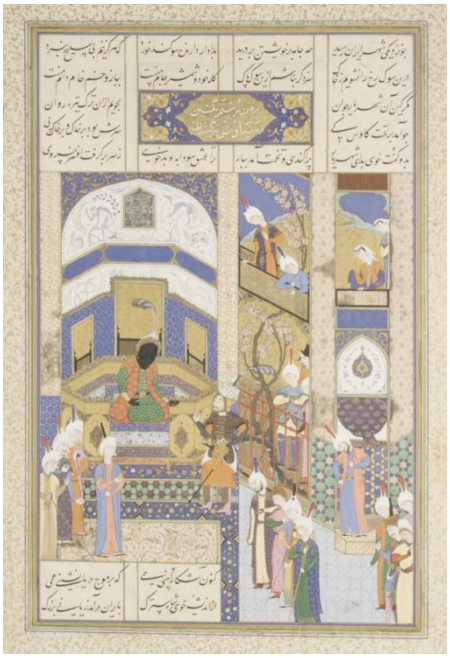


Fig. 11 – "Rostam Blames Kai Kavous for the Death of Siyavash", Folio 202v from *The Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp ca. 1525-30.

In every research one takes measures of the work to be shared. At such a moment *The Shahnameh* by Hamid Dabashi revealed my previous challenges in situating the rise of this woman from the bed of history into theoretical frame of European and Western feminist theories. The fundamental questioned is why seeking refuge in such wisdom when in fact the entirety of the question of this research breathes in the performance of identity in the ancient Persian court, myths and legends around it, Iranian women of the antiquity and what a particular Iranian performance groups had done with such ideas in regards to the notion of the performance of democracy and human rights in a way that relates to their reality. The legitimacy of thought and argument I have been so rigorously seeking, I realised, does not solely lie within the wisdom of the masters to whom I owe the entirety of my academic enlightenment. It instead thrives in a world that has only been seen through a colonising Western lens, a post-Enlightenment European middle-class morality. And through the imperial hegemony of English—or any other colonising language through which Western knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, literature and the arts have been

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transmitted to us, its colonial subjects—or the appropriation of it. Soudabeh, unlike Phaedra does not suffer from the burden of the Catholic sin and such religiously incited regrets and lamentation that Racine, for instance writes into her character or as we see in Seneca's[12] *Phaedra* from a Roman patriotic lens:

> PHAEDRA: Hold! I will myself confess.
> THESEUS: Why dost turn away thy sorrowing face and hide with veiling robe the tears that suddenly o'er flow thy cheeks?
> PHAEDRA: Thee, thee, O sire of the heavenly gods, I call to witness, and thee, bright radiance of celestial light, on whom as founder of this house of ours depends – though sorely tempted, I withstood his prayers; to sword and threats my soul yielded not; yet did my body bear his violence. This stain of shame shall my blood wash away.
> THESEUS: Who, tell me, was the destroyer of my honour?
> PHAEDRA: Whom thou least thinkest.
> THESEUS: Who is he? I demand to hear.
> PHAEDRA: This sword will tell, which, in his panic terror, the ravisher left behind, fearing the gathering of the citizens.
> THESEUS: Ah me! What villainy do I behold? What monstrous thing do I see? The royal hilt of ivory, embossed with tiny figures, gleams before me, the glory of the Athenian race. But he, whither has he escaped?
> PHAEDRA: The slaves, here, saw him speeding swift away in headlong flight.
> THESEUS: O holy Piety, O ruler of the heavens, and thou (Neptune) who with thy billows dost sway the second realm, whence came this infection of infamy in our stock? Was that man nurtured by the land of Greece or by the Scythian Taurus and Colchian Phasis? The breed reverts to its progenitors and debased blood reproduces the primal stock. This, truly, is the madness of that warlike race (the Amazons), to contemn Venus' laws and to prostitute the long-chaste body to the crowd (Seneca 1917, lines 885-903)

Soudabeh, as we have seen here, is not disrespected, diminished, or called a sinner by Ferdowsi, Siyavash, Key Kavous or even Rostam—who cannot help but blaming her for the origin of Siyavash's misfortune. And the reason for that cannot be accessed by the discourse that has already decided on how to perceive the women of "beyond the West", the veiled woman.

[12] Seneca, *Phaedra*, trans. Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), line 885-903, https://www.theoi.com/Text/SenecaPhaedra.html. Accessed 1 March 2020. Seneca the younger, was a Latin playwright and philosopher who flourished in Rome in the late C1st A.D. during the reigns of the emperors Claudius and Nero. His surviving work includes ten tragedy plays, nine of which are based on mythological themes.

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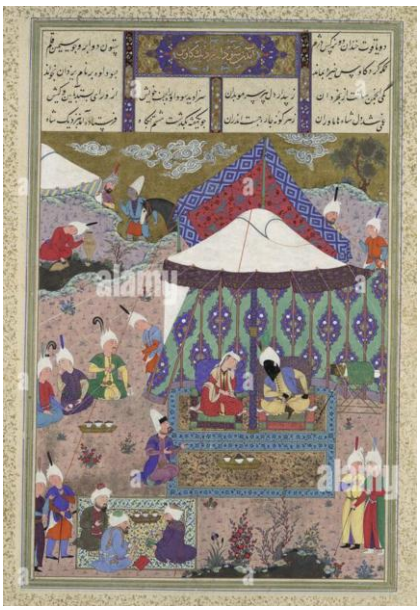


Fig. 12 – "The Marriage of Soudabeh and Kai Kavus", Folio 130r from *The Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp 452129.

So here, in my attempt to access Soudabeh, the woman seductress, it is important to ask "[i]n what way do classical texts like *the Shahnameh* carry the imperial memories of their past into the postcolonial history of their future? *The Shahnameh* is not a 'modern' text. The very temporal or spatial or ideological designation of 'modernity' does not apply and is in fact entirely irrelevant to the Persian epic. But how does the fate of a literary masterpiece of a once imperial pedigree reflect on the aggressive theorization of 'modern epic' as 'the form that represents the European domination of the planet'?" argues Dabashi (Dabashi 2019, 143). And by the same token, I question why her performative dialogues of diplomacy have been erased and replaced by notions of seduction and objectification into a mere carnal desire? Hence the importance of decolonising the patriarchal narrative around the women who desires to rule as an active player on the theatre of politics of her land.

In dialogues that Ferdowsi has written for Soudabeh, gender performance in the political arena of the Persian court, the greatest empire of the world at the time, is at its best. She first appears as an aside, an observer who has the ear of the king; a good queen who

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sees the importance of respecting the prince who may carry the line of Kay Kavous. Siyavash is not the son of the royal Queen but born to one of the royal wives, of a Touranian descend. So naturally at the beginning he is no threat, hence the absence of Soudabeh's direct engagement with him. Soudabeh herself is the princess of Hamavaran. Beyond the respect she demands in her own right, she is the symbolic and guaranteed bond between Iran and the king of Hamavaran who once took Key Kavous and his close council, hostage. Soudabeh in her very essence, is the arena of the politics of the region, and she plays it. Her body, in other words is at once her gender identity when marked by interpretation of passion, and the stage of the politics of the empire; an actual queen who had lived it. She is not a myth and stands on the shoulder of many other women who were active in ancient Persianate societies[13].

Unlike the Greek or Biblical myths, no god or superpower is there to take the responsibility of the demise of these characters. They do it to themselves. Ferdowsi gives Soudabeh and Siyavash the agency of a doer, a player on the scene of his theatre of politics and history. That is the significant difference between Soudabeh and her Muslim, Jewish, Christian or Greek counterparts. Her body and persona both, are embedded in a sociopolitical frame narrative based on gender equality in civil and human rights[14]. Yet in

[13] For more information on women rights and the role of women in the organisation of the empire, women as Foremen and business owners see sections under "Female Workers" and "Representation of Women" in Brosius, M. (1996). *Women in Ancient Persia, 559-331 BC*. Oxford University Press, USA. Similar and more concentrated information can also be found here: Brosius, Maria. "WOMEN I. In Pre-Islamic Persia." *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, 1 Jan. 2000, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/women-i/. Accessed 14 May 2018. Under i. *Achaemenid period*. 4 & 5, iii. *Sasanian period*, 5 for archaeological and historical documents regarding women equal pay, paid maternity leave and children allowance, women in workforces, women merchants, governors and women admirals and military commanders in ancient Persia (600 BC) and antiquity (until 650). It is noteworthy to mentions that Iranian women under the rule of Greeks and Romans (Seleucid and Parthian) were treated like pawns and practicing polygamy was the way of court. This interrupted order was again restored during the Iranian Sassanid empire for the commoners according to surviving civil documents and religious hermeneutic text, but not the royal court.

[14] Additionally in the following Tooran Shahriary Bahrami provides an insight into legal and ideological rights of women in Ancient and antiquity Persia that is more rooted in Avesta (Bahrami 2008, 25-30). Britanica introduces Avesta as the "sacred book of Zoroastrianism containing its cosmogony, law, and liturgy, the teachings of the prophet Zarathushtra (Zoroaster)".

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the imaginary of the generations to come, gradually Soudabeh's performative agency was reduced to the level of a type character, a seductress, a femme fatale. Jami's narrative based on the Quranic story of Yousuf played a significant part in the formation of that image.

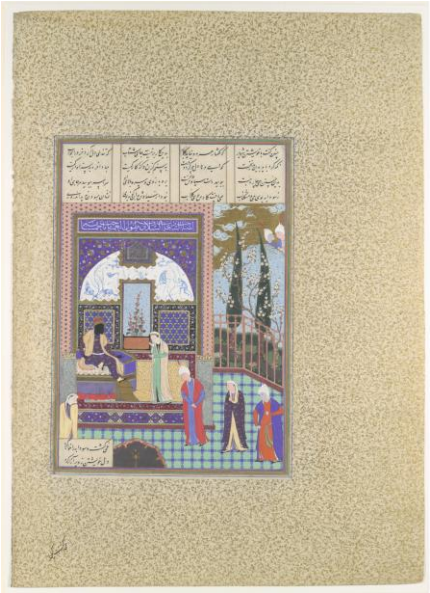


Fig. 13 – Siyavash Stands Accused by Soudabeh before Kai Kavous, Folio 163v from *the Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp ca. 1530-35.

It may be possible to look at the performance of gender in the stories of Greek and Mesopotamia based on what Judith butler has established in her seminal essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (Butler 1988, 519-531).

Where she argues that "reified and naturalized conceptions of gender might be understood as constituted and, hence, capable of being constituted differently. In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief." She then by drawing from "theatrical, anthropological, and philosophical discourses", and phenomenology,

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demonstrates that "what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo"(Butler 1988, 520).

The patriarchal master narrative, in constructing the identity of these women allowed them to take on a role, or better say, given a role to them, which produces a series of effect. Their stories create an internal reality or truth for that matter, which I will argue is produced and reproduced in all these tales, reinstating what is to be expected from a woman in position of power—considering that they all have been wives of men of authority (social sanctions). In the same vein I'd suggest that the case of Soudabeh may provide us with more than that; a glimpse to the political structure of ancient Persia, foreign policies and the not too passive role of women as actors in the sociopolitical scene, which puts the Iranian woman in a slightly different theoretical frame as far as feminist movement is concerned. This is one of the reasons based on which I argue the recent movement of Iranian women demands a narrative of its own and cannot be fully understood within the paradigms of Western philosophy.

Cultural performativity — embedded in Persian history and heritage — I argue, is the driving force of formation of resistance movements. Because when tapping into the archive of ancient figures, myths and legends, we re-discover and accentuate them in a strange temporality, that Kristeva calls "future perfect," where "the most deeply repressed past gives a distinctive character to a logical and sociological distribution of the most modern type" (Kristeva 1981, 13-35). Butler[15] defines critical genealogy of gender as "conception of an 'act' which is both socially shared and historically constituted, and which is performative" (Butler 1988, 530). She also acknowledges that it ought to be "supplemented

[15] Please see: "[…] reified and naturalized conceptions of gender might be understood as constituted and, hence, capable of being constituted differently. In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief. In the course of making my argument, I will draw from theatrical, anthropological, and philosophical discourses, but mainly phenomenology, to show that what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (Butler 1988, 520).

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by a politics of performative gender acts, one which both redescribes existing gender identities and offers a prescriptive view about the kind of gender reality there ought to be" (Butler 1988, 530). While Iranian young girls, during Women Life Freedom uprising, and in their practices of everyday life, protest the existing gender identities, they are not shy of redescribing ancient models in order to offer the kind of identity that has already become. Reappearances of images or historical figures of women warriors of ancient Persia or intentional celebration of Zoroastrian festivals as protest performance, historically constitute, are socially shared, and actively resist the gender apartheid of the IR.

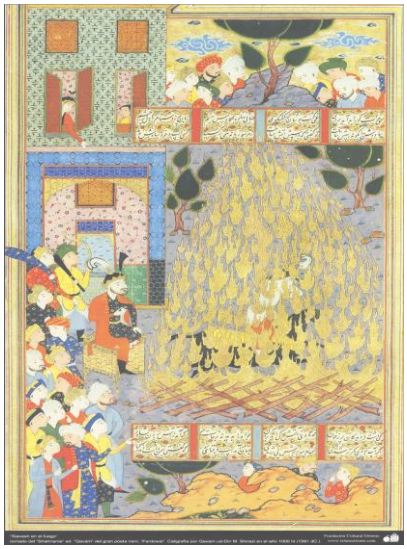


Fig. 14 – Siyavash on Fire, *The Shahnameh*, Qavam Edition, by Qavam ud-Din M. Shirazi Fundació Cultural Oriente islamorient.com ©

This very active gender performativity however has been appropriated within *The Shahnameh*'s master narrative and more so in Jami's hermeneutic poem based on the story of Yusuf and Zulaikha[16] — where the woman is reduced to a lustful seductress. These texts

[16] Nūr al-Dīn ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Yūsuf Va Zulaykhā*, MS Trinity Hall 88, Cambridge Digital Library, 2018, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TRINITYHALL-00088/224. Accessed 1 March 2020.
The poem is written in Epic Poetry meter in 1483 in Farsi. Originally written in the 15th century by the Persian poet Jami, this poem narrates the story of Yusuf (Joseph) and Zulaikha. Griffith's English translation was first

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were produced centuries after the Arab conquest of Persia under a different ideological discourse than that of which the ancient Zoroastrian Persians once submitted to. Unravelling this palimpsest of politics of gender therefore invites the question originally promised in this research, on the construction of gender and desire. The becoming of this woman and her collective identity, unlike what Butler has established, is constituted based on a different anthropological, philosophical and theatrical model that of her western counterparts.

The curiosity of the western audience in noticing the absence of the woman asks for an investigation, for that audience too is submitted to a particular notion of gender construct when nations like modern Iran in particular and the Global South in general is concerned. Hence the necessity of examining myths of the ancient Greeks and the Middle Eastern Abrahamic religions, against the ancient Persian's, while questioning gender performativity and the construct of gender identity. A construct that was reinforced in various ages and stages, then through each translation and rendition, these stories were influenced by the hand that held the pen. This is where, I argue, the notion of female desire lurks in disguise. She can only breath if accessed outside the Western and Islamic colonial ideologies and theories. While Zuleikha or Phaedra need emancipation, Soudabeh's agency puts her outside such formula of objectification (taboo).

Here, I offer us to assume a different angle in order to look at the woman who desires. As Dabashi indicates in the conclusion of *The Shahnameh*, while I acknowledge that I am operating within the very structure of a Western tradition of research, thinking and writing in English, I have to be cognisant of the fact that the culture in which my subject is embedded embraces dimensions that surpass the boundaries of this tradition.

published around 1882. Later, in 1980 David Pendlebury provided another translation very close to the 19th century version titled *Yusuf and Zulaikha : An Allegorical Romance*. London: Octagon Press, 1980. It is important to note that Jami gives the nameless woman in Quran a name, Zulaikha and he fictionalises and expands the story to an eventual happy ending and lovers' fulfilment, hence the addition of "romance" into the title by Pendlebury.

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Dabashi too acknowledges that:

> What am I doing writing these lines in English, or Fanon in French, or Spivak and Said in English? None of us are European or of European descent. We are all colonials turned into postcolonial theorists. When they translate a Chinese or Arabic or Persian literary text into English or French they have not translated it into a European language but into a colonial language, a language read and understood far more by Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans than by Europeans — or those of European descent. The world did not learn these languages at a Berlitz school, or on an Ivy League campus. The world learned these languages at colonial gunpoint, in the trenches of anticolonial battlefields […] (Dabashi 2019, 198).

By the same token I would also offer similar approach towards the missing woman in the performance of the *Persian Hyppolite*. While it was difficult then to imagine a woman whose agency and desire could be a part of the political arena for a contemporary Iranian ensemble, who was concerned with their democratic rights, now, Iranian women whose performances as practice of everyday life we witness today, call for a different narrative. While the ensemble of *Persian Hyppolite* were comfortable with allowing so much vulnerability, unpredictability and freedom of participatory expression based on audience participation in various countries, they could not shift their focus from the victimhood of Siyavash to the performative power of Soudabeh's desire. Not a passionate or sensual one, but a desire to rule and to control the fate of the politics of the land. For that is what has been actively erased from her 'desire' throughout time by pens of male writers such as Jami, Seneca or Racine.

The *Persian Hippolyte* was all about 'presentness', everyday life, everyday judgement and the contemporary human condition: "What the spectators see and hear in the performance is always present. Performance is experienced as the completion, presentation, and passage of the present." (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 94).[17] What was missing in that performance, now has come to the foreground. Iranian women in their intentional practices of everyday life on the stage of streets of Iran, by unveiling their hair and body as performance of protest.

[17] See Kalami 2020, 282-288.

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So here in our attempt to access Soudabeh, we should ask how that past is now projected in the present performances of women. Especially when this veiled woman beyond the West, burns her compulsory hijab, inspiring women like Michelle Obama and many other celebrities to join the movement, to take it to the stage of the United Nation's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), to force the United States Congress to pass Mahsa act (March 2024), to have Juliette Binoche and Isabelle Huppert cut their hair in protest on camera, to move European women parliamentarian like Hanna Neumann or Ye-One Rhie to fight for the freedom of imprisoned musicians and artist from the dungeons of IR. Abir Al-Sahlani's[18] performance made Iranian women's hair visible, especially because of who she is and where she performed, as did all other celebrities who appeared on Binoche's Reel (such as Anna Karin Faccendini, Présidente de l'association la Voie de la Justice, Anne-Cécile Mailfert, Présidente de la Fondation des Femmes, Isabelle Huppert, and 47 other women)[19]. As Reinalt and Rai have stated, "the role of public space as a staging ground for political legitimacy and contestation" (Rainalt and Rai 2015, 10) in this case connects the political struggle of Iranian women who are dealing with gender apartheid with a heightened spectacle and clandestine efforts of IR to filter internet access or block social media to stop the performance (on the stage of the streets of Iran) from being seen (on the screens of the world). For this was (and still is) a political uprising and a gendered performance, both, at once.

[18] Simon Johnson. "Swedish MEP Cuts Hair during Speech in Solidarity with Iranian Women." *Reuters*, 5 October, 2022. https://www.reuters.com/world/swedish-mep-cuts-hair-during-speech-solidarity-with-iranian-women-2022-10-05/.

[19] See Juliette Binoche Instagram Reel, 5 October 2022 https://www.instagram.com/reel/CjURS9tI8CF/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

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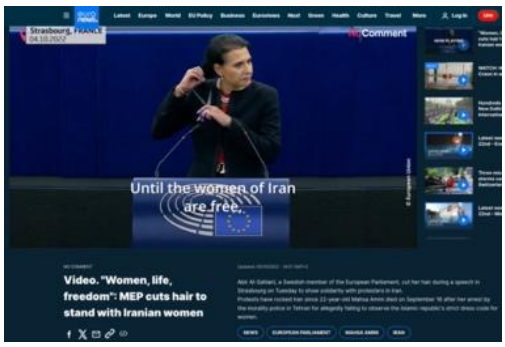


Fig. 15 – Abir Al-Sahlani, Swedish Member of the European Parliament, 5 Oct 2022

In Conclusion

When we toured with the play *Persian Hippolyte*, a decade ago, the performance group could not shift their focus from the victimhood of Siyavash to the performative power of Soudabeh's desire. On the global arena of post Mahsa's death, however, Iranian theatre and cinema actresses, along with other women, are taking their imposed hijab off, claiming not only their gender identity through their hair, but also the basic human rights of marginalised Kurd, Baluch or LGBTQ communities and going to prison for it. Iranian teenage girls had not started their nocturnal street dances, burning their compulsory hijab, and women practicing their everyday lives in an intentional performance of removing compulsory hijab and cover. But they are here now. Iranian women have shifted 'life' on the political arena of freedom. This is gender performativity constituted on their anthropological, historical and cultural identity.

It is still difficult to imagine a woman, a Middle Eastern woman, a woman who is immediately assumed to be Muslim, whose agency and desire are already a part of the political arena. As Glissant in *Poetics of Relation*, says opacity offers a potential for social movements to challenge and subvert systems of domination (Glissant 1997, 193)[20]. And like him, the contemporary Iranian women who are concerned with their democratic rights,

[20] In *Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997),* Édouard Glissant develops the concept of *opacity* (*opacité*) primarily as an ethical and political stance against the demand for total transparency and assimilation imposed by colonial and Western universalist discourses: "Opacity is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy, but subsistence within an irreducible singularity."

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demand the right to opacity, leaving these brackets and definition for the white West, hoping, maybe the world also start to rid itself of the colonial perspectives, informed by white-supremacy of thoughts—and maybe the guilt that western intellectuals carry—to allow the voice and the breath of *the other* to be heard without the fear of another patriarchal oppressive perspective. In other words, this woman is fighting a double battle, both rooted in patriarchy. Therefore, the real question to ask is how do we transform deeply embedded systems that currently centre white supremacy cultures and transactional ways of knowing and doing?

Iranian women have been vocal that hijab and Islam do not have any roots in Persian culture, moreover, they have always been considered imposed, occupying, and of colonial ideologies—ones that are now utilised and mobilised by the gender apartheid of IR to take the entire nation hostage. Nazanin Bonyadi along with Masih Alinejad and other women activists, in an effort to raise awareness regarding what cultural wealth supports the uprising of Iranian women, where their courage stems from, and how this culture is in opposition to the imposed rules of the fundamentalist regime, have documented their claims on multiple social and political grounds such as the United Nations, the US Senate, and the European Parliament[21].

I am reminded here of what Janelle Reinalt and Shirin Rai in the introduction of their seminal work *The Grammar of Politics and Performance* (2015) have stated: "Democracy works through the assertion and affirmation of claims to represent others. Such 'representative claims' (Saward 2010) require cultural performances… [which] is not a marginal curiosity or epi-phenomenal aspect of a more fundamental idea of representation – rather, it creates and reinforces representation itself" (Reinelt and Rai 2015, 10). An obvious analogy is easily drawn here: in the absence of such privilege, therefore any attempt to represent the *other* will be crushed by IR, rendering any performance, political at once. What I am interested in,

[21] See Nazanin Bonyadi's speech on 3 November 2022, at the United Nation Security Council meeting on the issue of Iranian Women Uprising after the death of Mashable Jina Amini (https://www.instagram.com/reel/Ckgb1iBJ3qu/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link, Accessed 3 Nov 2022

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however, is not this obvious analogy but another one. The claim to represent is common to both performance and politics, especially in a democracy. Would the democratic space of discourse entertain similar power of representation for this woman without looking at her, receiving her, framing and defining her through what our ever-illuminating W.E.B. Du Bois acknowledges as the veil? Without the invisible barriers that prevent genuine understanding of her? Iranian women who are performing protest in their practice of everyday life, are aware of how they are perceived or theorised by the dominant theoretical and academic discourse along with imposed ideological traditions they resist. The question is if we, embedded in the western traditions have achieved double consciousness in questioning how we might transform deeply embedded systems that currently centre white supremacy cultures and transactional ways of knowing and doing.

And I shall end with a few words by Erika Fischer-Lichte:

> Artists are working towards exposing people to performance situations that shatter the spectators' safe positions and require them to become co-participants in the action. By setting up extreme conditions and exposing themselves to deadly risks the artists call on the spectators' sense of responsibility and provoke them to act. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 171)

Soudabeh's desire demands the spectators' sense of responsibility and in performing her gender identity, provokes them to act.

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Bio-bibliographical note

Proshot Kalami, Ph.D. (University of California, Davis, 2007), is an artist-practitioner and scholar specialising in Iranian cinema, performance studies and digital media, particularly in the context of gender and ethnicity. An Associate Professor in Performance Studies and Media Studies at NSU, she has taught at UC Berkeley, UC Santa Cruz, UC Davis in the US, and at Loughborough University in the UK. Proshot is an award-winning playwright, theatre director, dramaturg, documentary filmmaker, radio drama director, poet, visual artist and voice actor. Her plays and installations have received residencies, grants and sponsorships nationally and internationally, touring in the US, UK, Europe, India and Morocco. Kalami's scholarly work is concerned with the interaction of body and technology with specific focus on gender performativity and civic resistance. She sits at the editorial board of *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, and has served as guest editor and associate editor for journals including *Theatre Topics*, *Theatre Survey*, *International Journal of the Image*, and the journal of *Women & Performance*.

Email address: pkc.work@gmail.com

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Exposing Female Experiences:

A Reading of Surjeet Kalsey's Poetry

Simran Kaur

(Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, IN)

Abstract

Understanding women's suffering by situating Surjeet Kalsey as a poet in the complex diaspora milieu of two distinct societies which is Indian (pertaining to Punjabi society) and Canadian. It is one of the pressing issues that are taken up as meaningful context in this paper. The aim of this article is to analyse the position of women as marginalised through various socio-cultural elements of the society as well as through their experiences. Kalsey's poetry deals with the issues related to immigrant women on the Canadian soil. Her poems are testament to the imagery of the female experiences shown throughout her works. The poems of Surjeet Kalsey discuss the issues of immigrants, the situations and problems of women, culture, tradition, and human relations. She tries to bring forth or to centre stage the emotions, feelings, struggles of a woman which they experience and encounter in life. As a woman, Kalsey speaks for the women who are seen on margins and perhaps considered doubly marginalised. Being marginalised labels them as inferior, outcast, voiceless, powerless, suppressed both as female and immigrants. But the poet tries to challenge that by taking a stand as a "woman writer" who resists patriarchy and the oppression of women in Western society and culture through the selected poems of Surjeet Kalsey from *Paunan Nal Guftagoo* [Conversation with The Wind], *Aurat Shabad te Shakti* [Woman, Words & Strength], and *Rom Rom Vich Jagdey Deewey* [Body Illuminates].

Keywords: immigrants; diaspora; marginality; intersectionality; feminism.

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"To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body."

Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center

In her preface to *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Bell Hooks affirms that it is problematic to be on the margins because margin is a place where there are powerlessness and a lack of agency. "Marginality" as a theory falls under the field of sociology in social sciences whereas in the field of literature, it is applied to understand inequality and development. Although, it can be used to describe the situation, the condition as well as the location of the people or the group or community whereas the term "margin" describes the boundaries, outskirts and the peripheries. Marginalities refer to the people or the community at the lower spectrum of the hierarchy in the society due to various criteria such as economic, social, cultural resources, and power. These criteria grapple the society for equal participation regardless of it being regional, national or global which impact the group's chances of living in the society. It can be stated that the concept of margin is not only used in the context to define people in the economic sense but also referred to the people of local communities based on their geographical, political, social or cultural spaces. Such spaces shape the environment of the person and his personality; therefore, margin can be understood from the perspective of centre or reference with the set of values associated with the ideal, process and resources. It suggests that marginality cannot be understood without the centre because it is the centre which provides some significant value to the margin as it does not hold its importance otherwise.

The theorists of marginality have understood marginality in context to the migration, culture, social as well as psychological. Theorists like Robert Ezra Park have understood the marginality through migration in relation to marginal man. He states that the characteristics of the marginal man are "spiritual instability, intensified self-consciousness, restlessness,

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and malaise" (Park 1928, 803). He has understood the situation of a marginal man through the fusion of the cultures and the conflict of the cultures which results in the "divided self" i.e., the old and the new one (Park1928, 802). He uses the term "cultural hybrid" in the essay which means that a man is living a cultural and traditional life of two distinct people which is inseparable. The situation can be taken to understand the condition of diasporic people as well where it becomes forceful to live a dual life. The other theorist named Everette V. Stonequist elaborated the concept of marginality to discuss the psychological uncertainty between two social world which reflects and impact the personality of an individual. He mentioned about the two cultures wherein one dominates the other and there is a certain tendency amongst the group of marginalised people to become the associates of the dominating group. Their desire of assimilation is very strong that it may lead to the development of anxiety, divided loyalty, and inferiority complex. Such conditions may also create mental illness or an expression of personal dysfunction like criminal activities and so on. The gap between the dominant group and the marginalised group develops in the individual a sense of self-pity, insecurity, and sensitivity for themselves. Further critics have commented that to be on the marginality also suggests that the marginal group stay away from the access to resources, opportunities, freedom of choices, development of their personal capabilities, and knowledge which hampers their potential of decision-making capabilities. The host society always sees them as an outsider, which them of their opportunities.

To contextualise the marginality in the relation to the Indian-Canadian Punjabi poet Surjeet Kalsey leads to understand the female experiences especially the immigrant women. Her works discusses the issues of immigrants, the situations and problems of women, culture, tradition, and human relations. She tries to bring forth or to centre stage the emotions, feelings, and struggles of a woman which they experience and encounter in life. The image of the women appearing in the poems of Kalsey depicts their desolate conditions

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in Canada. That as a woman they are seen as victims to social injustices and prejudices of society whether they are situated in India or Canada. It indicates the rigid and confined patriarchal conditions which do not offers them enough space to live their lives as a free individual. Conditions like these keep them away and behind as a woman and keeps them at the periphery of the society where she lacks access to her options generally. Being kept at the margins make marginality then gradually and slowly becomes an inevitable the part of her life. As a diasporic Punjabi woman writer, she expresses her thoughts deeply on the plight of females through her poems. The poetry of Kalsey reflects images of pain, angst, anguish, repressed desires, suffering, state of desolation, loneliness, position of women, bondage of cultural and traditional customs, man-woman relationship, patriarchy, diasporic experiences, resistance, existential position to name some. These emerging shades of women's position appearing in her poetry shows that Kalsey's in depth understanding of her surroundings as well as her minute observation over the conditions of woman belonging to her community.

Kalsey in her poems gives ample space to show critical circumstances of female in the society while taking complete charge by providing them voice and opportunity. In *Paunan Nal Guftagoo* [Conversation with The Wind], the poems are composed from the various perspectives. Surjeet Kalsey's poems are testament to the aspect of marginality which is evident through her poetic works. The marginality of woman is shown through the poems like "Dehleez–Teej" [Threshold–Three] where Kalsey is focusing on the condition of women which has remained persistent from generations. The meaning of threshold according to Marriam Webster dictionary means boundary or limit. The threshold shows that the women are kept within the boundaries where they feel trapped, suffocated, caged inside the circle of tradition and the clutches of patriarchy. Kalsey in "Dehleez–Teej" [Threshold–Three] writes:

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There lies a threshold beyond that space of yours
where my arrival is restricted
and forbidden
within this threshold to that
my existence wriggles
when stuck in trap of arguments
you seek my reasons
but you find them fatuous
you call my sensibility a mindful illness
your echoing laughter
satiates the generational male voices
hanging at your back
the maddening laughter rumbles in me since times
that woman's chained feet
when collides with the threshold
makes their lives blood-spattered. (Kalsey, my translation. 1990, 67).

In this poem, she is questioning the state of women through it. To Kalsey, the generational burdens push the women towards being submissive. Woman's ability of having compassion and emotional is criticised by the man who laughs at her situation is shown through "your echoing laughter." The echoing of laughter of a man is an example of the patriarchy which is still being carried forward till date. These thresholds have confined women not only pertaining to home and society but also psychologically. It restricts and curtails the potentiality and capability of women and Kalsey's poem is an example of that situation. When such situation is tackled upon, they give them endless pain and struggle to deal with it.

Other poems such as "…Te Mard Boleya" […And the Man Speak] and "Bin Chehari" [Faceless] discusses about the silences of a woman. In the "…Te Mard Boleya" […And the Man Spoke], Kalsey says:

That she is only made
to stand on her feet to wash dishes
that her hands

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are not meant to hold pen
that her forehead
is a trench of old and aged thoughts
which is futile to hatch a new thought! (Kalsey, my translation. 1990, 47).

The first poem reflects upon the presence of a woman which is voiceless where it is man who speaks only. Kalsey depicts through this poem that an intellectual faculty cannot be ascribed to the female as an individual. She is incapable to hold "pen" indicates her powerlessness to articulate. Her ability to not hold 'pen' ["Kalam"] indicates that her capability is confined within the household chores (Kalsey 1999, 47). She is considered as someone who is incapable to think thoughtfully and give new ideas which reflects the prejudiced notion and biased thinking of the man who sees women as a secondary to them. The second poem "Bin Chehari" [Faceless] says:

In the presence of the breeze
her face existed on her body
… … … … … … … … … … … …
She lost her face
in the bog of time
… … … … … … … … … … … …
She began searching since ages:
her face
her intellect
her identity

She has found
that lost face today
which she keeps on her empty neck
so, what's surprising in it then?
that if she has identified herself
and her intellect again!

Oh! But this is not the age of this face now!
That each manly thought
speaks the language of the body
turns for woman's body. (Kalsey, my translation. 1990, 48).

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The second one describes the identity of a female who is faceless. The faceless identity means that all the women are seen with one perspective by the patriarchal society which is to view their existence as a mere commodity. Kalsey is searching for her identity (identity is referring to her face here) which is lost. The lost identity presents the lack experienced by the females in the society. The "lost" shows the search to question their identity and existence in the society. Thus, it is difficult to retain one's existence and identity again. The female is viewed as figure who at the margins of the society against the centre which is represented by the male figure (the opposite gender). Due to this, at the centre, her position becomes weak as she lacks the access to the opportunities. Her denied access makes her moot in the society where she loses her power to express herself against the hegemonic system. Kalsey as a feminist has shown her thought against patriarchy by reflecting within which is referred by Dr Gurumel Singh Sidhu as introvert. He has observed her poems in *Paunan Nal Guftagoo* are as against the "repressive patriarchy" (Sidhu 2007, 41). He observes that Kalsey's poems show the figure of woman who is shy, naïve, respectful who is under the "social pressure" (Sidhu 2007, 42). Sidhu mention in his article "Feminism in Surjeet Kalsey's Poetry" that Kalsey's entire poetics oeuvre reflects that her feministic ideals are influenced by the western feminism[1]. Though the western feminism is more extrovert, but Kalsey's feminism is more towards inwards which reflects her conscience and intensity. Her poems portray the experiences of woman which are the result of their marginality. Kalsey's poetry becomes the medium to analyse and understand marginal position of woman which means that woman is bereft of the viable medium to speak. Kalsey's poems speak about the women's struggles and their painful situation. She is aware of the marginal space given to

[1] The title of the article is translated by me from Punjabi to English. The article is the part of the book titled *Aurat Ton Aurat Tak da Safar*.

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women in the male centric society which is why the poet finds it necessary to discuss this marginality through her poems.

Marginality not only discusses one's place in the society but also it talks about the identity. As Dr Rebecca Ray in her article "Identity and Marginality" quotes Stephen Mennell that:

> Identity which is multilayered and multifaceted…[and] are a way of making sense of who we are. It is the result of a very individual process of reflection, choice and an empowering expression of beliefs, tastes and values. Identities are also socially constructed and determined by wider social, cultural, political and economic contexts. They may be reinterpreted or even imposed upon certain groups or individuals by others, often as a result of inequalities of power and authority. In this case identities may be divisive and repressive or even rebellious and subversive (Kay 2005, 1).

The theme of identity is embedded in the poem of Kalsey while understanding in the context of marginality. Her appearing female imagery which appears reflects the concern regarding their identity that there is a constant search for one's individuality and identity. In the repressive patriarchal society as mentioned by Dr Sidhu, Kalsey is constantly talking about the hidden identity of women through her poetic works. Poems like "Bin Chehari" (Faceless) from third section of *Paunan Nal Guftagoo* shows the inherent desire for oneself and image. The woman in the poem is constantly searching for her old self. The self which was her identity and with the passing of time it is lost, and she has not found it yet. This yearning to find the inner self is apparent in her poems. Kalsey is trying to question the society's confined nature which has diluted the identity of women. The poem "Faceless" is a critique over the desire of the female body and that the face which refers one's unique identity hold no value. Marginalised people often tend to use their identity collectively against the dominant group to show their solidarity. They try to re-enforce their power against them and show their existence which reflects their consistent desire to assimilate

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with the dominant group. When the desire is not met as per the longing then they choose to create a separate identity against the dominant group to assert the importance of their identity.

Kalsey's second book *Aurat Shabad te Shakti* [Woman, Words & Strength] is composition of the poems based on the power of words which provide strength to woman to express her desires. The poems are the example of asserting one's identity through the various poems are thematically written from the different aspects of women such as of woman, woman's eyes, hand, feet, and house. These aspects of woman's body provide the glimpse into the life of a woman as well as who woman is and what it is like to be one. Each body part shows the different facet of her life such as in the poem "Aurat de Hatth" [The Hands of Woman] describes the function of the hands. Her hands which provide security, shelter, blessing, food, love, prosperity, and caresses. They are artistic and ultimate source of creativity. The other poem "Aurat de Paer" [The Feet of Woman] reflects that a woman is bounded with traditions and kept within boundaries. Here the boundary is shown by anklets, brother, father, husband or in-laws' house that her entire life passes by following the orders and rules. Her feet teach the coming generations to walk and show them the path to lead a prosperous life. Another poem "Aurat de Akkh" [The Eyes of Woman] where the poet finds herself as a witness to the injustices experienced by women in the society. She reflects that it is her inner eye of consciousness which is seeing the brutality against woman. It is painful, cynical, and detrimental to watch it. It is unbelievable to see their history written in front of her eyes. In "Main Janmaangi" [I will Be Born] from *Rom Rom Vich Jagdey Deewey* [Body Illuminates], Kalsey is claiming her existence that she will be born again because her existence is inevitable. Along with the existence, she is reclaiming her identity by asserting it. Her poetry can be analysed to understand the marginal position of woman which means that she is bereft of the medium viable to speak. It can be observed that Kalsey's writing shift discusses the journey of a woman from the margin to the journey

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where she has claimed this marginality as power to defend her position in the society. The shift from the submissive identity towards the reclaimed identity shows the evolving identity of the women presented through her poems. As the culture studies theorist Stuart Hall discusses in his article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" that identity is ever evolving, dynamic, and not fixed. It is negotiated and redefined constantly with the help of cultural, social, and historical forces. As a diasporic writer, Kalsey is also criticising the identity of the women as secondary. She is commenting upon the doubly marginalised state of women. The identity of women has remained static and never appeared as fluid. The poem of Kalsey depicts both the conditions of Hall that on one hand, he writes:

> … 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history… (Hall 1990, 223).

This shared "'one true self'" is expository of the women's collective strength which appears through the poems. Kalsey not only shares the painful plight of immigrant women but also bring into forefront the problematic condition of women experienced universally. This universality leads women to feel and express their shared selves going beyond cultures and traditions. It is their common identity of being women which makes them "'one people'" as it reflects their shared historical and cultural experiences. It brings in them the notion of solidarity and oneness which makes them stable and firm besides the ongoing shifts. However, the second idea of 'cultural identity' depicts the process of being and becoming which means that identity belongs to future as well to the past. This emerging identity of being and becoming of women's marginal position with respect to the male counterpart located at the centre is apparent in the poems. Women's consciousness and

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solidarity help to overcome from the act of the suppression. As Bell Hooks in "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" is claiming and accepting the position of being at margin, but she is not seeing her state as weak rather she views that this will give her power to challenge the centre. Hooks says that it gives a sense of acknowledgment that they are a part of a whole. She considers that a centre cannot hold itself unless there is a margin which has become a focal point for Kalsey to discuss their situation as margins has given them a sense of wholeness provided with a strengthened self and solidarity. For she considers, marginality is way to show resistance to the hegemony and the centre, Hooks says:

> I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance - as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle. We know struggle to be that which is difficult, challenging, hard and we know struggle to be that which pleasures, delights, and fulfils desire. We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world (Hooks 1989, 23).

Kalsey's poetry is also coming from the space of this radical openness which Hooks has talked about. She shows her subjectivity by articulating her desires and opinions which has changed and transformed her personality. It has given her hope to live with the sense of freedom that the centre holds the power, and the margin is always understood in relation to the centre. She converts this space of deprivation into space of power which she enforces to show resistance against centre. Hooks uses this space to provide agency to those who are seen as marginalised, deprived, and abandoned. Therefore, this space becomes important to understand its necessity and significance when studied in relation to the centre. Woman's marginal identity is also the result of the power politics played because of race, class, caste, gender. Kalsey's diasporic image and women centric issues leads to understand the marginal identity of women through "Intersectionality" as coined by Kimberle Crenshaw

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in *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*. The work discusses the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in lieu of women of colour. The intersectional approach towards Kalsey's poetry brings forth the space where she is giving voice to the women of her community. The poet is taking an advantage to show the marginality as being a woman as well as being an immigrant. Kalsey's poems can be analysed to understand the immigrant Punjabi women who are ill-treated, seen unequal, and subordinate within the Punjabi society where their identity is questioned. It is difficult to survive in a space where there is lack of opportunity, and one is constantly pushed towards the boundaries. The space from where she is talking about the experiences of the females depicts excessively about the unchanged and quite traditional mindset of the Punjabi household. It is clearly observable that the patriarchal notion is embedded deeply in the structure of the Punjabi community. Taking the geographical space of Canada and India, there is very less difference when it comes to see the shifts in the traditional customs and behaviour. Seeing Canada as a first world country and land of opportunities, "multiculturalism" is its essential part which becomes an identity of Canada as a nation. The ideas of freedom and liberation are a part of its culture. It is evident that the movement from the third world country to the first world country like Canada brings many shifts culturally. These shifts bring some inherent changes behaviourally which shapes the immigrant's identity gradually while one is exposed to the cultural freedom. The behavioural change in the identity is lacking in the rigid and confined nature of immigrant Punjabi community/culture. Therefore, intersectionality also helps to understand the immigrant and gendered status of women when located in the rubric of diaspora and feminism.

Surjeet Kalsey's poems bring in various aspect of her poems through the concept of marginality. Her poems are witness to marginal conditions of women which reflects their positionality which becomes the reason of their marginality. The theorisation of marginality

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leads to understand the identity which brings in the concept of intersectionality. Discussing the issue of identity with Hall's essay gives window to understand the complexity of female identity and to overcome such situation by claiming the identity. The reclamation comes from the point of resisting marginality and calling marginality as a space of radical openness as Hooks says. Kalsey as Punjabi diasporic writer challenges the customs and behaviours imposed upon women from generations by the patriarchal system which are the reason for marginal identity.

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Bio-bibliographical note

Simran Kaur is currently a doctoral candidate of English from University School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi. Her M.Phil. in English was also from same university. She has completed her graduation and post-graduation in English literature. Her Ph.D. project is focused on the study of Punjabi poetry of the selected Indian Canadian Punjabi poets.

Email address: simrankaurdhanoa@gmail.com

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Rivista Multilingue
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Socioeconomic Status and Health Gaps:
A Baseline Study of India's Marginalized Population

Mauli Sanyal

(New Alipore College, Kolkata, IN)

Abstract

Marginality is a manifestation of 'capability' deprivation that affects the 'functioning'[1] of individuals. It is specific to race, ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic background and leads to oppression and prejudice to a certain degree. Disparity in socioeconomic opportunities influences health, a prime indicator of the Human Development Index. India is a centre of marginalization, undergoing an epidemiological shift, and making slow progress towards universal health care. Under these circumstances, a detailed study of the healthcare system, with special reference to the marginal community, is worthwhile. The paper is descriptive in nature and uses secondary data from the NSSO, India, reports. The sample considered comprises people hospitalized in the last 365 days and examines disease incidence, healthcare utilization and financing patterns. The study reveals that there exist differences in morbidity pattern, access to and utilization of healthcare services, the magnitude of healthcare expenditures and insurance enrolment across socioeconomic groups. The pillars of egalitarian health care—availability, accessibility, and affordability—are gravely threatened, especially among the marginalized communities in India. The analysis is crucial in policy framing, as any anomaly between the development programs and the target groups can adversely affect the marginals and the deprived.

Keywords: diseases; healthcare; health insurance; hospitalization; marginal community.

[1] A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functioning in a sense, is more directly related to living conditions, since they *are* different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead (Sen 1987, 36).

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Introduction

Marginalized groups within the socioeconomic framework include individuals who, on account of their race, ethnicity, religion, or economic status, face inequalities in opportunities, access to resources, and treatment. From the perspective of human development, one of the many ways that this manifests itself is through its effect on health indices. It gets reflected in the personal health status, perception and awareness of health, prevalence and type of diseases, availing of medical care and healthcare financing. The difference in social opportunities influences both individual and collective well-being throughout one's life and even has intergenerational effects.

India is a hub of marginalization, with discriminations found at multiple levels based on caste, creed, religion, ethnicity and language. As for the historically evolved caste system, there are thousands of castes in India, which the Constitution of India has broadly categorized into four groups: Scheduled Caste (SC), alias the *Harijan* (the untouchable), Scheduled Tribe (ST) or the *Adivasi*, Other Backward Class (OBC) and the General category. A closer glance at the latest statistics reveals that in India there are about 740 tribes (8.6%), 1108 castes (16.6%) and more than 5000 backward classes (42%) in the total population. In summary, about three-quarters of India's population belong to historically disadvantaged classes (NHFS, 2015).

The caste system has been a crucial part of India's internal politics and society even after globalization. There exists ample evidence of identity-based marginalization that results in the exclusion of sizable segments of the population from social, economic, and political domains. Disadvantage manifests in their per capita income, educational attainment, health indices and overall standard of living. In this paper we tried to highlight the health-related discriminations faced by the marginalized members of Indian society.

Literature (Adler and Newman 2002) claims that a significant portion of the variability in the rates of mortality and morbidity can be explained through an individual's or group's

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access to basic resources to achieve good health or the Socioeconomic Status (SES). Even after discounting the effects of education and income (the two main indicators of SES), differences in morbidity and mortality have been noted to stem out of socioreligious stratification (Emberson et al. 2004; Nazroo 2004). In most cases the explanation is based on cultural and historical differences like genetic traits, acquired habits and socioreligious practices (Jackson 1991; Curtin 1992; Barghaus et al. 2007).

Genetics, the early environment and opportunities brought about by social mobility are three main factors that have a considerable impact on health. People belonging to a particular socioeconomic group are found to share similarities in a number of health indicators, such as self-rated general health, disability and the presence of a chronic illness. Multiple deprivations based on various parameters mentioned above can result in poor hygiene and poor nutrition, which in turn can lead to poor health and diseases (Nayar 2007). A study on the rural districts of Kerala (a developed state in Southern India) found women from lower castes reporting a higher prevalence of poor health than women from forward castes (Egede et al. 2006). Dasgupta and Thorat (2009), in their study, brought out the differentials in the rate of decline of the infant mortality rate or IMR[2] and maternal health between Scheduled Caste (SC)/Scheduled Tribe (ST) and other social groups. The study by Saroha et al. (2008) in Maitha, Uttar Pradesh (a large, prosperous state in Northern India), identified caste as a significant barrier to maternal healthcare service use among the rural women.

Among the chronicles penned by the marginalized in the community, the one that deserves special mention is the autobiographical narrative *Jina Amacha* (later translated by Maya Tyagi in English titled *The Prisons We Broke*) by Dalit (SC) activist and writer Baby Tai

[2] Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) refers to the number of deaths per 1000 live births of children under one year of age.

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Kamble, a member of the *Mahar* community of Maharashtra, in Central India. She gave firsthand information about the various discriminations and exploitations that the marginals face in their day-to-day lives. Among many things, she specifically narrated how the marginal caste lacked access to not only quality health care services but also the essential ones. Discrimination and oppression existed across the length and breadth of India. India's healthcare system was facing a critical moment in the period under consideration. The nation was going through an epidemiological transition characterized by the emergence of new diseases alongside those that already existed. The change in morbidity pattern coincided with a systemic movement towards universal health coverage, instigating major reforms across the healthcare sector in areas such as pharmaceuticals, pricing, and service delivery. In this context, a detailed study of the healthcare system in that period, with specific focus on its impacts on the marginal community, seemed worthy.

Objective

The objective of this study is to analyze the vicious cycle that was imprisoning the marginalized population in India between 2004 and 2014, leading to compromised health status and financial impoverishment. The goal is to provide a crucial baseline for evaluating subsequent healthcare reforms undertaken in India (specifically those implemented following the National Health Policy, 2017) in terms of their impact on the socioeconomically disadvantaged population.

Database and methodology

This study is based on a secondary analysis of unit-level data from two nationally representative rounds of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) on Health (the 60th Round published in 2004 and the 72nd Round in 2014). The data for two rounds are taken for comparative analysis and study of the progression of the key economic and social indicators related to the health of the sample population over the decade.

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The decision to seek medical care is dependent on individual perception about their state of health, has human and economic costs and involves both patient and physician efforts. Accordingly, the health of the population can be studied through health status (perceived), nature of ailment and duration of stay in the hospital. Analyzing the effectiveness of healthcare services can be done by looking at how well-informed people are about the options for care and treatment available, as well as how affordable the services are. This study investigates the health status (morbidity pattern), availing and utilization of healthcare services (hospitalization) and healthcare financing (sources of finance and third-party coverage) among different social groups. A hint about the extent of distress in the event of hospitalization is given at the end of the study by reflecting on the disease burden (in terms of loss of household income) borne by the marginalized class. Cross-tabulation and descriptive statistics are used in the study to analyse the data from this perspective.

When faced with perceived or existing disease, individuals' social, economic, situational, and attitudinal characteristics determine their pattern of medical care utilization. With this intent the profile of the social groups has been created with demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the sample, like income class, education level, residence (rural/urban), and gender. Literature shows that treatment seeking and cost burdens vary by the type of disease (Russell 2004; McIntyre et al. 2006). Therefore, we conducted our research with linkage to the morbidity of the sample population, as and when required.

Morbidity Pattern: Diseases have been classified following WHO guidelines with modifications as adopted in Mahal et al. (2010). Major diseases are grouped into Communicable Diseases (CD), Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD), and Other Conditions/Disabilities.

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Healthcare Utilization: The incidence of ailments leading to hospitalization in the last 365 days has been used as a key indicator of utilization of formal healthcare services.

Healthcare Financing and Burden: The sources of funding for medical expenses were examined to ascertain the out-of-pocket expenses and the rate of household income loss due to hospitalization was computed to account for the burden of illness. While analyzing the healthcare expenditure financing, we specifically concentrated on the various sources and their coverage to shed light on their potentialities in preventing catastrophic out-of-pocket expenditure[3] and subsequent impoverishment. Impoverishment refers to the event of people being pushed below the poverty line[4] due to household health expenditures. The financial burden was measured by assessing the household income lost during NCD-related hospitalization (which is reported to have the maximum impoverishing effect) using data available in the NSSO 2004 report (loss of household income not reported in the 2014 report). It is to be noted that the poverty line in India was INR 446.68 per capita per month in rural areas and INR 578.80 per capita per month in urban areas (the reference period is 2004-05). Judged by this yardstick, an income loss of more than INR 500 due to hospitalization can be counted as impoverishing for the low-income groups.

Therefore, the extent of impoverishment is studied using higher values than the poverty line income during that period. The data sets for the two rounds considered were loaded in STATA (version 12) and the conclusions are predicated on the basis of computed distributions and percentages for the different social groups in India. This has given a

[3] Catastrophic out-of-pocket expenditure refers to direct payments by private households for health services that exceed 40% of households' capacity to pay.
[4] Poverty line is the amount of per capita expenditure or income required to meet the basic needs of the population.

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robust, evidence-based snapshot of the situation before the launch of major pan-India health insurance schemes.

Findings

Demographic Profile of the Marginalized

The relationship between race and disease is biological in effect rather than biological in origin. Marginalization affects the group's treatment, resources and jobs, living conditions, worldview, environmental exposures and the chances of reaching their full potential. These factors are said to enhance or limit opportunities for the health of an individual or a group (Duster 2006).

The analysis of NSSO data from 2004 and 2014 also revealed a clear pattern of disparity among the different groups under consideration (Table 1). This scenario of positive discrimination of the low-caste group in income, education and employment bred inequality and unfairness. The majority of people in this group lived below the poverty line, considered education an unattainable goal, and were frequently denied access to state-aided schools. They were unable to adapt, received unfair treatment, and are ill-prepared to compete with members of the higher caste, even when they were successful in enrolling in the formal educational system.

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Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Sample (in %)

Socio-economic Indicators1	SC		ST		OBC	
EDUCATION	**60th**	**71st**	**60th**	**71st**	**60th**	**71st**
No Formal Education	51.19	40.05	47.89	40.15	34.27	39.61
Primary or less	26.07	**15.65**	24.78	**14.83**	28.64	**15.58**
Middle	11.40	**12.45**	14.06	**12.24**	17.30	**12.58**
Secondary & HS	8.35	**21.03**	9.35	**21.39**	13.88	**21.48**
Above HS	2.98	**10.92**	3.91	**11.89**	5.91	**10.35**
INCOME CLASS						
Poorest	39.50	26.9	30.94	28.88	21.97	19.26
Poor	24.82	27.06	25.73	25.17	22.68	23.84
Middle	17.24	19.69	19.31	18.13	22.20	20.49
Rich	12.17	**16.45**	14.41	**16.25**	18.82	**21.24**
Richest	6.26	**11.56**	9.62	**11.56**	14.34	**15.17**
SEX						
Male	47.68	51.13	53.40	51.09	53.54	51.01
Female	45.80	**48.87**	46.60	**48.91**	46.46	**48.99**
SECTOR						
Rural	86.22	63.19	71.06	74.62	68.54	55.55
Urban	13.78	**36.81**	28.94	**25.38**	31.46	**44.45**

The vulnerability of women in this context is worth mentioning. Most of the women from the backward communities in India lived under poor hygienic conditions and worked under physical and mental stress (physical abuse was common). They were uneducated, ill-fed and ill-informed about health and healthcare (a lack of basic facilities like proper schools, primary healthcare centres, qualified doctors and other amenities was common, especially in rural India). The results were high rates of infant mortality, miscarriage, reproductive

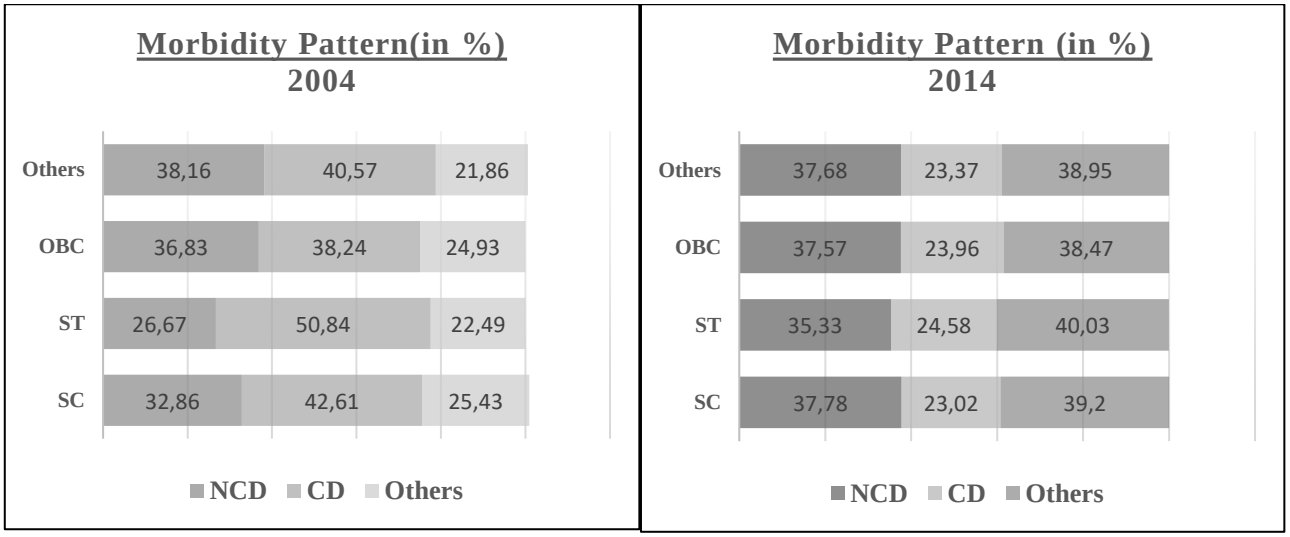
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tract disorder, multiple pregnancies, anaemia, tuberculosis, mental depression and even chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension.

The Dual Burden of Disease

Evidence of mortality, nutritional status, and morbidity from several all-India-level data sets, gathered by various government agencies at various times, makes it abundantly evident that the nation's socio-economic disparities are reflected in the state of health. The study here tried to reflect on the morbidity pattern using data on inpatient hospitalization due to various diseases in the period considered. Figure 1 depicts India's epidemiological transition, where the incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is seen to be rising across all groups, including the most marginalized.

Figure 1. Percentage variation in disease-specific hospitalization across social groups in India in 2004 and 2014



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Examining the main NCDs (cancer, heart disease, neurological and psychological conditions) minutely revealed that the percentage of NCD-related hospitalizations was high for all the diseases and was rising over the decade (Table 2).

Crucially, the SC and OBC communities had been severely impacted by NCDs (what was formerly thought to be a disease of the wealthy). The finding is important, as chronic diseases necessitate costly, long-term care, which places a significant financial strain on low-income households, which is a matter of serious concern and will be discussed later in the study.

Table 2. Major NCDs categorized by social group (in %)

Social Group	Cancer		CVD		Hypertension		Neuro Disorder		Psycho Disorder	
	60th	71st	60th	71st	60th	71st	60th	71st	60th	71st
ST	7.69	**13.74**	2.89	**12.94**	3.03	**13.98**	3.03	**13.98**	7.12	**12.58**
SC	17.58	**18.41**	11.46	**16.21**	15.7	**18.5**	15.7	**18.5**	16.48	**20.75**
OBC	25.27	**34.86**	33.99	**38.19**	33.59	**35.32**	33.59	35.32	35.96	34

Note: The table includes the percentage of hospitalization as inpatients due to the relevant NCDs and is based on data as available in NSSO, 2004, Report No. 507; NSSO, 2014, Report No. 574.

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The increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCD) among marginalized groups was attributed to factors such as inadequate nutrition, occupational hazards, and genetic factors from endogamous marriages. It has been found that the tradition of marriages within the community for the marginalized groups (often close relatives) promotes consanguinity and increases the prevalence of specific autosomal recessive diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, ischaemic heart disease, mental impairments, mental illness, spinocerebellar ataxia, thalassaemia, and sickle-cell diseases. Also, men from a backward community were most likely to work as labourers in the field (in rural areas) or as construction workers (in the urban areas), lived in unhygienic conditions, ate lots of raw meat (mostly those portions not eaten by the upper castes), had alcohol addictions and chewed tobacco frequently. These habits made them vulnerable to many NCDs, and matters worsened the longer they lived and the traits got passed on to the next generation.

Healthcare Utilization and Barriers to Access

The study examined healthcare utilization to assess the accessibility of institutional care for different social groups, focusing on hospitalization rates in the last 365 days and the reasons for forgoing medical services.

The findings revealed stark disparities in healthcare access. Hospitalization rates for the Scheduled Tribe (ST) group were 12%, significantly lower than the rates for the Other Backward Classes (OBC) at 31.47% and for upper-caste groups, which exceeded 50%. The majority of the underprivileged population mentioned financial constraints, geographic inaccessibility, and subpar service quality as reasons for not using government facilities or medical advice. The data suggested that substantial structural and financial obstacles kept underprivileged communities from receiving the institutional care they required.

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Access to modern medical care was further impeded by a combination of factors, including lower literacy levels, prevailing cultural norms, and religious beliefs. Moreover, reported reluctance and discriminatory attitudes from medical personnel emerged as a significant deterrent, preventing individuals from seeking institutional medical care. The findings indicate that historical patterns of social exclusion remained powerful even in the early 21st century.

The Financial Catastrophe of Healthcare

The extent of affordability of institutional healthcare in our study revealed that the proportion of the population who could spend in the range of INR 200,000 to INR 500,000 annually for hospitalization was negligible. The reimbursement received for these expenditures was significantly lower and often amounted to nothing.

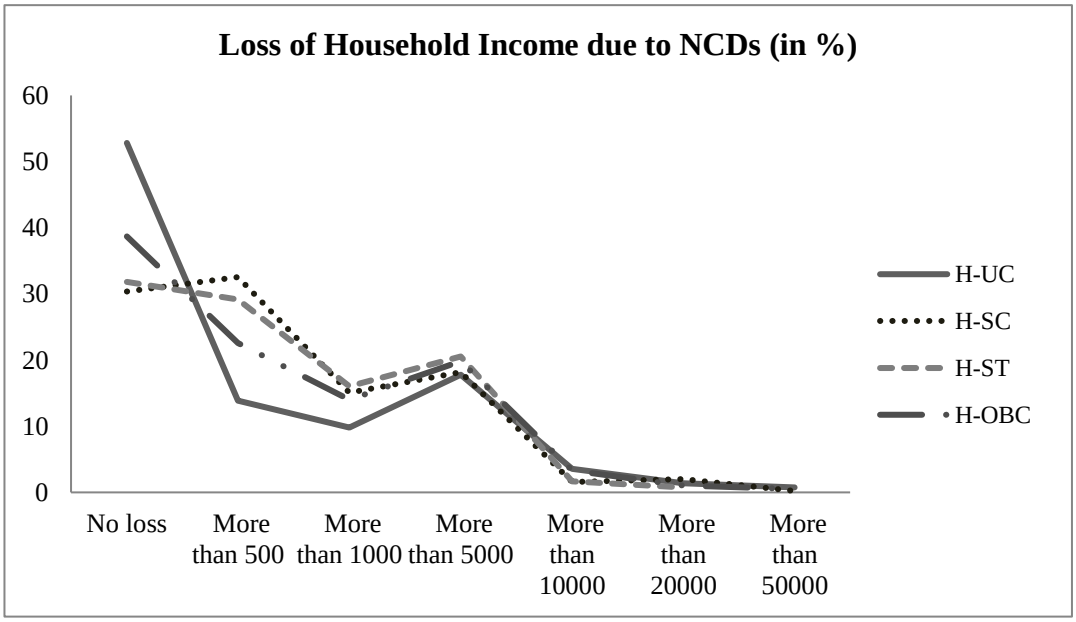
In India public investment in health was minimum in the period considered here and only 5% of the population had any insurance coverage or third-party backup. As a result, the majority of health care expenditures (more than 50.6%) were out-of-pocket payments and roughly 18% of households faced catastrophic health costs. Even later, in the period 2011-12, health spending alone impoverished about 63 million people in India (GOI, 2014).

The study indicated that more than 70% of households in all groups relied on household savings as the main source of financing medical expenses, with borrowings contributing 16% - 17% of the funding and a nominal contribution from the sale of assets. The low initial endowments and the near-total absence of effective risk-pooling mechanisms for the marginalized population made this evident. The outcome indicated a significantly elevated level of Out-of-Pocket Expenditure (OOPE) that led to further impoverishment among the already vulnerable social groups. The share of NCDs in OOPE incurred by households increased over time, from 31.6 percent in 1995-96 to 47.3 percent in 2004 (Mahal et al. 2010).

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The impact of hospitalization and morbidity on both the individual and their family has been of significant concern. The reduction in household income resulting from inpatient hospitalization quantified the burden. Our data indicated that the revenue loss linked to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) was often twice that associated with communicable diseases (CDs), attributable to prolonged hospital stays and increased costs. Figure 2 illustrates that a significant proportion of marginalized households experienced income losses exceeding INR 10,000, which can be detrimental for families near or below the poverty line.

Figure 2. Loss of household income due to NCD-related hospitalization across social groups



Note: The poverty line in India in 2004-5 was INR 446.68/capita/month in rural areas and INR 578.80/capita/month in urban areas. The calculations are based on NSSO, 2004, Report No. 507.

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For SC, ST, and OBC categories, the proportion of the population that experienced an income loss of over INR 10,000 was higher compared to that of the upper castes. This demonstrates that the socially disadvantaged not only experienced higher rates of illness but also incurred higher expenses in relation to their income, thereby exacerbating their poverty.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are inherently chronic and frequently exhibit a pattern of recurrence, leading to multiple hospitalizations. This can significantly undermine the financial stability of households, potentially resulting in impoverishment. Over the past decade, the treatment costs for non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have risen fivefold in rural areas and nearly tripled in urban locations. While rural households were more vulnerable to catastrophic health expenditures, urban households were more likely to experience destitution as a result of out-of-pocket medical expenses (Yadav et al. 2021). Under such circumstances, the results that we have shown are not surprising.

Discussion

Our interest in the topic stemmed from the fact that, apart from genetic or biological links, it is the social and economic exclusion that fosters inequality in health status, healthcare-seeking behaviour and healthcare financing across social groups. Marginality becomes synonymous with discrimination and oppression in the context. There were some intriguing insights from the study undertaken on disease prevalence and consequent hospitalization for the socioeconomically marginal groups in India for the decade considered (2004 to 2014).

Firstly, marginalized communities faced a dual disease burden, being afflicted by both communicable and a rising incidence of non-communicable diseases, the latter impoverishing in its effects. Apart from genetic disposition, discrimination on ethno-religious grounds seemed to be acting strongly in such cases.

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Secondly, significant barriers related to cost, distance, and quality of care limited the marginal's access to institutional health services. The case was particularly grim for the ST group. The tribes in India have specific health problems and genetic abnormalities and are affected by ignorance, illogical religious beliefs, poor living environments and lack of proper health education. The vulnerability was more because of ineffective coverage of nutritional and health services for the tribes in India. Also, the low hospitalization rates, particularly for the Scheduled Tribes, should not be misinterpreted as better health. Instead, they likely reflected severe barriers to healthcare in India. The health and economic disparities documented here reflect the jeopardized state of two major sustainable development goals: 'good health and well-being' and 'no poverty'.

Thirdly, the overwhelming reliance on out-of-pocket payments for healthcare led to catastrophic financial consequences and significant loss of household income, particularly for the marginalized groups. It corroborated the fact that ill health deteriorates the quality of life of the patients both economically and socially. It led to a significant loss of productivity and income. Again, loss in income led to a consequent loss in investments in human capital, especially education for the children, which in turn reduced future income-earning possibilities. The poor family thus got caught in a vicious cycle of morbidity and impoverishment.

Conclusion

It is estimated that catastrophic health expenditure impoverished 3.3% of Indians every year (Swetha et al. 2020). India fared worst among countries where OOP contributes to the highest degrees of impoverishment (Peters et al. 2002; Sriram et al. 2022). This tendency is growing and is now being estimated to be one of the major contributors to poverty.

Empowering the weak is the key to solving any socioeconomic issue, and this is precisely what Indian experts and policymakers have attempted to do. The Indian

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government has introduced policies and initiatives to improve health, education, employment, and living conditions in the decade post the review period mentioned in the paper. The paper attempted to provide a benchmark for evaluating the effectiveness of these health and insurance programs.

There has been an increase in government health expenditure (from 1.13% in 2014-15 to 1.9% in 2023-24) and social security expenditure on healthcare including government-funded health insurance and social health programs (8.7% of total health expenditure in 2014-15 to 9.3% in 2020-21), contributing to a decline in OOPE in India (NHA 2021-22). Government investment in public health infrastructure, training of healthcare workers and development of healthcare facilities in rural and backward regions of India have been witnessed, thereby improving the availability and accessibility of quality healthcare to all.

Guided by the National Health Policy 2017, the Indian government had implemented numerous programs to achieve 'Universal Health Coverage' and prevent poverty caused by healthcare costs. The central program is *Ayushman Bharat*, which has two parts: *Health and Wellness Centres* (HWCs) for primary care and the *Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana* (PM-JAY) for financial protection. In addition, several other state-aided insurance schemes, such as the *Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana* and *Jeevan Jyothi Bima Yojana*, were launched to provide financial security to vulnerable populations. The roles of Microfinance Institutions (MFIs), Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) have also been profound. The programs have been effective in reducing the severity of illnesses, improving health outcomes and lowering the overall burden on the healthcare system in India. The government response to the COVID-19 pandemic has also been instrumental in developing a long-term health strategy for India.

The present study has a limited scope. Future research employing more recent data is necessary to formulate effective, evidence-based solutions for targeted healthcare delivery.

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Governmental efforts can then only become instrumental in lowering out-of-pocket costs, enhancing healthcare utilization, and reducing financial impoverishment. The procedure is intricate and demands consistent and rigorous efforts from all ends. The gestation period is long, but the wait is worth it for establishing an egalitarian healthcare system for all.

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Bio-bibliographical note

Mauli Sanyal is an Associate Professor and the Head of the Department of Economics at New Alipore College in Kolkata, West Bengal, India. With twenty-two years of experience, she is a dedicated educator specializing in Statistics, Econometrics, and Development Economics, teaching undergraduate economics courses. Prof. Sanyal completed her postgraduate and M.Phil. studies at the University of Calcutta, India, and is currently pursuing her doctoral work at the West Bengal State University, India. Her recent research focuses on Health Economics, addressing challenges in healthcare in developing countries to promote equitable and universal access. An accomplished researcher, Prof. Sanyal has numerous national and international publications and was honored with the Best Paper Award at the International Conference on Finance at Vidyasagar University, India, in 2017. She is an active member of several prestigious organizations, including the International Health Evaluation and Promotion Association (IHEPA), the European Association of Population Studies (EAPS), the Bengal Economic Association (BEA), and the Indian Accounting Association Research Foundation (IAARF). Additionally, she serves as the Convener of the Women's Cell and the Mentoring Committee at New Alipore College.

Email address: maulisanyal@newaliporecollege.ac.in

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di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Holistic Stories of the Whole:
Trees and Humans in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*

Esra Öztarhan

(Ege University, TR)

Abstract

This paper explores the interplay between human and non-human systems as depicted in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*. Powers asserts that human and environmental systems are deeply connected and mutually dependent, challenging anthropocentric views that regard nature and non-humans as separate and inferior. Powers reacts to the destruction of nature amidst human interests, seeing trees as marginalized entities within the Anthropocene. The novel is a prime example of an environmental text that effectively problematizes this issue. He portrays trees as significant creatures in humans' lives. The lives of the trees intricately connect with those of nine human characters and their families, and they affect people's lives in various ways. *The Overstory* highlights the interconnectedness and the vital role trees play in human lives. Apart from their significance in human experiences, the novel also celebrates the importance of trees in the ecosystem. *The Overstory* illustrates human efforts to protect these living entities, emphasizing the common bonds formed through shared struggles against tree decay caused by illness or human impact. Lastly, the novel endows trees with resilience and agency, positioning them as central protagonists. By focusing on specific trees that bind generations and offer refuge, the narrative likens them to humans. They are conscious and intellectual creatures who deserve respect and value. The paper aims to exemplify Powers' holistic approach to fictionalizing the intrinsic value of trees and portraying them as vital components of the world, rather than marginalizing them as objects.

Keywords: trees; marginalization; Richard Powers; anthropocentric; biocentric.

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Trees have been analyzed and studied for centuries for scientific and aesthetic purposes in fields such as biology, art, botany, philosophy, and literature. They are essential in human lives, from providing resources to offer shade, to purifying the air, and serving as the home for many animals and plants. However, despite their significance and our dependence on them, they are among the most exploited living organisms in the planet. In the Anthropocene era, human existence and behaviors have caused inescapable and profound changes to the Earth's geology and environment. Humans are responsible for altering the planet's structure. These drastic changes affect everything in nature. Disasters like climate change, deforestation, and wildfires… are all results of the Anthropocene, leaving trees as helpless victims. One of the primary reasons for this is the anthropocentric viewpoint, which prioritizes the importance and needs of humans over those of all other living and nonliving things. This mindset places humans at the center of the universe, relegating non-humans to the periphery, where they lack agency and importance. Trees, along with all non-human life, derive their value from their usefulness to humanity. This viewpoint is valid in the literary world too. In "Arboreal Imaginaries," Solvejg Nitzke writes: "Despite this long tradition, trees have been marginalized in literary and cultural studies as just motifs and symbols, that is, as something which stands for human interests and stories, not for themselves" (Nitzke 341).

Literature reflects all these ecological themes and their reflections on society, economy, and culture. Writers and philosophers have responded to the devaluation and destruction of nature, producing a greater number of nature-based and ecocritical works in the last decade. Lawrence Buell outlines four criteria in defining an environmental text: First, nature should play an essential role in the narrative. The text should include the negative impacts of human beings and human accountability on the natural world. It should also include the ethics of survival and raise questions about both human and non-human survival. And

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lastly, the text should emphasize the interconnectedness among all living beings (Buell 1995, 7-8). In these literary works, humans and non-human beings are portrayed as interdependent, reflecting an ecocentric rather than anthropocentric perspective.

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* is a prominent example of environmental literature that takes a holistic view of both non-human and human beings. The novel centers on trees within its narrative. They have been the unseen and silent beings that have existed around us throughout human history, but with Powers' novel, trees have agency, long lifespans, and qualities similar to those of human characters. In an article, "The Tree is Saying Things in Words before Words," Pia Masiero mentions the structure of the novel, which stands as an extended metaphor of a tree (Masiero 2020, 136). The novel comprises eight chapters, all organized under the sub-chapters named after parts of trees: Roots, trunk, crown, and seeds. Throughout the book, we encounter how the lives of all the characters are entangled with a particular tree or trees in general.

In one story, we see an American Chestnut tree planted in Iowa by Norwegian immigrants. Their descendant, Nick Hoel, gets artistic inspiration from the trees. In another story, a Chinese immigrant family lives around a Mulberry tree. The daughter, Mimi Ma, later becomes an activist because of her family memories around the tree. Another character who fights for the rights of the trees is a pilot named Douglas Pavlicek, who was saved by a banyan tree when he was blown out of an airplane during the Vietnam War. It is a literal and symbolic example of the life-saving effect of trees. Another character Neelay Mehta became disabled at age 11, falling from an oak tree. However, as a computer game producer later in his life, he created alternative worlds in his games, forming unusual and almost unreal spaces inspired by real trees. Ray Brinkman and his wife Dorothy, who are the ones who care about trees the least, decide to plant a tree every year on their wedding anniversary. Another protagonist, Patricia Westerford, is a plant scientist who dedicated

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her life to studying trees. Adam Apich has a boyhood attachment to a maple tree. Finally, a college student, Olivia Vandergriff begins to hear the voices of trees after a near-death experience and dedicates her life to saving them from destruction.

Whole trees and humans are interconnected

Richard Powers uses the theme of interconnectedness in the novel to restore the dignity of trees. They are depicted as living organisms connected to human beings, existing alongside them for a lifetime and sometimes profoundly affecting their lives. The concept of interconnectedness has been a prominent idea since the 19th-century Transcendentalist movement. In Nature, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes that there is a deep and secret connection between plant life and human beings:

> The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right (Emerson qtd in Brooks 1940, 7).

Emerson claims that the non-human world is an inseparable part of humans' lives. This is a challenge to the anthropocentric worldview. As Lawrence Buell states in *The Environmental Imagination,* all living creatures are subjects related to others: "The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest" (Buell 1995, 7-8).

Another challenge to the anthropocentric worldview is the concept of deep ecology. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess points out that everything in nature is interrelated, where a change in one thing affects the others. As par Naess deep ecologists:

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> adopt a biocentric/ ecocentric perspective that proposes a 'biospheric egalitarianism' in which the interest of the biosphere overrides the interests of individual species, including the human…deep ecology challenges the anthropocentrism at the heart of modern society and the kind of shallow ecological standpoints that see the natural world as merely a resource for humanity and presuppose that human needs and demands override other considerations (Marland 2013, 850).

According to these various philosophical and environmental movements, all living beings have value, regardless of their utility to human needs. This ecocentric perspective views humans as coexisting with, rather than separate from, the wider natural world. Correspondingly, the stories in Richard Powers' novel highlight every tree's value in the lives of the protagonists. The trees touch the lives of the individuals, become their reasons for living, or change the course of their lives. Powers explains this as such: "You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes" * (166). *The Overstory* adopts a holistic approach to the environment, meaning that all beings on Earth coexist as part of a whole

In Powers' stories, trees and humans coexist side by side as people grow old and families evolve, but they remain as their lifespan exceeds that of humans. The first story revolves around a Norwegian immigrant family living near a chestnut tree. The tree was brought from New York to Iowa in the 19th century via six chestnut seeds carried in the pockets of travelers, and it has since grown hundreds of miles away from its natural habitat. The family created a family tradition of photographing the tree every month from the same angle from the 1910s to the early 1980s. As the narrator puts it: "It is a monthly exercise in noticing a thing worth no notice at all, a creature as steadfast and reticent as life" (17). The family's last member, the grandson, created a flipbook from the photographs: As seasons change, the tree witnesses generations of the family.

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Another example of how people respect and view trees as part of their family histories and traditions is that of a Chinese family that planted a mulberry tree in their garden. The family plants trees in their garden for their four children as they are born. The children adopt a particular tree as theirs, watching it grow into adulthood alongside them. Their lives revolve around it, with both the best times of the children playing on the tree and the tragic moment when the father commits suicide, leaving blood on the tree. The mulberry tree has an important place in their lives: "Mimi looks at the rings on the cut tree, which run backward to the circle's center. She remembers everything the tree witnessed in her life, year by year. The year his father died, the year she graduated, back to the year she was a child" (258). In the novel, another example of people bonding with trees is a couple who care the least about them. They are described as such: "two people for whom trees mean almost nothing. Two people, even in the spring of their lives, can't tell an oak from a linden" (80). However, as they grow older in life, they change; they decide to plant trees and look after them as if they were their own children.

The Overstory challenges 'the human-centeredness syndrome' that values non-human organisms for the use they provide for humans. The novel connects the human and non-human protagonists together, much like a mycelium —a chemical network of interconnected roots. (Masiero 137). Masiero suggests that the novel's plot design also exemplifies this union. People and trees each have their roots separated in the first place, but get together within a trunk and spread their seeds for future generations and new trees. This cyclical organization predominated the novel's stories (Masiero 139). As the trees have relations among their various parts, so can people and trees be connected. The structure of the novel that aligns different characters and their stories reflects the interconnectedness of life, just like nature (Stewart 168).

In *The Overstory*, trees are more than living creatures around people; they are a part of

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the families, as siblings and brothers. In other stories within the book, trees save people's lives; sometimes, trees change people's viewpoints about nature forever. For many protagonists in the novel, trees become their raison d'être for living. They dedicate their lives to studying them or fighting for the rights of these living creatures.

Whole trees are vital for the ecosystem

The second theme Powers uses to counter the marginalization of trees is to highlight the vital role trees play for humans and the entire ecosystem. The human destruction of the ecosystem has elicited a range of reactions from various disciplines. For example, from an ecocritical perspective, it constitutes one of the main issues of third-wave ecology, which focuses on the environmental damage caused by global capitalism (Marland 2013, 855). *The Overstory* asserts that people are largely unaware of the commodification of nature and the profit-driven deforestation (Masiero 143). The overconsumption of non-human entities for the sake of money devalues the most essential elements of the ecosystem. Babette Tischleder argues that the system of obsolescence further causes the marginalization of non-human creatures like trees:

> Progress and convenience are built on systematic obsolescence, not just the obsolescence of daily disposables…but the coldly calculated obsolescence of the lives of others—the exploitation of human labor and non-human bodies that are utilized, eradicated, poisoned, deprived of their subsistence, left to die or killed for consumption and economic profit. The industrial and economic exploitation of trees further marginalizes their value as living organisms, reducing them to mere profit-driven commodities. In many places worldwide, areas with trees are overexploited, burned for agricultural use, and polluted with urban and industrial waste (Tischleder 2019, 14).

Powers opposes this system where trees are commodified and exploited for consumption and production. In *The Overstory*, many characters unite at the novel's end against the logging industry and corporations that cut trees in pursuit of capitalist gain.

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One of the characters, Olivia Vandergriff, undergoes a life-changing experience as she recognizes the vitality of the trees. She was a carefree college student who was not concerned with environmental issues in the early part of the novel. However, after a near-death experience, she undergoes a spiritual and psychological transformation. She begins to hear the voices of the trees and gets involved in eco-activism. Her mission becomes to protect trees and forests. When she encounters large trucks carrying timber people inform her that: "The industry is cashing out every salable scrap of timber in the inventory. Which in this case means lots of seven and eight-hundred-year-old trees. Trees wider than your dreams are going into mill B and coming out as planks" (267). Nitzke mentions a similar cultural disrespect for trees. He claims that human beings' drive to shape and control the natural landscape poses a significant danger to the trees. People exploit trees for timber and for settlement, thus endangering the whole ecosystem too (Nitzke 2). The novel criticizes the anthropocentric view of the forest as an infinite source of consumption. Trees are more than that; they are our kin. As Diana Bresford Kroeger writes in "To Speak for the Trees", trees and humans share a common history and a connection:

> I want to remind you that the forest is far more than a source of timber. It is our collective medicine cabinet. It is our lungs. It is the regulatory system for our climate and our oceans. It is the mantle of our planet. It is the health and well-being of our children and grandchildren. It is our sacred home. It is our salvation. Trees offer us the solution to nearly every problem facing humanity today, from defending against drug resistance to halting global temperature rise, and they are eager to share those answers. They do so even when we can't or won't hear them. We once knew how to listen. It is a skill we must remember (Bresford- Kroeger 2021, 13).

In the novel, as the characters come to understand their vitality, they begin to hear the trees both literally and metaphorically.

Powers aims to illustrate how the trees are marginalized despite their vitality through the medium of storytelling with this novel. A fictional cautionary tale for trees will be more

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effective than merely scientific articles about the' importance of trees to the ecosystem and people's lives. Scott Slovic discusses a psychological phenomenon related to our emotional responses to natural disasters. He claims that human beings are insensitive when presented with numerical information. It means that people care less if a disaster affects a large number of people or a significant area of land. However, if the same disaster is narrated from the perspective of a single person, animal, or house with a story, it becomes more effective and poignant (Slovic). Therefore, it is no longer just a number but a subject. People are more inclined to hear about what happened to specific trees, necessary for the culture of a town, or a family, than hearing about hectares of forests deforested.

The power of storytelling is a central element to bring awareness to the vitality of the trees in the novel. In the section focused on Ray and Dorothy. Ray, who is living with the aftermath of a stroke, has developed a deep appreciation for fiction. Fiction now serves as a powerful means of passing time and finding comfort for him. It not only takes a lot of his time, but also he starts to give so much importance to the details and plots. Powers wants to emphasize how human beings are affected with emotionally satisfying stories like real life. In contrast, it argues that life operates on a much broader scale, and that the world suffers because fiction often fails to portray the urgency of global crises with the same intensity it gives to individual human struggles (322).

In an interview, Powers had mentioned the power of storytelling as opposed to abstract information for creating a consciousness. He says:

> Fiction, of course, is an instrument of consciousness. Through fiction we can see someone looking at nature, struggling to understand the intelligence that is both larger and smaller than his own. Or slower and faster than his own... This is precisely what fiction can do. The novelist knows that our stories about nature are stories about ourselves. He can explicitly focalize the anxieties, the narratives, the hopes, the fears, and the dreams that bind us together in this complicated and terrifying web. A novel can make a human viscerally aware of our estrangement from nature in ways that nonfiction cannot (Hermanson).

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In Powers' novel, one of the characters, Patricia tries to find such an effective way while writing her book on trees. She gives examples from a real tree in Norway, the "old Tjikko", almost nine thousand years old. She says she kept thinking about the tree for all these centuries, "dying and resurrecting" (277). She discovered at the end that the tree is there to remind humankind that "the world is not made for our utility" (277). The individual stories of trees serve to exhibit an ecocentric worldview. Trees are like miracles for Patricia: "creatures-bigger, slower, older, more durable-call the shots, make the weather, feed creation, and create the very air. It is a great idea- trees. So great that evolution keeps inventing it, again and again" (143). She further says: "We all travel the Milky Way together, trees and men…in every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks. The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness" (156). Moreover, she recites Buddha's words: "A tree is a wondrous thing that shelters, feeds, and protects all living things. It even offers shade to the axman who destroys it" (277). However, despite their excellent presence for human beings, they are marginalized. In *The Overstory*, Powers narrates the story of different trees, including their history and their individual and cultural significance. Trees are essential, each one of them. He writes about how we exploit trees: "A third to a half of existing species may go extinct by the time I'm gone." "Tens of thousands of trees we know nothing about. Species we've barely classified. Like burning down the library, art museum, pharmacy, and hall of records, all at once" (382).

The Overstory expresses many concerns of the twenty-first century, including the marginalization of trees, and exemplifies the resulting eco-anxiety and environmental grief that characterize contemporary environmental consciousness. These concepts define how humans perceive and respond to the ecological disasters that surround them. Humans witness habitat loss, the extinction of species, air pollution, and a rise in temperatures, all of

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which create an uneasy disturbance that affects people's psychologies. The characters in the novel also experience these feelings like the rest of the world. Therefore, they react when they see the destruction of the forests. One of the characters ask: "What's crazier? Believing there might be nearby presences we don't know about? or cutting down the last few ancient redwoods on Earth for decking and shingles" (222). The loss of trees affects their lives on a large scale and the trauma of their deaths has an enormous impact on their lives. This demonstrates how trees constitute such great importance for humankind as a whole and the ecosystem they live in. In an interview, Powers says that novels are like myths that help people see the world differently and perceive it from a perspective beyond their self-interests (Hamner). This way, literature adopts a more tree- and nature-conscious approach to ecological problems and celebrates the vitality of these solutions.

Whole Trees are like Human Beings

The third way Powers responds to the marginalization of trees in the novel is by portraying them as living organisms, much like his human characters. He eliminates the distinction between humans and the vegetal world by attributing human qualities such as intelligence and sensibility to trees. Birgit Spengler in *Arboreal Encounters* refers to this as 're-narrativization': a new way of perceiving human and non-human relations: "What is known today about the lives of trees and plants can have a large-scale effect on how we think time, space, and the relationality of existence, if we allow these insights to unsettle long-held certainties about the ostensible distinctions and hierarchies between human and so- called vegetal life in terms of agency and forms of intelligence" (Spengler 2019, 69). This plant-centered view presents trees as living creatures similar to human beings, therefore eradicating their objectification. In the novel, Patricia summarizes this: "This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees, where humans have just arrived (530).

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Many late scientific discoveries have proven that trees possess agency, knowledge, and specific communication skills. The concept of arboreal communication is one of the areas that has been explored by various scientists in the last decade of the twenty-first century. One of these prominent scientists is Peter Wohlleben, who studied and worked in the forest industry. He had written "*The Secret Life of Trees,*" in which he presented trees as social creatures who communicate with one another. In forests, trees are interconnected, and they support one another through their root systems. Therefore, a tree can only be as strong as the forest surrounding it (Wohlleben 29). Moreover, he also states that trees have their own language; they can spread a particular scent to warn other trees in case of danger (Wohlleben 20), and they can make sounds, such as vibrations, when they are thirsty (Wohlleben 57).

Canadian scientist Suzanne Simard made groundbreaking discoveries about how trees interact with one another. She studied the underground network of forests using fungi and roots. She says that they exchange carbon, water, nutrients, and defense signals with each other. She utters the concept of 'the mother tree' which acts as the center of this network. She demonstrates that cooperation is essential for the resilience of trees in the face of various disturbances and dangers. In her 2016 TED talk, Simard further discusses the interdependency among forests, likening them to human communities. Mother trees take care of their siblings, sending signals when they are in distress or in danger of dying. This further proves that they possess feelings such as fear, and are capable of using language. They are not simple organisms but complex systems with support systems and even have memories. She coined the word 'wood wide web' referring to the communication of trees among each other through roots and fungi. (Simard 2016). In *The Overstory*, the character Patricia Westford was inspired by her. She mentions many times that trees communicate with each other and humans.

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The new materialist theory posits that non-human beings possess agency and vitality, in contrast to human exceptionalism, which marginalizes non-human entities. In *The Overstory*, trees are the central figures; they communicate, respond to their environments, and shape the lives of human characters. On the first page of the novel, trees are said to speak, remember, gossip, laugh, "in the lowest frequencies," which almost completely evade humans (5). There are many instances in the book where trees are depicted with human traits: " loner trees, cunning trees, sages and solid citizens, trees that turn impulsive or shy or generous…This is not our world with trees in it. It is a world of trees, where humans have just arrived" (530). Patricia Westerford gives examples of trees and forests as agents in one of her public lectures. She says, "A forest knows things. They wire themselves up underground. There are brains down there, ones our own brains aren't shaped to see. Root plasticity, solving problems and making decisions. Fungal synapses. What else do you want to call it? Link enough trees together, and a forest grows aware" (453). Trees in the novel are social; they remember and feel. These human-like characteristics empower them as creatures capable of reacting to the outside world.

Michael Marder argues that plants are not passive but active, and he calls this view "plant thinking". They have a peculiar way of existing, thinking, and even moving and remembering like other creatures. The life of plants is coextensive with the mode of thinking appropriate to them. Their turning and moving to the sun, their closing of leaves in response to touch or light are all examples of the non-conscious act of plants. It is a way to "store imageless and nonrepresentational material memories in their cells, and so to retain a trace of the remembered thing itself, in place of its idealized projection. Whereas humans remember whatever has phenomenally appeared in the light, plants keep the memory of light itself" (Marder 2013, 117). Michael Pollan also speaks of a radical new paradigm in our understanding of life referring to the field of plant neurology: "Its

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proponents believe that we must stop regarding plants as passive objects—the mute, immobile furniture of our world—and begin to treat them as protagonists in their own dramas, highly skilled in the ways of contending in nature" (Pollan 2013). New discoveries in plant neurobiology also defends their agency. The new theories suggest that they are "information processing organisms with complex communication skills" (Gagliano et al 2017, xii).

American scientist and enrolled member of the Indigenous Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, has described how the vocabulary and grammar profoundly impact the way the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world is imagined, conducted, and represented. She compares the language of science, European languages, and Indigenous languages: "Science can be a language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects" (Kimmerer 2013, 49). As she states:

> They are not mere objects—When we tell them the tree is not a who, but an it, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. Saying it makes a living land into 'natural resources.' If a maple is an it, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a her, we think twice (Kimmerer 2013, 57).

The characters in *The Overstory* coexist alongside human beings. Their human-like depictions, as well as their assistance and support in people's lives, foster a harmonious coexistence between non-human life and humans. This viewpoint, which is dominant in the novel, attributes agency to trees that have been previously neglected. People in the novel care for the trees not because they are helpful or profitable but because they are living. They move from a stance of exclusion and domination to inclusion. Their primary aim is to enable these giant and resilient creatures to survive and resist the dangers posed by the greed and negligence of society. Douglas Pavlicek tells them, "Hang on. Only ten or twenty

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decades. Child's play for you guys. You just have to outlast us. Then no one will be left to f. you over" (113). In the novel, people converse with trees, hug them, and risk their lives for the sake of trees.

In an interview with Richard Powers, he explains the reason why he used trees as characters in his novel:

> At the heart of the book is a rejection of human exceptionalism—the idea that we're the only things on earth with will, memory, flexible response to change, agency or community. Research has shown in many amazing ways that trees possess all these things. The ability to *see* trees—which we'll need to recover if we hope to stay on this planet much longer—means learning to appreciate how our private stories are never totally independent from the stories of trees. Trees are significant characters in every human life. They deserve to be characters in their own stories as well (Rose).

In *The Overstory*, there are many anthropomorphic depictions of trees. These create a more effective way of comprehending their existence. They are depicted as such: "Best tree you could ever want to see. Strong and wide but full of grace, flaring out nobly at the base, into its own plinth. Generous with nuts that feed all comers…. elegant with sturdy boughs so much like human arms, lifting upward at the tips like hands proffering. Hazy and pale in spring, but in autumn, its flat, wide sprays bathe the air in gold" (144). In another section, the novel mentions how the wounded trees send out an alarm to the other trees through a scent. "Her maples are signaling. They're linked together in an airborne network, sharing an immune system across acres of woodland. These brainless, stationary trunks are protecting each other" (158). This is another way to provide agency for them, showing how they communicate just like human beings.

In "Organic Reformation in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*", Garrett Stewart claims that quasi-personified trees have a choral narrative. They communicate with biochemical signals and roots. It is their way of being responsive and conscious. Trees have an organic

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story to tell with their own language (Stewart 165). *The Overstory* demonstrates that even static things have cycles of life and a narration of themselves (Stewart 170).

Moreover, in some other examples, trees act consciously like human beings, having knowledge about certain things: "Trees know when we're close by. The chemistry of their roots and the perfumes their leaves pump out change when we're near…When you feel good after a walk in the woods, it may be that certain species are bribing you. … Trees have long been trying to reach us. But they speak on frequencies too low for people to hear" (530).

Depicting them as human beings provides them not only agency but also visibility. In *The Language of Plants*, Gagliano states that society suffers from plant blindness as another reason for the marginalization of trees. This blindness refers to the inability to see and recognize plants around us. It also refers to not giving enough importance to their existence (Gagliano et al 2017, vii). As Patricia's father tells her, people are "plant-blind. Adam's curse. We only see things that look like us. Sad story". (143). Her father teaches her how to see these creatures around them. Just like the novel that aims to change the mindset of perceiving trees as passive, non-moving, non-human, and unimportant organisms in the Western world.

Conclusion

Powers recognizes that plant-blind humans often struggle to truly perceive the presence of trees around them. Even when they see and identify them, it remains difficult to grasp their significance and enduring presence when compared to the fleeting nature of human life. He writes: "Four billion years of evolution, and that's where the matter will end. Politically, practically, emotionally, intellectually: Humans are all that count, the final word. You

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cannot shut down human hunger. You cannot even slow it. Just holding steady costs more than the race can afford" (598). The novel challenges the hierarchical understanding of placing plants at the lowest level of living creatures. Powers attacks the anthropocentric worldview, which harms and marginalizes trees. He offers a biocentric perception as opposed to a human-centered one.

The novel illustrates the interdependence of humans and trees. Nine characters in the novel reflect diverse historical experiences, varying ecological awareness, and distinct personal stories. However, they are all somehow related to particular trees in their lives, and all unite at the end of the novel to pursue a tree-conscious life dedicated to respecting and protecting them. Birgit Spengler says that: "Powers's panorama of characters thus represents a myriad of ways of response-ability to and of becoming entangled with trees: by approaching them on a scientific, artistic, or spiritual level, through activism and legal discourse, by climbing onto, falling into, walking among, or surrounding oneself with trees" (Spengler 2019, 86).

Secondly, the novel invites readers to see trees as more than resources—they are portrayed as essential to the broader ecosystem and human survival. Novel calls for a more holistic understanding of life on Earth. *The Overstory* de-centers human exceptionalism and places the vitality of trees in the center of its story. In all the stories, Powers not only places trees as interdependent with humans, but also fictionalizes trees as invaluable for the ecosystem.

Trees in the novel possess specific characteristics, such as agency, communication skills, and a lifespan, just like human beings. The novel is a response to the marginalization of trees, portraying their resilience and power. Powers use anthropomorphic depictions to alter people's perceptions of trees and their place in the ecosystem. Their portrayal as agents and characters in the novel is a challenge to traditional anthropocentric thinking.

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Bio-bibliographical note

Esra Öztarhan is an Associate Professor in the Department of American Culture and Literature, Ege University, İzmir, Turkey. She has been teaching various graduate and undergraduate courses in the same department since 2002. Her PhD thesis is entitled *Good Girls, Bad Girls: Class, Gender and Ethnic Identities in Contemporary American Bildungsromane*. She also published a book in 2018 on food memoirs entitled: *Food in Contemporary Ethnic American Literature and Culture*. Her areas of interest are gender studies, cultural studies, contemporary literature, ethnic literature, and regional cultures.

E-mail address: esrasahtiyanci@gmail.com
esraoztarhan@yahoo.com

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di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

"Terra maxime cornifera"
Donne caprine nell'Inghilterra e nella Scozia del Cinque e Seicento, tra stigma sociale, pubblico spettacolo e curiosità scientifica

Luca Baratta

(Università degli Studi di Siena, IT)

Abstract

Il presente contributo esamina la rappresentazione delle cosiddette *horned women* nell'Inghilterra e nella Scozia della prima età moderna, soffermandosi sulle vicende biografiche di Margaret vergh Gryffith, Mary Davies ed Elizabeth Lowe. Tali figure femminili furono accomunate dalla presenza di escrescenze cutanee cornee, che suscitarono vasto interesse tra osservatori, cronisti, predicatori e scienziati. Attraverso un'analisi che coniuga approcci storico-culturali, letterari e medico-antropologici, l'articolo indaga le molteplici modalità con cui l'anomalia corporea femminile venne percepita e strumentalizzata in contesti diversificati. Nel caso di Margaret vergh Gryffith, il suo corno frontale fu interpretato come manifestazione visibile di una colpa e utilizzato quale veicolo di ammonimento teologico e sociale. Con Mary Davies, invece, fu la spettacolarizzazione dell'insolito a prevalere, inserita nel circuito del meraviglioso e della cultura dell'intrattenimento tipica della Restaurazione. Infine, la figura di Elizabeth Lowe inaugurò un paradigma interpretativo improntato alla razionalizzazione clinica, in cui il corpo femminile, medicalizzato e studiato, divenne oggetto di indagine scientifica. Il saggio evidenzia come il significato attribuito all'alterità corporea non risieda tanto nell'anomalia in sé quanto nelle strutture epistemologiche, morali e simboliche che ne determinarono la ricezione. Le *horned women* si configurarono così come dispositivi narrativi e visivi attraverso cui articolare conflitti religiosi, tensioni di genere, e mutamenti nel rapporto tra sapere e meraviglia. A partire dai margini geografici e sociali, esse giunsero a occupare un ruolo centrale nell'immaginario collettivo, offrendo uno specchio rivelatore delle dinamiche culturali e delle strategie di normazione dell'epoca.

Keywords: alterità femminile; corpi straordinari; *horned women*; Inghilterra e Scozia della prima età moderna; simbologia del corno.

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Prologo

Nell'estate del 1710, il giurista e bibliofilo tedesco Zacharias Konrad von Uffenbach (1683-1734) si mise in viaggio in direzione di Oxford: dopo aver attraversato la Bassa Sassonia e l'Olanda, approdò sulle sponde del Mare del Nord e da lì si imbarcò verso il neo costituitosi Regno di Gran Bretagna. Giunto a destinazione in agosto, compensò le fatiche del lungo tragitto recandosi all'*Ashmolean Museum*, fondato nel 1683 dall'alchimista Elias Ashmole (1617-1692) e rinomato sul Continente per l'ingente e pregiato patrimonio di beni.[1] Nel suo resoconto della visita, Uffenbach annotò con sbalordimento la presenza di "various very large goats' horns, one of which was four spans in circumference" e, più avanti, rilevò che "this realm is everywhere very prolific in horn, and moreover all horned creatures are extraordinarily well furnished with them". Lo stupore prodotto dalla vista di imponenti corna animali poteva forse essere spiegato con la varietà della fauna autoctona, ma Uffenbach restò ancor più sconcertato quando si accorse che in una teca era stato conservato un "curious horn which had grown on the back of a woman's head". Di fronte a una simile stranezza, che mai aveva visto prima, egli si spinse a ipotizzare un ardito legame tra il fenomeno appena osservato e le peculiarità climatiche dell'Isola, suggerendo poi che "it appears that men-folk bear their horns in front and women theirs behind" (von Uffenbach 1928, 27-30).

Privo dei necessari strumenti di indagine epistemologica, Uffenbach elaborò la sua stramba teoria 'metereologica' senza saper guardare oltre l'apparenza delle suggestioni e dei preconcetti e morì nel 1734, a Francoforte sul Meno, parecchi decenni prima che una nutrita schiera di dotti *fellows* e *secretaries* della *Royal Society* di Londra dimostrasse che i cosiddetti 'corni cutanei' erano l'esito di un disturbo dermatologico piuttosto raro, che

[1] L'istituzione, oltre ad avere una collezione ricchissima, è tra i musei pubblici più antichi al mondo e, dopo il museo d'arte di Basilea, il più antico in Europa. Per maggiori informazioni, si rimanda alla pagina web ufficiale: <https://www.ashmolean.org/>.

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poteva portare all'insorgere di proiezioni coniche costituite da cheratina compatta.[2] L'esposizione cronica ai raggi solari suggeriva che la luce ultravioletta potesse contribuire a queste formazioni, ma vi concorrevano anche altri fattori, come, ad esempio, la predisposizione genetica, la compresenza di infezioni fungine o batteriche, e il sussistere di lesioni epiteliali benigne, preneoplastiche o maligne.[3]

Per quanto ci è noto, né l'Inghilterra né la Scozia (di cui ci occuperemo attraverso un caso specifico) svilupparono mai condizioni ambientali (atmosferiche e/o epidemiche) tali da poter giustificare, nel periodo menzionato, un tasso di occorrenze di corni cutanei maggiore rispetto a quello di altre nazioni europee, con le quali condivisero, invece, più o meno le stesse percentuali di incidenza della patologia. Il primato, dunque, se così lo si può definire, non fu senz'altro di tipo quantitativo come era parso a Uffenbach con la sua iperbolica definizione di "terra maxime cornifera" (von Uffenbach 1928, 27), ma di genere: le fonti ci dicono, infatti, che quella dei corni cutanei nella storia inglese e scozzese della prima età moderna fu una parentesi che ebbe per soggetti soltanto le donne.[4]

Il presente articolo si inserisce in questo contesto per ripercorrere le vicende biografiche di Margaret vergh Gryffith, Mary Davies ed Elizabeth Lowe: tutte *horned women* – la prima gallese, l'altra inglese di provincia, l'ultima scozzese – vissero a cavallo tra sedicesimo e diciassettesimo secolo e lasciarono un segno profondo sia nelle cronache coeve che nell'arte, nella letteratura e nell'immaginario collettivo. Le pagine che seguono

[2] Si vedano, a questo proposito, i lavori dei primi pionieri della dermatologia europea, quasi tutti inglesi: Home 1791; Worthington 1836; Wilson 1844; Giese 1848 e Edwards 1859. Sulla patologia del *cornu cutaneum*, e per una sintesi delle sue principali classificazioni mediche, si rimanda a Bland-Sutton 1893, 183-190 (specialmente il capitolo "Cutaneous Horns"); Montgomery 1941 e Luck 1950, 449-451 (soprattutto il capitolo "Tumors of Bones").

[3] Cfr. i recenti contributi di Yu, Pryce, MacFarlane, Stewart 1991 e Srivastava e Srivastava 2021. Si veda, inoltre, la pagina dedicata sul sito dell'Istituto Dermatologico Europeo: <https://www.ide.it/patologie/corno-cutaneo/>.

[4] Per un quadro generale sulla corposa casistica di umani con le corna nel contesto inglese e scozzese a cavallo tra Cinque e Ottocento, si veda Bondeson 2000, 120-140. Per due antologie storiche, ricche di testi e immagini, si vedano Dauxais 1820 e Liebert 1864.

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tentano di sondare le ragioni dell'interesse quasi ossessivo che i contemporanei nutrirono verso queste tre figure, focalizzando lo sguardo sulle molteplici sfumature di senso che la loro insolita caratteristica anatomica incarnò in risposta al variare della temperie culturale.[5] Per secoli – come ci ricordano Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant nel *Dizionario dei simboli* (1986, I, 320-323) – il corno era stato cifra di saggezza e onnipotenza nel pensiero occidentale (basti ricordare Mosè o Alessandro Magno, di sovente raffigurati entrambi con le corna come equazione della grandezza delle loro gesta), ma nel caso di Margaret, Mary ed Elizabeth altre esigenze prevalsero, dettate da specifiche contingenze storiche che, come vedremo a breve, conferirono ai loro corni una polifonia di significati, trasformandoli prima in arma di stigma sociale, poi in strumento di svago e piacere, e infine in materia di indagine scientifica.

In un'epoca in cui raramente fu concesso alle donne di emergere come soggetti liberi e muniti di una propria identità, Margaret vergh Gryffith, Mary Davies ed Elizabeth Lowe abbandonarono l'ombra di esistenze semplici e ritirate e si imposero sulla scena con la straordinarietà di un sembiante posto al confine liminare tra umano e bestiale. In questo spazio pubblico, frastornato da applausi, grida, domande, sorrisi e derisioni, le loro voci risuonarono e – per quanto adesso ci sembrino lontane e spesso intermittenti come le frequenze di una vecchia stazione radio – non sono ancora svanite del tutto. Non resta, dunque, che iniziare il nostro cammino indietro nel tempo per tornare ad ascoltarle.

1. "She had giuen her husband the Horne": Margaret Gryffith e il corno dell'infedeltà

[5] Sulla percezione del corpo umano deforme, inteso come corollario della meraviglia e classificato in base a "complessi emotivo-cognitivi" di orrore, piacere e ripugnanza, si veda l'imprescindibile lavoro di Daston, Park 1998, 173-214. Lo studio non si occupa in nessun caso di individui affetti dalla specifica patologia dermatologica che colpì Margaret vergh Gryffith, Mary Davies ed Elizabeth Lowe, ma al corno – dispositivo culturale e simbolico composito – le due autrici dedicano pagine interessanti nell'ambito della loro discussione sul collezionismo di epoca barocca, soprattutto in relazione alla leggenda dell'unicorno.

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Nell'ottobre del 1588, un quartetto di prolifici stampatori londinesi costituito da Henry Carre (1578-1604), Richard Jones (1564-1602), Thomas Orwin (*fl*. 1581-1593) e Edward White (1577-1612) ottenne licenza di stampa per un breve testo dal titolo bizzarro e accattivante: *A myraculous, and Monstrous, but yet most true, and certayne discourse, of a Woman (now to be seene in London) of the age of threescore yeares, or there abouts, in the midst of whose fore-head (by the wonderfull worke of God) there groweth out a crooked Horne, of foure ynches long*.[6] Di autore ignoto, ma quasi certamente vergato da un predicatore protestante, come si evince dal registro alto e stilisticamente avvertito, di frequente puntellato di riferimenti vetero e neotestamentari, il documento – un opuscoletto di 8 pagine in quarto con frontespizio finemente illustrato – era giunto al vaglio della *Stationers' Company* dopo aver già superato un fitto setaccio di controlli e censure:

> The censure of a learned Preacher that examined the woman, and perused the copie of this Booke, before it was printed.
>
> I Haue (not only) carefully perused this copie, but haue diligently examined the party her selfe; & seeing the thing to be true, & not only apparant to all mense yes, but signified also by the Iustices of the Countrey, vnto the Lords of her Maiestis priuie Counsell: I wish it to bee printed, that the beholders might not satisfy themselues with the sight, but the readers also take some benefite by the Discourse and Exhortation, which hath bin penned for that purpose (Anonymous 1588, A1^{v}).

Ma per quale motivo un semplice pamphlet, come tanti apparsi in questo giro d'anni, aveva richiesto l'intervento delle più alte cariche politiche e religiose del regno di Elisabetta I, prima di potersi immettere nei circuiti giornalistici della capitale inglese? La risposta va senz'altro ricercata nella peculiarità della vicenda narrata, con protagonista

[6] La notizia relativa al nulla osta per la pubblicazione del pamphlet si trova negli archivi della *Stationers' Company*, ora digitalizzati e reperibili qui: <https://stationersregister.online/>. Per un profilo bio-bibliografico degli stampatori e *book-sellers* Henry Carre, Richard Jones, Thomas Orwin e Edward White, si veda McKerrow 1910: 62, 159, 208 e 288. Gli unici contributi critici che *A myraculous, and Monstrous, but yet most true, and certayne discourse, of a Woman* ha ricevuto sin qui sono i lavori di Worthington 1836 e di Wood 1966 e 1967. Si tratta, tuttavia, di saggi molti brevi (in un caso, una sola pagina) e con un taglio prevalentemente descrittivo-documentaristico.

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una figura femminile reale che in breve tempo aveva affascinato l'intero paese. Di chi si trattava?

Margaret vergh Gryffith era nata in Galles intorno al 1528 ed era stata a lungo la sposa di un certo David Owyn, fattore originario di Llhan Guduain, nella contea del Montgomery.[7] Madre di quattro figli, una volta rimasta vedova si era mantenuta autonomamente con la coltivazione di un appezzamento di terra, conducendo una vita sobria e appartata:

> THIS woman, whose name is Margaret vergh Gryffith, by her Fathers name after the vse and custome of *Wales*, was lately the wife of Dauid Owyn, of the parish of *Llhan Guduain*, in the Countie of *Montgomry* Husbandman, deceassed: with whom, as she liued many yeares (to the eye of the world) verie quietly, and honestly, hauing foure children, whereof three are yet aliue, so hath she since, during the time of her Widowhood, mainteined her self with her small portion of Land, and other necessaries (for any thing that is knowne) in verie good order (Anonymous 1588, A2^{r}).

Questa tranquillità agreste e familiare era stata, tuttavia, turbata dal sopraggiungere di un inspiegabile malessere fisico, che aveva destato grande scalpore nella piccola comunità rurale: in mezzo alla fronte della donna era spuntata all'improvviso una specie di protuberanza epidermica, dura al tatto e ricoperta di croste essiccate, impossibile da guarire o rimuovere. In più occasioni tagliata e appianata, l'escrescenza era sempre ricresciuta nel medesimo punto, fuoriuscendo verso l'esterno, solidificandosi e assumendo lentamente le sembianze di un vero e proprio corno ovino, ricurvo verso il basso:

> Yet notwithstanding, there appeared of late, *viz*. In Lay last, through the wonderfull worke of God, as the woman her self confesseth, and so likewise tistified by others, in the midst of her fore-head, a small hard knob, hauing on the top thereof at the first as it were a dry skab, which she laboured by citting, and all other helpe of Surgerie, to haue couered and cured, but al was in vaine, for the more that she stroue with it, the more it grewe; and although it was often pared away, yet was she aduised, and in the

[7] Nel 1588, anno di pubblicazione del pamphlet, ci viene detto che Margaret Gryffith ha 60 anni: se l'informazione è attendibile, la data di nascita della donna può essere collocata congetturalmente intorno al 1528. Nonostante le ricerche, non è stato possibile risalire ad alcun documento di archivio.

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> enforced to let it alone, it hath still growne both in greatnes and hardnes, so that it is now become both in colour, quantitie, and proportion, a verie Horne, much like vnto a Sheepes horne, foure inches long, or there abouts, most miraculously growing downe out of her fore-head, to the middle of her nose, and there it crooketh towards her right eye, and groweth so fast, that she is fayne to haue it cut, least otherwise the sight of her eye should be stopped therewith (Anonymous 1588, A2^{r}-A2^{v}).

L'accorrere di astanti, bramosi di vedere il prodigio umano, aveva fatto subito da cassa di risonanza all'evento, trasformando quella che era iniziata come una pura questione domestica prima in un chiacchierato *affair* di campagna e dopo in un caso di interesse nazionale: "The Woman hath been examined by the Justices of Peace of y^{t} said Countrie, who haue also enformed the Councell of the Marches of Wales therewith, & now lately she is sent vp hither to *London*, by the said Justices, to the end she might be seene of the Lords of the Queenes maiestis most honorable priuie Councell" (Anonymous 1588, A2^{v}). Il trasferimento di Margaret vergh Gryffith sulle rive del Tamigi per soddisfare la curiosità dei membri del governo Tudor rappresentò l'apice dell'attenzione mediatica di cui la sua persona fu fatta oggetto, un clamore opportunisticamente immortalato dall'oscuro estensore di *A myraculous, and Monstrous, but yet most true, and certayne discourse, of a Woman* proprio quando l'ormai celebre *horned woman* gallese era in mostra nella zona commerciale dello *Strand* e nel cuore della *City* non si parlava d'altro (fig. 1).[8]

Dietro la sua operazione editoriale non vi furono, però, solo ragioni di carattere economico e pubblicitario. Sfruttare la morbosità dei lettori dell'epoca per fenomeni preternaturali, connettendone le cause con temi di scottante attualità, poteva altresì avere significativi risvolti sul fronte pedagogico e la storia di Margaret vergh Gryffith sembrava perfetta per percorrere anche questa strada.

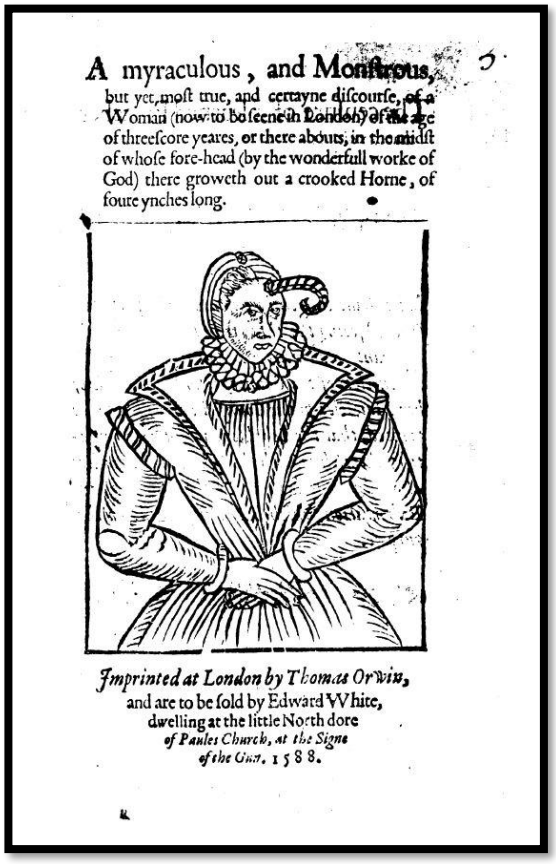
Ecco perché, indagando sulle origini del suo corno portentoso, l'anonimo non mancava di segnalare un'informazione importante: in un passato non meglio definito, la

[8] Quella posta sul frontespizio del pamphlet è l'unica immagine nota di Margaret vergh Gryffith. Sulla falsariga di questa incisione si baserà il ritratto della donna realizzato nel 1813 da Roger Stephen Kirby per il suo *Wonderful and Scientific Museum* (vedi, oltre, fig. 2).

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donna era stata sospettata di tradimento dal consorte, accusa che ella aveva respinto senza indugio, invocando di essere corporalmente marchiata dalla comparsa di un corno se avesse mentito in merito. L'esito di questo tentativo di difesa e autodeterminazione femminile non poteva che essere scontato:

> And yet there is no certaine & naturall cause knowne but the handie worke of God, how this Horne should growe: some speaches there are, but yet doubtfully reported, and not willingly acknowledged, either by her, or her friends, that there hath heeretofore some words passed betwixt her husband and her in his life time, who suspecting her of some light behauiour, and charging her with it in these tearmes, that she had giuen him the Horne, she then not only constantly denied it, but wished also, that if she had giuen him her husband the Horne, she might haue a Horne growing out of her owne face and fore-head, to the wonder of the whole world (Anonymous 1588, A2^{v}).


A myraculous, and Monſtrous,
but yet, moſt true, and certayne diſcourſe, of a Woman (now to be ſeene in London) of the age of threeſcore yeares, or there abouts, in the midſt of whoſe fore-head (by the wonderfull worke of God) there groweth out a crooked Horne, of foure ynches long.

Imprinted at London by Thomas Orwin,
and are to be ſold by Edward White,
dwelling at the little North dore
of Paules Church, at the Signe
of the Gun. 1588.

Fig. 1 – Incisione raffigurante Margaret vergh Gryffith col suo corno a uncino in mezzo alla fronte, forse

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durante un'esibizione londinese, in Anonymous, *A myraculous, and Monstrous, but yet most true, and certayne discourse, of a Woman (now to be seene in London) of the age of threescore yeares, or there abouts, in the midst of whose fore-head (by the wonderfull worke of God) there groweth out a crooked Horne, of foure ynches long*, London: Imprinted by Thomas Orwin, and are to be sold by Edward White, dwelling at the little North dore of Paules Church, at the Signe of the Gun, 1588, frontespizio. © The Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Sebbene retoricamente sminuito a pettegolezzo di contado ("But how certaine these speaches are, I leaue to him that is the searcher of secrets"; Anonymous 1588, sig. A2^{v}), questo *flashback* nei trascorsi privati degli Owyn consentiva in realtà all'autore di virare sensibilmente i toni della narrazione, trasformandola ora da cronaca sensazionalistica in libello ideologicamente orientato e con evidenti fini propagandistici. Innanzitutto, focalizzando lo sguardo su Margaret vergh Gryffith e la sua sfrontata presa di posizione rispetto alla possibilità di un adulterio, con tanto di sfida nei confronti del fato, egli la rendeva automaticamente responsabile di quanto le era accaduto. In un'età in cui l'indagine eziologica delle patologie doveva ancora muovere i primi passi e le increspature dell'universo equivalevano a segni polisemantici, il corno apparso sul capo della donna poteva essere spiegato solo con le lettere dell'alfabeto di un immaginario numinoso, divenendo strumentalmente il simbolo manifesto dell'infedeltà coniugale, la conseguenza di una condotta etica illecita e lo stigma inoccultabile con cui espiarne la colpa.[9] Con questo sillogismo, secondo il quale al peccato terreno corrispondeva sempre una punizione divina, quella di Margaret vergh Gryffith – 'cornuta' perché 'cornuto' aveva reso il marito – diveniva così una parabola esistenziale negativamente esemplare, utile per aborrire le lusinghe della carne, scuotere gli animi pigri attraverso il deterrente della paura e incoraggiare le coscienze all'ammenda, soprattutto quelle delle donne.[10]

[9] Sull'uso opportunistico della vicenda di Margaret vergh Gryffith – impiegata dalla cultura protestante inglese con funzione pedagogica, ideologica e spettacolare e pensata per un pubblico squisitamente femminile – si veda Crawford 2005, 118-119.

[10] Per un quadro articolato su questo immaginario numinoso, per effetto del quale tutto ciò che era inspiegabile si caricava di significati soprannaturali e, attraverso l'uso della paura, veniva utilizzato come

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In secondo luogo, spostando l'asse della riflessione dalla spettacolarizzazione dell'oggetto meraviglioso (il corno) alla piaga dell'incontinenza sessuale (richiamata attraverso l'episodio della donna gallese), l'autore declinava il proprio discorso in chiave polemica, innestandosi nell'acceso dibattito di fine Cinquecento sulla decadenza dei costumi.[11] L'esperienza soprannaturale di Margaret vergh Gryffith si tramutava in questo modo nel pretesto per imbastire una dura reprimenda sulla degenerazione morale dell'Inghilterra, descritta metaforicamente come l'antica Gerusalemme, dedita a sguazzare nel vizio, ingrata di fronte alla benevolenza celeste e dunque meritevole di ogni castigo. Coerentemente con questo intento programmatico, la restante parte (circa un terzo) di *A myraculous, and Monstrous, but yet most true, and certayne discourse, of a Woman* cessava di essere resoconto di intrattenimento e assumeva, anche tipograficamente, la forma del sermone edificante, costellato di rimandi scritturali (dai salmi all'Esodo, dalle Lettere ai Galati e agli Ebrei, sino al poco noto Libro di Osea). In una cornice teologica abilmente costruita per celebrare da una parte l'inesauribile generosità dell'Altissimo e stigmatizzare

strumento di controllo sociale, specialmente dei costumi della donna, si vedano i lavori di Baratta (2016, 2017 e 2018).

[11] Con l'ascesa al trono di Elisabetta I, e il progressivo consolidamento del protestantesimo come religione di stato, il bisogno di approntare per i fedeli modelli di comportamento più inflessibili si fece di nuovo incombente e improrogabile. Questa necessità si tramutò nel 1563 in "certaine Sermons appoynted by the Quenes Maiesty, to be declared and read, by al Parsons, Vicars, & Curates, eueri Sunday and Holi Day, in their Churches", il cui scopo era, tra le tante cose, di scoraggiare tutte quelle "forms of sexual misconduct [which] were rife [and] largely condoned by popular standards". In particolare, una sezione intitolata "agaynst Whoredome and Uncleanesse" affermava: "it is necessary at this present to intreat of the sin of whoredom and fornication, declaring unto you the greatness of this sin, and how odious, hateful, and abominable it is and hath alway been reputed before God and all good men, and how grievously it hath been punished both by the law of God and the laws of divers princes; again, to shew you certain remedies whereby ye may, through the grace of God, eschew this most detestable sin of whoredom and fornication, and lead your lives in all honesty and cleanness" (Cramner 1563, 57). Sebbene senza dirlo esplicitamente, l'attività di predicazione che soggiaceva a tale iniziativa promossa dalla regina e dal suo *Privy Council* aveva come principali obiettivi le donne, che apparivano chiaramente – come nel caso di Margaret vergh Gryffith – "the focus of sexual guilt and responsability" (Gowing 1996, 63). A questo dibattito, a cui parteciparono con specifici interventi anche Philip Stubbes (1555-1610) nel 1583 e William Harrison (1534-1593) nel 1587, si unì nel 1588 l'autore di *A myraculous, and Monstrous, but yet most true, and certayne discourse, of a Woman*.

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dall'altra la cecità e ingratitudine dell'uomo, anche la nazione inglese era adesso chiamata a fare i conti con i propri errori:

> […] *England*: O *England*, *England*, how oftentimes haue I called thee? how sundry wayes haue I prouoked thee? how bountifully haue I bestowed my benefits? and how plentifully haue I powred out my blessings vpon thee? how earnestly haue I by the mouth of my Preachers, clocked and cried vnto thee, as a Hen doth to ther Chickens, that thou mightest awake out of thy securitie, and by repentance, returne vnder the shadowe of my wings, there to be safe, from all these greedie Kytes and Eagles, that houer readie to pray vpon thee? and yet thou wilt not: there thy house shall come to confusion: therefore I will remoue their candlesticke, I will take the light of my Gospel from thee: and though I haue of late for my owne name sake, destroyed thine enemies, and drowned them in the bottome of the Seas, that all the world might knowe and confesse, there is neither wisedome, power, policie, force, nor furie of flesh and bloud, tha can preuaile against me. Yet for thine unthankefulnes, my wrath shall waxe hot against thee (Anonymous 1588, A3^{v}-A4^{r}).

Stolta, superba, irriconoscente, Albione non era più il "pulcino" indifeso salvato dalle grinfie di avidi predatori – evidente, qui, l'allusione ai continui attacchi dei cattolici e agli spagnoli dell'*Invencible Armada*, sconfitti nell'agosto del 1588; tramutatasi essa stessa in un rapace, l'Isola si era abbandonata alla depravazione e all'impudicizia, venendo infine privata della luce del vangelo. Nel reiterare che solo un sincero pentimento e una nuova ricerca della parola sacra avrebbero potuto ovviare a questo baratro, l'autore si avviava rapidamente alle conclusioni del pamphlet, ma non prima di aver riportato in scena Margaret Gryffith un'ultima volta: solo un cameo non per darle dignità come soggetto degno di trattazione letteraria, ma per ricordare a tutti la necessità di contemplare il suo corno, emblema di un doppio tradimento – quello della donna nei confronti del marito e quello dell'Inghilterra verso il messaggio di Dio (fig. 2).[12]

[12] Sul caso di Margaret vergh Gryffith si veda anche Dietering 2021, 12-18, che parla di "forehead" come di un "testo" leggibile e manipolabile e interpreta la comparsa del corno in chiave di punizione collettiva e teologica.

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali



Fig. 2 – Ritratto di Margaret vergh Gryffith, realizzato usando come modello l'incisione tardo cinquecentesca di *A myraculous, and Monstrous, but yet most true, and certayne discourse, of a Woman* (1588), in Anonymous, *Margaret Vergh Gryfith. Aged 60 – 1588. Exhibited with a Horn in her Forehead, 4 inches long*. Pub.d Aug.t 6. 1813, by R.S. Kirby. 11 London House Yard. © Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru – The National Library of Wales: <http://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/>.

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Dopo la pubblicazione di *A myraculous, and Monstrous, but yet most true, and certayne discourse, of a Woman* di Margaret vergh Gryffith si persero le tracce: verosimilmente, ella fece ritorno al natio Galles, ma se e quando questo avvenne non è dato saperlo con certezza. Il suo nome e il suo corno dell'infedeltà rimasero comunque a lungo nella memoria collettiva, come dimostrano le allusioni, indirette o esplicite, contenute all'interno di alcune delle opere più gettonate del periodo: in *Have with You to Saffron Walden* (1596), ad esempio, si raccontava di una cerimonia ospitata alla *Audley End House*, in cui un gentiluomo aveva ballato con una danzatrice "thrice more deformed than the woman with the horne in her head" (Nashe 1596, 45); ancora, nella *Pleasant Comedie of Old Fortunatus* (1599), la strega Andelocia rispondeva con la seguente battuta alla protesta della principessa britannica Agrippina, che lamentava di aver smarrito un borsello magico: "Sigh not for your purse, money may be got by you, as well as by the little Welshwoman […] that had but one horne in her head; you have two" (Dekker 1604, V, i, D5v); infine, il giullare Pasarello, anima comica di *The Malcontent* (1604), ironizzava con questi argomenti sulla sorte dei 'traditi': "the horne of a cuckolde is as tender as his eie; or as that growing in the womans forehead twelue yeares since, that could not endure to be toucht" (Marston 1604, I, vii, C4r).

Di citazione in citazione, dal guizzo performativo di un drammaturgo all'altro (Thomas Nashe, Thomas Dekker, John Marston), Margaret vergh Gryffith rimase nella memoria collettiva almeno sino agli inizi del Seicento, quando un'altra *horned woman* fece capolino nel cuore degli inglesi, portando a un fondamentale cambio di paradigma nella percezione del corno: era giunta la stagione di Mary Davies.

2. "By a strange Operation of Nature, changed into Horns": Mary Davies e le sue *mirabilia* cornifere

Nel 1676, uscì con concessione reale *A Brief Narrative of a Strange and Wonderful Old Woman*

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That Hath a Pair of Horns Growing upon her Head. Il testo, un pamphlet di sette pagine in quarto, ripercorreva a ritroso la biografia di un'anziana signora di nome Mary Davies, divenuta una star dello *showbusiness* carolino per una caratteristica anatomica che l'aveva resa unica agli occhi dei suoi contemporanei. In mostra "at the Sign of the Swan near Charing-Cross", dove quotidianamente folle di spettatori si accalcavano per ammirarla, la donna era nata a Great Saughall, nei pressi di Chester, tra il 1591 e il 1594; moglie devota di Henry Davies, levatrice di chiara fama, paesana onesta e rispettabile, si era costruita nei decenni una reputazione talmente irreprensibile nel vicinato che "her Departure was generally lamented in the place of her Abode, in such a measure, that several of her Neighbours and Acquaintance brought her many Miles of her Journey" (Anonymous 1676, frontespizio e 5). Come nel già noto caso di Margaret vergh Gryffith, anche la giovinezza di Mary Davies – il documento informava – era stata segnata da un insolito fastidio medico: per circa un ventennio, un dolore l'aveva ininterrottamente afflitta all'altezza della testa, sino a provocare un visibile rigonfiamento della pelle sulla sfera posteriore del cranio. Dopo ulteriori cinque anni di sofferenza, il turgore – in realtà, una cisti sebacea – si era fessurato e aperto per lasciare spazio a due stupefacenti corni di ariete:

> This Soreness continued Twenty Years, in which time it miserably afflicted this good Woman, and ripened gradually unto a Wenn near the bigness of a large Hen Egg, which continued for the space of Five Years, more sadly tormenting her than before: After which time it was, by a strange operation of Nature, changed into Horns, which are in shew and substance much like a Ramms Horns, solid and wrinckled, but sadly grieving the Old Woman, especially upon the change of Weather (Anonymous 1676, 5).

In una sorta di rituale ciclico, che aveva visto alternarsi tagli, ricrescite e cadute spontanee o accidentali, Mary Davies si era sottoposta ad almeno tre interventi di rimozione delle sue corna: il primo paio, segato via dopo quattro anni, era stato

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consegnato a William Hewetson, vicario di Shotwick dal 1648 al 1661;[13] il secondo set, asportato dopo ulteriori quattro anni, se l'era aggiudicato Sir Willoughby Aston (1640–1702), secondo baronetto del Cheshire e *High Sheriff* di contea; il terzo duo, che si era spezzato a seguito di un violento colpo, l'aveva invece acquisito un certo nobiluomo inglese, che successivamente lo aveva esposto come cimelio da collezione alla corte di Luigi XIV di Francia, dando così alla vicenda addirittura un'eco internazionale; la quarta e ultima coppia di corni era quella con cui Mary Davies aveva iniziato a solcare i palcoscenici della Londra della Restaurazione, incantando industria teatrale e arte pittorica, come dimostra un fine dipinto ad olio realizzato da ignoto intorno al 1668, in cui la donna è ritratta di profilo, acconciata e vestita all'ultima moda (si notino l'abito di velluto scuro e l'ampio coprispalle di cotone bianco), con sguardo sommesso, ma fiero e distinto (fig. 3).[14]

[13] L'informazione è confermata da un'altra fonte contemporanea, la lettera in forma di pamphlet pubblicata dal ricusante cattolico William Blundell of Crosby (1620 o 1625–1698). Cfr. Blundell 1668, 2.

[14] È plausibile che Mary Davies abbia commissionato personalmente il dipinto a olio, concependolo non solo come strumento di promozione della propria attività, ma anche come celebrazione del culmine della sua carriera performativa. Sulla possibilità di una *agency* femminile in questo tipo di percorso artistico, cfr. Dirks 2024, 79-119 e 231-241, che evita la tentazione di descrivere le persone esibite unicamente come vittime, mettendo invece in primo piano il ruolo attivo che alcune di esse esercitarono nel modellare la propria immagine pubblica, nel controllare l'accesso o nel narrare la propria differenza. Questa riflessione entra in perfetta risonanza con i dibattiti attuali nella storia della disabilità sulla rappresentazione di sé e sulla politica della visibilità. Su questi temi, si rimanda a Turner, Stagg 2006.

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Fig. 3 – Ritratto di Mary Davis (la horned woman), all'età di circa 74 anni. Dipinto ad olio su tela, realizzato da artista ignoto intorno al 1668. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

Sugli effetti che avevano innescato il fenomeno delle escrescenze cornee, l'anonimo di *A Brief Narrative of a Strange and Wonderful Old Woman That Hath a Pair of Horns Growing upon her Head* non aveva dubbi: sebbene segnalasse *en passant* la possibilità che fosse stato l'uso di un cappello troppo stretto a generare il male alla testa (forse l'ombra di una non ancora del tutto sopita polemica protestante contro l'impiego, da parte delle donne, di

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specifici manufatti sartoriali che denotavano vanità e superficialità di spirito),[15] egli era certo che i corni di Mary Davies dovessero esseri considerati la prova inconfutabile della maestosità del cosmo, i cui processi di formazione risultavano tanto più eccezionali laddove si discostavano incomprensibilmente dalla norma. Con un approccio laico in linea con i nuovi orientamenti scientifici della tarda età Stuart,[16] l'autore del documento invitava i propri connazionali a liberarsi di antiche credenze, a non dare più forzate letture simboliche di ciò che si sottraeva alla *ratio* e a soffermarsi, estasiati, sulla soglia della contemplazione per godere dell'immenso e inesauribile spettacolo della natura. Di questo spettacolo, Mary Davies, con le sue corna di ariete, era, *corpore praesenti*, la manifestazione vivente; bastava solo vincere remore e superstizioni, predisporre l'animo a una realtà non sempre subito intelligibile e – in ultima istanza – abbandonarsi al godimento di una

[15] "This strange and stupendious Effect began first from a Soreness in that place where now the Horns grow, which (as 'tis thought) was occasioned by wearing a straight Hat" (Anonymous 1676, 5). Per la critica agli eccessi praticati nell'arte del vestire, si rimanda alla celebre *Homilie against Excesse of Apparel*, pubblicata a Londra nel 1563 e contenuta all'interno del secondo volume di *Certaine Sermons appoynted by the Queenes Maiesty* (Anonymous 1563, fol. 117r). La *Homilie* si inseriva all'interno di una lunga tradizione legislativa riguardante l'abbigliamento, che risaliva in Inghilterra agli ultimi secoli del Medioevo. La prima traccia di *Sumptuary Legislation* è, infatti, un'ordinanza della *City* di Londra del 1281, che normava l'abbigliamento di alcune categorie di lavoratori, per le quali i vestiti erano parte della remunerazione a loro dovuta dai datori di lavoro. Ma la più vasta e importante attività legislativa in questo campo è costituita senz'altro dalle *Sumptuary Laws* emanate, in due momenti successivi, da Edoardo III (1312-1377) e destinate a promuovere e preservare le attività tessili del regno, ma soprattutto a regolare l'abbigliamento sulla base della classe sociale di appartenenza. Il primo provvedimento (1336), ad esempio, proibiva l'acquisto di abbigliamento di fabbricazione estera a chi non fosse membro della famiglia reale, e l'uso di pellicce a chi fosse di rango inferiore a quello di cavaliere. Il secondo provvedimento (1363), invece, distingueva sette categorie sociali e rendeva i membri di ogni classe facilmente riconoscibili sulla base dei colori e dei tessuti del loro abbigliamento: "servants"; "handicraftsmen and yeomen", "gentlemen under the state of knights"; "merchants, citizens, burgesses", "knights which have lands", "clerks", "ploughmen and other of mean estate". L'intervento normativo su questi temi proseguì anche nei secoli successivi e ricevette particolare attenzione soprattutto durante il regno di Enrico VIII e, ancora, di Elisabetta I. Per i testi delle varie leggi, cfr. Luders *et* al. 1810-1828: I, 280-281; I, 380-381; III, 430-432 e Hughes e Larkin 1969: II, 187-192, 192-194, 195-201, 202-203. Chiaramente, come nel caso delle infrazioni in ambito sessuale, al dibattito sulla proibizione del lusso in ambito sartoriale contribuì anche la letteratura di strada.

[16] "But more accurately to Describe its Nature and Manner of Production, may be a Subject proper for a Colledge of Physitians; and no question but it will be esteemed worthy to employ the *Ingenious Vertuoso's* of the Age, who need not their Glasses to magnifie its Wonder" (Anonymous 1676, 5-6).

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passeggiata dal potere epifanico:

> Take but a Walk to the Swan in the Strand, near Charing-Cross, and there thou mayest satisfie thy Curiosity, and be able to tell the World whether this following Narration be truth or invention. There thou mayest see a Woman hath Horns growing upon the hinder part of her Head, an Object not onely worthy of your Sight, but Admiration too! She is Seventy six Years of Age, Bred and Born in the Parish of Shotwick in Cheshire, and within four Miles of Chester, Tenant unto His Blessed Majesty, upon a Farm of Sixteen pounds *per Annum*; so that she is not necessitated to this Course of Life: or to deceive the credulous and short-sighted People, but to manifest to the World such a Wonder in Nature, as hath neither been read or heard of (we may justly suppose) since the Creation (Anonymous 1676, 4).

Con questo invito ad accogliere con una doppia valenza il miracolo della creazione (inebriante per i sensi, ma anche viatico per la conoscenza), l'autore di *A Brief Narrative of a Strange and Wonderful Old Woman That Hath a Pair of Horns Growing upon her Head* prendeva commiato dal proprio libretto, ma non prima di aver vergato una poesia con cui – forse sognava – i suoi lettori avrebbero sempre ricordato Mary Davies: "You that love Wonders to behold / Here you may of a Wonder read. / The strangest that euer seen or told, / A Woman with Horns upon her Head" (Anonymous 1676, frontespizio).

Dopo il 1679, la celebre 'cornuta' del Cheshire sparì dalla circolazione, per un ritiro dalle scene o – molto più realisticamente, data la sua non comune longevità – per il sopravvento della morte. Tuttavia, era stato profondo l'impatto che la sua figura e i suoi incredibili corni avevano avuto sulla cultura del tempo, tanto da riverberare in numerose attestazioni successive con valore puramente documentario e iconografico: ne è un valido esempio la poderosa *Natural History of Lancashire, Cheshire, and in the Peak in Derbyshire* (1700) di Charles Leigh (1662–1701?), in cui si trovava anche un nuovo ritratto di Mary Davies (fig. 4).

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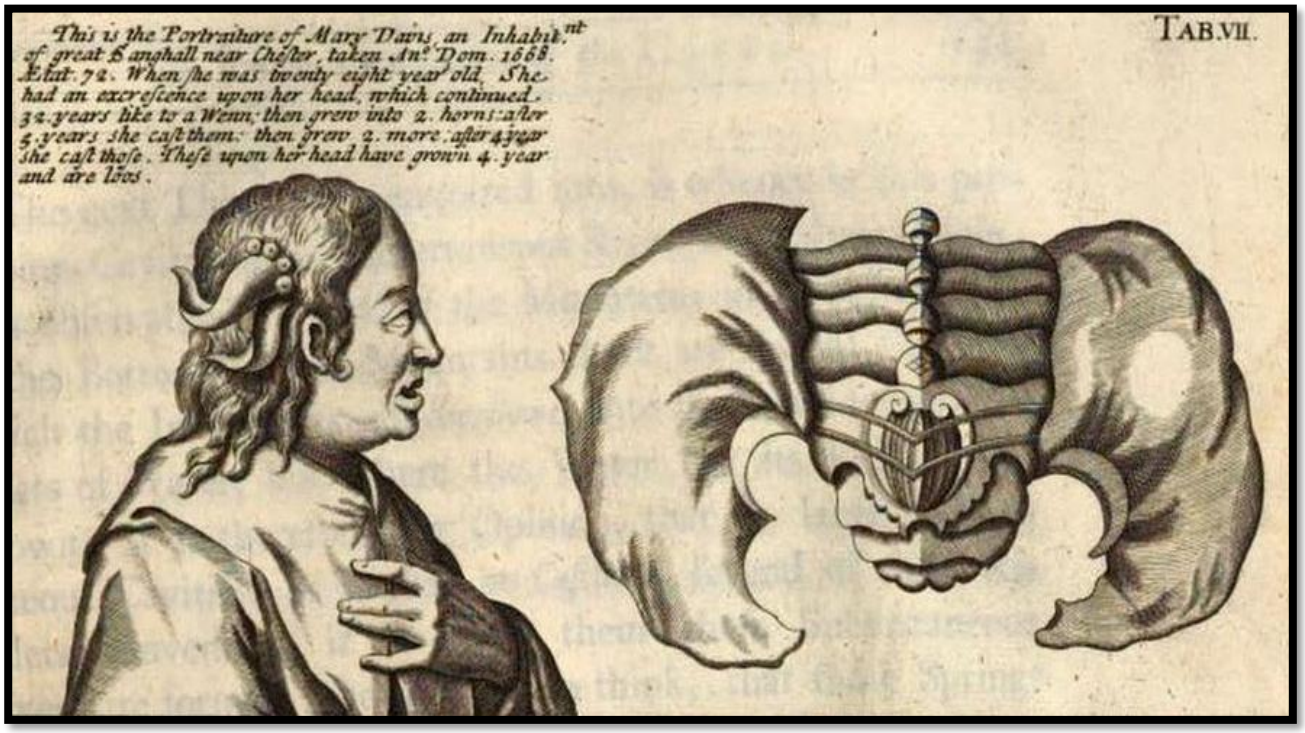


Fig. 4 – Incisione dedicata a Mary Davies, ritratta nel 1668 all'età di 72 anni, in Charles Leigh, *The Natural History of Lancashire, Cheshire, and in the Peak in Derbyshire, with an Account of the British, Phoenician, Armenian, Greek, and Roman Antiquities in those Parts*, Oxford: Printed for the Author, 1700, 193. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

Opere monumentali come quella di Leigh, e di altri come George Ormerod (1785-1873) e Roger Stephen Kirby (*fl*. 1799-1850), che lo avrebbero seguito con i medesimi propositi, testimoniavano che, seppur ancora con qualche minima resistenza, l'epoca delle interpretazioni allegoriche dei prodigi di natura era ormai giunta al termine: ricercarne le cause biologiche, tentare di comprenderne i meccanismi interni di funzionamento, e specialmente classificare e sistematizzare erano i propositi con cui ci si avviava al secolo dei Lumi. Si trattava di un processo di rinnovamento del pensiero intellettuale davvero rivoluzionario: Mary Davies, attrattiva umana, ma anche soggetto di studio e indagine medica per via dei suoi corni (un paio dei quali preservato, secondo una fonte, nella St.

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John's College Library di Cambridge almeno sino al 1848),[17] aveva fatto giusto in tempo a vedere i primi timidi bagliori di questa nuova era. Una sua contemporanea, però, Elizabeth Lowe, anche lei *horned woman*, avrebbe goduto anticipatamente e a pieno di questa inedita sensibilità.[18]

3. "There be many Unicorns, and consequently many Horns": Elizabeth Lowe e il suo corno da museo

Di Elizabeth Lowe, cinquantenne, originaria del circondario di Edimburgo, non si sentì mai parlare sino al 14 maggio del 1671, data in cui entrò ufficialmente nella storia scozzese per essere la prima donna a cui veniva escisso chirurgicamente un corno che le era spuntato al di sopra dell'orecchio destro.[19] L'intervento era stato diretto dal *Deacon of Surgeons* Arthur Temple di Ravelridge, che aveva praticato l'amputazione ossea alla presenza – quasi come se fosse in un teatro anatomico – di quattro testimoni (forse suoi allievi): Thomas Burne, George Smith, John Smyton e James Twedie. Il corno, lungo circa dieci centimetri, simile a una esse allungata, era cresciuto ininterrottamente per sette anni: spesso e di colore marrone scuro, fu immediatamente pulito, laccato, catalogato col numero di serie 2492 e destinato all'esposizione nei locali dell'Università. Una catenina con un ovale in argento di accompagnamento ne riassumeva i dettagli principali (fig. 5):

[17] L'informazione è fornita da Erasmus Wilson (1809-1884), chirurgo e dermatologo, che nei primi anni Quaranta dell'Ottocento diede alle stampe il suo *Account of a Horn developed from the Human Skin; With Observations on the Pathology of Certain Disorders of the Sebaceous Glands*, facendo esplicito riferimento al caso di Mary Davies (1844, 20).

[18] Si segnala che – contrariamente a Margaret vergh Gryffith e Mary Davies – Elizabeth Lowe apparteneva al contesto scozzese della seconda metà del XVII secolo, in un periodo ancora preunitario, quando la Scozia manteneva istituzioni religiose, politiche e culturali distinte dall'Inghilterra. Solo con l'*Atto di Unione* del 1707 i due regni si sarebbero formalmente fusi nel Regno di Gran Bretagna, pur continuando a preservare specificità nazionali sul piano giuridico ed ecclesiastico (cfr., su questi temi, Whatley 2006).

[19] Rispetto ai due paragrafi precedenti, il lettore noterà che questa terza parte è più breve. Ciò si motiva con la mancanza di fonti su Elizabeth Lowe, che si è comunque deciso di includere nel saggio per la potenza della sua storia e perché la sua vicenda contribuisce a dare un quadro più completo delle diverse letture di cui fu oggetto il corno nella prima età moderna inglese e scozzese.

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> This horn was cut by Arthur Temple, Chirurgeon, out of the head of Elizabeth Low, being three inches above the right ear, before thir witnesses Andrew Temple, Thomas Burne, George Smith, John Smyton and James Twedie, the 14 of May 1671. It was agrowing 7 years, her age 50 years.

Dell'evento non furono registrate altre notizie, così come della donna, forse ancora in vita nel 1682 come segnalato dal predicatore scozzese Robert Law (*fl*. 1646-1690) nei suoi *Memorialls; or, The Memorable Things* (1818, 224).[20] Difficile dire, dunque, quale reazione 'emotivo-cognitiva' i connazionali di Elizabeth Lowe potessero aver nutrito nei suoi confronti.

[20] Robert Law (*fl.* 1646–1686), autore dei *Memorialls; or, The Memorable Things* (pubblicati postumi nel 1818), fu un predicatore presbiteriano legato al movimento dei *Covenanters*, che si opponevano alle imposizioni episcopali e al controllo monarchico sulla Chiesa di Scozia. Il suo punto di vista riflette, quindi, le tensioni religiose e politiche del XVII secolo scozzese, segnato da persecuzioni, conflitti civili e da una forte accentuazione dell'identità confessionale. Su Robert Low, cfr. il profilo presente sull'*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Wells 2004), mentre sul movimento dei *Covenanters* un'ottima sintesi è fornita da Stevenson 2002.

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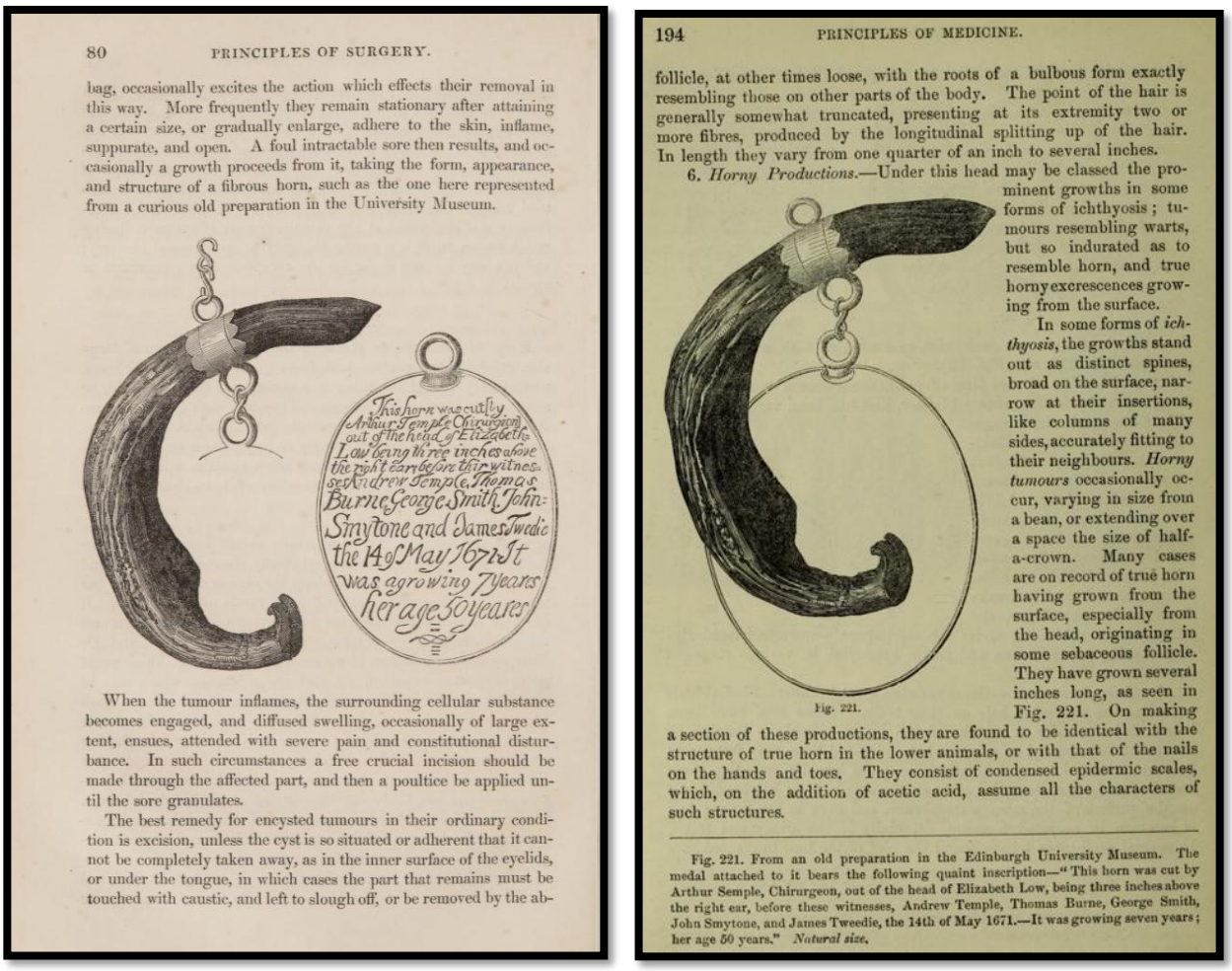


Fig. 5 – Il corno di Elizabeth Lowe, accompagnato da un ovale in argento che sintetizza i dettagli dell'intervento di rimozione a cui la donna si sottopose nel 1671. © Anatomical Museum Collection, Department of Biomedical Science, University of Edinburgh Medical School.

L'impressione che si ha è che l'immediata medicalizzazione del suo corno l'abbia sottratta a sfruttamenti e speculazioni popolari, impedendo di fatto che divenisse un fenomeno da baraccone. Se così fosse, il suo sarebbe il primo caso di *horned woman* in cui a prevalere non furono né la ricerca di un significato nascosto (o apocalittico) del corno né la sua spettacolarizzazione, ma la salute della paziente, afflitta da una malattia e per questo inserita all'interno di un piano terapeutico scandito da fasi ben precise: diagnosi, somministrazione della cura, finale (ed eventuale) risoluzione del problema. E, poiché compito della scienza era anche identificare e inventariare i disturbi del corpo umano, lasciando quanti più mezzi possibili a disposizione del sapere delle generazioni future, il

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corno di Elizabeth Lowe, una sorta di reliquia sanitaria, poteva (e doveva) assurgere a modello tassonomico, per rimanere un punto di riferimento nella rappresentazione clinica della patologia almeno sino a metà Ottocento. Non è da considerare una mera coincidenza, allora, il fatto che esso comparisse ancora come *specimen* nei *Principles of Surgery* (1842) di James Syme (1799-1870) per illustrare gli "Encysted Tumours" e nelle *Clinical Lectures* (1859) di John Hughes Bennett (1812-1875) per esemplificare le "Horny Productions" (figg. 6 e 7).



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bag, occasionally excites the action which effects their removal in this way. More frequently they remain stationary after attaining a certain size, or gradually enlarge, adhere to the skin, inflame, suppurate, and open. A foul intractable sore then results, and occasionally a growth proceeds from it, taking the form, appearance, and structure of a fibrous horn, such as the one here represented from a curious old preparation in the University Museum.

When the tumour inflames, the surrounding cellular substance becomes engaged, and diffused swelling, occasionally of large extent, ensues, attended with severe pain and constitutional disturbance. In such circumstances a free crucial incision should be made through the affected part, and then a poultice be applied until the sore granulates.

The best remedy for encysted tumours in their ordinary condition is excision, unless the cyst is so situated or adherent that it cannot be completely taken away, as in the inner surface of the eyelids, or under the tongue, in which cases the part that remains must be touched with caustic, and left to slough off, or be removed by the ab-

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follicle, at other times loose, with the roots of a bulbous form exactly resembling those on other parts of the body. The point of the hair is generally somewhat truncated, presenting at its extremity two or more fibres, produced by the longitudinal splitting up of the hair. In length they vary from one quarter of an inch to several inches.

6. *Horny Productions.*—Under this head may be classed the prominent growths in some forms of ichthyosis; tumours resembling warts, but so indurated as to resemble horn, and true horny excrescences growing from the surface.

In some forms of *ichthyosis*, the growths stand out as distinct spines, broad on the surface, narrow at their insertions, like columns of many sides, accurately fitting to their neighbours. *Horny tumours* occasionally occur, varying in size from a bean, or extending over a space the size of half-a-crown. Many cases are on record of true horn having grown from the surface, especially from the head, originating in some sebaceous follicle. They have grown several inches long, as seen in Fig. 221. On making a section of these productions, they are found to be identical with the structure of true horn in the lower animals, or with that of the nails on the hands and toes. They consist of condensed epidermic scales, which, on the addition of acetic acid, assume all the characters of such structures.

Fig. 221.

Fig. 221. From an old preparation in the Edinburgh University Museum. The medal attached to it bears the following quaint inscription—"This horn was cut by Arthur Semple, Chirurgeon, out of the head of Elizabeth Low, being three inches above the right ear, before these witnesses, Andrew Temple, Thomas Burne, George Smith, John Smytone, and James Tweedie, the 14th of May 1671.—It was growing seven years; her age 50 years." *Natural size.*

Fig. 6 – Il corno di Elizabeth Lowe in un'incisione apparsa in James Syme, *Principles of Surgery*, Edinburgh:

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Sutherland and Knox, 1842, 80. Fig. 7 – Il corno di Elizabeth Lowe in un'incisione apparsa in John H. Bennett, *Clinical Lectures on the Principles and Practice of Medicine*, Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1859, 190. © Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

"There be many Unicorns, and consequently many Horns", aveva scritto l'eclettico Thomas Browne (1605-1682) nei primi anni Quaranta del Seicento nella *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (Browne 1646, III, xxiii, 182). La sua intenzione era quella di sfatare la convinzione che gli unicorni fossero creature fantastiche, sottolineando che, a memoria, gli venivano in mente coleotteri, cerambici, balene e rinoceronti, e che avrebbe tenuto la mente aperta e vigile per verificare se potessero esserci altre specie simili in giro. Nel 1671, anno della nomina di Browne a *knight*, l'ingresso di una *horned woman* nei locali dell'Università di Edimburgo confermava che la sua teoria aveva avuto ragion d'essere: la donna in questione era ovviamente Elizabeth Lowe, che aveva varcato la soglia di quel tempio del sapere senza neppure immaginare cosa il destino avesse in serbo per lei. Lì per separarsi definitivamente di una porzione indesiderata del suo corpo, con quella stessa parte scissa da sé si sarebbe guadagnata un ritratto (forse l'unico esistente) nelle insigni *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* (1898) di George Milbry Gould (1848-1922) e Walter Lytle Pyle (1871-1921) e un pezzetto di posterità (fig. 8).

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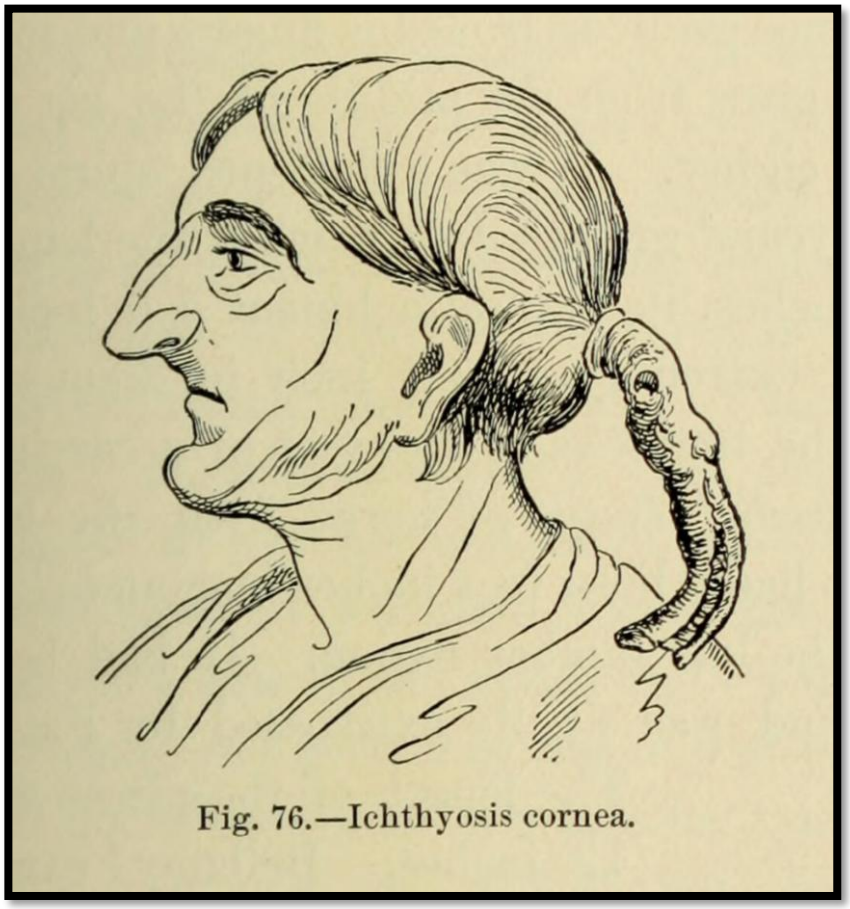

Fig. 76.—Ichthyosis cornea.

Fig. 8 – Ritratto congetturale di Elizabeth Lowe, in George M. Gould, Walter L. Pyle, *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*, Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1898, 225. © Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

Grazie a uomini dalla mente illuminata come Arthur Temple e i suoi discepoli, eredi della tradizione delle *Wunderkammern* rinascimentali e precursori *ante-litteram* del grande gusto antiquario settecentesco, il corno di Elizabeth Lowe – "the hieroglyphic of authority, power and dignity" (Browne 1646, III, xxiii, 182) – era divenuto un gioello da museo. In quello scrigno di tutela e conservazione della bellezza si sarebbe preservato sino ai giorni nostri.[21]

[21] Come segnalato nella didascalia della figura 4, il corno di Elizabeth Lowe si trova ancora oggi conservato ed

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Epilogo

Nel 1850, l'editore Harper di New York diede alle stampe la quinta fatica letteraria di Herman Melville, *White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War*. Ispirato al servizio svolto dall'autore per 14 mesi nella marina degli Stati Uniti, il testo avrebbe catapultato il lettore nelle scorribande acquoree della fregata *Neversink* e del suo composito equipaggio, fatto di individui tanto eccentrici quanto caricaturali. Tra questi, il sinistro medico di bordo Cadwallader Cuticle, possessore di un manufatto scultoreo alquanto originale:

> Chief among these was a cast, often to be met with in the Anatomical Museums of Europe, and no doubt an unexaggerated copy of a genuine original; it was the head of an elderly woman, with an aspect singularly gentle and meek, but at the same time wonderfully expressive of a gnawing sorrow, never to be relieved. You would almost have thought it the face of some abbess, for some unspeakable crime voluntarily sequestered from human society, and leading a life of agonised penitence without hope; so marvellously sad and tearfully pitiable was this head. But when you first beheld it, no such emotions ever crossed your mind. All your eyes and all your horrified soul were fast fascinated and frozen by the sight of a hideous, crumpled horn, like that of a ram, downward growing out from the forehead, and partly shadowing the face; but as you gazed, the freezing fascination of its horribleness gradually waned, and then your whole heart burst with sorrow, as you contemplated those aged features, ashy pale and wan (Melville 1850, 292).

Descritto con dovizia di particolari, questo passaggio ha incoraggiato alcuni studiosi a supporre che dietro l'immagine del gesso raffigurante una donna 'cornuta' non vi sia stato soltanto il genio creativo dello scrittore americano, ma anche una sua conoscenza più o meno diretta del caso di Margaret vergh Gryffith, la gallese che era passata alla ribalta nell'Inghilterra Tudor per il suo corno a uncino.[22] Sembra, tuttavia, abbastanza improbabile che Melville abbia avuto modo di documentarsi sulla sua storia o di mettere le mani su una copia di *A myraculous, and Monstrous, but yet moste true, and certayne discourse, of a Woman*, un pamphlet sopravvissuto in copia unica e poco noto persino fra gli antiquari più appassionati di *mirabilia*, che dovette avere scarsa circolazione anche al tempo della sua

è visibile nell'Anatomical Museum Collection del Dipartimento di Scienze Biomediche dell'Università di Edimburgo.

[22] Su queste congetture, si vedano Regan 1967 e Runden 1987.

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produzione e pubblicazione. Per la vicinanza cronologica è, invece, verosimile che ad ispirare la scena della *horned woman* sia stata la figura di Mme Dimanche, detta anche "Mère-la-Corne" o "Mother Horn", dalla cui fronte il chirurgo Joseph Souberbielle (1754-1846) rimosse nei primi anni Quaranta dell'Ottocento un corno della lunghezza di 25 centimetri.[23] Vera celebrità della Francia post-napoleonica, la donna fu immortalata in diversi calchi di cera, uno dei quali venne esposto poco dopo al Museé Dupuytren di Parigi, dove Melville si recò il 5 dicembre 1849, mentre si trovava in viaggio in Europa, come riporta esplicitamente il suo diario: "[…] Went to the Museum Dupuytren. Pathological. Rows of cracked skulls. Skeletons & things without a name" (Melville 1949, 51). Di Mme Dimanche non si fa menzione in modo esplicito, ma difficile credere che la scultura a lei dedicata non abbia catturato l'occhio di un ospite così speciale, divenendo la suggestione esotica su cui modellare, nella ormai quasi ultima stesura di *White-Jacket*, che sarebbe uscito solo alcuni mesi più tardi, il prezioso *plaster cast* posseduto dal *Surgeon of the Fleet*.

Al di là delle ragioni che possono aver orientato le scelte di Melville, ciò che mi preme fare, in conclusione, non è tanto un lavoro di attribuzione, quanto segnalare la forza comunicativa e immaginifica esercitata dalla figura di Mme Dimanche, la cui storia fu dibattuta in consessi istituzionali di altissimo profilo culturale come la *Society for Medical Improvement* di Boston e il *Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians* di Philadelphia, per essere poi accolta addirittura tra le pagine del grande canone letterario. Come nel suo caso, anche le *horned women* che l'avevano preceduta in Inghilterra e Scozia circa un secolo e mezzo prima ebbero questa forza e innescarono, con la loro fisicità disturbante, irregolare e non-normativa, emozioni e reazioni contrastanti.

Nel clima di inquietudine religiosa che caratterizzò la tarda età elisabettiana, il corno ad uncino di Margaret vergh Gryffith fu associato a una specifica tipologia di colpa e

[23] Sull'affascinante storia di Mme Dimanche, cfr. Morlan 1851.

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divenne la quintessenza di una carne marchiata da Dio per denunciare l'infamia: quella del tradimento di una donna (Margaret stessa) ai danni del marito e – per estensione – quella dei sudditi del regno inglese nei confronti del messaggio divino.

Allo scoccare del diciassettesimo secolo, tuttavia, un distinto scenario ermeneutico cominciò a manifestarsi all'orizzonte per intercettare i nuovi ideali di meraviglia e teatralità promossi dal nascente movimento barocco. Fu in questo contesto, in cui letture simboliche e sovrastrutture portentose e apocalittiche avevano ormai fatto spazio a sentimenti di fascino e curiosità, che tracciò il proprio cammino Mary Davies, i cui corni furono il diversivo di spettatori certamente bisognosi di evadere da una realtà crudele e dolorosa, ma anche ben predisposti ad accogliere il guizzo di natura come prova tangibile della magnificenza del creato. Ad un pubblico specialistico, dotato di strumenti analitici raffinati e animato da un nuovo sentire della scienza, fu, infine, destinata l'ostensione del corno della scozzese Elizabeth Lowe, non più la cometa di un arcano messaggio celeste da decrittare e nemmeno un oggetto da esibire e/o commercializzare come stravaganza anatomica, ma la spia di uno squilibrio fisiologico del corpo da ricondurre – a seguito delle necessarie valutazioni mediche – nei territori della patologia clinica e, da lì, nel sapere universale del genere umano.

Nate ai 'margini' geografici, culturali, sociali e simbolici dell'Inghilterra e della Scozia Cinque e Seicentesche e sopravvissute in un tempo in cui l'alterità trovava accoglienza solo se fatta convergere entro rigide categorie interpretative, Margaret vergh Gryffith, Mary Davies ed Elizabeth Lowe riuscirono, loro malgrado, a conquistarsi un 'centro' grazie all'eccezionalità dei loro corpi anticonvenzionali. Da quel centro, seppur indirettamente, ancor oggi ci insegnano che è lo sguardo altrui a definire cosa sia diverso, deformato o comunque anormale: tale sguardo, però, non rivela tanto le caratteristiche dell'oggetto scrutato quanto i parametri di valutazione di chi osserva.

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Nota bio-bibliografica

Luca Baratta è Professore Associato di Letteratura Inglese presso il Dipartimento di Filologia e Critica delle Letterature Antiche e Moderne dell'Università degli Studi di Siena e Direttore Didattico del Centro Linguistico di Ateneo, sede di Arezzo. È autore delle monografie «*A Marvellous and Strange Event*». *Racconti di nascite mostruose nell'Inghilterra della prima età moderna* (2016), *The Age of Monsters. Nascite prodigiose nell'Inghilterra della prima età moderna: storia, testi, immagini* (2017) e *Senza testa / Headless* (2018). Nel 2019 ha pubblicato la prima edizione critica dell'opera di Thomas D'Urfey *The Comical History of Don Quixote – Part I*. Dal 2018 al 2024 è stato membro (in qualità di responsabile della comunicazione) del board della *Italian Association of Shakespearean and Early Modern Studies*. I suoi interessi di ricerca sono principalmente dedicati alla storia sociale e culturale dell'Inghilterra della prima età moderna.

Indirizzo e-mail: luca.baratta@unisi.it

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Marginality and Resistance in M. G. Sanchez's *Jonathan Gallardo*: A Postcolonial Reinterpretation of Gibraltar

Ilaria Barbuto

(Università della Calabria, IT)

Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the novel *Jonathan Gallardo* (2015) by M. G. Sanchez, situated within the context of postcolonial studies and spatial theory.
The primary objective of this analysis is to demonstrate how marginality – understood in social, spatial, and psychological terms – assumes both epistemological and political functions within the text. The novel offers a perspective from the periphery, characterised as a privileged vantage point. Practices of resistance, forms of identity reappropriation, and processes of rewriting collective memory emerge from this peripheral standpoint. The methodology employed is interdisciplinary, integrating theoretical tools derived from sociology, postcolonial criticism, and geocriticism. A comprehensive examination of the concepts of "marginal man," post-imperial marginality, and "hauntology" is imperative, as these concepts are instrumental in elucidating the representation of the protagonist and the urban space of Gibraltar as locales characterised by historical, cultural, and symbolic tensions. The investigation demonstrates how Jonathan Gallardo stages a marginal subjectivity, capable of intercepting the voices of the colonial past and the prefigurations of an uneasy future. Gibraltar emerges as a liminal context, geographically peripheral and historically displaced, where marginality becomes a tool for critical awareness and a potential agent of transformation.
The findings support the assertion that the work functions as a postcolonial counter-narrative, through which Gibraltar asserts its entitlement to narrate itself from an autonomous perspective. Consequently, literature serves as a vehicle for symbolic resistance and a means of reconstituting collective identity from a post-imperial perspective.

Keywords: marginality; postcolonialism; Gibraltar; hybridity; urban space.

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Introduction

This paper presents a critical examination of the novel *Jonathan Gallardo* (2015) by M. G. Sanchez, drawing on postcolonial theory and spatial analysis to explore how the concept of marginality, particularly the resistance that can emerge from the periphery, underpins the narrative's foundation. The protagonist, Jonathan, embodies a condition of marginality shaped by social, spatial, psychological, and historical dimensions. This condition sheds light on the internal social and political tensions of Gibraltar, which is still marked by its colonial heritage. It also enables the examination of broader dynamics of exclusion, as well as the potential for counter-narratives.

Previous critical contributions have offered valuable insights into the oeuvre of Sanchez. For instance, Habermann's analysis highlights the hauntological elements in *Jonathan Gallardo*'s novel, while Adami, in turn, emphasises the novel's role in narrating the social and cultural history of Gibraltar. Despite representing some of the most compelling research on this subject, these studies do not fully articulate the interplay between marginality, space, and resistance that underpins the novel's structure. This paper builds upon those foundations by offering an interdisciplinary reading that integrates postcolonial criticism, sociological notions of marginality, and spatial theory.

The decision to focus the analysis on the aforementioned novel addresses the need to explore a peripheral literary production that remains excluded from canonical circuits, yet possesses significant critical potential. Sanchez's works are firmly embedded in the historical and cultural context of Gibraltar, thereby constituting the only extant literary corpus that can articulate and systematically illustrate the pertinence of postcolonial studies as applied to the Gibraltar case (Stotesbury 2014, 37). Gibraltar, a territory historically situated in a crucial location between Spain and the United Kingdom, emerges as a quintessential liminal space. Imperialism, a stringent border, and ongoing identity negotiations characterise this liminal space. Consequently, an emergent hybrid cultural subjectivity is revealed, which Sanchez seeks to define and develop through his literary

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pursuits. In an article published in *The New Statesman*, the author describes his literary practice as a form of resistance to the systematic misrepresentation of Gibraltar (Sanchez 2015). As a Gibraltarian born and raised in Gibraltar, who subsequently emigrated to England, Sanchez employs fiction to portray Gibraltar from an internal, 'lived' perspective, demonstrating how core concepts of postcolonial theory inform the evolutionary process of a territory that remains under British rule. In what could be perceived as a personal 'literary manifesto,' Sanchez affirms: "If we don't start writing about ourselves, we run the risk of being presented to the world solely through the prism of others' perceptions. Or, to paraphrase the words of the great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe: 'If you don't write your own stories, others will write them for you'" (Ibid).

Jonathan Gallardo is 'the marginal man'

Sanchez's *Jonathan Gallardo* (2015) is regarded as a *Bildungsroman* (Adami 2015, 233) as it tells the story of a young boy from Gibraltar who, from the earliest years of his life, must cope with a series of challenging experiences: "His name is Jonathan Gallardo and he is an orphan" (Sanchez 2015a, 1). With such an exordium, Sanchez introduces the protagonist of his novel – from which the eponymous title is derived – to the public by broadly stating both his social and psychological position. The novel traces the life of the unfortunate Jonathan, who spends his early adolescence at the Gibraltar Boys' orphanage, a place where he is a victim of bullying, further exacerbating his temperamentally inclined tendency to isolate himself from the group: "The way everyone laughs at him, […] Not a day goes by without Jonathan getting bullied at school or back at home. Usually, it is something to do with either possessions or personal space" (Ibid, 6). Jonathan lives with his bullies, the people who bully him at school are the same with whom he shares the dormitory and bathrooms of the orphanage. The young man feels disarmed and trapped: he has no space in the house where he can take refuge whenever the bullies decide to come after him. This prompts him to distance himself from the group, leading him to adopt a marginal existence.

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While this behaviour is regarded as excessive, it is also considered necessary to appease the harassment directed at him (Ibid, 7-8).

The death of his parents makes Jonathan believe he is left alone in the world. However, he discovers he still has an uncle named Alfredo in Gibraltar, albeit described as "a useless, good-for-nothing, disgusting puto gordo borracho" (Ibid, 8). Notwithstanding his familial relationship, Alfredo cannot provide adequate care for Jonathan. Indeed, Alfredo is a vagabond, living between one bench and another in Gibraltar, whose sole interest lies in the consumption of alcohol to the point of inebriation (Ibid, 12). Alfredo's personality and alcohol addiction have a deleterious effect on Gibraltar society, which regards him as "a bad man whose life is in freefall" (Ibid, 12). Consequently, he must be distanced. Although from a different perspective, Alfredo, like Jonathan, lives on the margin and is ultimately compelled to separate himself from the social environment of Gibraltar. What is surprising about Sanchez's narrative is that, despite everything, the protagonist chooses to meet that deadbeat uncle everyone talks about but no one knows: "Jonathan knows enough about life by this stage to realise that there is usually a reason why people turn to drink" (Ibid, 12). Despite Jonathan's young age, he repeatedly experiences the suffering that comes from feeling alone in the world, which prompts him to realise that there must be an important motivation behind Uncle Alfredo's dissolute behaviour that drives him to lead such an unhealthy life. At this point, it is inevitable to link up with the question of social marginalisation: Alfredo has no friends except people in the same condition as him. Society considers him a dangerous man to be kept away from, which is why he becomes so accustomed to his solitude that he has no interest in getting to know Jonathan, not even when the boy appears before his eyes in the flesh (Ibid, 13).

To better understand the dynamics at play within the text, a theoretical digression on the concept of marginality is essential. This conceptual framework offers valuable insights into how peripheral identities and spaces operate, both within the narrative and in broader socio-cultural contexts. Beginning with the concept of the 'marginal man,' introduced

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around 1930 by the American sociologist Robert Park, contemporary critics have concentrated their research on the social processes underlying phenomena such as marginalisation, exclusion, and the empowerment of liminal figures in the social context (Bankovskaya 2014, 94). In particular, Park defines a 'marginal man' as an individual with a hybrid cultural identity, mainly referring to immigrants who, upon arriving in the United States, find themselves caught between two worlds: that of their homeland and that of America (Wilson 2016, 260). Following this perspective, the notion of marginality has a spatial component, "since it embodies the 'spatial-social' interaction" (Bankovskaya 2014, 94). Therefore, analysing the phenomenon of social marginalisation—and thus the individual on the margin—requires examining human interactions within a given space, specifically in a cultural context. In this regard, drawing on the widely used conceptual dichotomy of centre and periphery, Wilson emphasises the inherently spatial and hierarchical nature of marginality. She observes:

> The marginalized are always aware of their location in relation to those at the centre… The place in the centre is where we are absent, voiceless, or invisible. […] The spatial view of marginality readily lends itself to conceiving of those 'on the margin' as those who are disenfranchised. When we think 'center/periphery,' we inevitably dichotomize such that there are those who are in or at the center (those holding power, presumably) and those who are not, thus relegating them to the periphery. […] The goal is to exclude, indeed, to further marginalize the marginalized (e.g. the homeless, the poor, and the young) (Wilson 2016, 261).

The spatial view of marginality positions the marginalised individual at the periphery, namely on the edge of a social and cultural context considered 'adequate,' presentable, and embodying the ideal of the centre. However, the marginalised know the centre, for it is precisely that social space into which they are not admitted. This framework is instrumental in reading Sanchez's depiction of Gibraltar, where Jonathan and Alfredo's exclusion from central social spaces reflects their broader alienation from the cultural and political 'centre.' In Wilson's terms, such individuals are "voiceless, or invisible" to the institutional structures that shape daily life (Wilson 2016, 261). We see this in Jonathan's character – an

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orphan with no familial network, who drifts through life with neither a clear social role nor the means to claim one. Although specific figures offer him support, his internalisation of marginality renders him unable to reinsert himself into what Wilson would call the 'centre' of Gibraltar's social fabric.

Bankovskaya's extension of the concept of marginality into post-imperial contexts is also crucial here: "'Marginal' is a universal social type. […] 'marginality' provides a new 'ideal type' for modern social reality analysis, and is made along space/time dimensions. The main objective of the research on marginality is to develop a conceptual framework of reference for the sociological analysis of marginality as a specific post-imperial social type, process, and social relationship" (Bankovskaya 2014, 95). The type of society and historical period to which Bankovskaya refers is that of the post-Soviet space and era, thus the national contexts that gained independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In this sense, the so-called "post-soviet marginals," she argues, can be regarded "as exemplifying the universal modern social type of 'marginal'" (Ibid, 95). Compared to Sanchez's novel, what is more interesting about Bankovskaya's theory is the consideration of the subject on the margin as a particular social 'type' emerging in a renewed, but especially post-imperial national context, as in the case of Gibraltar.

The novel opens with Jonathan's birth in the 1970s and continues to the present day, tracing the final stages of British imperialism in the territory, as well as the first glimmers of awareness among the local people about the need to seek their own cultural identity. In the post-imperial society of Gibraltar, Jonathan and Alfredo are two men on the margins. In the first case, the young orphan already starts from a disadvantaged situation, since he has no family and is forced to rely only on himself. While it is true that the people he meets in the course of his life try to help him rise above his condition, it is equally valid that Jonathan is generally regarded with low esteem, as someone aimless and seemingly incapable of accepting help from others. On the other hand, Alfredo's shift from working at the Gibraltar shipyard to a life of alcoholism is triggered by his firing from the British after a theft

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(Sanchez 2015a, 8). Thus, Alfredo's social marginalisation is predominantly attributed to his actions; nevertheless, the hostility of the city's social environment remains a significant factor in his exclusion. It should not be forgotten that, even after colonialism, Gibraltar remains an overseas territory of the United Kingdom – a tendentially Anglophile one – in which the centre-periphery model is typically implemented. Sanchez shifts from describing the bourgeois neighbourhood around Main Street to the dynamics of environments for peripheral figures, such as Jonathan himself (Adami 2015, 233). Bankovskaya's theorisation of marginality proves helpful in analysing the social positioning of characters in Sanchez's novel. As she explains: "Marginality is usually defined as a lack of participation in social institutions (in economics, in political decision making, […]), as a deprivation and exclusion from the social structures" (Bankovskaya 2014, 98). It is, therefore, unlikely that figures like Jonathan or Alfredo could hold prestigious institutional roles in Gibraltar, much less voice their opinions on matters of public concern. As citizens on the margin, they are placed at a universal social distance that drives them to self-impose isolation in the peripheral space, as they are acutely aware of their inability to meet 'the expectations' of the social reality at the centre.

When Jonathan leaves school, he gets a job with the Public Works Department of Gibraltar, assuming the role of a garbage collector. Miss Ida Alarcón, the administrator of the orphanage, mobilises the community to enhance Jonathan's prospects (Sanchez 2015a, 23). However, the work remains menial and does little to showcase the young man's qualities, as society persistently regards him as a hopeless orphan. It is, however, his employment as a garbage collector that enables Jonathan to transform his life, allowing him to leave the orphanage and move into a flat in the New Passage area: "All that matters now is that he has his own place. That he can fall asleep in his own bedroom" (Ibid, 43). After years spent in shared spaces and amidst intrusive children, Jonathan finally obtains the opportunity to claim a space that is distinctly his own. Moreover, he even succeeds in

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purchasing a used car, facilitated by his colleague and friend Pepe, who becomes his closest confidant.

> The next few weeks are like a dream come true for Jonathan. Seated behind the wheel of his [Peugeot] 204, he drives round and round the Rock like other young Gibraltarian drivers […] his whole being feels welded to the present moment, completely insulated from both his past and his future. He is also relaxed and content, convinced that life is good and wholesome and that nothing bad will ever happen to him because, […] the future doesn't actually exist (Ibid, 57-58).

For the first time, Jonathan is grateful to life for the sequence of events that made him a man like any other. For the first time, Jonathan is no longer a marginal figure, socially speaking. He maintains a residence, steady work, and interpersonal relationships, which suggest a degree of social inclusion and security. In line with Wilson's theoretical framework, "a corollary to the concept of marginality is the term threshold. When referring to a threshold, the focus may be that of a point of beginning or entering […], or the focus may instead be on a point of transition – that is, threshold as indicating the verge of a new experience" (Wilson 2016, 261-262). Jonathan experiences a moment of transition, as he passes from the instability of the adolescent period to the responsibilities of adulthood, finding himself at the beginning – or rather on the threshold – of a new life.

However, occupying a marginal position is simultaneously a cultural, structural, and psychological issue. Structural forces such as socio-economic inequality and political exclusion, as well as cultural norms that define who belongs and who is othered, can place individuals in a state of marginality. Yet marginality is not only imposed from the outside, but also internalised, experienced, and negotiated by individuals. This defines its psychological dimension. The psychological approach to marginality focuses on how individuals subjectively experience exclusion and displacement. As Bankovskaya explains, it attends to "the marginal's feelings, sentiments, consciousness, self-consciousness, memories, and perceptions" (Bankovskaya 2014, 95). In other words, this perspective emphasises how marginality becomes embedded in one's inner life. It highlights the cognitive dimension of marginality: feelings of inferiority, alienation, uncertainty, and

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internal conflict, all of which influence identity formation and interpersonal relations. In *Jonathan Gallardo*, the eponymous protagonist's attempt to rehabilitate himself from the condition of social outcast is suddenly undermined by a phenomenon as curious as it is disturbing, which marks his existence forever. Throughout the narrative, Jonathan begins to hear a buzzing in his ears in various parts of Gibraltar. This sound gradually becomes increasingly debilitating until it culminates in an overwhelming and unbearable noise. No doctor can find a remedy that soothes Jonathan's distress, which intensifies until the buzzing transforms into a kind of incessant, incomprehensible chattering. As time progresses, the situation takes a macabre turn, and Jonathan undergoes intense psychological strain. When he decides to revisit the places where the voices first emerged, these repeated 'sound experiences' offer no clarity; instead, they deepen his confusion and trigger existential doubt (Sanchez 2015a, 88-89). Overcome by anguish, anger, and frustration, Jonathan eventually isolates himself in his apartment. This time, he enacts a self-imposed marginality, not as a result of social rejection alone, but because he is mentally and emotionally exhausted from confronting the unknown.

This narrative turn underscores the psychological dimension of marginality, a core element in many literary representations of peripheral figures (Bankovskaya 2014, 95). Jonathan, perceived by Gibraltar society as a derelict, paradoxically chooses to retreat from the world. His withdrawal illustrates that marginality operates not only as a socially imposed condition but also as a deeply internalised psychological state, one rooted in fear, confusion, and an acute sense of disconnection from both the self and the surrounding world.

Past, present, and future: a narrative from the margin that resists time

In Sanchez's novel, Jonathan Gallardo undergoes supernatural experiences, as the initially cryptic noises he hears gradually transform into discernible echoes of the past. His encounters with the past occur at four specific sites in Gibraltar. However, rather than

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witnessing these events visually, he experiences them solely through sound, positioning him not as a spectator but as a listener to the city's residual memories. "What if he went back to one of the four places again? What would happen then? Would they be speaking about something else? Would other voices have taken their place? Or would he go there and encounter no voices at all? The number of questions racing through his head catches him off guard" (Sanchez 2015a, 86). Despite his fear of losing his sanity, the protagonist gradually adapts to his unusual abilities and embarks on an enlightening exploration of Gibraltar's past, becoming a frequent visitor to libraries and an avid, almost professional, reader (Habermann 2020, 7). "Though uneducated, he is sensitive, empathetic and alive to the history of the place to such an extent that he can 'tune in', as it were, to pick up the echoes of suffering in bygone times" (Ibid, 7). The narrative turning point occurs when Jonathan stumbles upon some newspaper articles dating back to the previous century, the reading of which allows him to understand how the events and misdeeds he experiences are a (sound) re-proposition of historical facts that happened in those same places in Gibraltar where Jonathan is accustomed to experiencing them:

> 'So a crime really took place in College Lane,' Jonathan thinks, leaving the library in the company of other patrons. 'I'm not just plucking things out of thin air!' The thought relaxes him, energises him, makes him feel he is back in control of his life again. […] Now he knows for certain that he is only hearing voices from the past. […] The voices increase in quantity, but Jonathan is no longer discomfited by them. On the contrary, he now approaches every new 'voice episode' with great curiosity, analysing it from different angles pondering its significance (Sanchez 2015a, 114).

Jonathan consistently engages in daily interactions with Gibraltar's colonial heritage, which reemerges after centuries of obscurity. However, prior to uncovering the 'real' truth of the situation, he compels himself to seek a solution that is as empirical as possible. He visits a psychiatric hospital, where medical professionals prescribe him antidepressants and anxiolytic medication, measures that suggest an endeavor to address the mental health issues characteristic of individuals residing in a colonial context, who strive to reconcile their instability (Adami 2015, 234).

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In *Jonathan Gallardo*, Sanchez transforms time into another world, a parallel space, in which to conceive of the past as an intrinsic – and potentially accessible – part of the present (Habermann 2020, 7-8). The narrative becomes complicated when, like the past, the future increasingly presses upon the present moment (Ibid, 10). At a certain point, in addition to reliving past experiences, Jonathan finds himself immersed in a future dimension, that is, he begins to have premonitions about the future of friends and strangers. For instance, Jonathan senses an explosion, which ultimately results in death, and this event occurs a few days later; or, the moment when he is conversing with a colleague and suddenly foresees his own death, which is caused by pancreatic cancer. For Habermann, Sanchez's work thus prompts a confrontation with a dissolution of temporal boundaries: "When Jonathan begins to have his premonitory visions of the future, he realises that just as the past has shaped, and continues to shape the present, future disasters are already emerging under his very eyes, making him feel responsible, if powerless. Refusing to be compartmentalised in a parallel space, relegated to the past, colonial violence bleeds into the present and determines the future" (Ibid, 10-11). Gibraltar's past resurfaces, reminding Jonathan of old crimes and acts of violence committed during colonialism. This highlights how deeply Gibraltar's colonial past continues to impact the present, and especially the future, which Jonathan already perceives as uncertain. He feels as responsible as incapable of bearing the weight of such a discovery, which is why he marginalises himself, ceases to have contact with the outside world, and cuts off relations with his loved ones, including Pippa Lancaster, a potential romantic interest. The present life of Jonathan is no longer of consequence, as the restlessness of the past and the enigmatic nature of the future dominate his psychological state. Also interesting is the medical assessment of Dr Acton, who diagnoses Jonathan with dysthymic disorder, that is to say, a chronic depression, treatable with a quiet lifestyle, healthy relaxation, and the help of medication. It is probably no coincidence that the doctor is a former British serviceman who remained in the colony after finishing his term. One could speculate that Dr Acton represents the British Empire, and that the sedatives he

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prescribes to Jonathan for his alleged depression symbolise the United Kingdom's attempts to appease the local population's desire to confront and rediscover the nefarious legacy of British colonialism in the territory (Adami 2015, 234).

Habermann also finds it interesting to read Sanchez's novel in light of the philosophical concept of 'hauntology,' coined by Jacques Derrida in response to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (Habermann 2020, 16). Specifically, in *Specters of Marx* (2006), Derrida draws inspiration from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, evoking the ghost of the old Hamlet, who returns insistently to denounce the crimes and injustices of the past, urging his son to punitive action (Ibid, 17). "Accordingly, Derrida describes hauntology as a 'logic of haunting [...]. After the 'end of history', as Derrida states, 'the spirit comes by coming back, it figures both a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again'" (Ibid, 17). Thus, the so-called 'hauntology' is the science of what returns, which insists on injustices and unresolved problems that refuse to remain relegated to the past. In addition, the spectres through which it manifests itself are meant to facilitate an encounter with the past, in the hope that it will shape our understanding of the present and the future. Consequently, for Habermann, "Sanchez creates a specifically Gibraltarian hauntology: Jonathan Gallardo is haunted by the victims of colonial violence. […] Colonialism provides the context, […] for the atrocities that echo in Jonathan's ears. Unable to cope or to take action, he is ultimately overwhelmed by the tragic visions that crowd in upon him" (Ibid, 17-18).

Habermann's Derridean reading of the novel proves particularly insightful. The disembodied voices that haunt Jonathan evoke Gibraltar's colonial past, a past that demands recognition to be critically processed and ultimately transcended. Following Derrida's formulation, this spectral return is not a gesture of nostalgia but a disruptive intervention that unsettles the present and compels a reimagining of the future. The past, rather than remaining confined to historical silence, insists on being acknowledged. Moreover, the fact that Jonathan, a marginal, socially invisible figure, is the one haunted by

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these ghosts is far from incidental. On the contrary, it suggests that Sanchez engages with Gibraltar's colonial legacy not through dominant or institutional discourses, but by foregrounding the perspectives of those who have been historically silenced or subjugated. Jonathan thus emerges as a conduit for a counter-history that arises from below, privileging the voices of the oppressed and positioning the marginalised subject not as a passive victim of history, but as a potential agent of historical rearticulation. This perspective is further reinforced by the revelation that Jonathan's Uncle Alfredo shares the same spectral sensitivity, suggesting that this haunted relationship with the past is not an isolated experience, but rather an intergenerational burden: "Is this why you drink so much? […] 'So that you don't have to experience all these omens or premonitions or whatever they are?' My uncle nodded: 'It's the Gallardo family curse, kiddo. We have this thing where, […] we frequently end up time travelling backwards and forwards in our heads" (Sanchez 2015a, 275). Driven by an intrinsic need to comprehend the intricacies of its past, Jonathan engages in meticulous research and study. Nevertheless, it is not the past itself that unsettles him, but rather the uncertainty surrounding the future. As a marginal figure, Jonathan fears being left alone to bear the weight of this unresolved legacy, with the possibility that history might repeat itself. His anxiety reveals the profound tension between memory and responsibility, suggesting that acknowledging the past is merely the initial step in a more daunting process: shaping a future that is no longer constrained by it.

The City as a Key Player: Gibraltar's Role in *Jonathan Gallardo*

Although until the 20th century critical theory focused more on the study of time, diminishing conceptions about space, it was only at the close of the century that Western intellectuals turned to the so-called 'spatial theory': "What is now called the spatial turn" (Shi, Zhu 2018, 224). In recent years, interdisciplinary research has devoted growing attention to the concepts of space, place, and cultural geography – a relatively recent field of study focusing on cultural phenomena attributed to specific places and the 'functioning'

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of human beings in space. Consequently, space is acquiring an increasingly significant role in modern society, particularly in conjunction with the development of contemporary cities. Henri Lefebvre advances the concept of 'urban space' to define "the place where people walk around, find themselves standing before and inside piles of objects" (Lefebvre 2003, 130). Initially defined by its physical elements (streets, buildings, infrastructures), urban space gradually came to be understood as a socially produced phenomenon, shaped by human interactions and the institutions that support them. Edward Soja furthers this idea by describing the city as "a historical-social spatial phenomenon" (Shi, Zhu 2018, 225). He proposes two intriguing perspectives on the study of urban space. The first perspective is centered on its material aspects, that is, urbanism in a practical sense. The second one is more introspective, dealing with "thoughts about space" (Ibid, 225); in essence, it emphasises the cognitive processes involved in the conceptualisation and representation of urban space by individuals, addressing how they perceive and interpret the city, whether in reality or through the imagination. According to Soja, literary representation is among the most compelling ways to explore urban space. He affirms: "Literary texts not only reveal the writer's reflections on urban space, but show the character's experience in urban space. Therefore, the textual representations offer unique way to know the city" (Ibid, 228). The relationship between space and literature marks a significant turning point in modern literary theory, as space emerges as a compelling approach to literary analysis. Similarly, from an artistic perspective, literary texts appear to be the most effective in representing urban space (Ibid, 227-228). These texts are meticulously crafted by authors who maintain a profound connection to the depicted urban environment, wherein fictional characters navigate and simulate authentic urban experiences. Consequently, it can be posited that textual representation is the most efficacious means of achieving recognition for an urban space, both geographically and socially.

Within this framework, *Jonathan Gallardo* by Sanchez offers a compelling case. The author utilises literature to introduce Gibraltar to the world, disseminating historical news

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and general information about the territory and its people. He rejects the notion of Gibraltar as a passive British colony 'addicted' to imperial power. For Sanchez, the fact that Gibraltar survived centuries of British imperialism is synonymous with endurance, a quality that has characterised the entire history of the Rock, including its population. In this regard, it is possible to claim that *Jonathan Gallardo*'s real strength is the opportunity to examine the multifaceted condition of Gibraltar, presumably the novel's key player (Adami 2015, 235). Despite being a work centred on Jonathan's biography, the focus is mainly on the spatiotemporal movement of the protagonist in the city of Gibraltar. This allows the author to deal with the numerous issues concerning the territory, such as the Hispanic-British dispute, Franco's border, colonialism, the constant presence of the British, and the subsequent Anglophile attitude of the local population. Moreover, the novel's narrative dynamics enable Sanchez to delve into the social dimensions of Gibraltar, particularly: "the sense of displacement that takes its toll on the population, and the blurred identity of a colony that seems not to be able to find its place in history, […] but also the many forms of discrimination, racism and prejudice against the Gibraltarians themselves, often depicted as a crowd of ignorant, illiterate and 'inferior' subjects" (Ibid, 235). In other words, Jonathan's fractured identity and perpetual sense of marginalisation reflect the territory's enigmatic geopolitical status, rendering the protagonist's challenges representative of Gibraltar's overarching postcolonial circumstances. In this manner, Sanchez serves to amplify the voice of a territory that is often marginalised. Gibraltar, due to its geographic periphery and political ostracisation, emerges as an emblem of marginality itself. Consequently, it enters the literary discourse not merely as a setting but also as a literary subject. In this regard, Gibraltarian writer Humbert Hernandez asserts with confidence that no one has yet explored aspects of Gibraltar's civil and social history with the same depth as Sanchez in *Jonathan Gallardo* (Hernandez 2020). Hernandez underscores the importance of emotional engagement and the capacity for identification, particularly among Gibraltarians.

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In the novel's finale, Sanchez invites the reading public to break free from stereotypes, in the hope that the advancing world is headed for real change. The author aims to persuade and captivate readers worldwide that the actual narrative of a colonised territory is not the one imposed by the oppressors, but rather the one that emerges from the colonised people, who have survived and possess the capacity to rewrite their history. For Sanchez, portraying Gibraltar's urban space involves a thorough analysis, continually adopting new and potentially more comprehensive perspectives to offer the audience a complete understanding of the territory's ever-evolving history. In this regard, fields of research such as postcolonial literature promote open-mindedness by incorporating works in the literary canon from authors like Sanchez. These works not only foster an understanding of 'the Other,' but also prompt a critical re-examination of dominant historical narratives shaped by colonial ideology. Sanchez's narrative aligns with this theoretical perspective, offering a counter-narrative through which Gibraltar and its people reclaim spatial and long-suppressed historical subjectivity, actively participating in the construction and transmission of collective memory.

Conclusion

This paper sought to explore *Jonathan Gallardo* from a multidisciplinary perspective. The analysis demonstrated how Sanchez's novel contributes to creating a counter-narrative that challenges dominant and colonial representations, offering a genuinely Gibraltarian voice instead. The fact that marginality can be resistant implies that cultural memory persists.

The figure of the protagonist embodies a marginal subjectivity across multiple dimensions: social, psychological, spatial, and historical. The initial condition of exclusion serves as a point of departure for a more comprehensive reflection on marginality as a privileged positioning. Jonathan, positioned at a distance from the centre of power, develops a sensitivity that enables him to perceive and restore the memories of Gibraltar's colonial history that have been effaced. Jonathan's journey signifies an endeavour to

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reintegrate himself into the social fabric of his community. However, the psychological dimension of marginality reveals the complexities associated with marginal identity as an internalised condition that proves challenging to overcome. A fundamental aspect of the novel under examination is the incursion of the past into the present. From this vantage point, marginality is configured as a privileged access to the memorial dimension; it is those who inhabit the margins who possess the opportunity to hear what the centre has sought to forget. The analysis of Gibraltar's urban landscape is equally crucial. Through the protagonist's movements within the city, Sanchez restores an alternative map of the territory, highlighting the historical, cultural, and political tensions that permeate it. Gibraltar transcends being merely the backdrop of the narrative; it also emerges as a protagonist and narrative subject, through which literature serves as an instrument of resistance, knowledge, and the reworking of identity.

Ultimately, each section of the analysis contributes to supporting the thesis that *Jonathan Gallardo* functions as a postcolonial counter-narrative. Marginality, interpreted in a comprehensive and nuanced manner, serves as a vehicle for symbolic resistance, cultural memory, and the possibility of reinterpreting history from the viewpoint of the subalterns. Therefore, through literature, Sanchez not only asserts Gibraltar's right to narrate its own story but also establishes a framework for critical reflection on the colonial past and its enduring legacies, thereby facilitating a postcolonial reinterpretation of Gibraltar's identity.

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Bio-bibliographical note

Ilaria Barbuto graduated with a degree in Modern Languages and Literatures from the University of Calabria in 2023, focusing on English literature and the Spanish-British dispute over Gibraltar from both colonial and postcolonial perspectives. The study specifically examined the representation of Gibraltar in literature. This research stemmed from a year-long investigation on the territory itself. In recent years, she has gained valuable professional experience abroad, which has further enhanced her academic and cultural understanding. Currently, she works in English language teaching, holding positions in both university and school settings.

Email address: ilaria.barbuto6@gmail.com

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

L'ultima *wilderness*: l'Oregon nella poetica di John Reed

Marzia Dati

(Dickens Fellowship – Carrara Branch, IT)

Abstract

In questo saggio s'intende fare luce sull'impatto che l'Oregon ha avuto nella poetica di John Reed. Una terra sospesa tra due *wilderness* - il Pacifico e il deserto - l'Oregon diede i natali al giornalista, autore del famoso reportage sulla Rivoluzione Russa *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919). Escluso dal canone letterario nordamericano per le sue posizioni politiche, Reed è stato rivalutato solo di recente come poeta. Ciò che emerge dall'analisi delle liriche di Reed è l'immagine dell'Oregon come terra incontaminata, un 'paradiso perduto' esempio di perfetta armonia tra uomo e ambiente.

Keywords: frontiera; Oregon; wilderness; Pacifico; deserto.

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Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

> Portland was less than thirty years old, a little town carved out of the Oregon forests, with streets deep in mud and the *wilderness* coming down close around it (Reed 1936, 185).

John Reed (Portland 1887 - Mosca 1920) è conosciuto in tutto il mondo per il famoso reportage sulla Rivoluzione Russa *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919). Considerato uno tra i più grandi giornalisti del Novecento, John Reed fu anche un poeta. Tuttavia, a partire dalla Red Scare (1917) e successivamente negli anni del Maccartismo (1953-1957), le sue liriche furono dimenticate a causa della sua militanza politica. Il *corpus poetico*, riscostruito e indagato solo di recente (Dati, 2024), comprende centotrentasei liriche (Dati 2024, 210-219) di cui quattordici hanno come protagonista incontrastato la sua terra natale. Le 'poesie dell'Oregon' includono anche il lungo poema autobiografico *America, 1918,* pubblicato postumo nel 1935.

Lo stato dell'Oregon, entrato a far parte dell'Unione il primo febbraio 1859, fu uno degli ultimi avamposti della frontiera americana: un luogo selvaggio, solcato da grandi fiumi e lambito dalle onde dell'Oceano Pacifico, che contribuì a forgiare e alimentare l'idea della nuova *wilderness*, il *plus ultra* nell'accezione di Henry David Thoreau (Thoreau 1865, 165):

> A little south of east was Palos, where Columbus weighed anchor, and farther yet the pillars which Hercules set up; concerning which when we inquired at the top of our voices what was written on them, – for we had the morning sun in our faces, and could not see distinctly, – the inhabitants shouted *Ne plus ultra* (no more beyond), but the wind bore to us the truth only, *plus ultra* (more beyond), and over the Bay westward was echoed *ultra* (beyond). We spoke to them through the surf about the Far West, the true Hesperia, ἕω πέρας or end of the day, this Side Sundown, where the sun was extinguished in the *Pacific*, and we advised them to pull up stakes and plant those pillars of theirs on the shore of California, whither all our folks were gone the only *ne* plus ultra now (Thoreau 1865, 165).

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In *Avventura nella wilderness* (2010) Sergio Perosa ripercorre il cammino della letteratura nordamericana e traccia l'evoluzione del rapporto che l'eroe instaura con il mare, il deserto e la foresta, facendo luce sulla progressiva trasformazione della *wilderness* da ostacolo ed entità da domare a una vera e propria rivelazione spirituale. Fin dall'inizio della colonizzazione europea, l'immenso continente nordamericano fu percepito come un luogo di grande bellezza e allo stesso tempo uno spazio di terribile distruzione. In *A Terrible Beauty. The Wilderness of American Literature* (2014) Jonah Raskin illustra come già i primi esploratori inglesi Henry Hudson (1570-1611) e Robert Juet (?- 1611) avessero avvertito tale ambivalenza (Raskin 2014, 30-31). La percezione duplice del continente nordamericano sia come "luogo del pauroso e del meraviglioso" viene evidenziata anche da Perosa:

> Il deserto come primo ostacolo, prova o punizione, la foresta misteriosa e sconfinata da attraversare, ma anche il mare periglioso e senza sponde delle saghe nordiche e delle navigazioni o *immrama* celtiche (San Brendano, per tutti, o quei monaci che cercano il deserto nel «pelago intransmeabili» di cui scrive Colomba nel VI secolo), e poi dei romanzi medievali e rinascimentali, dove egualmente è *res nullius*, abitata da mostri e non da uomini, da demoni, fate e maghi. È insieme luogo del pauroso e del meraviglioso, della metamorfosi agognata o subita. Si uccide il mostro per soggiogare la *wilderness*, ma anche sfogare i propri impulsi distruttivi, liberarsi delle proprie angosce, tornare alla Grande Madre, subire o sperimentare la metamorfosi, porsi al di fuori della legge e della società, sopra o sotto il livello umano, stravolgere principi di identità e di non-contraddizione; per smarrirsi e magari incontrare l'*homme sauvage* (di per sé contraddittorio); per scoprire o sfidare soprattutto se stessi nel selvaggio o identificarsi con lui. (Perosa, 228)

Il concetto di frontiera americana è strettamente legato alla *wilderness*. Dal 1607 quando gli inglesi fondarono Jamestown (Virginia) la frontiera venne a rappresentare qualsiasi parte di territorio nel continente nordamericano situato oltre gli insediamenti lungo la costa orientale: una terra sconosciuta che venne presto identificata con la *wilderness*. Non è un caso che a partire dal 1785 la strada che portava nel Kentucky passando dalla Virginia e dal Tennessee fosse chiamata *Wilderness* Road.

Agli inizi del Novecento durante la Presidenza Jefferson (1801-1809), in seguito all'acquisizione della Louisiana (1803), l'espansionismo verso l'Ovest diede vita alle teorie

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del 'Manifest Destiny' (Borgognone 2013) e del 'Frontier Myth': se la prima si configurava come un credo che coniugava l'espansione verso il Pacifico con il nazionalismo romantico e l'eccezionalità del popolo americano, la seconda afferiva all'ipotesi dello storico Frederick Jackson Turner[1] che rintracciava le specificità del popolo americano proprio nel selvaggio Ovest. Per quanto concerne la prima teoria, vale la pena menzionare il dipinto *American Progress*[2] di John Gast (1842-1896) in cui il pittore prussiano, naturalizzato americano, rappresenta il 'Manifest Destiny' in forma allegorica: una donna angelica, sospesa nell'etere, probabile personificazione dell'America, stende i cavi del telegrafo assurgendo così a simbolo di portatrice della luce della civiltà. Il volto della donna è rivolto emblematicamente verso il buio, la *wilderness*, in cui il pittore colloca i Nativi e gli animali selvaggi.

Fu nell'arco di tempo intercorso tra la California Gold Rush (1848-1855) e l'Oregon Trail (1841-1869) che si assistette alla più grande ondata migratoria nella storia della colonizzazione. La conquista dell'ultima frontiera americana ebbe come conseguenza la nascita di una società fluida fatta di uomini violenti e spietati che attraverso l'imposizione forzata della propria cultura distrussero l'ambiente che incontrarono man mano che si spingevano verso il Pacifico. Le battaglie per la salvaguardia e la conservazione della *wilderness*, in particolare delle foreste dell'Ovest, furono al centro della vita del biologo, botanico e geologo scozzese, naturalizzato americano, John Muir (1838-1914)[3], il quale insieme a Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946)[4], fu uno dei maggiori esponenti del Movimento Conservazionista.[5]

[1] Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) in *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893]) espose la *Frontier Thesis*. Secondo l'autore, la frontiera rappresentava "the meeting point between savagery and civilization,", (Turner 1893 3), e l'identità americana era il risultato della fusione tra la civiltà europea e la *wilderness* che i primi coloni incontrarono all'arrivo nel Nuovo Mondo.
[2] John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872, olio su tela, 29,2 x 40 cm, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles.
[3] I suoi scritti (in particolare le lettere) descrivono la natura selvaggia delle montagne della Sierra Nevada. Un attivista *ante-litteram*, Miur promosse la protezione della Valle dello Yosemite, fondò il Sierra Club che ancora oggi è considerato una tra le più rilevanti organizzazioni nordamericane per la conservazione della natura.
[4] Gifford Pinchot fu un ricco mercante, nonché politico che servì nella Forestale Nordamericana dal 1898 al 1910.
[5] Il Movimento nacque negli Stati Uniti alla fine dell'Ottocento con la fondazione del Yosemite Park ed ebbe tra i suoi maggiori sostenitori anche il Presidente Theodore Roosevelt.

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Il concetto di *wilderness* mutò radicalmente nel Novecento. Nel 1964, sotto la presidenza di Lyndon Johnson (1963-1969), fu approvata la *Wilderness Act* [6] in cui Howard Zahniser, attivista e fondatore della Wilderness Society[7], nonché redattore del testo di legge, così definisce *la wilderness* "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." (891).

Come già accennato all'inizio, lo Stato dell'Oregon fu riconosciuto come trentatreesimo stato dell'Unione nel 1859. Il nome dato allo Stato è strettamente legato ai Nativi come sostiene John E. Rees in *Oregon – Its Meaning, Origin and Application* (1916). I Nativi stanziati sulle coste del Pacifico nord-occidentale non avevano termini fissi per designare le cose, spesso utilizzavano parole descrittive; otto su dieci dei nomi geografici venivano coniati al momento a seconda degli attributi che li colpivano nell'istante in cui osservavano i fiumi, le catene montuose e il mare. Secondo Rees, il nome 'Oregon' deriverebbe da un sintagma utilizzato dalla tribù Shoshoni[8] che significa 'il fiume dell'Ovest'. Attraverso un'accurata analisi filologica Rees illustra che nella lingua dei Nativi *ogwa* significava 'fiume' e *Pe-on* 'ovest', pertanto *Ogwa Pe-on* indicava il fiume dell'ovest. Il suffisso *gwa* subì successivamente una mutazione consonantica trasformandosi in *r*, da cui

[6] *The Wilderness Act*, Pubblic Law, 88-577, 3 September 1964,

[7] La Wilderness Society fu fondata nel 1935 con lo scopo di tutelare centonove milioni di acri di *wilderness* in quarantaquattro Stati del continente nord-americano. Tra le finalità della Society ricordiamo la preservazione dell'ambiente naturale e il riconoscimento dei Nativi americani come i più antichi depositari e guardiani della *wilderness*: "The Wilderness Society recognizes Native American and Indigenous people as the longest serving stewards of the land. We respect their inherent sovereignty and self-determination and honour treaty rights, including reserved rights that exist off their reservation […] We seek the guidance of native American and Indigenous peoples to effectively advocate for the protection of culturally significant lands and the preservation of language and culture." Cfr: URL: https://www.wilderness.org/ . Data ultima consultazione 8 agosto 2025.

[8] Gli Shoshoni meglio conosciuti come il popolo del Serpente erano stanziati nell'attuale Idaho ma si spostavano spesso verso il Columbia River. La loro lingua era compresa in un'area che si estendeva dalle Montagne Rocciose fino alla California.

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or(p)on; pertanto quando l'esploratore e scrittore inglese Jonathan Carver[9] giunto nei villaggi dei Sioux udì la parola *oreon* per designare l'attuale Oregon, la utilizzò per la prima volta in *Travels Through America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768* (1778). Rees, andando più a fondo sull'etimologia della parola, spiega che la radice *og* presente nella parola *ogwa* significa ondulazione, quindi 'acqua ondulata', ed è presente anche in altre parole che designano il fiume, il serpente e il salmone. Aggiunge inoltre che la parola *Pe-on* è data dalla contrazione delle due sillabe *Pe- Ah*, dove *Pe* significa 'grande' e *Pah* 'acqua', da cui risulta il sintagma 'grande acqua', ovvero l'Oceano Pacifico. Interessante la preposizione *nah*, 'verso', da cui si ottiene *Pe on -nah*, frase utilizzata dai Nativi per indicare 'verso la grande acqua', cioè l'Oceano. Se Carver codificò per primo la parola 'Oregon', altri prima di lui si riferirono a quella terra con il nome datogli dai Nativi: 'il fiume dell'Ovest'. I primi navigatori spagnoli che nella prima metà del Cinquecento esplorarono la costa nordoccidentale immaginavano, infatti, di trovare un grande fiume: l'idea di un grande fiume che attraversasse le Montagne Rocciose e si gettasse nell'Oceano Pacifico indusse alcuni cartografi a indicarlo sulle carte geografiche con una linea tratteggiata e con il nome di 'Fiume dell'Ovest'. Molti esploratori andarono alla sua ricerca, ma fu solo nel 1792 che il Capitano Robert Gray, risalendo per la prima volta il misterioso fiume, lo battezzò con il nome della sua imbarcazione, Columbia.

Parlando di Oregon non si può non menzionare John Jacob Astor (1763-1848) famoso per aver fondato la Pacific Fur Company (1808) e Fort Astoria (1811), una stazione di posta sulla foce del fiume Columbia, il primo stanziamento permanente dei pionieri sulla costa nordoccidentale. Pochi anni dopo la fondazione, Astoria fu occupata dagli inglesi che scatenò una vera e propria guerra con gli Stati Uniti che terminò soltanto nel 1814 con il

[9] Jonathan Carver (1710-1780) fu un noto esploratore che si spinse verso Ovest e raccontò quello che vide al suo passaggio in *Travels through America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768* (1778). Il volume fu un grande successo: pubblicato per la prima volta nel 1778, riuscì l'anno successivo a Dublino e ne seguirono numerose altre pubblicazioni e traduzioni in varie lingue. La pubblicazione del libro ebbe un ruolo importantissimo nella storia delle esplorazioni dell'Ovest americano in quanto Carver fu il primo esploratore europeo a spingersi oltre il Mississippi. Fu il primo a nominare un'importante catena montuosa, presumibilmente le Montagne Rocciose, che bloccava il passaggio a nordovest. Penetrò nelle profondità dell'Ovest ancor prima dello scoppio della Rivoluzione, stimolando la curiosità di molti altri che, desiderosi di scoprire le rotte del Pacifico, vennero dopo di lui, tra questi gli esploratori Aleksander Mackenzie and Lewis and Clark.

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Trattato di Ghent. [10] Astoria, oggi capoluogo della contea di Clatsop, è citata da Reed nel poema *America, 1918*: "Fisherman putting out from Astoria in the foggy dawn/their double-bowed boats" (Reed 1935, 109).

Qualche anno dopo la fondazione di Astor, precisamente nel 1814, i due esploratori Meriwether Lewis e William Clark, a capo della famosa spedizione chiamata 'Lewis and Clark Expedition' (1804-1806), furono i primi a raggiungere la costa del Pacifico via terra. Nel Lewis and Clark Journal[11] i due esploratori descrissero un paesaggio luminoso che includeva la Great Columbia Valley. In letteratura, il primo a usare la parola 'Oregon' fu William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878) nel poema *Thanatopsis* (1812) in cui l'Oregon è descritto nelle sue componenti essenziali: il deserto e la foresta la quale viene descritta come luogo di silenzio quasi primordiali in cui è facile perdersi : "Take the wings/ of morning- and the Borean desert pierce-/, or lose thyself in the continuous woods/ that veil Oregan, where he hears no sound/ save his own dashings, - yet- the dead are there/ And millions in those solitudes, since first/ the flight of years began, have laid them down/ in their last sleep, - the dead reign there alone!" (Bryant 1812, 338).

John Reed era nato a Portland nel 1887. Nonostante gli anni di studio a Harvard (1906-1910), gli anni trascorsi a New York, i suoi lunghi e perigliosi viaggi come inviato speciale in Messico, sul confine orientale della Prima Guerra Mondiale e infine in Russia, l'Oregon è una presenza costante nella sua breve parabola esistenziale. Il deserto con le sue specie animali, i Nativi, le foreste, i grandi corsi d'acqua riaffiorano costantemente nella memoria sino a diventare una specie di *comfort zone* in cui rifugiarsi e proteggersi dal *turmoil* del suo Tempo. Tra le 'poesie dell'Oregon' ne sono state selezionate alcune ritenute più significative ai fini del presente saggio. All'inizio dell'autobiografia *Almost Thirty* Reed utilizza il sintagma 'wild frontier' e la parola 'wilderness' per descrivere Portland e l'Oregon

[10] Il Trattato di Ghent, firmato il 24 dicembre 1814 a Ghent nel Principato dei Paesi Bassi Uniti, pose fine alla guerra del 1812 fra gli Stati Uniti e il Regno Unito.
[11] URL: https://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/archive/idx_jou.html. Data di ultima consultazione 8 agosto 2025.

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in generale: "My grandfather had come around the Horn in a sailing ship when the West Coast was the *wild frontier* [corsivo mio] made his pile and lived with Russian Lavishness. Portland was less than thirty years old, a little town carved out of the Oregon forests, with streets deep in mud and the *wilderness* [corsivo mio] coming down close around it" (Reed, 185). L'Oregon è un territorio compreso tra l'Oceano Pacifico, il deserto e il confine settentrionale è marcato dal fiume Columbia; questo grande corso d'acqua e il suo affluente Willamette sono i protagonisti delle liriche *The Columbia River* (1902) e *Willamette* (1910) di Reed.

The *Columbia River* (1902) rappresenta un testo esordiale, scritto all'età di quindici anni in cui sono presenti i tre tòpoi dell'Oregon che costituiscono il tesauro primigenio dell'autore: il fiume, le montagne (il vulcano St. Helen[12]) e i Nativi americani:

> Thus it was the tribe of Clatsops
> In the dawn of living beings,
> Was swept almost from existence
> But across that deep, dark valley.
> Flows a river, broad and lovely.
> To the east the Smoking Mountain
> Robed in Liao's snowy blanket
> Rises smokeless now to heaven,
> Covered with eternal whiteness. [13]

Nel primo verso il poeta ci riporta indietro nel tempo a quando le terre del *Pacific Northwest* non erano ancora state antropizzate dai pionieri; il verbo 'swept', usato nella forma passiva, sembra voler sottolineare come i *Clatsop*[14], abitanti di quelle terre dall'inizio dei tempi, "in the dawn of the living beings" (v. 2), subirono passivamente l'invasione dei pionieri e furono letteralmente spazzati via; la congiunzione "but" (v.4) segna il passaggio al presente:

[12] Il Vulcano St. Helen (Stato di Washington) è a 80 km da Portland ma è ben visibile dalla città. Montagna sacra per i Nativi tra i protagonisti principali del loro folclore e delle leggende dell'Oregon.
[13] The Columbia River fu pubblicata sulla rivista *Troubadour* quando Reed frequentava la Portland Academy. Cfr: URL: https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/reed_john_jack_1887_1920_/. Data di ultima consultazione 8 agosto 2025.
[14]Tribù di Nativi che erano stanziati tra la foce del fiume Columbia e del promontorio di Tillamook; di lingua Chinnok, la loro principale attività era la pesca del salmone.

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la valle e il fiume sono descritti mediante le due coppie aggettivali "deep, dark" (v. 4) e "broad and lovely" (v. 5). La "Smoking Mountain"[15] (v. 6) avvolta in una coperta di neve, s'innalza verso il cielo personificato e che, ieratico e imperturbabile, è anch'esso vestito da una coltre di eterno biancore. Pur nella sua struttura semplice, il testo anticipa la visione della natura impassibile nei confronti dell'uomo: il fiume continua a scorrere nella valle un tempo abitata dagli indigeni e il vulcano addormentato scruta indifferente dall'alto il mondo noncurante della sofferenza dell'uomo.

La lirica *Willamette,* scritta in *free verse*, fu composta mentre Reed portava a termine gli studi all'Università di Harvard (dove si laureò in letteratura inglese insieme a Thomas Stearns Eliot).

O pleasant stream
Born where the uplands dream
Beneath the summer sky,
Brought forth to give a people life, and die
Forever vanquished in the cosmic strife,
Where the clear current girds the shining fields
There is my heart
When in the golden afternoon
The silver trout upstart,
and where the spreading orchard yields
A solemn shade
To elfin folk beneath the harvest moon
For elfin dance arrayed.
Long, along ago
Still did the eerie morn
Pale the dark stream and edge the pines with fires,
ere yet was born
The star-white city of my birth
And my desire
The garden spot of earth.
And through the night
Still came the sound of singing, as you passed
Proudly and strong, to join yourself at last
To the Columbia, against the sea,
Great leader of a hopeless cause eternally. (Reed, 30)

[15] Reed usa il nome con cui gli indigeni designavano il Vulcano

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Il testo è caratterizzato da un susseguirsi di immagini dell'Oregon una sorta di dipinto in versi in cui Reed dipinge un'Arcadia atemporale, un paradiso terrestre in cui uomini e natura sono in perfetta armonia. Reed sottolinea lo smarrimento dell'io poetico davanti alla grandezza della Natura e la sua impotenza nella "cosmic strife" (v. 5) che identifica nel mare, di fronte al quale l'uomo si arrende e soccombe, sintetizzato nella metafora del verso finale: "Great leader of a hopeless cause eternally." (v. 25). L'uso degli aggettivi 'lovely' e 'pleasant' rivela l'atteggiamento benevolo del poeta verso il fiume che è legato ai ricordi della sua infanzia. Il *locus amoenus* descrittoci da Reed come "summer sky" (v. 3), "shining fields" (v.6), "the golden afternoon" (v. 8), "the silver trout" (v. 9) e "the spreading orchard" (v.10), ci riporta a epoche lontane e soprattutto a una natura ancora incontaminata.

Anche il deserto e il coyote occupano un ruolo centrale nella poetica di Reed come emerge nelle liriche *The Desert* (1908) e *Coyote Song* (1908). L'Oregon orientale è occupato dall'Oregon High Desert: si tratta di un deserto non sabbioso ma stepposo, ricoperto dal *bush*, habitat naturale di coyote, cervi e pantere che, prima dell'arrivo dei pionieri, era luogo di transito e di accampamenti nomadi dei Chinook. In *The Desert* Reed sceglie la forma del sonetto (ABBA, CDDC, EFFE, FE),

> This solemn waste is hushed for evermore,
> and nothing lives, but on the shifting sand
> Lost souls trace with imponderable hand
> The Hieroglyphics of their mystic lore.
>
> Like ruins of some old, Titanic war
> The shattered desert lies; nor wakes the land
> Save to the thunder's furious saraband,
> When armored lightening smites the rocky floor.
> All night the caravans of stars go by
> In silence. Still the sombre wasteland keeps
> Its lonely watch while all high heaven sleeps,
> and the lone moon is drowsy in the sky…
> How delicate the trembling thrill that leaps
> From heart to heart as the pale star-fires die! (Reed, 14)

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Nella lirica il deserto viene ad assumere una dimensione quasi mistica enfatizzata "this solemn waste" (v. 1), le cui sabbie spostate dal vento portano in superficie geroglifici che custodiscono misteriose leggende note solo ai Nativi "the Hieroglyphics of their mystic lore" (v. 4). Sopra questa terra si estende il cielo, dove le stelle assomigliano a carovane, metafora che potrebbe rimandare alle carovane dei pionieri che attraversarono il deserto: "all the night the caravans of stars go by in silence" (v. 9). L'uso di "waste" (v. 1) e "wasteland" (v. 10) potrebbe afferire al deserto come parte della *wilderness*.

Di particolare interesse è la lirica *Coyote Song* che fu messa in musica dalla compositrice Marion Bauer[16]. Il coyote occupa un ruolo di rilievo nella letteratura dell'Oregon e in quella dei Nativi americani: la specie *canis latrans* è infatti molto estesa nell'area nordoccidentale degli Stati Uniti e nella cultura di quel territorio. Nella letteratura tradizionale il coyote appare solitamente come personaggio secondario. L'eroe è descritto spesso anche come un truffatore, un personaggio che viola i precetti morali e che riesce a trovare una via di fuga dalle restrizioni sociali e alla fine viene immancabilmente punito per il suo comportamento non sempre esemplare. In molti racconti il coyote espleta sia la funzione del *transformer* che del *trickster*[17], è una figura mitologica costantemente presente nel ciclo dei racconti dei Wasco Chinookan (nome di Nativi insediati nell'Oregon settentrionale) dove il coyote spostandosi lungo il Columbia, inganna i personaggi che incontra lungo il suo cammino; viene spesso associato al salmone, che il coyote stesso libera dalle reti dei pescatori. Come spiega Jarold Ramsay in *Coyote Was Going There: Indian Literature of the Oregon Country*, nella

[16] Marion Eugénie Bauer (1882 – 1955), originaria dello Stato di Washington, con la famiglia a Portland nel 1890. Compositrice, insegnante, scrittrice e critico musicale, Bauer ebbe un ruolo attivo nel plasmare l'identità musicale americana nella prima metà del Ventesimo secolo. Compose musica per pianoforte, musica da camera e per orchestra. Lo spartito di *Coyote Song* fu pubblicato a Boston in un libretto con altri testi musicali della Bauer. All'inizio dello spartito, la musicista dedica la canzone a Clarence Whitehill (1871-1932), noto baritono molto famoso a New York.

[17] Secondo il *Webster's Encyclopaedic Unabridged Dictionary*, il lemma trickster è: "a supernatural figure appearing in various guises and typically engaging in mischievous activities, important in the folklore and mythology of many primitive peoples and usually considered as a culture hero".

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letteratura dell'Ovest americano il coyote si presenta sempre nella sua doppia veste di *trickster/transformer* (Ramsay 1977).

Coyote Song si snoda attraverso cinque sestine con il seguente schema metrico AABAAB – CCDEEF:

A-oo, my brothers, the moon is red,
And the antelope starts from his prairie bed --
Then join ye again in the ancient threne
For the day that's dead,
And the hunt that's fled
And the terror of things unseen!

Afar, afar on the starlit plain
Our fathers howled where the deer had lain,
And hung on the flanks of the bison run --
For the bull that fell
In the wild pell-mell
Had died ere the night was done!

No more the warrior rides his raids,
And the hunting-star of the prairie fades;
While a fiery comet tears the night,
With a crimson streak
And a demon shriek,
All ablaze with the white man's light!

But oft when the winter winds are high,
We hear on the prairie the bellowed cry
And the rumbling hoofs of the bison run --
But we seek in vain
Through the empty plain,
For the buffalo days are done. . .

A-oo, my brothers, the stars are red,
And the lean coyote must mourn unfed.
Come join ye again in the ancient croon --
For the dawn is gray
And another day
Has faded the red, red moon... (Reed, 16)

Nel caso della lirica, si tratta di un lamento funebre in cui al coyote è affidato il compito di piangere la morte dei fratelli bufali uccisi per mano dell'uomo bianco. Non è casuale, infatti,

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che Reed usi il termine "threne" (v. 3), variante di 'threnody' dal greco 'lamento funebre'. Il posizionamento del sintagma "ancient threne" in apertura conferisce al testo un tono sacrale che si mantiene costante lungo tutta la narrazione; nell'ultima strofa il lemma "croon", nel significato di canto dolce, sommesso e carico di emozione e sentimento, sembra lenire il dolore. Si tratta di uno straordinario canto corale cui partecipano tutti gli animali dell'Oregon, "the antelope" (v. 2), "the deer" (v. 8), "the bison" (v. 9) e "the bull" (v. 10) che abitano "the prairie" (v. 2, v. 14, v. 20), "plain" (v. 7, v. 23); di particolare interesse la metafora "wild pell-mell"(v. 11), con cui il poeta sembra voler sottolineare il caos informe della *wilderness* contro la quale si è scagliata la violenza dei pionieri. La natura partecipa al dolore come è esemplificato da "the moon is red", posta in modo speculare all'inizio della lirica e alla fine (v. 1, v. 30), pure "the stars are red" (v. 25): qui il rosso sta ad indicare il sangue versato. Interessante la presenza delle stelle "the starlit plain" (v. 7), "the hunting star" (v. 14) e "the fiery comet" (v. 15) che squarcia il cielo con la sua scia cremisi. Nelle leggende e nel folclore dei Nativi americani il coyote è spesso associato alle stelle; si narra infatti che, il coyote, osservando il Creatore nell'atto di sistemare le stelle nella volta celeste, si offrì di aiutarlo, ma le mise in tale disordine che guardando il cielo la notte cominciò a ululare in segno di disperazione per il caos che aveva creato. Reed sembra quindi aver attinto alle leggende e alla cultura dei Nativi utilizzando i due *tòpoi* classici delle stelle e del coyote. Il latrato del coyote si contrappone allo *shriek* dell'uomo bianco che, paragonato a un demone, con l'intento di portare la luce nella *wilderness* ha seminato solo violenza e terrore: "While a fiery comet tears the night, /With a crimson streak/ And a demon shriek" (vv. 15-17). La lirica presenta un alto tasso di metaforicità e una struttura fonica molto articolata, caratterizzata dall'uso di allitterazioni ("rides his raids" (v. 13), "when the winter winds" v. 19) "must morn" (v. 26), "bull, fell, pell-mell" (vv. 10-11), "hung", "flung", "bison run" (v. 9, v. 21), uso anaforico di 'and', ripetizioni e l'abbinamento delle tre vocali "a-oo" (v. 1, v. 25) per riprodurre il latrato del coyote collocato anch'esso in modo speculare nel verso iniziale e finale della lirica. L'utilizzo di tali accorgimenti fonici conferisce al testo il

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ritmo di una canzone ricollegandosi pertanto a tutta la tradizione poetica dei Nativi Americani, contrassegnata dall'oralità e dal fatto che le loro leggende fossero accompagnate da musica e danze. Il coyote di Reed non è né il *transformer* né il *trickster*, il poeta affida al coyote il compito di intonare un inno funebre per i fratelli uccisi. Il coyote si muove in uno spazio geografico atemporale, in un non-luogo in cui è assente qualsiasi coordinata socio-culturale di riferimento; tale mancanza determina una sorta di spaesamento, un "terror of things unseen" (v. 6) uno smarrimento che genera paura e sgomento che emerge dallo spazio senza centro e senza confini della *wilderness* dove è il demoniaco a prevalere. Reed esprime attraverso la parola poetica la personale 'solidarietà' con animali, fiumi, piante, mare e deserto dell'Oregon intesi come parti di un tutto armonico, si erge in difesa della terra anticipando l'ecologia moderna.

Il legame con l'Oregon emerge in *America, 1918* in cui sono presenti gli elementi costitutivi della sua terra: il fiume, il Pacifico, le spiagge, le montagne, il deserto, i coyote, i coguari, il vento Chinook [18], orti e giardini in fiore e aranceti:

[…]
By my free boyhood in the wide West,
The powerful sweet river, fish-wheels, log-rafts,
Ships from behind the sunset, Lascar-manned,
Chinatown, throbbing with mysterious gongs,
The blue thunderous Pacific, blaring sunsets,
Black smoking forests on surf-beaten headlands,
Lost beaches, camp-fires, wail of hunting cougars . . .
By the rolling range, and the flat sun-smitten desert,
Night with coyotes yapping, domed with burst of stars,
The grey herd moving eastward, towering dust,
Ropes whistling in slow coils, hats flapping, yells . . .
By miles of yellow wheat rippling in the Chinook,
Orchards forever endless, deep in blooming,
Green-golden orange-groves and snow-peaks looming over.
By raw audacious cities, sprung from nothing,
Brawling and bragging in their careless youth . . .

[18] Il Chinook, il cui nome deriva dai popoli nativi dell'Oregon, è un vento caldo e asciutto simile al Fohn che si origina dalle Montagne Rocciose e spira verso le grandi vallate e città dell'Ovest.

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I know thee, America!
Fisherman putting out from Astoria in the foggy dawn
their double-bowed boats,
Lean cow-punchers jogging south from Burns with faces
burned leathery and silent,
Stringy old prospectors trudging behind reluctant pack-
horses across the Nevada alkali,
Hunters coming out of the brush at night-fall on the
brink of the Lewis and Clark canyon,
Grunting as they slide off their fifty-pound packs and
look around for a place to make camp,
Forest-rangers standing on a bald peak and sweeping
the wilderness for smoke,
Big-gloved brakeman walking the top of a swaying freight,
spanner in hand, biting off a hunk of plug,
Lumberman with spiked boots and timber-hook, riding
the broken jam in white water,
Indians on the street-corner in Pocatello, pulling out
chin-whiskers with a pair of tweezers and a pocket- mirror
Or down on the Siuslaw, squatting behind their summer
lodges listening to Caruso on a two-hundred dollar
phonograph,
Loud-roaring Alaska miners, smashing looking-glasses,
throwing the waiter a five-dollar gold-piece for a
shot of whiskey and telling him to keep the change,
Keepers of dance-halls in construction camps, bar-keeps,
prostitutes,
Bums riding the rods, wobblies singing their defiant,
songs, unafraid of death,
Card-sharps and real-estate agents, timber-kings,
wheat-kings, cattle-kings . . .
I know ye, Americans! (Reed, 109)

Dopo aver descritto *l'habitat naturale* e gli animali che lo abitano, Reed elenca le persone che popolano l'Oregon sulla base delle loro professioni: "fisherman" (v. 18), "cow-punchers" (v. 10), "old prospectors" (v. 22), "hunters" (v. 24), "forest rangers" (v. 28), "big gloved brakemen" (v. 30), "lumberman" (v.32), "Indians" (v. 34) "miners" (v. 39), "keepers of radance-halls in construction camps" (v. 42), "bar-keeps" (v. 42), "prostitutes" (v. 43), "real estate agents" (v. 46), "timber- kings" (v. 46), "wheat kings" (v. 47), e infine i "cattle kings" (v. 47). Criticata dai suoi contemporanei per essere troppo whitmaniana, *America, 1918* è una vera dichiarazione d'amore verso la sua terra che metonimicamente rappresenta l'America

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stessa. Se il verso lungo non rimato, gli elenchi di parole antiche e moderne possono ricordare Whitman, *America, 1918* rappresenta una mappatura autentica e veritiera della compagine socio-culturale ed economica dell'Oregon di cui Reed descrive anche il processo di urbanizzazione ormai in atto: "raw and audacious cities, sprung from nothing" (v. 15). Le liriche di Reed dimostrano chiaramente come in ogni creazione letteraria vi possa essere un'esplicita o implicita caratterizzazione etica del rapporto tra umanità, società e natura. Ciò che traspare nei suoi testi è una concezione edenica della natura in cui i vari elementi, incluso l'uomo, sono in armonia e come tutti gli esseri umani dovrebbero adottare un comportamento rispettosamente ecologico per rispettare quell'armonia primordiale. Pertanto, Reed sembra porre all'attenzione dei lettori alcuni temi che peraltro sono al centro del dibattito ambientale contemporaneo, quale per esempio la deforestazione. In *Almost Thirty* vi è il riferimento alla deforestazione a Portland per creare nuove aree edificabili (Reed, 185); in *America,1918* l'immagine delle guardie forestali che spazzano letteralmente la wilderness dal fumo è ancora più significativa: "Forest-rangers standing on a bald peak and sweeping the wilderness for smoke." (Reed, 109).

La contrapposizione tra una natura incontaminata e l'intrusione dell'uomo nel complesso equilibrio dell'ecosistema, la giustapposizione tra mondo naturale e la città che a poco a poco guadagna terreno cambiando la morfologia del territorio sono presenze costanti nelle 'poesie dell'Oregon' di Reed. In conclusione, per Reed l'Oregon sembra costituire un elemento pervasivo e permeante di buona parte della sua produzione poetica: è uno spazio poroso, un'entità fluida in cui oceano, deserto e foresta sono parte integrante dell'esperienza nazionale che ha lasciato tracce indelebili tanto nel suo immaginario individuale quanto in quello collettivo. La preoccupazione per la distruzione dell'ambiente naturale dell'Oregon potrebbe essere imputabile verosimilmente a una sensibilità 'ecologica' di Reed: l'idea di un ecosistema in cui tutto è armonia e la preoccupazione per la salvaguardia dell'ambiente ci inducono ad azzardare l'ipotesi di un Reed proto-ecologista. Inoltre, anche se non sempre in modo esplicito, emerge una critica all'antropocentrismo sul

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quale è stata costruita la società occidentale e con il quale si stava costruendo l'Ovest americano, secondo quella visione gerarchica e dualista che ha avallato il primato dell'uomo sul mondo, evidenziando il distacco piuttosto che lo stretto rapporto con gli altri esseri viventi (piante e animali).

In ultima istanza, alla luce di quanto è emerso in questo breve saggio, John Reed sembra essere riuscito a dare voce a una terra di confine, idealizzata e mitizzata, di cui restituisce attraverso la parola poetica la sua primigenia integrità.

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Nota bio-bibliografica

Marzia Dati è *un independent scholar*. Ha conseguito il Dottorato di Ricerca in letteratura nordamericana presso l'Università di Pisa. È Presidente della filiale italiana della Dickens Fellowship e insegna Lingua e Letteratura inglese presso il Liceo Scientifico Statale G. Marconi a Carrara (MS).

Indirizzo e-mail: marziadati@gmail.com

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Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Ecologia politica femminista e autoetnografia: decolonizzazione del patriarcato e attivismo ambientalista nell'accademia

Patrizia La Trecchia, Ph.D.

(University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida, USA)

Abstract

Questo saggio propone un'autoetnografia femminista che intreccia ecologia politica, studi di genere e riflessione sul trauma per decostruire le logiche patriarcali e coloniali che permeano le relazioni tra corpi, territori e conoscenza. Partendo dal principio che il personale è politico, l'autrice colloca la propria esperienza di violenza e migrazione all'interno di una prospettiva ecofemminista, mostrando come le ferite individuali si connettano alle strutture di potere che governano le crisi ambientali e sociali. Il testo esplora la performatività delle emozioni come forma di sapere e come strumento di resistenza, proponendo una pedagogia del trauma e una prassi epistemica decoloniale. Attraverso la narrazione situata, il saggio evidenzia le intersezioni tra giustizia sociale, di genere e ambientale, denunciando le pratiche estrattive materiali e simboliche che colpiscono le donne e la natura. L'obiettivo è immaginare un'ecologia politica femminista capace di includere le dimensioni affettive e corporee della conoscenza e di trasformare il dolore in possibilità di cambiamento.

Keywords: autoetnografia femminista; ecologia politica; patriarcato; trauma; giustizia ambientale; epistemologia situata.

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Non c'è agonia più grande che portare dentro di sé una storia mai raccontata.

Maya Angelou

1. Introduzione e posizionamento

Applicando l'ecologia politica e gli studi femministi al mio vissuto, intendo evidenziare la dimensione umana e politico-personale dell'attivismo ambientalista in ambito accademico. L'obiettivo è mostrare come tale attivismo si intrecci non solo con i conflitti ecologici, ma anche con le loro radici storiche e sistemiche. Comprendere le diseguaglianze significa interrogare i rapporti tra emozioni, potere e traumi, sia sociali che personali, riconoscendo come la storia delle donne sia profondamente legata alla crisi ambientale. Come hanno mostrato Vandana Shiva e Maria Mies (1993), la logica dello sfruttamento della natura e quella della subordinazione femminile appartengono allo stesso progetto patriarcale-capitalista, fondato sul controllo della riproduzione e delle risorse vitali. Se l'ecologia politica femminista ci invita a riconoscere come i rapporti di potere plasmino corpi e territori, anche le nostre lingue portano i segni delle storie che abbiamo vissuto. Per questo, in questo stesso spirito, la lingua in cui ho scelto di scrivere diventa parte del mio posizionamento politico ed epistemico. Scrivere questo saggio nella mia lingua madre, l'italiano, è stata una decisione difficile perché mi ha costretta a confrontarmi con una parte della mia identità lasciata in sospeso. La vicinanza linguistica rende i temi trattati più viscerali rispetto all'inglese, lingua che amo e che mi ha dato una seconda identità. Tuttavia, tornare all'italiano è per me un gesto di epistemologia situata, nel senso proposto da Donna Haraway (1988): scrivere da dove si è, con il proprio corpo, la propria lingua e la propria storia. Questa scelta è anche un atto politico: una forma di

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radicamento che onora il mio impegno verso il cambiamento ambientale e la creazione di società giuste e pacifiche, oltre che un gesto di giustizia verso me stessa, le donne della mia famiglia e le comunità da cui provengo.

Parto dal presupposto che il trauma psicologico sia una forma concreta di oppressione e che la violenza abbia una riverberazione intergenerazionale. In questo senso, il trauma è una questione politica (Herman 1992), e la sua narrazione diventa un atto di resistenza (Hooks 2000). Scrivere del dolore è un atto d'amore e di trasformazione, capace di restituire *agency* alle persone colpite e interrompere il ciclo della violenza. Condivido la mia esperienza non per raccontarne i dettagli a scopo vendicativo o per discreditare coloro che ne sono parte, ma per dare visibilità alle storie delle donne, alle memorie corporee e psichiche del trauma e ai legami tra queste esperienze e le strutture socioeconomiche patriarcali, specialmente nel contesto di piccole comunità del Sud Italia da cui proviene la mia famiglia materna. Questo saggio si inserisce in un percorso di ricerca sul Meridione che ho sviluppato altrove (La Trecchia 2003, 2004, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2013, 2018, 2026), rivendicandone la complessità e opponendomi alle narrazioni stigmatizzanti. Anche qui, scrivo dalla parte della mia famiglia e delle donne oppresse dal patriarcato, posizionandomi in opposizione alle forze che hanno segnato le nostre vite. Dare voce all'esperienza è uno strumento di sopravvivenza, come ricorda Audre Lorde: «I miei silenzi non mi avevano protetta. Il tuo silenzio non ti proteggerà» (Lorde 1984, 41).[1] La rilevanza di questa forma di autoetnografia risiede nel fatto che l'identità non è mai fissa, ma il prodotto di negoziazioni che avvengono attraverso conflitti e relazioni di potere. La soggettività femminile è determinata non solo da classe ed etnia, ma anche da processi sociali e pratiche ecologiche. Le stesse strutture che

[1]Traduzione mia.

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degradano le donne contribuiscono alla distruzione degli ecosistemi: le logiche estrattive che lacerano la natura sono le stesse che sviliscono le vite femminili. Immaginare un paradigma di non violenza significa ripensare anche il nostro rapporto con la natura come rete di interdipendenze, non come risorsa da sfruttare. L'obiettivo di questo saggio è duplice: riflettere criticamente sul patriarcato e le sue forme di violenza lenta, materiale e simbolica, ed esplorare come l'autoetnografia possa costituire una prassi decoloniale capace di connettere giustizia sociale e ambientale. Dopo aver delineato il quadro teorico, intreccerò la mia esperienza con le strutture che l'hanno resa possibile, per proporre un'ecologia politica femminista che includa le dimensioni affettive e corporee della conoscenza.

2. Trauma e patriarcato

La mia prospettiva nasce dall'ecologia politica femminista: il personale è politico, e dunque la mia esperienza è politica. Parlare apertamente di come l'oppressione generi traumi profondi è già un atto sovversivo. Scrivo come accademica, ma anche come persona sopravvissuta al trauma di violenze fisiche e psicologiche che mi hanno spinta a lasciare l'Italia e a costruire una vita altrove. Questa distanza non ha cancellato le ferite, ma mi ha dato strumenti per comprenderle e trasformarle. Per la maggior parte della mia vita ho vissuto una dolorosa e involontaria alienazione dalla mia famiglia di origine, cercando di rimuovere i traumi subiti. Nonostante la carriera e la posizione di privilegio che occupo oggi, porto dentro di me la consapevolezza dell'oppressione e del disconoscimento, anche se non giuridico. Alcuni luoghi e dinamiche del passato riattivano ancora il trauma, ma so che la sua intensità appartiene al passato e non al presente. Non mi considero vittima delle circostanze: riconosco le mie emozioni e faccio

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del mio meglio per gestire le mie reazioni grazie a conoscenze e strumenti appresi attraverso il mio percorso accademico e sociale. La mia storia merita di essere condivisa perché mostra come la sofferenza possa trasformarsi in possibilità di cambiamento. Come ricordano Thich Nhat Hanh e Robert Frost, l'unica via d'uscita è guardarsi dentro: la sofferenza personale diventa sempre motore di trasformazione sociale.

Sostengo che l'attivismo ambientale e sociale sia profondamente intrecciato con le emozioni e che esperienze traumatiche possano orientare i nostri progetti di ricerca verso giustizia e pluralismo. Quando scrivo di giustizia ambientale o alimentare e di sfruttamento dei lavoratori agricoli migranti, parlo anche del mio trauma, senza appropriarmi dell'esperienza altrui né parlare *per* i subalterni, evitando quella «violenza epistemica» che Spivak (1988) denuncia. Non esiste giustizia ambientale senza giustizia sociale: il trauma e la violenza di genere fanno parte di questa riflessione femminista ed ecologista, attraverso storie di ferite emotive, violenze, malattia mentale e ingiustizie intergenerazionali, spesso silenziate nei contesti rurali e trasmesse di generazione in generazione. Mi colloco nella tradizione femminista della prassi e dell'impegno convinta che la giustizia—sociale, di genere e ambientale—debba partire dalla cura reciproca e dal prendersi cura del pianeta. Il patriarcato, invece, è un assalto alle donne: un sistema silenzioso e pervasivo che privilegia gli uomini a scapito delle donne, minandone la salute fisica e mentale e promuovendone invisibilità e subordinazione. In queste narrative della violenza (Fanon 1968), il legame con il rischio psico-affettivo di malattia mentale per le donne è stato ampiamente dimostrato (Kaur 2023; Nguyen 2019). In alcuni contesti, il controllo patriarcale è spesso legato alla dipendenza economica e, per chi si ribella all'egemonia maschile, il rischio è di venire ostracizzate dall'intera comunità che solitamente disonora sempre la donna che rompe il silenzio e le impedisce di ricevere

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aiuto 'nascondendo' la situazione. Frantz Fanon osservava come i soggetti oppressi, privati di strumenti di liberazione, continuino ad accettare l'abuso e finiscano per riprodurre la violenza su altri membri della comunità oppressa in un circolo vizioso che non fa che perpetuare lo status quo (Fanon 1968). In aggiunta, accade anche che le stesse donne in questi contesti interiorizzino modalità patriarcali e non siano di sostegno verso le loro simili, contribuendo inconsapevolmente all'oppressione delle stesse. In simili contesti di soprusi e oppressioni normalizzate, la sopravvivenza delle donne al senso di sconfitta e rassegnazione passa spesso per disturbi psichici e fisici come reazioni maladattive. Non sorprende che, secondo l'Organizzazione Mondiale della Sanità (2024) una donna su tre al mondo abbia subito una qualche forma di violenza fisica, sessuale o psicologica, con ripercussioni devastanti sulla salute fisica e mentale. Dove risiede la guarigione per i soggetti che sono stati vittime in modalità diverse dell'egemonia patriarcale e per i loro discendenti che ne pagano il prezzo e spesso non sanno spezzare le catene della violenza?

Bisogna parlare. Solo così possiamo attivare politiche di sensibilizzazione verso queste problematiche che ancora si annidano in alcune comunità, rendendo inaccettabile l'indifferenza verso le ripercussioni di tali comportamenti. L'indifferenza non riguarda solo chi ha subito direttamente la violenza, ma anche coloro che, decenni dopo, continuano a beneficiare delle espropriazioni terriere compiute nell'accaparramento di proprietà sottratte alle eredi donne. Il consolidarsi di queste pratiche opera su più livelli—giuridico, etico e simbolico—rafforzando il loro perpetuarsi e mantenendo l'opacità di norme violente che delegittimano le vittime. Le risposte, in ogni caso, non si troveranno mai nei documenti legali, sicuramente redatti con l'intento di seppellire queste violenze sistemiche ed eliminare le prove attraverso cui queste ingiustizie avrebbero potuto essere

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risarcite. D'altronde, a questo punto, il risarcimento che sarebbe spettato è impagabile: non si tratta solo dei terreni sottratti attraverso la diseredazione testamentaria dei legittimari, ma soprattutto dell'impossibile restituzione di vite fragili che tali violenze sono riuscite a spezzare. Sono storie di corpi e vite femminili vittime di un estrattivismo insieme materiale e psicologico, storie che restano celate nelle dinamiche quotidiane di certe comunità del Sud Italia che sono parte della mia storia.

Raccontare non è vendetta, ma trasparenza. Le storie che porto dentro di me—vissute sulla mia pelle o ascoltate nelle voci disperate delle vittime di tali violenze mai riconosciute—non possono restare sepolte ed escluse dagli archivi delle storie ufficiali di questi paesi di per sé incantevoli. Annullare la violenza non può e non deve continuare a rimanere un peso esclusivo delle vittime. Il mio intento è di mostrare come la mia traiettoria personale e intellettuale abbia formato la mia prospettiva decoloniale e la necessità di liberare la conoscenza da quella che Fanon definirebbe una "diseducazione" (1967) con l'imposizione sistemica delle logiche del patriarcato, del colonialismo e del neoliberismo. Il dualismo violento che sostiene colonialismo ed eteropatriarcato produce narrazioni tossiche da decolonizzare e reimmaginare. Per questo faccio spazio alla performatività delle emozioni, storicamente delegittimate nella scrittura accademica in relazione alle politiche identitarie ed ecologiche. Il dolore deve, invece, diventare parte dell'ecologia politica e delle sue dimensioni affettive per riconoscere il ruolo delle emozioni nelle lotte per la giustizia ambientale. Le emozioni non sono reazioni isolate ma circuiti di potere che plasmano relazioni e soggettività (Ahmed 2004). Infatti, se consideriamo le emozioni come parte integrante delle relazioni di potere, allora anche i conflitti ambientali sono conflitti emotivi (Sultana 2011). Includere la sofferenza nel pensiero ecologico-politico significa riaffermare che il sentire è una forma di sapere.

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Raccontare le storie del nostro passato attraverso nuovi filtri permette di trasformare il dolore, distanziandoci da esso, per dare al futuro una forma diversa. Quando siamo pronte a farlo è perché abbiamo ripreso in mano le redini della nostra esistenza. Siamo coscienti del potere che abbiamo nelle nostre mani. Agiamo e non siamo più spettatrici inermi delle nostre circostanze.

3. Autoetnografia e accademia

Mi è stato spesso detto di non scrivere in prima persona, di non portare la mia storia nella scrittura accademica. Eppure, io esisto nella mia storia, e dalla mia storia mi sono formata, come persona e come studiosa. Dalla mia storia nascono la mia ricerca, i miei libri, il mio impegno nell'ecologia politica, nell'ecofemminismo e nella giustizia alimentare che hanno una natura collettiva. Io esisto nelle vite che ho toccato e in quelle che hanno toccato la mia. Come spiega Gayatri Spivak (1988), il soggetto marginale non parla perché privo di voce, ma perché le strutture epistemiche dominanti non sono disposte ad ascoltarlo. Rivendicare la mia voce è quindi un atto di resistenza: un modo per prendere parola nei miei termini e, attraverso il mio vissuto, interrogare le egemonie disciplinari dominanti.

In questo contesto, l'autoetnografia si configura come una prassi epistemica decoloniale. È un atto politico che destabilizza l'illusione di un'oggettività neutra nella conoscenza accademica, restituendo valore alle soggettività situate e incarnate. Come insegnano le studiose decoloniali e femministe del Sud globale, scrivere di sé non è un atto narcisistico, ma un gesto sovversivo: è il rifiuto di farsi dislocare, di rinunciare alla propria esperienza come fonte di sapere. È una forma di resistenza alla colonialità del sapere, che tende a estrarre e silenziare. Come ricorda Spivak (1988), il subalterno non

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può semplicemente parlare nei termini dell'accademia dominante, ma può articolare un contro-discorso che ne sfida le strutture. La mia autoetnografia non è mera testimonianza, ma atto critico e spazio di solidarietà affettiva tra soggettività marginalizzate.

Non rivendico l'eccezionalità della mia storia rispetto ad altre, ma rivendico il mio diritto a raccontarla—nel bene e nel male, nella vita e nell'accademia—perché essa mi definisce. E perché ho capito che anche il non detto resta sempre presente e visibile persino quando tace. Perché parlare non significa necessariamente accusare o tradire le persone di cui si parla: significa piuttosto perdonare coloro che hanno fatto parte del nostro percorso, facendo come potevano e sapevano. Il perdono è un dono che diamo a noi stesse. Non giustifica la violenza, non ricuce necessariamente rapporti spezzati, ma libera dal peso del passato. Aiuta a comprendere che chi opprime è spesso intrappolato in storie complesse di trauma e violenza e che, come osservava Fanon (1968), la rabbia impotente dei soggetti vittimizzati finisce spesso per generare altra violenza. Rivendicare il diritto a raccontare la mia storia non significa che essa appartenga solo a me. La mia storia è anche la storia di coloro che ne fanno parte. Nel raccontare, mi assumo la responsabilità di ciò che comporta renderla pubblica e di continuare a vivere con questa scelta. Una volta divulgata, non sarà più solo mia: diventerà anche dei lettori, di chi mi conosce, di chi si sentirà autorizzato a commentarla facendo aggiunte o correzioni, a giudicarmi sulla base dell'idea o della parziale esperienza che ha di me—riflessi, in realtà, del proprio essere e della propria identità. Potranno accusarmi per aver parlato, domandarsi perché lo faccia ora, dopo tanti anni. Perché riportare alla luce storie e ricordi che sembrerebbero destinati all'oblio? Perché tornare al passato quando una vita intera mi separa dalle violenze subite da bambina, nel silenzio di una comunità che, pur sapendo, le ha istigate attraverso l'oppressione di mia madre? Perché scrivere oggi,

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trent'anni dopo aver lasciato il paese in cui sono nata? Perché parlare adesso, dopo esser riuscita a costruirmi una vita in un altro paese e considerata la mia posizione pubblica?

Queste sono domande a cui non so dare una risposta. Ho compreso che si può amare e odiare allo stesso tempo qualcosa che non si comprende appieno. Nei giorni e nelle notti di solitudine durante la pandemia le parole si sono scritte quasi da sole, in inglese, sulla pagina bianca del computer. Ci sono scritti che sembrano non essere opera nostra, ma qualcosa che si impone e chiede di essere detto. Per me è stato così: non potevo non scrivere. La mia storia è inscritta nel mio corpo, nelle mie emozioni, nel mio stare con gli altri. E anche se non la mettessi su carta, continuerebbe a esistere: visibile agli occhi di chi sa guardare, invisibile a chi non vuole o non può vedere, pronto a giudicarmi o fraintendermi. Il silenzio mi priverebbe ancora della possibilità di capire chi sono davvero e di essere riconosciuta per ciò che sono. Non voglio sprecare questo breve viaggio terreno: non voglio che la mia storia resti non detta, né continuare a vivere senza aver raccontato la mia verità, senza aver contribuito a cambiare la conversazione e a rimuovere lo stigma che grava sui traumi e sulla salute mentale legati alla violenza di genere. Sento l'urgenza di usare la mia posizione pubblica e la mia visibilità per raccontarla. Perché se non sono persone come me, che hanno privilegio e strumenti, a trovare il coraggio di parlare, chi altri lo farà?

So che tacere significherebbe diventare complice del patriarcato e della sua «violenza simbolica» (Bourdieu 2002), o peggio ancora, una di quelle donne che partecipano alla propria oppressione. Non lo sono mai stata e non voglio esserlo. È in questo senso che la mia scrittura autoetnografica si configura come una prassi epistemica decoloniale: una forma di conoscenza situata (Haraway 1988) e, insieme, un atto politico di disobbedienza che rifiuta la falsa neutralità della soggettività accademica. Come scrive

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Spivak (1988), non si può parlare da una posizione di marginalità senza che quella posizione venga immediatamente assorbita dalla logica dell'Altro. Tuttavia, è proprio in questa tensione che si genera uno spazio di possibilità.

4. Ecologia politica femminista

Dare voce alla nostra prospettiva significa anche darla a chi non l'ha avuta o non è riuscito a trovarla. Il silenzio contribuisce allo stigma verso la violenza di genere e verso il disagio mentale che essa infligge alle donne, incluso quel trauma generazionale che si trasmette da madre a figlia o tra sorelle. Come nota Sara Ahmed (2004), la vergogna è uno strumento di oppressione sociale che agisce sui corpi marginalizzati, spingendoli al silenzio. Rompere quel silenzio è un gesto collettivo di resistenza, un tentativo di ricucire l'intimità lacerata del mondo. Silenzio e vergogna possono seppellire le vittime nell'oblio, lasciandole sole in una specie di limbo dove le sopravvissute faticano a riconoscere il proprio valore. E allora ho deciso di parlare anche per le donne della mia famiglia che non sono riuscite a trovare la loro voce, nonostante il dolore e la violenza che da loro mi sono venuti. Parlo per me, ma anche per mia madre e mia sorella, le cui vite distrutte dall'oppressione patriarcale, hanno segnato il corso della mia. Perché la mia storia appartiene anche a loro. Parlo anche per mio padre, insignito Cavaliere della Repubblica Italiana nel 2016, al quale, anche quando ho creduto che mi fosse dolorosamente venuto meno, devo invece la possibilità di studiare che mi ha permesso di essere dove sono adesso e di acquisire gli strumenti per scrivere queste parole. La mia identità si è formata grazie e nonostante le scelte e i sacrifici dei miei genitori, entrambi intrappolati nelle norme patriarcali ma a cui sarò sempre grata per avermi dato la vita. Quando la situazione familiare è precipitata a causa della malattia di mia sorella, mio padre ha fatto

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scelte che mi hanno lasciata sola, ma forse nella convinzione che sarei stata capace di sopravvivere per conto mio. A vent'anni, mi sono trovata senza sostegno familiare, ma questa condizione mi ha spinto a costruire percorsi di autonomia.

Anche mia madre ha vissuto in una rete di violenze e crudeltà che hanno minato la sua salute mentale, rendendola incapace di sottrarsi all'abiezione patriarcale. Ho pagato il prezzo della sua rabbia repressa verso i suoi familiari da bambina. Bell hooks ci ricorda che «la famiglia patriarcale idealizzata non è uno spazio "sicuro"» (Hooks 1994, 28): le violenze più profonde arrivano spesso da chi ci è più vicino. Il destino che mi attendeva era quello di essere trascinata in un crollo psichico, come mia madre e mia sorella. Me ne sono andata, e così mi sono salvata. Forse, alla fine, è stato proprio mio padre a salvarmi. Ma non giustifico o approvo le azioni della famiglia di mia madre: il loro trattamento ingiusto nei suoi confronti, le ferite che non le sono mai state riconosciute, che hanno generato sofferenza in tutta la linea familiare. Esiste un legame profondo tra la salute mentale delle donne e il dominio patriarcale che, umiliandole, le relega a una posizione di inferiorità e neutralizza il loro potere. Foucault, in *Madness and Civilization* (1964), ha mostrato come la follia sia un fenomeno sociale, una risposta disperata a norme tossiche che richiedono di esser messe in discussione. Fanon (1968), dal canto suo, ci ha insegnato che la violenza interiorizzata nelle relazioni familiari, sotto il colonialismo e il patriarcato, è una forma di alienazione psichica che si trasmette da una generazione all'altra. Come donne, e come soggetti marginalizzati, non possiamo limitarci a raccontare storie individuali: dobbiamo situarle nei sistemi di potere che le hanno generate. Scrivere la nostra storia è anche denunciare le strutture oppressive che la rendono possibile. È nel gesto della narrazione che si rompe la catena della ripetizione traumatica e si apre uno spazio per la trasformazione.

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Il trauma è una forma di oppressione sistemica, spesso ridotta a fatto individuale o patologico. Eppure, è al cuore delle mobilitazioni sociali ed ecologiche: molti movimenti nascono da esperienze di ferite, esclusione e disumanizzazione. Come scrivono Eve Tuck e K. Wayne Yang (2012), esiste una politica del dolore che viene troppo spesso neutralizzata o resa illegittima quando non rientra nei codici accettabili della sofferenza riconosciuta. Judith Herman (1992) ha mostrato come i traumi, soprattutto quelli legati a violenza domestica, razzismo o guerra, vengano rimossi o distorti nei discorsi pubblici, mentre Cathy Caruth (1996) ci invita a considerarli come eventi che eccedono la rappresentazione, che insistono nel chiedere di essere testimoniati. Quando il trauma resta represso, i suoi effetti emergono comunque sotto forma di relazioni disfunzionali, meccanismi di difesa distruttivi o ripetizioni inconsce. Le sue conseguenze—vittimismo, rabbia, aggressività, senso di inadeguatezza—si insinuano nei contesti interpersonali e istituzionali. Riconoscere il trauma come fatto politico e collettivo significa anche sviluppare coscienza critica delle relazioni di potere che lo producono e includere le politiche del trauma nel discorso accademico e pubblico. Non si tratta solo di riconoscere il dolore, ma di riconfigurarlo in una prassi etica e politica di resistenza. Non tutti hanno accesso a risorse o strumenti critici per elaborare criticamente il trauma. Alcuni riescono a trasformarlo in resistenza costruttiva contro razzismo, omofobia, patriarcato, disastri ambientali e via dicendo; altri, invece, reagiscono con dominio, bullismo e violenza perpetuando le stesse dinamiche oppressive. Questi comportamenti mostrano come il trauma non elaborato possa diventare vettore di potere. Oggi queste dinamiche sono amplificate dai social media che da un lato diffondono testimonianze prima silenziate, dall'altro polarizzano e talvolta strumentalizzano il dolore. Per questo credo sia urgente una pedagogia del trauma che unisca introspezione, analisi critica e impegno

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trasformativo. Non per patologizzare l'esperienza, ma per restituire complessità alle forme in cui corpi e soggettività segnate dalla violenza si muovono nel mondo, resistono e immaginano alternative.

5. Giustizia ambientale e sociale

Lo studio delle emozioni all'interno dell'ecologia politica, insieme al contributo degli studi femministi, permette di decostruire le relazioni di potere che attraversano le crisi ambientali, cogliendone le intersezioni emotive, politiche e affettive. Le emozioni, spesso svalutate come "non razionali", sono invece strumenti epistemici e politici fondamentali per comprendere come i soggetti vivono, resistono e rielaborano le esperienze di violenza ambientale e sociale. Non si può analizzare l'agro-estrattivismo e la sua logica di dominio sulla natura senza considerare le pratiche patriarcali di espropriazione delle terre e dei saperi femminili, né l'impatto psicologico e sociale che queste forme di esclusione hanno avuto sulle donne, soprattutto sulle diseredate dal *pater familias* per garantire la trasmissione del capitale naturale ai soli discendenti maschi. Queste pratiche non sono solo simboliche: sono materialmente e affettivamente distruttive, e rappresentano un'estensione delle stesse logiche estrattive che riducono la natura a risorsa da sfruttare. Le loro ripercussioni sono intergenerazionali e sono radicate in contesti culturali che normalizzano l'inferiorizzazione delle donne.

L'ecologia politica, come campo critico, deve problematizzare tali strutture di esclusione e denunciare la misoginia sistemica che permea le pratiche ambientali. Ignorare le narrazioni di espropriazione femminile significa occultare una parte fondamentale del sistema di sfruttamento e colonizzazione delle risorse naturali. In molti dei contesti rurali in cui queste pratiche oppressive verso le donne sono orchestrate, le

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strutture patriarcali sono talmente radicate da rendere invisibili le stesse pratiche di esclusione, giustificandole attraverso codici culturali e leggi consuetudinarie che le legittimano rendendo impossibile svelarne le dimensioni culturali e sistemiche. L'assenza di testimonianza pubblica non equivale ad assenza di danno, ma ne rivela piuttosto il suo insidioso potere sistemico. La violenza patriarcale è una forma di violenza lenta che, anche quando non uccide fisicamente, ferisce nel tempo le donne psicologicamente e socialmente, mantenendole soggiogate in relazioni familiari e sociali sbilanciate che le sminuiscono (Toyoshima e Nakahara 2021) innescando comportamenti maladattivi. Le donne che vivono in contesti dominati da queste logiche repressive reagiscono in modi diversi ai maltrattamenti di una società che consente e autorizza la crudeltà nei loro confronti: alcune resistono, altre crollano. La sofferenza psichica, spesso silenziata o ridicolizzata, è una reazione legittima a una crudeltà sociale normalizzata.

Rob Nixon (2011) definisce violenza lenta (*slow violence*) quella forma di danno che si accumula nel tempo, colpendo soggettività marginalizzate senza visibilità politica o mediatica. È questo il tipo di violenza insita nelle pratiche estrattiviste che disconoscono il ruolo delle donne come custodi della terra, negando loro proprietà, memoria e voce. Tali pratiche non solo riducono il valore simbolico e materiale delle donne, ma ne negano l'intima conoscenza dei territori e delle pratiche agricole, trasmesse per generazioni. L'eco-femminismo ha evidenziato il legame storico tra oppressione delle donne e oppressione della natura. Secondo Rocheleau (1996), le donne, proprio in virtù della loro posizione sociale e culturale, hanno sviluppato un attaccamento emotivo e conoscitivo alla terra, spesso ignorato o ridicolizzato dal patriarcato. Negare questo legame significa svalutare una conoscenza ecologica situata e incarnata, fondamentale per ogni progetto di giustizia ambientale. Occorrono pressioni comunitarie e istituzionali contro le pratiche

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che marginalizzano le donne non riconoscendone il ruolo fondamentale e il diritto di occupare e possedere i luoghi e gli spazi dove sono cresciute e hanno lavorato la terra. Non farlo significa svalutare non solo il loro valore umano ma anche il sapere delle pratiche agricole che custodiscono. La misoginia insita nelle pratiche ambientali sottolinea ancora una volta come l'esperienza di genere sia concreta e radicata. I conflitti ambientali riflettono conflitti sociali e culturali più ampi sull'accesso diseguale alle risorse, alla terra, alla memoria e alla possibilità di esprimere dolore. Come ricorda Paul Robbins (2012), l'ecologia politica deve svelare questi rapporti iniqui e politicizzare ciò che viene tenuto nell'ombra: emozioni, ferite e soggettività marginalizzate. Serve dunque il coraggio, personale e collettivo, di portare queste esperienze all'interno del discorso accademico e delle lotte ambientali. Le ferite psichiche e materiali inflitte alle donne non sono incidenti collaterali, ma effetti strutturali di un sistema che continua a riprodurre diseguaglianze di genere, di classe e di potere attraverso il dominio sui corpi e sui territori. Solo riconoscendo questi legami possiamo immaginare un'ecologia realmente liberatoria.

6. Conclusioni e speranze

Questa analisi nasce dall'intersezione tra femminismo ed ecologismo, passando attraverso un'ecologia affettiva che riflette sull'espressione delle emozioni e sull'interiorizzazione delle politiche dell'impotenza. In una prospettiva radicalmente umanistica, intende mostrare come l'oppressione danneggi le persone e venga normalizzata a livello sociale. L'esproprio delle terre è solo uno dei tanti esempi di privilegio maschile. Questo non è un *memoir*: non descrivo i traumi e le storie in dettaglio ma cerco di ricordare il passato in modo nuovo, scoprendo parti di me stessa in un atto

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di apertura radicale. Alcuni ricordi sono riemersi in terapia, altri riaffiorano improvvisi e vividi, con immagini che spesso cerco di ricacciare indietro. Il prezzo del trauma si paga dopo, quando quelle immagini restano indelebili nella memoria. Nei momenti più difficili mi hanno aiutata i libri, le camminate, le meditazioni. L'EMDR mi ha insegnato che il camminare calma e riconnette.[2] Sono sempre stata una viaggiatrice e una *flâneuse*, e sono grata ai passi che mi hanno condotta in tanti luoghi, riempendo la mia memoria di immagini e ricordi. Raccontare non è autoreferenziale: è un gesto inclusivo. Io sono il margine, e il margine è la mia forza, lo spazio che scelgo come apertura, come scrive Bell Hooks. Perché ognuno dovrebbe poter vivere libero dalla paura e dalla violenza.

Nell'attivismo ambientale è cruciale riconoscere che emozioni e dolore sono parte dei conflitti e delle strutture di potere. Tali conflitti non si esauriscono nelle differenze di classe, genere o razza, ma coinvolgono anche le esperienze emotive. I modi in cui viviamo e sentiamo sono profondamente politici: costruiscono le nostre soggettività in relazione a norme che possiamo accettare, rifiutare o resistere. Io stessa ho negoziato le lacerazioni

[2] EMDR è l'acronimo dell'inglese *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing*, traducibile come "desensibilizzazione e rielaborazione attraverso i movimenti oculari." Si tratta di un approccio terapeutico sviluppato negli anni Novanta e oggi ampiamente utilizzato per il trattamento di esperienze traumatiche che causano disagio psicologico. Il trauma, infatti, disorganizza la mente di chi lo vive e innesca una condizione di 'disregolazione' emotiva come risposta a un conflitto interno. Come spiega la neuroscienziata Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017), il cervello ha una funzione predittiva: cerca costantemente di anticipare ciò che accadrà basandosi sulle memorie e sulle informazioni accumulate nel corso della vita, incluso il trauma, assumendo che tali previsioni corrispondano alla realtà. Di conseguenza, le nostre azioni si fondano sulle previsioni cerebrali, che vengono continuamente confrontate con gli input sensoriali. Quando la previsione combacia con la realtà, operiamo in tempo reale; quando invece non coincide, subentra la sorpresa e la discrepanza viene segnalata all'amigdala. La risposta dell'amigdala—con il rilascio di ormoni come cortisolo e adrenalina per preparare il corpo alla reazione—è programmata biologicamente per prendere il sopravvento. Tuttavia, il fatto che una situazione ricordi un'esperienza stressante o traumatica del passato non significa che lo sia anche nel presente. Anche se corpo e cervello reagiscono secondo schemi appressi, possiamo sempre introdurre un margine di consapevolezza: fare una pausa, respirare, fermarci, allontanarci e concederci lo spazio necessario per capire ciò che realmente sta accadendo.

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della mia vita, costruendo la mia identità nonostante traumi e violenze di origine patriarcale. La scrittura rompe l'isolamento del non detto e restituisce voce alla nostra forza vitale. Liberarsi della vergogna di essere sopravvissute è difficile: restano il biasimo verso sé stesse e la convinzione di non meritare amore o sostegno. Anche per me l'impatto è stato ed è ancora costante: fuga dalle emozioni, senso di pericolo, maltrattamenti familiari che hanno minato la mia salute. Non sono riuscita a recidere del tutto quel legame, e forse mai lo farò, perché è parte della mia identità. Scrivere questa storia è un atto di solidarietà. Non vorrei che altri vivessero ciò che ho vissuto io. Non pensavo di mettere queste parti di me in un saggio accademico, eppure è forse il mio scritto più importante. Ho sempre avuto il bisogno di raccontarmi, anche quando l'accademia respingeva la qualità autoetnografica del mio lavoro. L'autoetnografia, invece, rende politico il personale: esporre la vulnerabilità è coraggio, non debolezza. Se questo fosse il mio ultimo scritto, sarei felice di aver trovato la forza di dire la mia verità, con gratitudine verso chi mi ha sostenuta e persino verso chi mi ha abbandonata, perché mi ha mostrato cosa non voglio essere.

Questa non è una narrazione vittimistica, ma una posizione critica e politica. Condivido la mia autobiografia tossica con trasparenza strategica, per rivendicare la dignità di chi non è in grado di parlare e per prendere una posizione politica contro l'ingiustizia a livello globale. Questa è una narrazione di liberazione, anche per mia madre, che ha vissuto una vita sprecata, oppressa da relazioni di potere a cui non è stata in grado di resistere finendo per ripetere il ciclo di lenta violenza a cui è stata sottoposta. Il silenzio ormai non è più un'opzione per me: spezzo il ciclo vizioso della violenza con la mia voce. Racconto la storia alle mie condizioni, per sabotare le narrazioni tossiche ovunque esse siano e per sabotare coloro che le stanno ancora perpetuando con il silenzio.

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La mia speranza è un mondo in cui tutte le donne, e tutti gli esseri umani, vivano liberi da paura e violenza. Non ero pronta a parlarne per molto tempo, ma ho capito che le cose che non diciamo, o che non siamo pronte a dire, restano comunque con noi parte della nostra storia e che possiamo controllarle solo se le raccontiamo in maniera deliberata. Ho scelto di scrivere in italiano, nonostante la fatica, come riconoscimento a Lidia Curti, che mi invitò anni fa a tradurre i miei testi.[3] Allora non ci riuscii: l'inglese era stato lo schermo che mi aveva salvato la vita. Oggi voglio affrontare il passato nella mia lingua madre. La madrepatria ritorna come luogo simbolico dove, finalmente, affronto la mia storia. Concludo lasciando il passato nel passato e affermando con forza la persona che sono diventata. Da questo margine, rivendico la mia voce.

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Un ringraziamento speciale va agli straordinari studenti del corso *Environmental Humanities* che ho creato e insegnato alla University of South Florida e al direttore dell'*Institute for the Advanced Study of Culture and the Environment* alla University of South Florida che nel marzo del 2022 mi ha dato l'opportunità di fondare e dirigere l'*Environmental Humanities Initiative*. È un lavoro che, più di ogni altro, spero di continuare per il resto della mia carriera.

[3] Lidia Curti era una docente che ammiravo e con la quale avrei voluto lavorare per la tesi all'Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale. Non ne ebbi l'occasione poiché seguivo i corsi da pendolare e lei non mi conosceva. Mi misi in contatto con lei tramite suo marito, Iain Chambers, il cui lavoro avevo contribuito a far conoscere nell'italianistica americana che non lo conosceva all'epoca ventotto anni fa quando arrivai negli Stati Uniti. Dopo aver ottenuto la posizione alla University of South Florida, ci incontrammo più volte a Napoli e andai anche a farle visita a casa. In quelle occasioni, Lidia mi suggerì di tradurre in italiano alcuni testi che le avevo inviato in inglese. Non lo feci allora, perché non ci riuscivo: la vita negli Stati Uniti e la scrittura in inglese mi avevano letteralmente salvato la vita.

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Nota bio-bibliografica

Patrizia La Trecchia è Professoressa Associata e Responsabile della cattedra di Studi di Italianistica presso la University of South Florida (USA). TED speaker sul tema dello spreco alimentare e direttrice fondatrice dell'iniziativa sulle discipline umanistiche per l'ambiente (Environmental Humanities Initiative), la sua ricerca si colloca all'intersezione tra *Food Studies* ed *Environmental Humanities*. Ha pubblicato tre libri e ha due volumi di prossima uscita: *Reframing Naples: The South in Global Perspective* (Palgrave, 2026) e *The Politics of Food Justice in Italy* (Routledge, 2026). Il suo lavoro collega contesti italiani e transnazionali, affrontando questioni di cultura, giustizia e sostenibilità. Fa parte del consiglio direttivo dell'Association for the Study of Food and Society.

Indirizzo e-mail: patrizia@usf.edu

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Shaul Bassi, ***Turbo Road: il Kenya, i suoi scrittori, un bambino***

(Einaudi, 2022)

Recensione di Serena Ammendola
(Università della Calabria, IT)

Ci sono libri che non si limitano a raccontare un viaggio: lo diventano. *Turbo Road* di Shaul Bassi, edito da Meltemi nel 2022, è uno di questi. Bassi, professore di letteratura inglese e studi postcoloniali presso l'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia, scrive un testo che sfida ogni classificazione. È al tempo stesso diario di viaggio, saggio critico, *memoir*, indagine interculturale. "Ecco una piccola mappa", scrive Bassi nelle prime pagine, e da lì si dipana una cartografia esistenziale e intellettuale che attraversa otto mesi di vita a Nairobi, capitale keniana e crocevia di tensioni storiche, politiche, linguistiche e culturali.

Turbo Road prende il nome da una strada periferica di Nairobi, ma emblematicamente centrale nel percorso dell'autore: è da lì che si avvia la narrazione, che si estende come un sistema reticolare in cui ogni capitolo affronta un tema cardine – l'urbanizzazione selvaggia, l'ambientalismo, le pratiche artistiche e giornalistiche locali, il femminismo africano, la stratificazione sociale e culturale della metropoli. La mappa di Bassi è "personale, arbitraria e limitata" (24) ma traccia percorsi coraggiosi, che invitano il lettore a indossare lo zaino e partire insieme a lui. Ogni capitolo è legato a un tema dominante, ma tutti sono intrecciati come i fili di un tessuto metropolitano complesso.

Per Bassi, avvicinarsi all'Africa significa innanzitutto "*dis*conoscerla" (16), cioè sospendere le rappresentazioni stereotipate che l'immaginario occidentale ha sedimentato nel tempo. L'Africa, osserva l'autore, ci si presenta più come desideriamo che sia che come effettivamente è: tra l'estremo della visione esotica e "tribale" e quello dell'Africa "ferita" da guerre e carestie, si collocano migliaia di storie taciute, sommerse, spesso ignorate. Il libro

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si assume il compito di restituire voce a quelle narrazioni silenziate, adottando uno sguardo critico e partecipato.

La dimensione personale e familiare si innesta con naturalezza nel tessuto del libro, che racconta il percorso di adozione da parte di Bassi e della moglie Susanne, del piccolo Samuel Peter Kariuki, "detto PK, pronunciato *pikéi*" (22). L'esperienza adottiva diventa qui lente privilegiata per interrogare le categorie di appartenenza, identità, traduzione culturale. "Adottare un bambino è uno straordinario processo di traduzione, e per tradurre e comprendere per quanto possibile il mondo di nostro figlio ho seguito la regola aurea per cui la letteratura è una guida senza pari" (13), scrive Bassi, rivelando quanto profondamente la parola letteraria sia per lui strumento etico e conoscitivo. La letteratura diviene così territorio condiviso, spazio di mediazione tra culture, memoria e alterità.

Anche il linguaggio dell'adozione offre uno spunto teorico rilevante: nel lessico tecnico si utilizza il verbo "abbinare" (24); si abbina un bambino a una famiglia, una cultura all'altra, due genealogie diverse che si incontrano. Bassi estende questa immagine alla condizione umana: "Tutte le culture e le persone sono mobili, spurie, ibride e si trasformano di continuo a contatto con le altre. In una famiglia adottiva si accelerano i processi di scambio e confronto che trasformano le civiltà" (24). L'adozione, allora, non è solo esperienza intima, ma ci interroga su come costruiamo le nostre identità e su come possiamo fare tesoro delle differenze senza neutralizzarle.

Il ricorso agli autori locali – a cominciare dallo scrittore, poeta e drammaturgo Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "monumento vivente" (30) e punto di riferimento imprescindibile per comprendere le dinamiche del plurilinguismo postcoloniale – è parte integrante di questo processo. Nel suo fondamentale saggio critico-teorico *Decolonizzare la mente* (1986), Ngũgĩ compie una scelta radicale e simbolica: contrappone all'inglese, lingua imposta dai colonizzatori, la sua lingua madre, il gikuyu, rivendicandola come atto di sfida e liberazione dal giogo coloniale, soprattutto da un punto di vista culturale. La critica di Ngũgĩ alla

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centralità dell'inglese come lingua della letteratura e dell'istruzione diventa per Bassi uno stimolo ad affrontare il nodo del potere linguistico e dell'autenticità narrativa.

Con "Nairobi Railway Museum", Bassi entra nel cuore pulsante della scena letteraria kenyana. È proprio dal museo ferroviario della capitale – luogo carico di stratificazioni coloniali e memorie sospese – che inizia un nuovo itinerario dell'autore, non più solo geografico. La ferrovia diventa metafora del transito, dello scambio, della connessione tra epoche, lingue, visioni. La letteratura diventa lo spazio privilegiato per comprendere la complessità del Kenya contemporaneo, e Bassi sceglie di farlo non da spettatore, ma immergendosi attivamente, incontrando scrittori, editrici, intellettuali. È qui che prende forma uno dei passaggi più significativi del libro: l'incontro con la rivista *Kwani?* – che Bassi traduce con "Embè?" – una delle piattaforme più vitali della nuova narrativa kenyana, nata all'inizio del nuovo millennio con l'obiettivo di superare l'immobilismo post-indipendenza e raccontare il presente del paese in modo libero e innovativo. Bassi osserva, ascolta, dialoga: e lo fa con la cura di chi sa che ogni parola è il frutto di un'eredità e, insieme, il seme di un possibile nuovo inizio.

L'incontro con Binyavanga Wainaina, figura iconica e anticonvenzionale, fondatore di *Kwani?*, è rivelatore. Autore di saggi, racconti e *memoir*, nonché voce dirompente nel dibattito culturale africano, Binyavanga è il "perfetto antieroe di una narrazione rapsodica" (58) che attraversa decenni di silenzio, compromessi e tensioni nella storia postcoloniale del Kenya. È grazie a lui che Bassi diventa consapevole di una verità fondamentale: se Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o ha rappresentato (e rappresenta) un riferimento ideologico forte – soprattutto nel suo appello ad abbandonare l'inglese come lingua dominante–, è altrettanto vero che il Kenya reale, oggi, è plurilingue, ibrido, in trasformazione continua. La letteratura non può ignorare la realtà: il plurilinguismo non è solo un dato linguistico, ma una condizione esistenziale. *Kwani?* incarna questa consapevolezza, dando voce a un'intera generazione che ha scelto di raccontarsi non per adeguarsi a un canone, ma per inventarne uno nuovo.

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Il quarto capitolo, intitolato "Ngara" dal nome di un quartiere multiculturale di Nairobi, segna un altro passaggio fondamentale nel percorso di Bassi: quello dell'ascolto e della valorizzazione delle voci femminili della letteratura kenyana contemporanea, portatrici di sguardi radicalmente autonomi e rivelatori. Come Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, figura singolare e di straordinaria rilevanza. Nata a Southampton, giunta in Kenya negli anni Cinquanta come missionaria e libraia, Macgoye ha fatto del Kenya la propria patria culturale e politica. "Pochissimi scrittori postcoloniali bianchi non nati o cresciuti in Africa si sono votati a una causa nazionale e hanno dato voce agli abitanti con tanta perspicacia ed empatia" (81), scrive Bassi. Macgoye, con romanzi come *Coming to Birth* (1986), non ha soltanto raccontato il Kenya: ne ha adottato le tensioni, le voci marginali, le traiettorie femminili. O ancora Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, vincitrice del prestigioso *Caine Prize* nel 2003 e autrice di *Dust* (2013), in cui si mescolano magistralmente trame familiari e grandi eventi traumatici della storia kenyana, con uno stile "tra il postcoloniale e l'afropolitano" (95).

"*Matatu*", è invece un viaggio dentro la città, nella sua geografia visibile e invisibile e nei suoi ritmi dissonanti. Nairobi si offre a Bassi come una metropoli mutante, cresciuta in maniera esplosiva e disordinata: da piccolo agglomerato di capanne a megalopoli da oltre cinque milioni di abitanti, due terzi dei quali vivono in slums. È una città che sfugge a ogni immagine cristallizzata, e che si rivela nella sua tensione costante tra diversità e segregazione, tra mescolanza e disuguaglianza. Una "città accidentale" e "frammentaria" (105) che Bassi percorre, appunto, a frammenti: da turista, da studioso, da padre, da ospite straniero in cerca di una lingua comune. L'esperienza urbana si costruisce a bordo dei *matatu*, i celebri minibus collettivi che sono il cuore del trasporto popolare kenyano. Coloratissimi, caotici, sgangherati, decorati con graffiti, citazioni musicali, icone religiose e politiche, i *matatu* sono molto più che semplici veicoli: sono "globuli bianchi" (120) nel sistema circolatorio della città, cellule mobili che trasportano storie, sogni, tensioni. Sono anche spazi sociali e teatrali, domini giovanili, palcoscenici mobili di creatività e

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rivendicazione. Non a caso, compaiono anche nei romanzi di Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, come *Il diavolo in croce*. Sono metafora e lente di lettura di una città impossibile da ridurre a un solo volto. Salire su un *matatu* vuol dire addentrarsi nella vita quotidiana della città, per attraversarne le contraddizioni: dai sobborghi dove vive la classe media africana, alle *gated* communities dei *mzungu* (i bianchi) benestanti, ai quartieri simbolici come Karen, dove si trova la casa museo di Karen Blixen, l'autrice di *La mia Africa* (1937), punto di partenza (e di polemica implicita) per una lunga serie di rappresentazioni esotiche e romantiche dell'Africa.

"Kangemi" prende il nome da uno degli slum più vasti e marginalizzati di Nairobi. In questo spazio estremo e vulnerabile, Bassi continua la sua esplorazione etica e letteraria del Kenya, affrontando con lucidità le disuguaglianze urbane, le contraddizioni economiche e il peso della memoria. Kangemi, insieme ad altri slum come Kibera e Dandora diventa un luogo-simbolo, un nodo critico da cui osservare le fratture profonde della città e, più in generale, del mondo contemporaneo. Kibera, lo slum più noto e più esteso di Nairobi è il luogo che, più di ogni altro, ha attirato l'attenzione dei media internazionali e del cosiddetto "turismo degli slum". La riflessione spinge Bassi ad affrontare questa ambiguità: che cosa significa attraversare luoghi di marginalità estrema senza diventare spettatori complici? Qual è il limite tra testimonianza e voyeurismo, tra solidarietà e consumo dell'altrui dolore? Eppure, è anche in luoghi del genere, epicentri di degradazione e lotta per la sopravvivenza che, come altrove, si manifesta la forza di una città che non si lascia ridurre alla miseria, ma che esprime, nella fatica quotidiana, una vitalità testarda e una capacità di reinventarsi.

L'ultimo capitolo di *Turbo Road*, intitolato "Vision Café", porta con sé la parola-chiave che chiude il viaggio e ne illumina il senso più profondo: la visione, il contrasto stridente tra le promesse roboanti del Kenya contemporaneo, intriso di slanci verso la modernità e la crescita economica, e la persistente incapacità di elaborare pienamente il proprio passato coloniale, culturale e sociale. Con la visione intesa come desiderio e lacuna, prospettiva ma anche come ferita, si chiude il cerchio narrativo che si era aperto sulla Turbo Road e sulle

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sue pietre si conclude. Un cerchio fatto di strade polverose e autobus sgangherati, ma anche di letteratura viva, plurilingue, mobile, che attraversa generi, generazioni e geografie. L'Africa che ci viene restituita da Bassi, infatti, non è più quella "da disconoscere" degli stereotipi, ma quella frammentata e molteplice di chi prova, parola dopo parola, ad "abitare la complessità". In questo senso, il gesto di Bassi si avvicina a quello del "ri-membrare" (279) – termine caro al grande Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o – inteso come ricomporre un passato smembrato dalla colonizzazione, ma anche come pratica affettiva e intellettuale di cura, attenzione, responsabilità. "Ri-membrare", scrive Bassi, è anche dare senso a un lungo percorso di adozione, che culmina infine in un dono inaspettato: la costruzione di una nuova famiglia, e con essa, di una nuova appartenenza.

Turbo Road è, in definitiva, un libro importante perché non pretende di rappresentare l'Africa, ma di ascoltarla, attraversarla con rispetto, apprenderla in cammino. Nel suo muoversi tra i luoghi, i volti, i simboli, *Turbo Road* tesse quella trama plurale e ibrida che è cifra del libro intero. Un esercizio di comprensione, traduzione e ascolto, dove la letteratura si conferma, ancora una volta, una "guida senza pari". Ne consegue, quindi, che per comprendere un luogo bisogna abitarne i margini, salire su mezzi che non controlliamo, accettare deviazioni, e magari anche perdersi un po'. Per poi, forse, cominciare davvero a capire. Con *Turbo Road*, Bassi induce il lettore alla riflessione etica e politica, mostrando come la letteratura possa farsi strumento di consapevolezza, interrogazione e rispetto. In questo modo, il libro disegna una mappa che è anche una coscienza, dove ogni luogo visitato si trasforma in occasione di risonanza storica, di confronto culturale, di profonda umanità e anche di amore, come quello tra un padre e un figlio.

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Profilo bio-bibliografico

Serena Ammendola è dottoranda al terzo anno presso il Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici dell'Università della Calabria, dove conduce un progetto di ricerca dedicato all'opera di Virginia Woolf. Collabora con la rivista accademica online *Margins* ed è membro dell'Associazione Italiana di Anglistica (AIA), della Italian Virginia Woolf Society e della International Virginia Woolf Society.

Indirizzo e-mail: serena.ammendola@unical.it

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Robert T. Tally (ed.), *Spatial Literary Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Space, Geography, and the Imagination* (Routledge, 2021)

Reviewed by Adriana Marinelli
(Università degli Studi di Napoli Parthenope, IT)

Robert T. Tally's research has consistently engaged with the challenging notion of spatiality in literary texts. Over the years, his work has paved the way for investigations into the intersection of literature and geography. Indeed, the inherent complexity of spatial constructs calls for interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approaches and strategies able to combine literary theories and geography. Marked by ceaseless vitality, this emerging field of scholarship is still undergoing a process of definition and redefinition as its methodologies and objectives continue to evolve.

Spatial Literary Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Space, Geography, and the Imagination (2021) edited by Robert T. Tally Jr. is one of the most recent volumes that contribute new insights to this scholarly domain. Tally begins by remarking upon the term "spatial" employed as an adjective to modify the phrase *literary studies*, and thereby including "matter of space, place, mapping, geography, architecture, spatial relations, and so on" (2). Based on this fundamental premise, the collection brings together a significant number of essays spanning theory and practice, to demonstrate the coexistence of integrated perspectives when addressing spatial concerns. The contributions engage with both literature and media, addressing not only physical locations but also imagined environments, social spaces, and virtual realms.

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The volume is made up of five sections, each focusing on a distinct facet that contributes to the complex mosaic of *Spatial Literary Studies*. The opening section "Geocritical Theory and Practice" reconstructs the theoretical framework behind the geocritical approach, with close reference to literary analysis. Mariya Shymchshyn and Jessica Maucione's essays emphasise the foundational relevance of interdisciplinary dialogue between geographers and philosophers in advancing the field, claiming that the "notion of space as a locus of intersections, contacts, tensions, and relationships gives numerous possibilities to geocriticism" (20). Building upon this theoretical background, Emmanuelle Peraldo and Yann Calbérac further investigate the role of maps in *Gulliver's Travel* by Jonathan Swift (1726) and *Through the Looking-Glass* by Lewis Carroll (1871). Integrating a semiotic perspective, they reflect upon the performative functions of these cartographic tools, proposing new perspectives for interpreting both novels. Indeed, such tools enhance narrative comprehension by mediating the relationship between the reader and the text.

Expanding on the previously established theoretical framework, the collection showcases several applications across a number of literary contexts. The third section, "Geographies of the Text", shifts the focus to how the dimension of space creates a specific *locus* that fosters a broader understanding of both the text and its author. Specifically, the essays in this section investigate how the geography emerging from literary texts can be employed to reconstruct a "spatiality" originating within the narrative itself. This involves exploring spaces characterised by liminality (Dreiding), memory (Robertson), and nature (Franco), and analysing how these *loci* actively contribute to the construction of identity. Rogério Melo Franco and Julia Kroger both analyse the concept of spatiality in French poetry and prose. By characterizing Mallarmé's text as "properly spatial, earthy, and territorial" (4). Franco both challenges and explores the "spatial" identity of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* seeking to reveal the ways in which space itself contributes to the text's significance. By contrast, Julia Kroger reconstructs Zola's knowledge of Paris through his preparatory notes,

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demonstrating how social and economic forces shape the lived experiences of his characters. Another chapter in this section likely considers how the space *of* the text can serve as a lens through which to reconstruct identity. Indeed, according to Michelle Dreiding, beginnings in Toni Morrison's novels function as textual *loci* to establish themes of liminality and self-discovery. Similarly, Kate Siklosi examines how M. NourbeSe Philip reclaims the space and place of silence, interpreting it not as absence but as a powerful, alternative epistemology. Interestingly, silence constructs a specific space which is strictly linked to postcolonial concerns, demonstrating how Philip uses spatiality to challenge dominant historical narratives and "universalising historicism".

Through a mere preposition switch, the third section of the volume titled "Geography in the text" moves from the geography *emerging from* the text to the analysis of space *within* the narrative itself, examining how characters inhabit and are shaped by their surroundings. Several contributions in this section engage in the reconstruction of specific, tangible spaces - such as caves (Crane and Fletcher), deserts (Ager), and ghettos (Murat Öner) - which enrich the reader's understanding of the novel by unveiling subtle dimensions of its main characters. Such analyses serve to illustrate how such spaces are not merely passive settings but actively shape the characters' experiences and participate in the articulation of the novel's themes. For instance, Adam R. McKees connects the city-country binarism to Nietzschean themes and broader historical and philosophical notions, underscoring how this context is reflected in the spatial representation. Tally's geocritical approach further interweaves with postcolonialism in Dunstin Crowley's contribution, where spatial boundaries and transgressions are related to issues of power, identity and resistance. Indeed, the spatial literary approach both intersects with and draws insight from postcolonial theory and of "the necessity to account from the particular conditions and histories that variously shape the relations between space and place, rather than relying on dichotomous categories with preset evaluations" (223).

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The fourth part, "The Problematics of Place" deals with the complex notion of place, as embedded in a specific context involving both literature and movies (Kohler). Walter Bosse examines Ralph Ellison's essay on Harlem, further underscoring its implications as "place of nowhere". By reconstructing the complex mosaic of racial, psychological, and cultural dynamics, Harlem comes to embody a form of universal specificity, an enduring condition that resists the contemporary tendency to conceive of place as rigidly bound to identity. Thereby illustrating the "dynamic processes in our American cityscapes, processes that continue to involve racial conflict, urban displacement, and ghettoization" (238). Moreover, cities become the privileged lens which "can either aid or restrict a writer's ability to make sense of one's existence in the tumultuous twentieth century" (240). Chris Margrave inspects Walker Percy's contrasting relationship with Covington, whose trace finds an echo in his novels. Through the spatial perspective, Convington motivates Percy's seminal awareness of place, that he conceives not as "an end, but a means to achieving a perspective: that the human condition is an unrooted experience" (251), stressing the notion of the human condition as fundamentally dislocated and in search of meaning. Will Cunnigham further examines Toni Morrison's work to broaden the potential of her texts, questioning two of her novels. The author highlights the implications of space as intrinsically bound to race, while emphasising a distinctive spatial fluidity which allows for considerations regarding broader sociohistorical processes. Cunningham thus points to "the hybridity" of Morrison's novels that configure themes as spaces reflecting on "both an oppressive whiteness and the act of re-visioning and remembering—the narrative of the oppressed—which is the home of counter-hegemonic practices and their spatial manifestation" (275).

Nathan Frank then concludes the section with a contribution on "Dave Eggers's Spatial Virtuality and the Condition of Literature". Frank investigates "the spatial turn in literary and cultural studies as that which is present without being local" (289). This notion of "spatial virtuality" can enhance our understanding of power dynamics by considering how one can be "in or out, contained or excluded" (289) regardless of physical location. He

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further introduces the idea of a "condition of literature", where the focus shifts to "the conditions they create, instead of referring to the conditions that create them" (289). Frank aptly focuses upon the intrinsic Worth of literature as an "(inter)textual umbrella" that includes "textual worlds" which are not necessarily confined to the literary sphere, highlighting how literature brings these worlds into dialogue, transforms them, and ultimately transcends their boundaries (290).

In his concluding remarks to the volume, Tally positions spatial literary studies as a distinct category set in contrast to literary geography. Drawing upon the contrast between the adjectives "spatial" and "literary" he offers a nuanced examination of what distinguishes broader, evolving field of inquiry. While literary geography might be conceived as "a blend of two disciplines, literature and geography" (328), spatial literary studies, as a field rooted within literary studies itself, focuses on issues, questions, and topics inherently related to literature, while still encouraging broader transdisciplinary encounters (329). Bringing together a wide range of multifaceted essays, Tally's recent volume proposes innovative and original interpretations that significantly contribute to and enrich the existing scholarship. While it is true that spatial literary studies remains a field in the process of active definition and refinement, its burgeoning critical potential is equally evident. Indeed, not only do these contributions offer insightful analyses of the intricate interplay between literary texts and the complex dimensions of space but they also serve as solid basis for future investigations. By highlighting the constant and evolving relationship between literature, space, and the human imagination, Tally's edited volume firmly establishes the enduring relevance and intellectual vitality of this increasingly crucial area of study.

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Bio-bibliographical note

Adriana Marinelli is a third-year PhD Candidate at Parthenope University of Naples. Her project explores the influence of classical antiquity on Robert Graves's poetry. She has conducted her research with the Robert Graves Collection, housed in St. John's College, Oxford. She has participated in several national and international conferences presenting papers on Robert Graves and the Classics. She also launched an online series of pop-up seminars about Robert Graves with Michael Joseph, editor of the *Robert Graves Review.*

Email address: adriana.marinelli001@studenti.uniparthenope.it

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Caterina Nirta, *Marginal Bodies, Trans Utopias* (Routledge, 2018)

Recensione di Federica Fucile

(Università degli Studi di Salerno, IT)

Partendo dall'assunto secondo il quale le identità *transgender*, per loro stessa definizione, hanno il potere di decostruire, mettere in discussione e, dunque, riposizionare il ben noto concetto di genere, il testo di Caterina Nirta *Marginal Bodies, Trans Utopias* – pubblicato nel 2018 per la casa editrice Routledge – propone uno studio che, di fatto, procede in due direzioni; se da un lato, infatti, la studiosa intende esaminare il modo in cui gli individui *transgender* tendono a collocarsi entro i limiti di una categoria che spesso – se non sempre – è il risultato di immagini e rappresentazioni visibilmente prefabbricate che riflettono un immaginario socio-politico tendenzialmente normativo, dall'altro vuole concentrarsi sulla formulazione di una nuova prospettiva teorica che possa smantellare qualsiasi sterile categorizzazione collettiva e favorire principi etici maggiormente inclusivi fondati, al contrario, sulle soggettività dei singoli individui. L'obiettivo del brillante discorso portato avanti da Nirta, infatti, è quello di mettere in atto un concreto superamento di quello che definisce "imperialism of categories" (4) – da sempre legato alla tirannica logica del binarismo – e di incoraggiare, invece, un rinnovato principio di molteplicità che sia in grado di accogliere una realtà sempre più eterogenea fatta di "connections, affects and active forces" (4) in cui le singole individualità *transgender* abbiano finalmente la libertà di diventare "nothing other than what [they are]" (4).

Per cominciare, tra le maggiori argomentazioni di Nirta, vi è un efficace ribaltamento del concetto stesso di utopia, non più da intendersi come il probabilistico spazio d'azione di

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un futuro e forse irrealizzabile 'non ancora', ma, piuttosto, come un immenso terreno reso fertile dal "materialism of everyday life" (3), identificabile come lo spazio in cui prende forma un effettivo "act *of* the present, *in* the present and *for* the present" (3). Questa rinnovata interpretazione dell'utopismo e, dunque, degli studi ad esso connessi affonda le sue radici in quella rivoluzionaria filosofia deleuziana che ha sapientemente rimarcato quanto esso, in realtà, sia sempre stato profondamente legato ad un presente che è, di fatto, già in corso. Nirta, dunque, si serve dell'approccio di Deleuze per ciò che concerne la nozione di *superior empiricism*, sostenendo l'opportunità di trasformare 'l'astratto' – che è, poi, l'oggetto dell'utopismo – in 'reale', ovvero in qualcosa che necessita, allo stesso modo, di una dimensione concreta: è, dunque, esplorando il mondo astratto delle possibilità che riusciamo a spiegare le molteplici singolarità 'reali' a cui la studiosa intende dedicarsi, analizzando ciò che ne scatena la marginalizzazione.

A tal proposito, sin dalle prime battute, il testo ci induce ad un'immediata, nonché cruciale riflessione epistemologica: come spesso accade nell'ambito di qualsiasi discorso riferito all'esistenza di corpi cosiddetti 'anomali', sistematicamente condannati per la loro presunta 'devianza' rispetto ad un'inoppugnabile fisicità normativa, tra le prime concettualizzazioni della transessualità vi è quella legata alla letteratura medica. Generalmente percepiti come il riflesso distorto di un'ideale, nonché idealizzata perfezione normativa, in ambito scientifico i corpi *transgender* sono sempre stati apertamente stigmatizzati in quanto 'sbagliati' e, di conseguenza, associati all'incarnazione errata di una sessualità discordante che necessitava di drastici trattamenti medici, quali la somministrazione forzata di medicinali, l'elettroshock o, in casi estremi, la lobotomia.

Ricostruendo accuratamente alcuni dei principali punti critici su cui si fonda l'ontologia di Deleuze, senza però tralasciare voci monumentali come quelle di Foucault e Derrida, il primo capitolo del volume – dal titolo *How might it be?* – esplora rispettivamente la problematizzazione dei radicati meccanismi di opposizione binaria che favoriscono la pericolosa logica del 'diverso da'; l'auspicabile superamento di ogni genere di dualismo

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volto a costruire una diversità di carattere comparativo; le motivazioni che hanno spinto l'autrice ad adottare un approccio che definisce 'etnometodologico' – ovvero basato sull'uso di videodiari incentrati sulle singole "marginal subjectivities that, because of their problematic social location and the different nature of their identification, struggle to represent themselves" (28) – e, in ultima analisi, le ragioni profonde che risultano alla base del volume in oggetto, il cui intento è quello di mettere in atto un riposizionamento delle individualità *transgender*, nel pieno riconoscimento delle loro specificità, così da abbattere l'intollerante rigidità di un sistema socio-culturale pericolosamente normativo e, appunto, forzatamente binario.

La progressiva decostruzione di tutte quelle implicazioni 'virtuali' e 'future' generalmente associate alle *queer utopias* rappresentano l'oggetto d'analisi del secondo capitolo – intitolato *Actualised utopias* – il cui proposito è quello di dimostrare quanto queste ultime risultino, al contrario, profondamente "immersed in the very now of the present" (38). Partendo da una panoramica di teorie relative alle cosiddette 'utopie del non ancora' – tutte originate dall'idealistica necessità di cercare una dimensione temporale 'altra' che non sia, appunto, ascrivibile al presente – Nirta giunge a porre due quesiti fondamentali: il primo è cosa si intenda per futuro; il secondo, invece, riguarda l'eventualità, una volta appurata la possibilità di un effettivo ricollocamento della dimensione futura, di riconsiderare la nozione stessa di 'utopia' nel suo legame imprescindibile col presente, portando avanti una posizione secondo la quale senza presente, non può esservi alcun futuro. Se, infatti, per Deleuze l'unico tempo possibile è il presente, quest'ultimo diventerà lo spazio stesso in cui l'utopia – il 'virtuale' – può finalmente concretizzarsi in quanto 'reale'. In tal senso, dunque, poiché "the virtual operates in multiplicity, it necessitates a vision of the real that is plural and constitutive of difference" (51) e, pertanto, le singole individualità *transgender* potranno riconoscersi in un *hic et nunc* in cui sono ammesse svariate molteplicità, nell'ottica di una prospettiva etica più sostenibile.

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Il testo prosegue, poi, con un terzo capitolo – dal titolo *Logics of recognition* – che, facendo ricorso agli ultimi studi giuridici sul transgenerismo portati avanti da Grabham, Sandland, Cowan e Sharpe, propone una puntualissima analisi del *Gender Recognition Act* approvato nel Regno Unito nel 2004, volta a dimostrare quanto il carattere divisivo e decisamente poco flessibile del linguaggio giuridico risulti fallimentare nel momento in cui c'è da considerare "the space of uncertainty and possibility of desire which inhabits the experience of living gender, so crucial for transgender subjectivities" (61). Cercando di non abbandonare le posizioni deleuziane, ma riprendendo i punti focali del lavoro di reinterpretazione di Nietzsche proposto dalla filosofa australiana Elizabeth Grosz, nel corso di questo capitolo Nirta intende spiegare per quale ragione le numerose contraddizioni che costituiscono il già menzionato *Gender Recognition Act* in vigore non possano garantire, allo stato attuale, lo sviluppo di un modello in grado di fornire alle singole soggettività *transgender* nuovi strumenti per far sì che "[the] incendiary space full of reactionary potential" (62) da loro occupato sia finalmente (ri)letto, tradotto e, di fatto, reinterpretato, invece che stigmatizzato. L'autrice, nello specifico, individua nella legge in oggetto quattro limiti di fondo: il primo è costituito dal meccanismo di legittimazione di un certo individuo attraverso il riconoscimento di chi, al contrario, deve necessariamente incarnare un presunto 'altro'; il secondo riguarda quel rigidissimo dualismo che presuppone l'imprescindibile presenza di due soli termini di paragone – il sé e 'l'altro' – rafforzando, appunto, la logica oppositiva del 'corpo giusto' e del 'corpo sbagliato'; il terzo risiede nella pericolosa verticalità della dialettica padrone-schiavo che tende ad affermare le caratteristiche del primo negando, di fatto, il secondo; il quarto ed ultimo, infine, risponde alle due associazioni hegeliane che identificano sistematicamente il sé con il soggetto e 'l'altro' con l'oggetto. A dimostrazione di quanto affermato dall'autrice, infatti, l'ultima parte del terzo capitolo – dal titolo *The diary sessions, I - on gender recognition* – presenta un'interessante sezione dedicata ad un numero significativo di testimonianze dirette fornite da individui

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transgender le cui specificità risultano relegate al di fuori di quelle riconosciute dal *Gender Recognition Act* del 2004.

Il binarismo sessuale su cui si basa la consueta bipartizione spaziale dei bagni pubblici – generalmente differenziati dagli iconici cartelli "Uomini" e "Donne" – è al centro del dibattito affrontato nel quarto capitolo, intitolato, appunto, *Spatial dystopia: or a case against public toilets* e accompagnato, anche in questo caso, da una sessione di testimonianze dirette inserite in una sezione denominata *The diary sessions, II - on public toilets*. Applicando le diverse posizioni di Derrida e Deleuze circa i limiti e le possibilità offerte dalla lingua al caso specifico dei bagni pubblici – definiti da Nirta come un evidente "battleground where the in-betweenness of transgender subjectivity clashes with the absoluteness of their uncompromising rigidity" (99) – la studiosa offre una necessaria riflessione su quanto la discutibile divisione spaziale dei sessi crei le condizioni per quella che, di fatto, si manifesta come una vera e propria segregazione sessuale ai danni delle fisicità *transgender*, soggette ad una reiterata forma di stigmatizzazione legata all'idea di una presunta 'impurità'. È fondamentale notare che le conclusioni a cui giunge la studiosa in relazione alla bipartizione e fruizione dei bagni pubblici non risultano affatto scontate: discostandosi dalle proposte più condivise avanzate dalla maggior parte delle comunità trans, nonché da quelle dei teorici *queer* e vari sostenitori della parità dei diritti – ovvero l'attuazione, già in corso in molti luoghi di dominio pubblico, di bagni cosiddetti *unisex* – Caterina Nirta si appella alla necessità di decostruire e, dunque, ricostruire in modo più radicale gli spazi a cui siamo stati abituati a pensare, così da abbattere quel rigido binomio che non consente reali pratiche di inclusione, ma, al contrario, alimenta e legittima continui meccanismi di esclusione e marginalizzazione.

In *Marginal bodies*, quinto ed ultimo capitolo di questo prezioso volume – corredato anch'esso di una breve sezione di testimonianze dal titolo *The diary sessions, III - on wrong bodies* – l'autrice si dedica ad una precisa e indubbiamente necessaria disamina dell'alterità fisica e delle dinamiche che hanno da sempre contribuito ad associare quelli che definisce

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"disobedient bodies" (134) ad un'immagine di mostruosa devianza o, in svariati casi, di condannabile perversione. Partendo, infatti, da una profonda analisi dei concetti di 'mostro' e 'mostruosità' – tra i protagonisti indiscussi dei celebri studi di Foucault – nella loro applicazione a corpi che non aderiscono ad una fisicità di tipo normativo – ovvero ascrivibile ad un modello occidentale, bianco, eterosessuale e normodotato – Caterina Nirta pone l'accento su tutti quei discorsi che hanno portato a trasformare 'il diverso' in 'altro' e, quindi 'l'altro' in uno spaventoso 'mostro' da combattere e, pertanto, sconfiggere.

Per concludere, è possibile constatare come gli obiettivi che l'autrice si pone nell'*incipit* del volume siano stati raggiunti: seguendo una triplice traiettoria, la studiosa si muove con grande abilità tra le teorie più significative riguardanti le rigide costruzioni socio-culturali relative al corpo e alle fisicità *transgender*, esplorando contestualmente gran parte degli spazi marginali in cui il corpo non normativo è stato generalmente relegato nel corso della storia dell'umanità e suggerendo un *ethos* alternativo di principi e valori realmente – e, forse, realisticamente – più inclusivi grazie ai quali "many marginal bodies that everyday see their own right to be sacrificed, belittled and vilified in the name of a normative ideal of existence" (178) possano ottenere, finalmente, i diritti per cui ancora oggi si ritrovano a combattere.

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Nota bio-bibliografica

Federica Fucile è dottoranda in *Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Storici*, curriculum letterario presso l'Università degli Studi di Salerno e sta attualmente lavorando ad un progetto di ricerca sulla costruzione dei personaggi deformi in una parte della produzione letteraria di Charles Dickens e Wilkie Collins. Nel 2019 ha conseguito la laurea triennale in *Lingue e Culture Straniere* presso l'Università degli Studi di Salerno con una tesi in Lingua Inglese. Nel 2023 ha conseguito la laurea magistrale in *Lingue e Letterature Moderne*, curriculum di *Letterature e Traduzione Letteraria*, con una tesi in Letteratura Inglese. Nel 2023 ha conseguito il diploma del corso di *Traduzione Letteraria per l'Editoria* presso l'Instituto Cervantes di Napoli, in collaborazione con l'Università di Napoli l'Orientale. Ha curato la traduzione dall'inglese di un racconto dal titolo *Luce* della scrittrice greca Amanda Michalopulou (Opera srl, 2021) e di due poesie intitolate *Amore* e *Due Cappuccini* dello scrittore israeliano Gilad Meiri (Fondazione Alfonso Gatto, 2022). Dal 2024 è Cultrice della Materia per l'insegnamento di Letteratura Inglese presso il Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici (DIPSUM) ed il Dipartimento di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale (DISPAC) dell'Università degli Studi di Salerno.

Indirizzo e-mail: ffucile@unisa.it

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Elena Porciani e Francesco Sielo (a cura di), *Attraversare il margine. Su smarginature e marginalità del presente* (Mucchi Editore, 2024)

Recensione di Carla Fusco
(Università per Stranieri di Siena; Università degli Studi della Tuscia, IT)

Il volume *Attraversare il margine. Smarginature e marginalità del presente*, nato all'interno del progetto di ricerca E.C.O. – *Environmental Campania Observatory* del Dipartimento di Lettere e Beni Culturali dell'Università della Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli", si presenta come un'opera corale e densissima che sceglie di interrogare uno dei concetti più sfuggenti e al tempo stesso più fecondi della contemporaneità: quello di margine. Fin dalle prime pagine introduttive, la prefazione di Elena Porciani delinea con chiarezza la posta in gioco, invitando il lettore a considerare il margine non semplicemente come una condizione di esclusione o di subalternità, ma come una categoria critica in grado di illuminare le contraddizioni del nostro tempo e di aprire nuove prospettive di lettura e di azione.

Il margine, scrive Porciani, non è mai qualcosa di fisso, è uno spazio dinamico, ambivalente, capace di rivelarsi tanto come luogo di vulnerabilità quanto come laboratorio di resistenza e di trasformazione. Nella società globalizzata e interconnessa, in cui i confini sembrano dissolversi e le distinzioni tradizionali appaiono obsolete, emergono con forza nuove forme di esclusione e marginalità. Guerre, migrazioni, disuguaglianze economiche, concentrazione del potere mediatico: tutto ciò produce condizioni di smarginatura che chiedono di essere comprese con strumenti inediti. È in questa tensione che il volume trova la propria ragion d'essere proponendo il margine come lente metodologica e come spazio

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epistemologico attraverso cui interpretare i fenomeni culturali, sociali e ambientali del presente.

L'opera si muove con consapevolezza entro una prospettiva interdisciplinare che intreccia saperi diversi. L'ecocritica, al centro del progetto E.C.O., si combina con la filosofia, la storia, la sociologia, la letteratura e i *media studies*, dando vita a un mosaico ricco e sfaccettato. La Campania, scelta come laboratorio privilegiato di osservazione, si configura come luogo paradigmatico in cui dinamiche globali e locali si incontrano e si scontrano. Non è soltanto un territorio geografico, ma una costruzione culturale e simbolica, attraversata da narrazioni contrastanti: da quelle turistiche che ne esaltano il patrimonio e la bellezza a quelle mediatiche che ne mettono in luce le fragilità sociali ed ecologiche. Questo continuo oscillare tra centro e periferia, tra attrazione e stigmatizzazione, rende la regione un caso esemplare per riflettere sul margine come categoria critica.

La forza del concetto di margine risiede anche nella sua apertura semantica. Non riguarda soltanto spazi geografici o categorie sociali, ma attraversa le discipline, i linguaggi, le forme della comunicazione. Pensare il margine significa dunque rifiutare definizioni univoche e accettare la complessità. In questo senso il volume si distingue, perché non riduce mai la marginalità a un dato puramente sociologico o a un semplice effetto di esclusione economica, ma la interpreta come dispositivo critico. Un dispositivo che permette di interrogare fenomeni eterogenei: la precarietà del lavoro, le nuove forme di povertà urbana, le narrazioni dei territori, la rappresentazione mediatica dei migranti, fino alle trasformazioni ecologiche e ambientali che ridisegnano i confini materiali e simbolici del nostro vivere collettivo.

Il dialogo che il libro instaura con alcune grandi tradizioni teoriche è costante e produttivo. Da Gramsci ai *subaltern studies*, da Foucault a Derrida fino a bell hooks, l'opera costruisce una genealogia del pensiero critico sul margine. Gramsci, con i suoi *Quaderni del carcere*, aveva già mostrato come i gruppi subalterni, pur privati di voce, costituissero il

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terreno su cui leggere i rapporti di forza della società. I *subaltern studies*, sviluppati a partire dagli anni Ottanta in ambito postcoloniale, hanno ampliato questa prospettiva interrogando la storia dalla parte degli esclusi, mettendo in discussione i modelli storiografici eurocentrici. Foucault ha insegnato a vedere la marginalità come prodotto di dispositivi di potere e di controllo, mentre Derrida ha 'decostruito' la nozione di margine come luogo destabilizzante, capace di scardinare le logiche centrali. Infine, bell hooks ha dato al margine un valore politico ed emancipativo, spazio da cui ripensare la società attraverso l'esperienza di chi è relegato ai bordi. Questo dialogo con le grandi tradizioni teoriche non è mai ornamentale, ma si intreccia con i casi di studio, fornendo un quadro di riferimento ampio che rende il volume solido e al tempo stesso aperto al confronto.

La ricchezza di prospettive si accompagna a una forte attenzione alla contemporaneità. Viviamo in una condizione che Porciani definisce "post-realtà intermediale", in cui i confini tra verità e menzogna, tra testimonianza e manipolazione, si fanno sempre più labili. Le *fake news*, la propaganda digitale, la manipolazione delle immagini non sono elementi marginali ma strutturali del nostro tempo. Leggerli attraverso la categoria di margine significa coglierne la funzione di spostamento, di alterazione, ma anche la possibilità di un loro uso critico. Laddove l'informazione ufficiale costruisce narrazioni di esclusione, le voci marginali trovano nella rete spazi inediti di visibilità e di contro-discorso. Il margine, ancora una volta, si rivela ambivalente: luogo di manipolazione e insieme di emancipazione.

La letteratura occupa un posto di rilievo in questa riflessione. Essa non è mai trattata come semplice rappresentazione, ma come laboratorio linguistico e immaginativo in cui il margine prende forma. Un esempio emblematico è offerto dall'opera di Elena Ferrante, dove la smarginatura è al tempo stesso esperienza psichica, gesto estetico e metafora sociale. Le protagoniste dei suoi romanzi vivono costantemente al limite, tra appartenenza e fuga, tra desiderio di emancipazione e rischio di dissoluzione. La smarginatura ferrantiana diventa così simbolo di un'identità che non si chiude mai, che non si lascia catturare da una

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definizione univoca, e che proprio per questo riesce a parlare alle esperienze di marginalità di molti. Allo stesso modo, altre forme artistiche e mediali vengono lette come luoghi di negoziazione del margine, capaci di restituire la complessità delle identità e dei territori.

La scelta di assumere la Campania come laboratorio di ricerca non è casuale. Questa regione, troppo spesso schiacciata tra stereotipi e narrazioni semplificanti, rappresenta un esempio concreto di come il margine sia costruzione culturale. Le immagini della Campania oscillano tra la celebrazione turistica delle sue bellezze e la stigmatizzazione legata alla criminalità o al degrado ambientale. Il volume mostra come queste rappresentazioni non siano neutre, ma frutto di processi storici, economici e mediatici che producono marginalità e identità. Studiare la Campania significa dunque interrogare i meccanismi che trasformano un territorio in "periferia" simbolica, ma significa anche restituire complessità e valore a un'area che si rivela centrale per comprendere le dinamiche globali. In questo senso, la creazione del portale Campania Landtelling è un risultato importante: uno strumento che mette insieme ricerca, narrazione e valorizzazione, mostrando come l'accademia possa produrre impatto culturale e sociale.

Un altro aspetto che emerge con forza è la dimensione politica della marginalità. Il margine non è solo oggetto di descrizione, ma spazio da cui ripensare le pratiche sociali. Laddove il centro impone le proprie logiche e le proprie gerarchie, il margine diventa luogo di resistenza e di contro-narrazione. Pensiamo alle lotte dei movimenti migranti, alle comunità che rivendicano diritti e visibilità, ai collettivi artistici che trasformano spazi degradati in laboratori culturali. Tutte queste esperienze trovano nel margine il proprio punto di forza, proprio perché capaci di sfidare il centro e di produrre nuove forme di *agency*. Il volume invita il lettore a considerare il margine non come semplice condizione di debolezza, ma come risorsa critica ed emancipativa.

Ciò che colpisce maggiormente, leggendo queste pagine, è la capacità di coniugare rigore teorico e apertura interpretativa. L'idea di margine non viene mai irrigidita in una

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definizione univoca, ma lasciata nella sua ambiguità fertile. È proprio questa ambiguità a renderla categoria potente, capace di attraversare fenomeni diversi e di restituirne la complessità. Il margine è, al tempo stesso, luogo di esclusione e di possibilità, di vulnerabilità e di creatività, di silenzio e di parola. È uno spazio in cui i confini si sfaldano e da cui è possibile ripensare il mondo. In questo senso, *Attraversare il margine* non è solo un libro, ma un invito a un esercizio critico, a un attraversamento che riguarda non solo il campo accademico, ma la vita quotidiana di ciascuno di noi.

In definitiva, l'opera riesce a dimostrare come la ricerca umanistica possa essere ancora oggi strumento di comprensione del presente e di trasformazione culturale. In un tempo in cui i discorsi pubblici tendono alla semplificazione, alla polarizzazione e alla superficialità, questo volume offre invece complessità, profondità e apertura. Non si limita a parlare di marginalità, ma invita a viverla come prospettiva critica, come lente con cui leggere le contraddizioni del nostro mondo e come spazio da cui immaginare alternative. L'attraversamento del margine diventa così un percorso di conoscenza e di emancipazione, una pratica che chiede di abbandonare certezze e di confrontarsi con le zone liminali della realtà. È un libro che non offre risposte preconfezionate, ma che insegna a porsi le domande giuste, a guardare il mondo dai bordi, da quei punti di vista laterali che troppo spesso vengono esclusi. Ed è proprio in questa capacità di decentrare lo sguardo che risiede la sua forza più grande, perché solo dal margine, come ci ricorda l'intera tradizione critica che il volume convoca, è possibile comprendere davvero la complessità del presente e aprirsi a futuri diversi.

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Nota bio-bibliografica

Carla Fusco ha conseguito il Dottorato di ricerca in Letteratura inglese presso l'Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" di Chieti-Pescara. Ha svolto attività didattica e di ricerca nell'ambito della lingua e della letteratura inglese presso diverse sedi universitarie, tra cui l'Università per Stranieri di Siena, l'Università degli Studi della Basilicata (Potenza), l'Università degli Studi di Macerata, l'Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" di Chieti-Pescara e l'Università degli Studi di Teramo, in qualità di docente a contratto. Attualmente è titolare dei corsi di Lingua e traduzione inglese presso l'Università per Stranieri di Siena e di *English for International Relations and Human Rights* presso l'Università degli Studi della Tuscia (Viterbo). La sua attività di ricerca si concentra sulla letteratura vittoriana e contemporanea, ambiti nei quali ha pubblicato numerosi articoli e saggi su riviste letterarie italiane e internazionali. Nel 2016 ha pubblicato una monografia dedicata a Kazuo Ishiguro, dal titolo *Gli inganni della memoria. Studio sulla narrativa di Kazuo Ishiguro* (Universitalia). È inoltre caporedattrice della rivista *Margins/Marges/Margini*.

Indirizzo e-mail: carla.fusco@unistrasi.it
carla.fusco@unitus.it

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Massimiliano Demata, *Discourses of Borders and the Nation in the USA: A Discourse-Historical Analysis* (Routledge, 2023)

Reviewed by Giuseppe Vitale
(Università degli Studi di Napoli Parthenope, IT)

Massimiliano Demata's *Discourses of Borders and the Nation in the USA: A Discourse-Historical Analysis* presents a meticulously researched and theoretically grounded examination of the evolving role of the border in contemporary American political discourse. The three chapters of the book delve into the way issues of national identity and security are constructed and contested in the US, particularly in the polarised socio-political climate of the Trump era and its aftermath. Specifically, the author aims to examine the main content, discursive strategies and linguistic means employed in the conceptualisation of borders across a wide range of discourses of the US nation, ranging from speeches and interviews to campaign websites and social media posts by prominent political figures like Trump and more progressive ones including Biden, Sanders and Clinton. The application of Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Analysis (DHA), providing a strong methodological framework to the study, allows for a deep exploration of the intertextual and interdiscursive connections in the discourses under observation, revealing how global historical events and underlying ideologies have significantly influenced the formation of contemporary US political rhetoric.

Chapter 1 establishes a clear timeline for the elevation of the border as a central concern in US political discourse, identifying Brexit and Trump's 2016 presidential victory as the pivotal moments. The author argues that these events catalysed a significant shift,

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transforming the border from a mere geographical demarcation into a potent symbol of national sovereignty and security. Functioning to "institutionalise and legitimise the existence of the nation" (Demata 2023, 9), borders are presented as both physical and rhetorical tools for asserting national authority. Moreover, the chapter underscores how nationalist and populist ideologies have strategically employed the discourse of the nation and the rhetoric and linguistic devices associated with it to normalise and legitimise border fortification. The shift towards both the physical and rhetorical fortification of the nation reflects a global response to perceived threats and vulnerabilities, with tangible barriers like walls serving as potent symbols of social exclusion and security management. Ultimately, the dichotomic construction of 'us' versus 'them', typical of nationalist and populist narratives, finds its most visible manifestation in these physical and discursive representations of the border, highlighting its role in institutionalising separation and discrimination.

The analysis of Donald Trump's discourse, presented in Chapter 2, is particularly compelling. The book effectively demonstrates how Trump's rhetoric transformed the border from a geographical boundary into a potent symbol of national security and identity. The author expertly unpacks Trump's use of fearmongering, the construction of an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy and the strategic deployment of terms like 'illegal' and 'criminal' to dehumanise and demonise immigrants. The detailed analysis of linguistic devices, such as the use of third-person plural pronouns to create distance, the 'flood' metaphor and the merging of Mexican immigrants and Syrian refugees into a single, threatening 'other' reveals the manipulative and dangerous power of Trump's language. Moreover, the insightful analysis of the aestheticisation and branding of the so-called 'Trump Wall' as a luxury good adds how Trump successfully commodified and politicised the border, turning it into a tangible representation of his political agenda and personal brand. By presenting the wall as a symbol of national identity and difference and employing aesthetic language like "great" and 'beautiful', Trump's rhetoric, as the author points out, successfully

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positioned the border as an embodiment of the exclusive "privilege of being American and of living on the right side of the wall" (Demata 2023, 46).

However, the book's value extends beyond a mere critique of Trump's rhetoric. As Chapter 3 shows, it also critically examines the responses and adaptations of the concept of border from Democratic and Liberal politicians. The author observes the surprising convergence between Trump and his political opponents in certain areas, such as the acknowledgment of the necessity for border control and national security, even among those advocating for more humane immigration policies. Despite the deployment of a more emotional language evoking rage and sadness for the inefficacy of Trump's policies, the book's analysis reveals how Democrats like Clinton and Biden reconceptualised and appropriated discourses traditionally associated to the Republican ideology, notably family rights, to critique his lack of humanity. Additionally, the Democratic response to Trump's wall project, exemplified in the book by Biden's emphasis on technological border modernisation, indicated a shift in the engagement of Democrats with border security. These examples strongly support the author's thesis: the enduring impact of Trump's border narrative has forced even his political adversaries to engage with the discourse of borders, albeit through different linguistic and strategic means.

In conclusion, *Discourses of Borders and the Nation in the USA: A Discourse-Historical Analysis* provides a significant contribution to the fields of discourse analysis, political communication and American Studies. It offers a sophisticated and critical examination of how the border has been transformed into a central component of national identity and political rhetoric in the contemporary United States, in both Republican and Democratic discourses. The book's rigorous methodology, insightful analysis and clear prose make it an essential read for anyone seeking to understand the complex dynamics of political discourse in the modern era. Undoubtedly, Trump's re-election in 2024 certainly necessitates further research to determine how the border might be discursively recontextualised and reshaped within his second mandate as US President.

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Bio-bibliographical note

Giuseppe Vitale is a third-year PhD candidate in Linguistic, Terminological and Intercultural Studies at Parthenope University of Naples. His research focuses on oral narratives of the Italian Scottish diaspora, with a focus on issues of identity, memory, and belonging. His research interests include Anglo-Italian Studies, Migration and Diaspora Studies, and Narrative Studies. He employs Corpus Linguistics and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies as primary methodological approaches to delve into these areas. He is a member of the PRIN project *Women's Empowerment* at Parthenope University.

Email address: giuseppe.vitale003@studenti.uniparthenope.it

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Geographies of the Marginal: Dialogues on Spatiality and Marginality in Literary Cartographies

In Conversation with Professor Robert T. Tally

Carla Tempestoso
(Università della Calabria, IT)

Introduction

This interview with Professor Robert T. Tally stems from a sustained interest in the intersections of spatial theory, literary analysis, and the politics of marginality. As one of the foremost voices in Spatial Literary Studies and co-editor of the journal *Margins*, Tally has contributed extensively to the theorization of space and place in literature, particularly through his promotion of geocritical methodologies. Professor Tally is a Professor of English and an Honorary Professor of International Studies at Texas State University, where he has received numerous honours for his academic work, including multiple awards for excellence in scholarly activity and teaching.

A pivotal figure in the development of the spatial humanities, Tally's influential works include *Spatiality* (2012), part of Routledge's *The New Critical Idiom* series, where he offers a compelling overview of the so-called *Spatial Turn* in contemporary theory. Engaging with thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, and Edward Soja, *Spatiality* argues for a geocritical framework capable of illuminating how literature both reflects and reshapes spatial realities. This commitment to spatial thinking is further elaborated in his edited volume *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2011) and his translation of Bertrand Westphal's foundational *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2011).

The questions posed in this interview revolve around Tally's body of work, including *Utopia in the Age of Globalization* (2013), *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories*

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in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies (2017), and *The Fiction of Dread* (2024). Central to our dialogue is the notion that spatiality is not a neutral backdrop but a constitutive force in literature—a force that enables the construction, negotiation, and critique of marginality. As such, this conversation investigates how concepts like exclusion, utopia, and the monstrous intersect with literary cartographies, and how geocritical methods may serve to map the contours of marginal existence, both imagined and lived.

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CT: Professor Tally, thank you for granting me this interview. I am honoured to have the opportunity to ask you some questions. Could you tell us about your journey and how you became interested in the studies of spatiality?

RT: I don't recall a time when I was not interested in space, place, and "mapping" (broadly conceived). Perhaps it is because, as a child, my family moved a lot, and I suppose displacement makes one more aware of place in general. As the saying goes, in Tolkien's version of it, "a fish out of water is the only fish to have an inkling of water." I expect it is also because I'm from the American South (in my case, North Carolina), where it seems that asking "Where are you from?" is a natural first question to ask when meeting someone, which then invites a discussion of that place or of people or events connected with it (e.g., "Oh, I have a cousin who lives there!" or "I visited that city when I was in high school" and so on). And then there's the more embarrassing possibility, which is that I don't have the best "sense of direction" and therefore can get easily lost; someone who is lost or worried about getting lost is more likely to think about mapping or desiring a map, I'd imagine.

As for my studies, the influence of existentialism likely paved that path, for existentialism insists upon the fact of one's situatedness in space (as well as in time), also emphasizing the ways that the situation is changeable, thus that our being-in-the-world is changeable. While reading and thinking about one's place in space—especially in social

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space, which I found to be somewhat analogous and related to one's place in history—I became more aware of theorists and other writers who deal with such issues, including Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and my own teacher Fredric Jameson. Later, this work was enlarged through reading others, and as I came to work more closely on what we might think of as "traditional" literary studies (e.g., I wrote my dissertation on Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick*), I began to imagine ways in which these theories worked in relation to literature, especially to narrative. Not everything I've done since is part of the same overall project, of course, but most of what I do is still informed by this intellectual background.

CT: In your work *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies*, you explore the intersections between ecocriticism and geocriticism. How do you see these two fields contributing to our understanding of marginality, particularly in relation to environmental and spatial justice?
RT: I'm not sure whether *I* do much exploring of those intersections, but the contributors to that volume do a great job. Apart from the Introduction to *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism*, which I wrote with my co-editor Christine M. Battista, I have never really done any work on ecocriticism or environmental literary studies. Chrissie was the ecocritic between the two of us. But it is clear that there are "overlapping territories" within the critical theories and practices of geocriticism and ecocriticism. The critical awareness of space and place ("topophrenia") is undoubtedly part of any environmentalist program, and the analysis of the ways in which space is produced, ordered, inhabited, occupied, traversed, or otherwise encountered may contribute greatly to the ecological and environmental studies of various spaces and places as well.

As for marginality in relation to environmental and spatial justice, I am not expert, but we have certainly seen at both local and more international levels the ways in which pollution is unevenly distributed. Just as the landfill or dump may be located at the margins

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of a city or outside its limits, thus transporting garbage to the "margins" with respect to a civil "centre," at regional or national levels waste can be dispatched to wastelands (or worse, the sea, which has its notorious islands of trash and now microparticles of plastic throughout), and in an international system, some entire countries—many in what used to be called the Third World—become dumping grounds for the detritus and jetsam of so-called "developed" economies. In this sense, spatial and environmental marginalization is directly tied to systems of "waste management" that perpetuate other forms of inequality, not least of which involves public health. But then, the reality of global climate change has only underscored the degree to which all people in all places are part of a single broader system, which itself must be changed if humanity on the planet is to survive. Hence, marginality certainly exists, but all people are likely closer to those "margins" in everyday life than they might imagine.

CT: Given your extensive work on spatiality and geocriticism, how do you see the concept of marginality being spatially constructed within literary and cultural texts, particularly in relation to the 'spatial turn' you discuss in *Spatiality*?

RT: Marginality is interesting, in large part because it is relational, always defined with respect to some sort of centrality or otherwise prioritized organization of space. But surely one of the most crucial lessons taught by geocriticism or spatial literary studies is that space is itself dynamic, and hence what might be thought of as marginal or central in a given moment or circumstance might be reversed or altered in others. The "spatial turn" in the humanities and the social sciences did not so much highlight that which was previously marginalized or even reveal the processes of marginalization, although that may also be true, as it helped to make clear the ways in which what we imagine as central or marginal are historically, culturally, and socially contingent.

I expect that that's why poststructuralist theory (as it is called in the UK and USA, at least, for the term never meant much in France, even to the thinkers to whom the label was

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applied) has been so important to the so-called "spatial turn," since the work of such thinkers as Foucault, Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard, to name a few, contributed to theory of social norms and forms in flux. Foucault in particular—with his studies of madness, the medical gaze, discipline and punishment, and sexuality—is probably most closely associated with the spatial and political study of the margins and the marginalized, but even there, he is most interested in the emergence of the power of normalization and the "invention" of knowledge, far more so than in the identities of the marginalized or something like that. Indeed, not to sound too deconstructionist, but the margins are themselves centres, and vice versa, when one examines the dynamics of space and historically produced and as occupied or inhabited. The same ways of representing space that would create centres and margins can operate in such a way as to reverse or transform those spaces and their representations in literature.

If anything, the "spatial turn" in the humanities and social sciences has help to show how terms like *marginal* or *central* cannot refer to stable categories or populations but must be seen as part of a more complex array of forces, making marginality or centrality contingent upon innumerable factors that render them perpetually subject to change or even reversal.

CT: In *The Fiction of Dre*ad, you explore dystopian narratives. How does the portrayal of marginal characters and spaces in these narratives reflect broader anxieties about societal marginalization and exclusion?

RT: *The Fiction of Dread: Dystopia, Monstrosity, and Apocalypse* began as a sort of sequel or companion to the earlier book on utopia, but of course part of my point is that dystopia is not really the opposite or even the "flipside" of utopia, but rather another means by which we "map" the present situation while still seeking to imagine alternatives. Hence "dread" is not the opposite of "hope," but rather a sort of anticipatory anxiety about potential futures as experienced very much in the here and now. As I was thinking of that in the context of

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contemporary culture, I kept coming across figures of monstrosity (including actual "monsters") as well as a wide variety of end-of-the-world scenarios, some of which, ironically perhaps, seem preferable or even utopian with respect to the present condition. For example, in the remake of *The Planet of the Apes*, audiences are actively encouraged to cheer for the apes over and against the humans who have destroyed the world and thus earned their near-species-wide evanescence. In the reimagined *Westworld* series, we sympathize with and even applaud the androids as they wreak havoc upon the humans, whereas in the original film the robots were terrifying enemies to be defeated. This is part of the reversal of margin and centre, perhaps, but it also demonstrates that reversibility was always a feature of the marginality-centrality concept.

The figure of the monster is the most obvious example of the socially marginalized character or group, but as I noted before, marginality is relational and the position on the margins is apt to change as the social spaces (and the powers organizing them) also change. Many dystopian and apocalyptic narratives often place the heroes on the margins, thus establishing a gutsy band of "outsiders" attempting to overcome or just survive the intolerable conditions in which they find themselves; yet here too, they are *central*, and not just for the purposes of the plot but also in order to "marginalize" the enemies in ways that make for better melodrama. To champion the marginal often means to seek to make those perceived as marginalized more central, which politically makes about as much sense as taking one of Foucault's prisoners out of his cell and placing him in the watchtower, where he can panoptically observe all others. That is, the underlying power relations—including those that we may find odious or repressive—do not change at all. In the best of these dystopian works, the dialectic of centre and margin reveals the complexities of such "positioning," and avoids any facile lionizing or demonization of those who seem to occupy such positions. Such narratives are often especially valuable precisely because the force the reader or viewer to engage with the complexity, even if it merely involves sympathizing with the enemy or being sceptical toward the heroes or something like that.

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CT: You argue for a "new form of utopian discourse" in *Utopia in the Age of Globalization*. How does the concept of marginality challenge or inform these utopian visions, particularly in the context of globalized spaces and systems?

RT: My views on utopia in that book are closely tied to work by Herbert Marcuse and Fredric Jameson, although I don't claim to follow all their ideas all the time, of course. The crucial matter involves the ability or inability to imagine alternatives to what already exists. In discussing the possibility of utopian thinking, for instance, Marcuse refers to "the scandal of qualitative difference." In other words, the utopian impulse is not about just making sure we are able to satisfy our material needs better or have more abundance to work with, but rather involves imagining entirely new forms, inventing new needs and desires that are then satisfied, and constructing future organizations that look nothing like our own existing ones. To put it differently, utopia attempts to overthrow the tyranny of the actual.

Needless to say, perhaps, this cannot truly be done with "blueprint utopias" or other formal plans or schemes. Such may be useful as thought experiments, hence the value of utopian narratives from Thomas More's *Utopia* through Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* to Jameson's own "American Utopia." But Marx's line about not providing "receipts [i.e., recipes] for the cook shops of the future" must always be born in mind by utopians: it is not for us to tell the future how to live, but only for us to engage in a "ruthless critique of all that exists," thus helping to clear the ground upon which to imagine alternatives.

As for marginality, it may be that imagining alternatives to the present order would involve movement toward the centre or, perhaps even more utopian still, the elimination of any social hierarchies with respect to centre or margin. In connection with the contemporary all-too-real "real world" system, this might be viewed in relation to the ongoing effects of the colonial networks which are themselves part of the globalization of capitalism itself. Along similar lines, within societies or communities, the marginalization of ethnic, religious,

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or racial groups (not always "minorities," of course, since in most societies the dominant castes or classes are themselves of a relatively small number) can serve the powers that be in ways that make changes to the order more difficult. Indeed, there are always multiple, cascading fields of differentiation, often crystallizing into temporarily stable hierarchies with their inequities and iniquities, whose manifestations vary from place to place.

But then, as capitalism as a system becomes more global, it effectively brings the margins or otherwise neglected spaces into its all-consuming ambit. This is not to say that political or cultural "marginalization" does not continue, for that is itself a feature of the spatial dynamics of capitalism; it just means that the uneven and exploitative developments of this network of spaces can only also prove that "we are all in the same boat," as it were. The concept of the Anthropocene, for all its problems—most visibly: ignoring and thus exculpating the people who are actually destroying ecosystems by blaming "mankind" in the abstract—at least has that advantage. If you can admit that man can change the world at its most fundamental levels, then surely you can admit that we can change our societies as well.

CT: In your work on geocriticism, you highlight the importance of mapping and place. How can geocritical methodologies be used to analyse and understand the marginalization of specific communities or groups within urban and rural landscapes?

RT: If we think about literal maps for a moment—and please note, in my own work, I rarely discuss *literal* maps—then among the first things we would notice is the way in which the space depicted is framed, which in turn means we recognize what is most visibly *central* and what could be called *marginal*. What elements are chosen to be included is another part of this, although there is not necessarily anything nefarious about the decision to leave things out. (For example, a street map ought to include streets, but need not include lots of other information; a nautical chart of estuaries or the like will include the depth at low tide, so sailors know whether there is sufficient water to navigate, but such data is not needed on

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land, presumably.) All this undoubtedly affects the way the spaces and places are viewed more generally, and this will include elements of how we *value* such sites.

Let me offer a potentially humorous example. The cover art (chosen by my publisher) for my edited collection *Teaching Space, Place, and Literature* featured a familiar world map of the landmasses of the planet earth. I say "familiar," because it followed the convention of making the prime meridian (the line connecting the north and south poles and running through Greenwich, England) the centre, and this has been relatively common ever since world maps based on the Mercator Projection became popular after the seventeenth century; that popularity is based, in part, on the adoption of such maps by leaders within the British Empire, who undoubtedly appreciated the ways that England was imagined as central. The map on my book cover also used the Mercator Projection, which distorts spaces, enlarging elements that are farther from the equator, thus making Greenland appear almost as large as South America, for instance, whereas the later is contains over six times Greenland's area. These decisions affect the ways that "we" imagine the world. With the Prime Meridian central, east Asia and Australia or, on the other side, Alaska are literally marginalizations (i.e., located at the edges of the map). As it happens, this image manages to cut out New Zealand and the Pacific Islands entirely, so the Kiwis are worse than marginalized, it seems, as they are omitted entirely!

Needless to say, perhaps, but once a given place is understood in the popular imagination as "marginal," then its populations may be seen as less important in other areas as well. Thus, the way that a given map represents the places on its surface has real world effects, as many critics have noted; some have produced alternative maps, renaming places (e.g., replacing the colonizer's toponyms with prior Indigenous names) or reorganizing the spaces (as with the famous "upside-down" world map). Changing the ways we "see" these spaces can affect the ways we imagine the places and their inhabitants as well. Some of this will depend on the uses to which these "maps" are to be put, after all, so it is not a matter of one map being "correct" and another "incorrect"—although inaccurate representations are

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possible, obviously—but more a matter of what is better or worse for the purposes to which the map with be put.

Again, marginality or centrality is relational, and these things can change very quickly, depending on the uses to which such concepts are put. In the U.S., for example, the urban-rural divide has taken on all sort of ideological and material nuances, as wealth and power-relations have shifted in recent decades, while the ideals of this or that imagined community reinforce various "codes" associated with such spaces. A certain political rhetoric would simultaneously project "rural" spaces are more *real*—that is, truer representations of an Americanness, with evocations of "the heartland" or other patriotic symbols—and still support policies that contribute to the destruction of that putative "way of life." The very process of making "the heartland" *central* to the idea of America also effectively *marginalizes* those places and the people living in them with respect to the larger national or international political-economic system.

CT: Considering the dystopian narratives, as you describe in *The Fiction of Dread*, how does the figure of the 'monster' or the 'outsider' embody or challenge the concept of marginality?
RT: While it is true that the monstrous might be understood as something outside of the norm, an aberration or an alien, and hence "marginal" relative to some notion of the centre-as-normal, part of my argument in *The Fiction of Dread* is that monstrosity has become central or at least predominant on our time. So, I don't really agree that the monstrous represents or occupies a marginal position today, but is rather a means by which we understand our system itself. In this teratocene, an "age of monsters," monstrosity lies at the core of our system. As I say, this is a dynamic, protean system, and so the metaphor of the centre and margin may not be helpful, unless it be understood that those positions are themselves always subject to change, and, indeed, they are likely to contain their opposite already, inasmuch as the margin of one representation might be central to another. In an older "monster theory," perhaps, the monster could be seen as the outsider, but I think now we

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must face the degree to which any sense of monstrous is itself a means by which we give shape to the non-monstrous, whatever that may be. Monsters thus help us map our "real" world.

CT: You mention the influence of theorists like Foucault and Soja in *Spatiality*. How do their perspectives on power and space intersect with the concept of marginality, and how do you apply these ideas in your analysis of literary texts?

RT: Edward Soja's writings on urban geography are indebted to Foucault, in part because Soja was so intrigued by Foucault's concept of the heterotopia (i.e., places of difference), which Soja in turn connected to his notion of "thirdspace." I find "heterotopia" less helpful, and I think it is probably noteworthy that Foucault introduces the term in the late 1960s only to drop it entirely thereafter, even when writing his book on prisons, which are presumably quite heterotopian; I think he felt the term to be too loose to be of much analytic value, which can even be seen in his "Of Other Spaces" lecture, where a wide variety of disparate sites (e.g., the mirror, cemeteries, brothels, boats, etc.) are named as examples. And, of course, given the dynamism of social space, any heterotopia could become a mono- or homotopia at different moments or under altered circumstances.

Notably, for Foucault, this is not a question of "margins." Often the spaces involved are quite central, and indeed, the spatio-political processes associated with centralization can be seen to create or sustain these spaces of difference. In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, it is not that the criminal is marginalized; on the contrary, the criminal to be disciplined or punished is made central to an entire array of powers of normalization. It is a great historical irony that Foucault is sometimes associated with the marginalized or even seen as a champion of their cause, because most often his work demonstrates how the formerly marginalized ("ship of fools," etc.) have ceased to exist in modern societies. For Foucault, even sites or networks of resistance are always still within the matrix of power-knowledge relations, so that there really cannot be a "margin" in which to operate apart

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from it. Or, to think of it another way, the margins are already incorporated into the centres (and vice versa!).

I'm not sure I'd say I *apply* Foucault or Soja to literature, but I think their work may be of value to literary critics who are thinking of the ways that spaces are organized in societies, which in turn may be of use in examining the representations of social spaces in literary works. If anything, they emphasize the ways that a given locus can have shifting values that reveal more simplistic visions to be facile at best. So, for example, in *The Scarlet Letter*, the scaffold in the middle of Boston is a site of public visibility, and yet it is also where Hawthorne shows so much to be hidden; the forest is a place of secrecy (e.g., where a sexual tryst could occur) but is show to be a space of openness, where one's "true" self can be made visible. But then, as Hawthorne also shows, these too can be reversed as the forest becomes a place of self-delusion or the scaffold a site for hiding the truth. In such a moral geography, the idea of centre and margin can only be provisional, subject to constant modification.

CT: In *Geocritical Explorations*, you discuss the interaction between writers, readers, texts, and places. How does the reader's own marginal position or perspective influence their interpretation of spatial marginality within a text?

RT: That's an interesting question. I'm not sure if I understand what you mean by a "reader's own marginal position or perspective." Do you mean that the reader stands in a marginal position with respect to the text itself, which would presumably be "central"? Or is this to do with some sense of personal identity as tied to a type of place, such as a reader who grew up on a farm being particularly attuned to the plight of farmers or the specifics of farmland in a novel?

Geocriticism, in the somewhat expansive way I employ the term, refers not so much to a specific method of interpretation but rather to a sort of comportment toward the text that would allow one to pay attention to the spatial aspects of the text under consideration, which could then take many different directions. For instance, literary geography, which

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could involve the textual representation of different categories of geographical space (say, rural-urban, mountain-valley, or island-mainland), might highlight the ways in which these places influence the characters, events, plot, and so on of the literary work. But one could also examine architectural spaces, even mathematical ones, as influencing the understanding of the text.

As with the map, in which some things may be depicted as more central or more marginal within the framing of the picture itself or simply in the choices of what to include or emphasize (boldface lettering, e.g.), an author might choose to leave certain elements of the narrative out entirely or in the background, foregrounding others. A reader who is interested in those "untold stories" or underrepresented places could focus on them. My most recent book, *The Mismeasure of Orcs: A Critical Reassessment of Tolkien's Demonized Creatures* (2025), examines a particular "race" (or apparent races) within Tolkien's fantasy world as depicted in his writings; these characters are not the main ones, and in some cases one needs to speculate about them (e.g., e.g., Tolkien insists that they were Orc women, who were mothers and wives, but we never *see* any in his texts, in part because he doesn't imagine women as soldiers—we only see one female soldier at all in *The Lord of the Rings*, but even she has to disguise herself as a man in order to fight). But then, Tolkien has enormous quantities of "untold stories," myths and legends hinted at but not fully developed, distant places seen from afar but never visited in person. That is not so much a question of "marginalization" as it is the usual work of literary cartography, where some elements are placed or placed more prominently on the map, and others left off it or not emphasized. Yet that does not prevent readers from exploring those sites on their own as best as they can.

CT: Given the contemporary climate of 'dread' you describe in *The Fiction of Dread*, how does the concept of marginality contribute to or exacerbate this sense of anxiety and hopelessness in popular culture?

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RT: As far as I can tell, the desire to be more marginal or even marginalized seems to be an aspect of the dystopian anxieties of the present, since for so many, the horror lies in a near-total system which leaves no spaces at the margins or off the map. Many of the pop culture depictions of dystopias or apocalyptic scenarios feature individuals or more often small group attempting to get to the margins, remain on the margins, or establish some enclave apart from the ostensible "central" powers that be. This is not to say that the sense of persecution of those who feel marginalized in a society is mitigated, but it seems that integration into a more central space is less desired than a more total separation from it, a space outside of the terrible world of the mainstream political or social system.

I suppose these enclaves might be considered utopian in that regard, but they are largely the result of the widespread anxiety (or dread) that makes one wish to imagine and to inhabit them. Perhaps it is understandable that, when a world system becomes so vast and nuanced that it is arguably inescapable, there should be the desire by some to escape, to live at the margins. It is an understandable desire, although it strikes me as being almost exactly like elitist enclaves of the very privileged (as with Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*), which is not exactly a utopian vision of a better world. The celebration of the marginal can itself become an endorsement of such inequality, an us-versus-them model that eventually consigns the majority of our fellows to perdition. The real hope would lie in changing the system itself, admittedly a difficult thing to even imagine, as has been widely observed. But dread or anxiety is not the same as "hopelessness," and indeed, dread is ultimately another form of hope in its anticipation of possible futures.

CT: You connect dystopian literature to the anxieties of our current capitalist system. How does the marginalization of certain groups serve the interests of or challenge the stability of this system, as depicted in the texts you analyse?

RT: If ever there were a dynamic system, the surely capitalism—the capitalist mode of production as an organization of the social sphere—is among the most pervasive. At its root,

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what might be called *marginalization* is tied to alienated labour, the exploitation of the worker and the extraction of surplus value from the labour. That said, all societies have also maintained other forms of marginalization of populations (e.g., ethnic hierarchies, castes, religious discrimination, racisms, and so on) that have contributed to exploitative processes of capitalist development and maintenance. In turn, one finds that such marginalized groups cannot help but discover something like a "class consciousness"—albeit one tied more to race or religion than to economic or social "class" in the traditional Marxist sense—that has at times been placed in the service of anti-capitalist or reformist movements.

Capitalism is, or tends to be, a global system. This does not mean a homogeneous system, of course, and the differences throughout the world and within even relatively delimited spaces within it are always to be found. The system teems with difference, in fact. Marx and Engels famously observed that ways that capitalism has brought "a cosmopolitan character" to all societies in which it is found, for the world market and the global reach of capitalist production means that virtually all nations in the world become intermingled through these relations. Various state forms are required to organize and administer things, but the nation (or race) itself is bound up in an international system. (The rise of nationalisms, which themselves are or tend toward racisms as the "true" members of a given nation are distinguished from those deemed impure, is a reactionary response to this tendency toward the globalization of capital, by and large.) Enclaves, including seemingly utopian ones, might be imagined or even temporarily established, but the system is total, and thus the system itself needs to be changed. In our own era, with climate change and global ecological disaster looming alongside global capitalist exploitation and the rise of ever more vicious forms of nationalism, it is all the more important to recognize the degree to which, as I said before, "we're all in the same boat."

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CT: Considering the resurgence of utopian discourse, as you suggest, what role do you see for marginalized voices and perspectives in shaping and realizing alternative spatial and social futures?

RT: Well, to the extent that being marginalized is considered a "bad" thing, then presumably any utopian vision would wish to do away with the centre-margin distinction entirely, right? Or perhaps it would simply encourage the revaluation of marginality that already seems to be happening among those who would codify the marginal as a "good" thing. But, as I have been suggesting, the idea of the centre or the margin is neither inherently good or bad, and even if it could be seen to be as such, shifting circumstances would reveal dialectical reversals. Moving an element from the margin to the centre of the map might well provide salutary results, particularly in offering new ways of seeing the spaces and places depicted, which in turn might make available new ideas for alternative arrangements or forms that could be preferable. However, being at the centre is not in itself a good or a bad thing. To the extent that spaces of freedom are possible or even imaginable, they will probably need to be available system-wide, for no one is truly free until everyone is free.

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di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Bio-bibliographical notes

Robert T. Tally Jr. is Professor of English at Texas State University. His recent books include *The Mismeasure of Orcs: A Critical Reappraisal of Tolkien's Demonized Creatures* (2025), *The Fiction of Dread: Dystopia, Monstrosity, and Apocalypse* (2024), *Representing Middle-earth: Tolkien, Form, and Ideology* (2024), *The Critical Situation: Vexed Perspectives in Postmodern Literary Studies* (2023), *J.R.R. Tolkien's* The Hobbit*: Realizing History Through Fantasy* (2022), *For a Ruthless Critique of All That Exists: Literature in an Age of Capitalist Realism* (2022), and *Topophrenia: Place, Narrative, and the Spatial Imagination* (2019). He is also the editor of the "Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies" book series.

Email address: robert.tally@txstate.edu

Carla Tempestoso is currently a research fellow in English Literature at the University of Calabria. She is working on the Bluestocking Circle's writers by adopting both a literary and a digital perspective. Her interdisciplinary research interests include Literary Geography, Gender Studies, Migration Studies and Digital Humanities and she is the author of a number of journal papers and books in the fields. Her latest book is *Il circolo delle Bluestockings. La costruzione dell'autorialità femminile con uno sguardo alle traduzioni italiane* (Rubbettino, 2025).

Email address: carla.tempestoso@unical.it

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