SPECIAL SECTION ON REPRESENTATIONS OF HUMAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL VULNERABILITY IN NORTH AMERICAN LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center somberly inaugurated the new millennium, critical discourses on trauma, grieving and vulnerability have gained relevance in the academic sphere. The global dimension of these events was however based on their mediatic repercussions worldwide, rather than on the actual physical impact that they had on the world population. Throughout the following two decades of the twenty-first century, intersecting environmental, economic and technological developments into globalization are revealing a heightened awareness of a similarly global vulnerability that visibilize embodied forms of ongoing trauma, public grieving and structural oppression of precarious life forms and environmental conditions. These stand against the backdrop of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4th IR), which is ambiguously put forward as either the origin or solution of this situation. The last two years of pandemic have intensified the interdependence of virtual connection and social alienation/exclusion relating techno-digital hyperconnectedness and embodied forms of existence, giving a new sense to the concept of "risk society" developed at the turn of the century (Beck 1992; Giddens 1998).

This special issue critically explores the forms of human and environmental vulnerabilities that are generated in the context of the 4th IR, including vulnerable forms of human and non-human intersubjectivity such as online embodied (onlife) interfaces or "inforgs" (Maynard 2015), precarious life and working conditions resulting from the global dimension of the 4th IR, environmental forms

of vulnerability in the 4th IR, the role of the pandemic in raising awareness about global vulnerability, or the hierarchical naturecultures (Haraway 2003) emerging from transhumanist ethics. It includes articles on literary discourses that represent human and environmental vulnerabilities as the object of aesthetic spectacularization (Garland Thomson 1997, 2017) in an information-saturated trade market, with special incidence on forms of human vulnerability based on economic and environmental precariousness (Butler 2004; 2009; Butler et al. 2016; Butler 2020) as well as disability. This issue also explores the instrumentalization as a narrative prosthesis (Mitchell and Snyder 2000) of human and ecological vulnerability as in the construction of the transhumanist ideologies underlying most of the 4th IR from a posthumanist critical perspective.

In this special issue, Rubén Peinado Abarrio presents a critical study of Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020) taking as a starting point the risk society and fragmentation in the digital area. Peinado Abarrio argues that Offill represents a critical posthumanist world which is in need of collective interdependence. Decolonial ecologies and the possibilities of resistance and hope in the context of the 4th IR are explored in Mónica Fernández Jiménez's article. She explores Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013) in relation to the coloniality of climate and the blending of human and environmental narratives. Esperanza González Moreno combines Baudrillard's simulacra theory and Mitchell and Synder's narrative prosthesis to support her main thesis of the effects of technology and the image in Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018). An interdisciplinary analysis is found in the article by Elena Anastasaki and Roula Kitsiou, who discuss the use of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) in Christina Dalcher's *Vox* in connection to women's vulnerability. Their examination of *Vox* works around the stances of silence and gender in a technologically-mediated world. Collective vulnerability and notions of mourning in a global pandemic context are discussed in Leonor Martínez Serrano's article on Goyette's *Solstice 2020: An Archive* (2021). She brings up concerns about

vulnerability in connection to the more-than-human world to emphasise Goyette's reflection on collectivity and vulnerability at complex and unprecedented times such as the COVID19 pandemics the world encountered in 2020.

All these contributions provide highly valuable insights into the contemporary debate of how the 4th IR is transforming the way humans and non-humans live and interact whilst also creating new forms of vulnerabilities. The analysis of North American literary and cultural texts presented in this section opens numerous opportunities to discover and expand the debate from a posthuman and transhuman perspective in our current society.

"FRAGMENTED AND BEWILDERING:" THE NEW RISK SOCIETY IN JENNY OFFILL'S *WEATHER*

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ABSTRACT:
US author Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020) shows her idiosyncratic take on the notion of risk society. In the novel and its accompanying website, Offill develops a type of anxious fragmentation as an answer to the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. A multiple text characterized by compulsive quotation and the formal influence of digital media, *Weather* is held together by a first-person confessional voice. Eventually, Offill manages to achieve a sense of interconnection through an aesthetics of the fragment thanks to a double movement: she favors a critical posthumanist perspective that understands the interrelational subject as constituted by interaction with multiple others, and she explicitly calls for collective action. Therefore, I conclude that *Weather* represents Offill's both aesthetic and political quest, as she distinctly aspires to elicit an answer from readers in the form of social activism.

RESUMEN:
Clima (2020) muestra el idiosincrásico acercamiento de la autora estadounidense Jenny Offill a la noción de sociedad del riesgo. Tanto en la novela como en su página web asociada, Offill desarrolla una fragmentación ansiosa como respuesta a los desafíos de la Cuarta Revolución Industrial. *Clima* es un texto múltiple caracterizado por la cita compulsiva y la influencia formal de los medios digitales, en el

que la primera persona confesional otorga unidad al conjunto. La autora logra un sentido de interconexión a través de una estética del fragmento gracias a un doble movimiento: por un lado, promueve una perspectiva posthumanista crítica según la cual el sujeto interrelacional se constituye en constante interacción con otros; por otro, realiza una llamada directa a la acción. De esta manera, *Clima* representa una búsqueda tanto estética como política, en la que Offill aspira a provocar una respuesta en sus lectores en forma de activismo social.

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication in 2014 of *Dept. of Speculation*, US novelist Jenny Offill has been at the forefront of a trend in contemporary first-person writing in English by female authors. Novels such as Olivia Sudjic's *Sympathy* (2017), Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), Kate Zambreno's *Drifts* (2020), or Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021), are characterized by compressed and fragmentary forms that evoke the distracted nature and the energy of the Internet, as well as the communication patterns of social media. In Offill's most recent novel, *Weather* (2020), set in New York City around the time of Trump's election, the autodiegetic narrator, Lizzie, strives to come to terms with what she labels as "twenty-first-century everything," (159) her name for the coming chaos humorously summarized as "dentistry, humiliation, scarcity." (160) Married to Ben, a Classics scholar turned computer games designer, and mother of the young boy Eli, Lizzie combines her work as a university librarian with her role as a personal assistant to Sylvia, the host of *Hell and High Water*, a podcast about the imminent climate catastrophe that attracts listeners obsessed with religion and environmental issues. Meanwhile, Lizzie becomes increasingly involved—or 'enmeshed,' as her meditation teacher calls it—in the life of her brother, a recovering drug addict about to become a father.

Lizzie's idiosyncratic take on the notion of risk society highlights the interconnectedness of climate emergency, political and economic crises, family tensions, and emotional and psychological distress. The narrative reflects many of the anxieties resulting from the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a paradigm shift stemming from the digital revolution. Surveyed by authors such as World Economic Forum founder, Klaus Schwab, and scholar Jon-Arild Johannessen,

this age is defined by the evolution and interaction of technologies; the contemporary seen as a perplexing, complex reality of networks; or the insecurity in work relations. This is the context in which Offill's narrative explores the individual's search for meaningful connection. Her work shows that the unique ways in which we communicate, interact, and gather information in the digital age determine how we face disaster. The tension between the enormity of the challenges faced and the agency of the individual fuels a narrative that needs to be analyzed as part of a wider project. *Weather*, the novel, is supplemented by its accompanying website, "Obligatory Note of Hope," in which Offill exhorts readers to "get involved" and become "part of the collective." In the present article, I offer two interrelated arguments. The first, developed in the sections "*Weather* as a fragmented novel" and "Twenty-first-century everything," is that throughout *Weather*[1] Offill employs a specific type of fragmentary writing as an answer to the anxieties of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. My second argument, developed in the sections "Critical Posthumanism" and "Resilience, collective action, and hope," is that *Weather* manages to achieve a sense of interconnection through an aesthetics of the fragment thanks to a double movement: it favors a critical posthumanist perspective that understands the interrelational subject as constituted by interaction with multiple others, and explicitly calls for collective action. Therefore, I contend that Offill's is not only an aesthetic quest, but a political one as well, with which she wishes to elicit an answer from readers in the form of social activism.

WEATHER AS A FRAGMENTED NOVEL

Literary fragmentation is hardly a univocal, new phenomenon. From the perfectly completed maxims and aphorisms of Michel de Montaigne, Blaise Pascal, and François de La Rochefoucauld to the more open Romantic fragment regarded as the finite and discreet form more suitable to capture a truth beyond human perception, examples abound of authors projecting a vision of the fragment in contradistinction to current associations with loss or lack.[2] The evocations of fracture and absence seem to be a salient feature of

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[1] Unless specified otherwise, I will use '*Weather*' to refer to the continuum 'novel + website.'
[2] For a historical overview of the fragment in western literature, see the Introduction in Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drąg.

literary fragmentation of the last century. The crises of completeness, totality, genre, the subject, and meaning—all of them central to the experience of Modernism—materialize in the primacy of the fragment. The most enduring aesthetic solution proposed by modernist writers is the use of myth as a way "to compensate for the dissatisfying fragmentation of the modern world" while facilitating the connection of subjects via the collective unconscious (Childs 198). This way, modernist dislocation is offset by a desire for reconstruction. With the death of the autonomous subject certified by mid- and late-twentieth century postmodernist thought, experimental writers dealing with fragments, such as William Burroughs, Kathy Acker, or David Markson, dispense with the idea of connectivity and the search for continuity and coherence, cultivating instead the random, as exemplified by the cut-up method.

In recent years, a number of contemporary critics, scholars, and authors identify a new trend of fragmented fiction inseparable from online and digital ways of communication. According to novelist Olivia Sudjic, "The dominant trend is to tell a story through fragments," regardless of whether social media plays an obvious role in the plot. Her further description of the novel shaped by the Internet deserves quoting at length, as it nicely captures *Weather*'s defining features:

> Sometimes [fragments] make a point of concision—only a paragraph, or even one line, which of course makes social media comparison easy, while others may be the length of a blog. Each fragment possesses no obvious bearing on the next, juxtaposing random facts with news articles, wry observation of a stranger on a commute followed by an unrelated emotional confession, in the manner of one individual's Twitter timeline.

For writer Ted Gioia the new fragmented novel is an artefact that "resists disunity, even as it appears to embody it." To convey this, he chooses the image of the jigsaw puzzle, with individual elements coalescing to create sprawling, multivalent stories. His preferred examples are multi-character novels without a unified prose style and voice, such as Roberto Bolaño's *2666* or Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, in which apparently unconnected stories and disparate subjects eventually commingle. Gioia shares the view of writer and editor Guy Patrick Cunningham that "Fragmentary writing is (or at least feels) like the one avant-garde literary approach that best

fits our particular moment," as it effectively "captures the tension between 'digital' and 'analog' reading." As we read online, we read in pieces more than ever. This applies to our way of dealing with short texts, but also with long online texts broken up by a number of interactive elements (e.g., hyperlinks, banners), encouraging distracted, fragmented reading. Understanding literary fragmentation as a direct consequence of cultural and technological change, as Sudjic, Gioia, and Cunningham do, invites us to consider phenomena such as the current primacy of digital media, or the increasingly rapid pace of audiovisual products such as music videos. Nevertheless, none of them address how those topics which are not necessarily connected to online communication also potentially determine the form of the texts produced by current writers of the fragment. My analysis of *Weather* in this section and the next will tackle this issue.

   Weather is structured around vignettes, fragments often no longer than a paragraph, loosely connected through similar moods or recurring themes despite the apparently arbitrary juxtaposition of events or thoughts. Offill claims that the consequent narrative leaps force readers to produce their "own chain of associations while reading" (Fries). Not only that: as individual fragments invoke one type of anxiety or another, a sense of paratactical accumulation ensues, similar to how social media conveys information as a succession of posts. Sudjic's assertion that social media does not always feature prominently in the plot of digital-age novels is of relevance for the study of *Weather*, whose main character is quite vocal about her refusal to use social network services, the addictive nature of which makes her feel "like a rat who can't stop pushing a lever" (Offill 39). But even the need to verbalize that rejection speaks volumes about the ubiquity of digital platforms and their impact on our eroded concentration spans and meandering thought processes.

   The boundary between sections is typographically established by the ellipsis sign, while other conventions—whole paragraphs in italics or surrounded by dashed-line boxes—are equally used to further divide sections, with the effect of giving blank space free reign on the page—which reviewers such as Adam Mars-Jones take as an important element of the visual hierarchy in the novel. It feels as if the repeated interruption of reading produced by switching between tabs in a browser were given a visual representation. After all, the dichotomy between digital and analog reading alluded to by Cunningham informs *Weather*, the novel, to the extent that it gives it its particular form, but also the project as a whole, which literally

offers an exclusively digital side in which the novel's fragmentary form reaches a new platform.

Even though Offill's work also feeds on the tension between resisting and embracing disunity mentioned by Gioia, she navigates it in a different way. For one thing, *Weather* does not have much of a main plot (let alone significant subplots). From a narrative point of view, it is the confessional first-person voice that holds the fragments together—which is listed by Sudjic as another feature of the social media inflected novel. Inconsistent as she may be, Lizzie is behind all the information we receive,[3] and her voice is a reflection of her anxieties, most of which stem from contemporary phenomena, as shown in the following section. Crucially, it is not only the quality of the information processed by Lizzie that affects her, but also the quantity. The impossibility to offer a coherent, unbroken narrative is the by-product of the abundance of information in the digital society and its concomitant poverty of attention and sense of disembodiment of experiences. This is all the more damaging as it takes place during what Stefana Broadbent and Claire Lobet-Maris (111-5), alluding to T. H. Eriksen, call the 'hegemony of fragments:' a context where algorithmic classifications create volatile consumer profiles at the expense of significant social environments.

In *Weather*, the first-person narrative is interspersed with fragments from magazines, diaries, e-mail correspondence, podcast episodes, signs, overheard conversations, greeting cards, jokes, interviews, articles on disaster psychology, or political speeches. If Cubist collage techniques helped Modernists to emphasize the composite nature of narrative and character (Childs 114), these extracts allow Offill to approach an overwhelming reality that a single perspective would not manage to apprehend. This anxious fragmentation, materialized in the compulsive quotation that reflects the many worries of the main character, produces a text that is "multiple, fragmented and made of the foreign" (appropriately, Pramod Nayar's (89) definition of the posthuman self). An assortment of sources provides the support needed to face the countless challenges of the new risk society. At the same time, the juxtaposition of disparate elements hints at the banalization of information as communicated via social media: a meme or a YouTube video provide distraction and temporary relief in the face of political and social anxieties, such as

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[3] This assertion will be problematized in the analysis of *Weather*'s accompanying website.

those discussed in the following section. As many of these fragments keep their place of enunciation—that is, the reader is usually able to discern their origin, with the assistance of a "Notes" section—, putting one sample of these textual genres next to another contributes to a sense of polyphony, while building up a vision of complexity that counteracts the apparently unstable architecture of the book. Arguably, Offill's vision of the fragment is not that of the portion derived from a lost totality to be recovered—theorists such as Pilar Carrera convincingly claim that such a totality is no more than an *illusion* of totality. Rather, she uses the fragment as a way to zero in on a specific element—be it an anecdote, a state of mind, or an idea— that might have remained inaccessible had a more traditional authorial voice established a homogeneous, clear hierarchy of information.

The novel is divided into six chapters. While the first two account for more than 50% of the text, the last two are considerably shorter than the rest—less than 20 pages in the 201-page long 2020 Vintage edition. Chapters 5 and 6 are also made up of shorter fragments, many of which are short quotations whose origin becomes increasingly difficult to identify, mirroring the ontological uncertainties of the main character. Fragmentation becomes as relevant thematically as it is formally. Lizzie has "always had an obsession with lost books, all the ones half written or recovered in pieces" (Offill 50). Aware of this, Ben leaves for her notes with quotations from Democritus, who "wrote seventy books. Only fragments survive" (50). The fact that Lizzie wrote "half a dissertation once" (59) hints at her unsatisfied expectations, and when the bigger picture is accounted for, Lizzie's fixation on shattered or incomplete artefacts seems to be plenty justified: *Weather* offers a catalog of the worries and anxieties, as well as the forms of human and environmental vulnerabilities, generated in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Granted, feeling fear, dread, or despair is anything but new, but complying with character limits to express those feelings, or having the chance to convey them instantly in a network consisting of both friends and strangers, inevitably changes the way we deal with and communicate our concerns. As Johanna Thomas-Corr puts it, Lizzie is confronted with "the familiar late capitalist doomsday checklist: the climate crisis, rising fascism, precarious socio-economic circumstances" (48)—matters that, as suggested by *Weather*'s structure, can only be addressed one at a time and in small doses. This is Offill's "twenty-first-century everything,"

an updated version of the risk society theorized by Ulrich Beck for an era, as described by Lizzie, in which "regular life becomes more fragmented and bewildering" (Offill 44), in which major and minor catastrophes, personal and public dilemmas, feedback into each other to the point of preventing a healthy engagement with one's environment. In the following section, the preoccupations of *Weather*'s characters will be addressed vis-à-vis the backdrop of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its attendant expectations, challenges, and vulnerabilities.

"TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY EVERYTHING"

Weather can be described as an anxious text, and Offill's fragmentary approach plays no small part in this. According to Emily Donaldson, "Lizzie and almost everyone around here are in a near-constant state of anxiety," the origins of which are varied but interrelated. The title of the book first brings to mind the climate anxiety on which the podcast *Hell and High Water* thrives. The certainty that things cannot go on like this forever is primarily based on an unprecedent awareness of climate change and its consequences. This makes it different from twentieth-century risks such as nuclear annihilation: in Cold War America, a foreign, external enemy embodied a threat that could be unleashed suddenly; nowadays, every individual citizen is seen as part of the environmental problem, a notion reinforced by the discourse of personal resilience and responsibility according to which the subject is first of all a consumer making his or her own choices. To this discourse, Offill opposes a narrative focused on community action, in which the individual becomes an agent of social change when working with others. Before such a narrative is explicitly articulated in the final sections of the project, throughout *Weather*, climate anxiety is portrayed as inadvertently entering quotidian scenes:

> Eli is at the kitchen table, trying all his markers one by one to see which still work. Ben brings him a bowl of water so he can dip them in to test. According to the current trajectory, New York City will begin to experience dramatic, life-altering temperatures by 2047. (106)

Here and elsewhere, the narrative voice seems to proceed with the operation 'one fragment = one shock.' The lack of commentary—the above paragraph marks the end of a section, without explicit

connection with the following—makes this intrusion of doom all the more unexpected. As a consequence of Offill's fragmentary writing, we share the unease and uncertainty experienced by characters as we wonder how the two events are connected: is contemplating the boy what makes the narrator consider the future? Or is it his careless use of water, a resource the predicted life-altering temperatures may make more precious than currently envisioned by him? These omnipresent climate concerns make Lizzie lose herself into a virtual rabbit hole. A particular section begins: "There are fewer and fewer birds these days. This is the hole I tumbled down an hour ago. I finally stop clicking when my mother calls" (95). Needless to say, no bird had been mentioned in the previous pages. Here, doomscrolling[4] is identified as a practice inherent in our digital era. That the saturation of information makes Lizzie and those around her aware of the oncoming climate disaster does not make it any less terrifying—as she puts it, "you can expect something and still get the breath knocked out of you by it" (176), nicely summing up the book's sense of anxiety about extinction. However, that saturation of negative information provokes a particular response in Lizzie's way of conveying her experience, which finds formal expression in Offill's preference for the paratactical over the hypotactical.

In an environment in which "becom[ing] rich, very, very rich" (Offill 127) seems to be the only effective way of keeping your loved ones protected, a sense of economic anxiety is found everywhere. Nowhere is this clearer than in the figure of the "doomed adjunct" (3) at Lizzie's college. He embodies the fragmented and precarious existence of the "academic precariat," the focus of increasing attention both inside and outside the academy—from monographs (Johannessen, Reyes) to Special Issues (Burton and Bowman) and even Twitter accounts (@acaprecariat). A subcategory of that precariat characterized by labor uncertainty, insecure social income, and lack of occupational identity (Standing 12), the academic precariat is a phenomenon understood "as a social and cultural 'condition of being'" in the context of a careless and hostile academy (Burton and Bowman 500). In *Weather*, the nameless adjunct has to sell plasma to make ends meet (Offill 43), while his wife passive-aggressively asks him to consider whether what he is doing right now makes any money (3). After seeing him paler than usual and unable to speak in complete

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[4] Defined by Wikipedia as "the act of spending an excessive amount of screen time devoted to the absorption of negative news."

sentences, Lizzie recalls that "when you're lonely you start to lose words" (168), interpreting his fragmentary speech as a very real ontological consequence of unremitting economic hardships.

With anxiety as the default mode of delivery, the perplexing complexity of networks typical of the Fourth Industrial Revolution finds expression in references to a number of significant contemporary phenomena, many of which have become buzzwords in recent years. "Do we live in the Anthropocene?" (170), *Hell and High Water* listeners want to know, and indeed the vision of the human as "a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 5) is very much present in the novel. "What is surveillance capitalism?" (170), other listeners wonder, and a useful answer is provided by Lizzie's paranoia when she begins to worry about her book-ordering history: "Lots and lots of books about Vichy France and the French Resistance and more books than any civilian could possibly need about spy craft and fascism" (117). The "evil government algorithm" (117) becomes the panopticon of the digital age: a most effective tool to keep track of (potentially troublesome) citizens. This is just one of the several cases in which concerns born out of the digital era, a consequence of the unprecedented means of surveillance and social control, affect both the behavior of Lizzie and (importantly for the development of Offill's fragmentary style) her way of communicating with the reader. The short sections on the pages following the last quoted paragraph are paradigmatic of Offill's approach: if the rise of fascism is too overwhelming a topic, then it forces us to abruptly shift our attention to dental health; if dentistry scares us, we insert a joke about it to which no origin or reaction is provided. Once again, the abundance of informational resources results in a diminished capacity to focus, powerfully conveyed via juxtaposition and blank spaces in Offill's text, mirroring also the fragmentation of experiences typical of the digital age (Broadbent and Lobet-Maris 114).

Commentators such as Johannessen and Schwab hold no doubts as to the impact of automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence on current and future societies. In *Weather*, Lizzie witnesses with growing preoccupation her son's fascination with machines. Neither the innocent book *How to Draw Robots* nor the YouTube material about crablike things learning to avoid obstacles seem to quench his curiosity. Eli's initial interest in a robot named Samantha (Offill 134-5)—which can be switched from family to sex mode—allows Offill to hint at the dangers of social media in the hands of the underage, stressing at the same time that technological progress

does not imply the overcoming of a patriarchal mindset. When we read that Samantha "was heavily soiled and had two broken fingers" after too many male attendants at a tech conference tried to test her (156), we become aware of the gender politics of robotics in the wider context of the commodification of the female body.

Although, as is often the case with Offill's fragments, there is no further comment on this news, the idea of the gendered robot as sex worker reinforces the posthuman notion of female alliances beyond the human species. Rosi Braidotti acknowledges that her situated position as a female makes her "structurally serviceable and thus closer to the organisms that are willing or unwilling providers of organs or cells than to any notion of the inviolability and integrity of the human species" (*Posthuman* 80). In a similar vein, Donna Haraway recalls the experiences of herself, an aging woman, and her elder dog, Cayenne, in which "woman and dog find themselves in histories of veterinary research, Big Pharma, horse farming for estrogen, zoos, DES feminist activism, interrelated animal rights and women's health actions" ("Staying" 7). These positions help us recognize the essential embedded embodiment conceptualized by critical posthumanism, according to which "the human body is located in an environment that consists of plants, animals and machines" (Nayar 20). The next section of this article is devoted to showing the ways in which this posthumanist perspective contributes to a sense of interdependence in Offill's fiction.

CRITICAL POSTHUMANISM

A few pages after a comic episode in which a group of techno-euphoric Silicon Valley types are ridiculed for their uncritical faith in progress, we are confronted with the following statement: "There is no higher or lower. [...] Everything is equally evolved" (46). This belief, which would not be out of place in any text penned by Braidotti or Haraway, belongs in fact to a lecture given by Sylvia in *Weather*, about a book called *Nature and Silence*. Sylvia seems to be discussing the work of Christopher Manes, author of the 1992 article "Nature and Silence," who in his *Green Rage* wrote that "in the vast web of life there is no first or second, higher or lower, superior and inferior. All life has made the same journey of organic evolution, over billions of years, and those that survive, whether worm or human, are equally, if differently, evolved" (161). Regardless of its sources, Sylvia's talk communicates a view of the contemporary as a complex reality of networks where

human and non-human, nature and technology, are interconnected. Therefore, it fits the notion of critical posthumanism as formulated by Nayar: "the radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines" (11). Since Sylvia largely represents the moral compass of *Weather* (she is, all things considered, the character who most consistently shows not only a comprehensive awareness of the need to tackle the climate emergency, but also a determined disposition to make a difference), the critical posthumanist ethos she embraces becomes also the project's preferred set of ideas and attitudes. With its emphasis on assemblages and associations, posthumanism provides Offill with a way to balance out thematically the formal fragmentation of her text, and to anticipate the principled commitment fully explored in the accompanying website. In *Weather*, Sylvia patiently demolishes the alleged superiority of the human being, in a reasoning akin to the posthuman interrogation of the hierarchic ordering of life forms: "if we privileged the sense of smell, dogs would be deemed more evolved. [...] If we privileged longevity, it would be bristlecone pines, which can live for several thousand years" (46-7). When asked about the message of the *Hell and High Water* shows, Lizzie rewrites Martin Niemöller's famous words, in Offill's characteristic tone, half wisecrack, half denunciation of exploitative practices: "First, they came for the coral, but I did not say anything because I was not a coral…" (41).

The ethical corollary of human entanglement with non-humans is a call for personal responsibility and accountability, implied in *Weather* by the Epictetus quote pinned above Lizzie's husband's desk: "You are not some disinterested bystander / Exert yourself" (195). This is intended as a wake-up call to Lizzie, in the face of her neglected family duties and her enmeshment with her brother, who depends excessively on her for both practical assistance and emotional support. However, the words of the pre-Socratic thinker evoke larger themes of the novel. Braidotti's 'assemblage' of human and non-human actors, together with Haraway's ideas of tentacularity, making-with, thinking-with, and becoming-with as a way to account for the dynamic subject's entanglement in technologies, relations, and changes, provide key frameworks to account for the world depicted in *Weather*. The relationship between Americans and the (their?) land is problematized even before the narrative begins. Right after the book's dedication and before chapter

1, the following quotation—under the title "Notes from a Town Meeting in Milford, Connecticut, 1640"—serves as epigraph to the novel:

> Voted, that the earth is the Lord's
> and the fullness thereof; voted,
> that the earth is given to the Saints;
> voted, that we are the Saints.

The political (what is voted at a town meeting) and the theological (what is expressed in Psalm 24:1) work hand in hand to facilitate the exploitation of the land. Thus, this paratextual fragment already signals the unhealthy, centuries-old relationship of dominion towards the natural world that leads to the frightening situation in which the novel's characters are caught up. Just as Braidotti emphasizes what female humans, oncomice, and the sheep Dolly have in common (*Posthuman* 75); and Haraway talks about "interrelated animal rights and women's health actions" ("Staying" 7); Offill suggests the shared sense of vulnerability between human and non-human actors in *Weather*'s most humorous passages:

> My brother tells me a story about his NA meeting. A woman stood up and started ranting about antidepressants. What upset her most was that people were not disposing them properly. They tested worms in the city sewers and found they contained high concentrations of Paxil and Prozac.
> When birds ate these worms, they stayed closer to home, made more elaborate nests, but appeared unmotivated to mate. "But were they happier?" I ask him. "Did they get more done in a given day?" (5-6)

In this case, the complexity of the contemporary is emphasized by the continuum 'narcotics + human animals + non-human animals.' This reads like a critique of the medicalization of depression, which pursues the protection of hyper-capitalist production and consumption. As the narrative progresses, the notions of productive assemblage and healthy involvement of human and non-human actors contrast with the challenges posed by insularity and negative connections. The former is best represented by those podcast listeners interested only in "what's going to happen to the American weather" (73). The latter, by Lizzie's enmeshment in her brother's life, a relation of mutual dependence that prevents their individual growth and threatens to fracture her marriage. Meanwhile, a good number of images contribute to showing the myriad ways in which we are all "connected into one

system, which makes us all interdependent, vulnerable and responsible for the Earth as an indivisible living community" (Onega and Ganteau 12). In the most accomplished sections of the novel, the fragmentary style and the themes of relationality and interdependence end up producing something similar to what Rodríguez Magda calls a narrative of fracture (26): one that favors complexity over totalization. That is the case with the opening of chapter 2 (71): via the family dog's saliva, the first two paragraphs connect the animal's nervousness (a consequence of someone setting firecrackers off; is it the Fourth of July? Maybe the announcement of Trump's nomination?) with the "bright pink" antibacterial soap Lizzie feels bad about having bought because of its chemical content. The result is a mini *tour de force* which, in less than 100 words, portrays political and ecological concerns, all the while suggesting the need to strive for an ethical relation to fellow species. This is, in sum, an example of writing compressed as if a character limit were in effect.

Other examples might be less showy but nevertheless instrumental for the novel's pervasive sense of polyphonic interconnectedness: a man in the library is convinced that his deceased wife manifested "as a small whirlwind that swept the papers off his desk" (16-7); Lizzie's son and his schoolmates "sing that their lives are like a drop of water, no more, in an endless sea" (99); a test in a magazine encourages readers to become aware of their surroundings by tracing the water they drink or naming five resident and five migratory birds in their area (105); an ecologist describes a moth that drinks bird tears as an example of interconnection (67); fragments from the fundamental vows of the Zen Buddhist path affirm the equal importance of all sentient creatures (125); and a Buddhist monk explains to a visitor on a YouTube video: "We have died and we are in love with everything" (200). Interestingly, these passages highlight two of the most distinctive peculiarities of *Weather*'s posthumanist approach: first, its decidedly ironic, when not outright comic nature, and second, the spiritual perspective, most visible in the passages where Offill's interest in Buddhism filters the narrative.[5]

The final paragraph of the novel, which perfectly encapsulates Offill's approach, is worth citing in full:

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[5] Although the relationship between posthumanism, transhumanism, and Buddhism sparks academic interest (see, for example, Ahamed et al. and Cook), its exploration in *Weather* is beyond the scope of this article.

> The dentist gave me something so I won't grind my teeth in my sleep. I consider putting it in, decide against it. My husband is under the covers reading a long book about an ancient war. He turns out the light, arranges the blankets so we'll stay warm. The dog twitches her paws softly against the bed. Dreams of running, of other animals. I wake to the sound of gunshots. Walnuts on the roof, Ben says. The core delusion is that I am here and you are there. (201)

The paragraph opens with the promising image of Lizzie as a kind of low-grade cyborg creature, enhanced by the technology of the night guard. However, in the second sentence her refusal to wear it hints at her technophobia. Meanwhile, the family's technophile, Ben, reads a book "about an ancient war," staying in touch with his Classics education. They share their bedroom with their dog, and the communion between the three is such that Lizzie ventures to interpret the twitches of her paws as indication of her "Dreams of running, of other animals." It is this understanding of the dog on her own terms that evokes Haraway's perception of dogs as companion species, "a species in obligatory, constitutive, historical, protean relationship with human beings" ("Companion" 11-2). In Lizzie's bedroom, dogs and people, "bonded in significant otherness," are neither wholes nor parts, but elements in a pattern of relationality (Haraway, "Companion" 16). It is in this union that Lizzie falls asleep, but the narrative resorting to an ellipsis accentuates the seamless transition from sleep to wakefulness. What might have been threatening human-produced sounds ("gunshots") are revealed to be harmless and natural ("Walnuts on the roof"). And then, the final sentence, which carries us back to the first page of chapter 6, where the question posed by Lizzie's meditation teacher lingered unanswered: "What is the core delusion?" (193). Now, in a rather mystical statement not clearly addressed to any particular narratee—so most probably to the implied reader—Lizzie confidently asserts that "The core delusion is that I am here and you are there." Once any artificial barrier between here and there has been demolished, otherness is exposed as an illusion, showing, in posthuman fashion, "alterity as constitutive of subjectivity" (Nayar 77). The valuable lesson in transversal interconnection learned by Lizzie calls to mind Judith Butler's declaration: "we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us" (64). Lizzie begins to realize what Sylvia has been preaching since the beginning of the story—i.e., what Braidotti summarizes as "'we' are in this together" (*Nomadic*

85)—: that even though we are operating in a fast-changing, complex context of fragmented realities (to which Offill reacts with her fragmentary approach), it is crucial to attend to the bond of vital interconnections between threats and possibilities, between challenges and hopes, and ultimately, between actors (human or otherwise).

RESILIENCE, COLLECTIVE ACTION, AND HOPE

Having explored Offill's characters' anxieties and consequent vulnerabilities, and how a posthumanist ethos appears in stark contrast to visions of disunity, we turn our attention to *Weather*'s movement towards collective action. I suggest an analysis of the types of resilience portrayed in *Weather* as a useful approach to this topic. Mark Neocleous discusses the current omnipresence of resilience as "the basis of *subjectively* dealing with the uncertainty and instability of contemporary capitalism as well as the insecurity of the national security state" (5). For him, "Resilience both engages and encourages a culture of preparedness" (4), which in *Weather* informs the culture of doomers and preppers. As hazards can no longer be prevented, we are forced to be prepared to confront them. Drawing on Neocleous, Sarah Bracke extends the meaning and social function of resilience in our neoliberal political economy: "resilience resurrects a form of self-sufficiency, and hence a fantasy of mastery, and it does so when climate change, the War on Terror, and economic crises (to name but a few systemic 'risks' and hazards of our times) increasingly affect livelihoods around the world" (58-9). In *Weather*, Lizzie spends precious time preparing for the worst without hoping for the best, much to the irritation of her husband. Her prepper obsession includes googling tips ("What to Do If You Run Out of Candles," 148), printing out acronyms ("DTA = Don't Trust Anyone," 162), and mulling over the most effective ways of building a doomstead, i.e., a place where she and her family could hide in order to survive disaster.

Since resilience implies an inability to imagine alternatives to these neoliberal times, Bracke argues that, instead of embracing it, we should resist it, refusing the "neoliberal social ontology that revolves around the individual" and shifting "to a social ontology centered in relationality and interdependence" (72). This resistance to mainstream interpretations of resilience in the face of impending doom can be linked to a crucial tension in *Weather*, which reinforces my argument that the project's ultimate goal is to promote collective action and

social change. Behind Lizzie's misguided attempts at self-preservation, or the solipsistic self-care represented by Lizzie's brother's wife—boiled down to going outside more, eating better food, and stepping away from the computer (79)—, a more politically oriented current runs through the novel. "I keep wondering how we might channel all of this dread into action" (137), confesses Lizzie, who, as we reach the two final chapters (adequately, the shortest and most radically fragmentary), is still a puzzled character struggling to navigate our complex reality—and all the more relatable for that. The narrative seems to acknowledge the obstacles faced by any contemporary collective movement willing to counteract "the extreme individualization of our digital lives" (Broadbent and Lobet-Maris 121). I contend that Offill's project strives to convince us that working together is the solution: after the concluding paragraph, a page with the message www.obligatorynoteofhope.com leads us to the novel's accompanying website, where the author offers her most explicit attempt at counteracting the "all talk, no action ways" (Offill 173) of her main character.

The name "obligatory notes of hope" originally refers to the notes Sylvia feels required to include in her correspondence with her podcast listeners, often about some actual or potential catastrophe. In Offill's website, the notes also mirror the main composition technique of the novel, therefore contributing to the "exemplary wholeness" to which contemporary fractured works aspire (Gioia). The website's home page presents, in four paragraphs written in the first person, a narrative of personal awakening that stems from the question: "How can we imagine and create a future we want to live in?" ("Obligatory"). After reading about ordinary people "refusing to give into fatalism," the 'I' leaves behind her disengaged position and sees "collective action as the antidote to my dithering and despair." The text closes with an appeal to the reader: "Aren't you tired of all this fear and dread?" ("Obligatory").

Surprisingly, nowhere in the website is the name of Jenny Offill to be found, and obligatorynoteofhope.com does not feature in the author's professional domain, www.jennyoffill.com. Therefore, the novel itself, either in its physical or digital version, provides the only obvious entry to these 'notes,' which further problematizes the identity behind that personal narrative. Is it Offill's or Lizzie's? This digital side of the project seems to invite a reading of *Weather* as a text located at the same time outside and inside literature, in which the distinction between reality and fiction is of little significance. When entering the

space of "Obligatory Note of Hope," we do not know whether we are reading a fictitious voice, but more importantly, this does not change our approach to a text in which the conative—rather than the poetic— function of language predominates. I contend that this quite explicit change of function does not automatically disqualify *Weather* as a literary project: if anything, it proves the capacious nature of even Offill's fragmented version of the novel. Just like *Weather* is able to contain a multitude of voices as a response to the myriad challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, it also refuses to be limited to one function. With its accompanying website, *Weather* also grows into a transmedia narrative that enhances the reading experience across different platforms. The very notion of transmedia storytelling— multiplatform, enhanced content that crosses media (Jenkins)— carries with it an implicit celebration of dialogue and exchange that fits with the novel's quest for interconnection and relationality, noticeable in the website's obvious social function: the "Get Involved: Becoming part of the collective" section offers detailed information regarding three ways to participate in climate activism: the Sunrise Movement, Transition Towns, and Extinction Rebellion.

    If the political concerns of *Weather* are more clearly addressed here, the section entitled "Tips for Trying Times: Surviving dark moments of history" clearly evokes the novel's aesthetic concerns. The 45 'tips' gather aphorisms and short pieces of wisdom from a variety of authors, which with titles like "Cultivate Modest Hopes," "Notice What You Have," or "Be Like a Plant" read like a how-to book for good living in challenging times. Were it not for the political dimension provided by the "Get Involved" section, some of these tips would in fact conjure up the vision of resilience as self-help mocked in the novel. As a result of the techniques of collage and juxtaposition, the words of intellectuals, philosophers, and canonical literary authors such as James Baldwin, Natalia Ginzburg, Emmanuel Levinas, or Simone Weil stand side by side with excerpts from the Army Survival Training Guide, an advice booklet published by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, or the testimony of a Bosnian War survivor. Here we find, again, the aesthetics of the fragment as the basis for a holistic project, with multiple sources building a sense of wholeness. Furthermore, the novel's affirmation of the nature-culture and life-death continua is highlighted in tips such as "Observe the Weather," in which the theologian Thomas Merton reminds himself: "I myself am part of the weather and part of the climate and part of the place;" or "Look at the Sky," in which Herman Hesse recommends: "Accustom yourself every

morning to look for a moment at the sky and suddenly you will be aware of the air around you" and have "a touch of coexistence with nature" ("Obligatory"). Offill's appropriation and juxtaposition of these various fragments incites readers to return to the novel and appreciate the different ways in which 'we'(and this pronoun clearly encompasses also those who are no longer with us) are in this together.

CONCLUSION

"Obligatory Note of Hope" not only expands the reading experience, but also recapitulates Offill's project for us. *Weather* presents a fragmentary narrative that reflects digital forms of communication and accounts for the epistemological crisis of a main character unable to apprehend an overwhelming reality. In order to counteract the sense of isolation and disengagement that such fragmentation could prompt, Offill, on the one hand, favors a critical posthumanism oriented towards relationality and connectivity, and on the other, urges readers to participate in grassroot community projects and global environmental movements, which represent an antidote to dominant views of resilience as self-sufficiency and individualism. As a result, *Weather* typifies the contemporary fragmented novel that resists disunity. Through structures that underscore the fragility—yet also the persistence—of connections, narrative fiction becomes an attempt to write the contemporary, a comment on the current climate, an alternative to the incredulity response, a celebration of moving and acting instead of freezing. How can we be so sure that Offill wants *Weather* to propose a solution for contemporary problems? Because she straightforwardly tells us that much in her "Obligatory Note of Hope," and her appeal resonates with the novel's persistent concern with social commitment.

Therefore, I understand the website as a manifest signal of Offill's ambition to have a direct impact on reality, so much so that her choice to expand the text across more than one medium while resorting to different linguistic functions could lay the foundations for a discussion of the potential and limitations of literary creation as a tool to effect positive social change. Is the responsibility of the writer as public figure in a digital world not to limit her message—assuming she wishes to convey a message, as is the case with Offill—to the boundaries of the literary text? Upon first reading the fragments Offill presents in her "Obligatory Note of Hope," in contrast to my experience of the novel, I often found myself more interested in what was conveyed

than in how it was conveyed, despite the obvious formal parallelisms between both parts of the project. To me, that does not necessarily render the website as less aesthetically satisfying than the novel. Rather, I understand my initial doubtful approach to the website as a reflection of my own reading habits and expectations: the printed novel *must* be the literary work, the online text *must* contain something else. Even though subsequent readings of *Weather* have changed my way of understanding Offill's project, I still find myself struggling with certain questions: Is the role of the literary critic or scholar to attend to these extensions of a narrative project, as organic or artificial as they may be? If so, which new skills and analytical tools are required? These are some of the issues that may enrich our future understanding of Jenny Offill as an author concerned with addressing the complexities of our "twenty-first-century everything."

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DECOLONIAL HOPE AGAINST THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S *CLAIRE OF THE SEA LIGHT* (2013)

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ABSTRACT: This article explores Edwidge Danticat's last novel, *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013), as a response to Modern/colonial ideologies of progress that continue to emanate from predictions of a Fourth Industrial Revolution. After an analysis of the work of Danticat as literature of the American hemisphere instead of merely Haitian or Caribbean literature, this article contends that the text's portrayal of nature, the environment, and the past aligns with visions of decolonial hope rather than with the linear progress of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Through the stories of a small community in Haiti, *Claire of the Sea Light* portrays the degradation of the environment that ravishes the country and does so in relation to the external forces that affect it, presenting a coloniality of climate associated to racial dynamics of the American hemisphere. The blending of human narratives and environmental ones in the novel nevertheless offers possibilities for resistance and a hopeful vision of the country rooted in decolonial ecologies and Caribbean epistemology. Granting equal importance to the stories of non-human actors in the narrative, the novel positions itself outside the Modern/colonial tradition to embrace a decolonial poetics that offers hope in a world which has proved to continually reproduce its own coloniality as new technology is developed.

RESUMEN: Este artículo explora la última novela de Edwidge Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013), como una respuesta a las ideologías modernas/coloniales que siguen emanando de las

predicciones de una Cuarta Revolución Industrial. Tras un análisis del trabajo de Danticat como literatura del hemisferio americano en vez de literatura meramente caribeña o haitiana, este artículo argumenta que el retrato de la naturaleza, el medio ambiente y el pasado que el texto realiza se ajusta a visiones de esperanza decolonial más que al progreso linear de la Cuarta Revolución Industrial. A través de las historias de una pequeña comunidad en Haití, *Claire of the Sea Light* también plasma la degradación medioambiental que asola al país y lo hace en relación a las fuerzas externas que lo afectan, presentando una colonialidad del clima asociada a dinámicas raciales del hemisferio americano. La amalgamación de narrativas humanas y medioambientales en la novela sin embargo ofrece posibilidades de resistencia y una visión esperanzadora del país basada en ecologías decoloniales y epistemología caribeña. Darles igual importancia a las historias de los actores no-humanos en la novela la posiciona fuera de la tradición moderna/colonial y abraza una poética decolonial que ofrece esperanza en un mundo que ha demostrado reproducir su propia colonialidad a medida que desarrolla nueva tecnología.

INTRODUCTION

The aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti left behind a clear picture of the hemispheric dynamics of inequality that have existed in America since the end of the nineteenth century or even earlier. The U.S. organized "the entire postearthquake 'recovery' project involving foreign government organizations, nongovernmental humanitarian aid organizations, missionaries, researchers, engineers, building companies, and many kinds of zealous volunteers" while at the same time the Port-au-Prince airport was placed under U.S. control in order to prevent the affected Haitians from reaching the continent in order to reunify with family (Sheller 15; 34). These twin images exemplify the logics of the Fourth Industrial Revolution much better than the "boardrooms and parliaments" where Klaus Schwab contends this phenomenon is being shaped (27). Ultra-rapid information and communication technologies indeed allowed these volunteers and helpers to organize and reach the disaster area, as well as to draft sophisticated recovery plans. The other side of the coin that Schwab and others do not consider is that the recovery process that was put into motion enabled "islanding" effects that perpetuated and accentuated the underclass' immobility and lack of resources. Suffice it to say that these volunteers were consuming the little drinking water that was being filtrated for survivors and building schools in a context

where most people cannot afford schooling and are in dire need of construction jobs (Sheller 76-77).

Schwab's premise that "[t]he Fourth Industrial Revolution represents a significant source of hope" (22) seems ironic considering that the preface of his book *Shaping the Future of the Fourth Industrial Revolution: A Guide to Building a Better World* (2018), written by the CEO of Microsoft Satya Nadella, identifies Amazon and other companies with a long history of exploitation as the leaders in this process. With all that is characteristic of the Fourth Industrial Revolution post-earthquake Haiti has only managed to become a puppet of those who own the technological capital and its environmental needs have been consistently ignored. The Interim Haiti Recovery Commision (IHRC) was orchestrated by the U.S. State department. The organization was composed of 17 voting members, many of them international, René Préval, the president of Haiti at the time, not being one of them (Dupuy 14-15). This article aims to debunk Schwab's hopeful predictions for another idea of hope put forward by decolonial and postcolonial environmental scholars through the analysis of Edwidge Danticat's novel *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013). Danticat's novel is a text that underscores the coloniality of climate that prevails in Haiti, weaving a narrative that places nature at the center. Her view sharply contrasts with Schwab's probably well-intentioned projection of a "human-centered future" and his urge to utilize natural resources for the best interest of every human on the planet (23-24). Differently, decolonial visions of environmentalism do not approach nature as a potential exploitable resource, but as an entity on its own, associating views like Schwab's to the modern colonial divide between nature and culture.

This article explores the figure of Danticat as a powerful voice for reflecting the state of affairs of the American hemisphere during a period whose identification as the Fourth Industrial Revolution hides a biased pro-capitalist ideology. Instead, *Claire of the Sea Light* offers a panoramic vision of the power dynamics between the different nations of the hemisphere and the hegemony of the United States over the rest. I will furthermore contend that Haitian writing is always imbricated within the cultural politics of U.S.-Haitian relations. As the dreams of the postcolonial nation or the Antillean Confederation have faded, Jacques Roumain has insisted that the key for the successful imagination of Haiti's political life after the revolution is to see it as part of something larger (5), namely, the American hemisphere. In fact, Michael Dash describes Haitians as "liminal citizens of the hemisphere

transformed by U.S. imperialism" (222-223). This is perhaps why Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian-American residing in the United States and who writes in English, has been considered by some the national writer of Haiti.[1] Together with the exploration of this perspective, *Claire of the Sea Light* projects throughout its pages a sense of decolonial hope that better negotiates the logics of an increasingly though unequally connected world.

EDWIDGE DANTICAT AND CARIBBEAN-AMERICAN HEMISPHERIC RELATIONS

Edwidge Danticat (1969-present) left Haiti when she was twelve years old to join her parents in Brooklyn. She has claimed that upon reaching her destination she discovered "books about [herself] to help [her] interpret [her] ever-changing country from afar" but also that she felt out of place and missed her home in Haiti terribly (Danticat, *Create Dangerously*[2] 59; 61). Both claims might explain why she sets most of her works in the Caribbean country. She comes back like Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin did, though imaginatively. Numa and Drouin were two migrant Haitians who enjoyed comfortable lives in New York but who chose to join a guerrilla group, Jeune Haiti, in 1964 to try to knock Duvalier's dictatorship down—a regime supported by the United States. The attempt resulted in their public execution on 12th November that same year (Danticat, *CD* 1-2).

Haitian political life, as well as Haitian contemporary writing, is inseparable from its relation with the United States. The country has been for more than a century subordinated to the interests of its neighbor power, displacing other nations since the military occupation of 1915 (Dupuy 15; Lennox 693). The U.S. has never used its technological capital for improving the situation of its impoverished neighbor, which has instead been a test ground for certain policies

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[1] An article featured in the cultural section of the Spanish newspaper *El País* (https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2017/04/18/articulo/1492512207_689285.html) took notice of a map drawn by a user of the popular forum Reddit which chose the most representative fiction work for each country of the globe. Edwidge Danticat was the chosen writer for Haiti, as was the case with the Dominican Junot Díaz, another immigrant writing in a foreign language. This shows how the country's experiences can be better recorded from a distance, as it provides perspective and a less nuanced vision of history. In fact, Bharati Mukherjee contends that in countries like Haiti "provocative national literature is banned" and that upon reaching another location writers acquire a more complete "'historical sense' of the homeland" (682).

[2] From now on *CD*.

and a place from where to extract raw material with no ecological consideration. This is what president Bill Clinton admitted as special envoy to Haiti after the disaster regarding the policy of rice that he enforced upon the country: "I had to live every day with the consequences of the loss of capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people because of what I did, nobody else" (quoted in Dupuy 14). Haiti is "one of the largest importers of U.S. food in the Caribbean Basin" and supplies the country with the cheapest labor force (Dupuy 15) despite the difficulties Haitians face in order to migrate. This is due to the U.S. support of Haitian regimes—including two brutal dictatorships—which prevents fleeing Haitians from being classified as asylum seekers, as well as to argue that the American military occupation (1915-1934) left an economically developed country (nothing further from the truth) (Lennox 695; 700).

Populari and far-reaching Haitian voices such as writer Edwidge Danticat's are increasingly dropping the successful immigrant narrative. In *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013), Edwidge Danticat's last novel (there have been other publications but these are either children's books, young-adult fiction, or short stories, the case of the acclaimed 2019 collection *Everything Inside*), the hemisphere lingers behind all that happens in the society that the writer describes. In other works—in particular *The Farming of Bones* (1998)—the Haitian-Dominican border has had a predominant role, but this is not detached from the interference of the United States. The border's current location dates from the 1929 Treaty of Haitian-Dominican Borders, which was revised in 1936 "strongly encouraged by the United States, keen to stabilize a potentially volatile situation for their own benefit" (Fumagalli 20). The rebirth of the sugar industry in Hispaniola attracted the Americans, who "owned eleven out of the twenty-one sugar mills operating in the country and 98 per cent of its sugar exports were absorbed by the United States' market" (20). This border has become a signifier of the precarity of "migratory labor system[s]" (Martínez ix) and also of the colonial legacies that inform hemispheric conceptions of race and social class. The management of the border by U.S. forces and its later nationalization under the control of the Dominican Republic set "the pattern for the exploitation of the Haitian workforce" (Fumagalli 20). Since then, it has been the setting of multiple violent episodes including the racially-based massacre of the Haitian peasants working on the borderlands (many born under Dominican jurisdiction) mandated by the Dominican dictator Rafael

Leónidas Trujillo in 1937 (Turits 589-591). This is the episode that *The Farming of Bones* narrates.

Claire of the Sea Light follows the steps of *The Farming of Bones* and extends its concerns to the environmental realm without ceasing to situate Haiti as the result of external influences and as a participant in an intricate net of unequal global connections. The novel relates the disappearance of a seven-year-old girl, Claire Limyè Lanmè, after she finds out that her father (Nozias Faustin), a fisherman, is going to give her away to the town's fabric vendor (Madame Gaëlle Lavaud) because he believes he cannot provide her with a good upbringing and that he might someday die at sea while fishing. Although it is not mentioned explicitly, migrating to the United States is something that could be in Nozias' mind, or at least in Claire's, as she seems to denote when she claims that she "wonder[s] all the time where he was chèche lavi, looking for a better life" when he goes to "another part of this sea, someplace where she could not spot his boat" (221). After the disappearance, Claire does not appear in the novel again until the very end. As if the narrator was looking for her throughout the town of Ville Rose and the contiguous neighborhood of Cité Pendue, the rest of the chapters revolve around the struggles and memories of the different inhabitants of these places, who share a net of "unacknowledged connections" (Gibby 356). The possibility of abandoning the area—the intended destination being the United States—is ever-present throughout the narrative in the minds of several of the characters (as a goal or even as something that has already happened).

Though it was written after the occurrence of the natural disaster, Danticat chooses to set her novel in 2009, just before the earthquake, in order to, in her own words, hang "on to something that was" (Danticat, "New Novel" n.p.), portraying the essence of the human and non-human relationships that sustain the community depicted and thus providing a clue on the values that might help to deal with the crisis. However, there already are signs of natural degradation throughout the novel that might imperil life in this community, such as the extinction of an animal species or the houses being "dragged downstream year after year in flash floods" because "the rivers were swelling in response to the lack of trees, the land erosion, the dying topsoil" (Danticat, *Claire*[3] 52). Depicting natural degradation is constant not only in the novel analyzed but in all of Danticat's oeuvre. According to Kristina Gibby, her fiction "disrupts tourist fantasies

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[3] From now on *CLS*.

[about the Caribbean] through her portrayal of Haiti's environment"
(347). This argument is reminiscent of what Malcom Ferdinand calls
"a reversal of th[e] touristic perspective," listening to insider voices
from the Caribbean world (*Decolonial* 2). Danticat brings these voices
to American audiences rather than portraying stories of success of
immigrant Haitians. While she still captures the difficulties of the
diaspora, she does so in terms of a long-lasting hemispheric racism
which still determines lives on the island. Danticat pays attention to
the island, pointing to the fact that, regardless of how many narratives
of migration are created, the Caribbean is still in existence and
demands our attention.

DECOLONIAL HOPE IN *CLAIRE OF THE SEA LIGHT*

> [Claire] had to go back to see her father and Madame Gaëlle, whose own
> sorrows could have nearly drowned them. She had to go down to the water
> to see them take turns breathing into this man, breathing him back to life
> Edwidge Danticat, *Claire of*
> *the Sea Light*

Many scholars have pointed out that *Claire of the Sea Light* is
a hopeful narrative, a surprising fact considering that most of the plot
revolves around the disappearance of a little girl whose mother died
and who lives with her father in conditions of poverty. Still, Maxine L.
Montgomery underscores Claire's "ability to utilize legend and lore
from the past in charting a hopeful future" in the novel (317). Silvia
Martínez-Falquina describes Danticat's work as an articulation of
"narratives of memorialisation, resilience and *hope*" (emphasis mine;
844) and Gibby highlights the unidealized and sometimes cruel
portrayal of nature in the novel as a framework for a narrative of "*hope,*
communion, and belonging" (emphasis mine; 363). It is Martínez-
Falquina's contention that the narrative's denouement—when the
whole community, rich and poor, attends to one of the characters who
tried to commit suicide—stands as a hopeful image of the future,
presenting a world that is fairer, where class divisions are not so
striking, and where community is the value that prevails (848).

Martínez-Falquina's choice of words when she claims that
"Max Jr. [was] being returned from the sea" implies that there is an
agent in the action, potentially the sea or some kind of water spirit. In
fact, it is towards the end of the narrative when Claire makes her
appearance again that natural elements acquire a more autonomous

role in the text, pushing Claire to come back to her father and Gaëlle, rather than just framing it. Not only does this hopeful narrative imbricate all humans into the same world-ship, as Ferdinand would say (*Decolonial* 21); non-human actors are also part of the story, more in consonance with Jason W. Moore's valuable concept of the Web of Life, "nature as us, as inside us, as around us" (3). This is what I have chosen to call, based on Malcom Ferdinand's vision of a decolonial ecology, decolonial hope, which stands in sharp contrast with Schwab's human-centered futurity. Ferdinand's proposal for a truly decolonial ecology is that we apprehend the world instead of the Earth, the difference being that we do not only take into account human quantitative understandings of the Earth such as property and resources, but the world in all of its dimensions, not just the human one (*Decolonial* 19). This is a relationality which, in opposition to the connectivity of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, is not valued through modern parameters. In his own words:

> The political recognition of the presence of non-humans giv[es] rise to a world between humans and with non-humans. If nature and the Earth are not identical to the world here, the world includes nature, the Earth, non-humans, and humans, all the while recognizing different cosmogonies, qualities and ways of being in relation to one another. (*Decolonial* 19)

This text's conflation of human stories of suffering and hope with environmental stories of degradation and rebirth all coexisting in the same plane, as well as being intermixed with knowledge from the past (as I will discuss later), adjusts to the myriad of dimensions that Ferdinand demands for beginning to confront the colonial/environmental problems that the very concept of a Fourth Industrial Revolution implies: a vision of progress as the increasing capacity to create wealth (Schwab 32).

But before going back to the end of the narrative, when Claire conflates her experience with that of the mountains, the maroons, and the water spirits, let us analyze the story of another character of Ville Rose: Madame Gaëlle. Throughout her storyline the relation between coloniality and environmental degradation is ever-present. Madame Gaëlle's is the richest character in *Claire of the Sea Light* and perhaps also the most tragic one, as her daughter dies in a motorbike accident and her husband is murdered. Though these events might seem to be designed to uniformize all the characters—rich and poor—in the face

of death and tragedy, the narrative always imbricates them within a bigger frame of coloniality, as when Gaëlle reflects on the sinking of the houses: "[h]ers and Laurent's was now the only house so close to the rivers. The other houses, newer yet shabbier, had been dragged downstream year after year in flash floods, many with entire families inside" (*CSL* 52). The incident reflects a structural problem in Haiti: erosion, consistent in the Caribbean since the colonizers mistook "diversity for fertility" when they arrived (DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley 6; Lowenthal 14). Not only are the heavy rains a bad combination with erosion. Deforestation, an activity which American ships have routinely carried out on the island (see Danticat, *CD* 67), also adds to the equation. The degradation of nature together with the death of the people who lived in those houses are presented as a result of coloniality (particularly U.S.-American coloniality), placing both victims at the same level. It is not only that citizens from the Global South are victims of the bad quality of resources, as seems to be Schwab's worry (see Schwab 147, where he mentions the impact of climate change on people's health conditions but not on the environment), but that both citizens and nature suffer the consequences in the same way. This connection is also present in the narration of Gaëlle's pregnancy.

In the same chapter—"The Frogs"—Gaëlle reminisces about her pregnancy, which is framed around another ecological event: the extinction of the town's frogs due to the high temperatures resulting from climate change: "[i]t was so hot in Ville Rose that year that dozens of frogs exploded" (Danticat, *CSL* 41). Unlike other instances of adaptation, this is not the natural cycle that Gaëlle is "fool[ed]" into inferring from the event: "that a normal cycle was occurring, that young was replacing old, and life replacing death, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly. Just as it was for everything else" (Danticat, *CSL* 41). Just like the premature death of her daughter which is predicted with this paragraph, the phenomenon is not to be expected within a healthy course of events. Instead, a whole animal species does not have the time to adapt to the increasing temperatures and hence dies. As Pieter Vermeulen insightfully explains, current debates like those on the Anthropocene—the idea that this geological era is entirely determined by human activity on the planet—"misrepresent the role of capitalism" on phenomena such as climate change (11). Since it has been more or less been concluded that the beginnings of the Anthropocene date from the first uses of fossil fuel (Crutzen 23), it is surprising that it is not immediately associated to the first wave of

colonization in the Americas, as the expansion of land and the cheap labor that the slaves provided hugely accelerated the processes that led to the First Industrial Revolution (Malm and Hornborg 63). Both the citizens who descend from those slaves and the animals from their lands live the effects. Schwab's contention that the wealth created by the First Industrial Revolution is still to be celebrated in spite of "the spread of colonialism and environmental degradation" (Schwab 32) follows a largely fallacious logic.

Such a relationship between the American underclass and the degradation of American lands is present in Gaëlle's storyline. Despite her fear that "should the temperature continue to rise, she too might burst" like the frogs (41), both mother and daughter survive. Like Schwab's, Gaëlle's logic is not correct. It is not a coincidence that instead Claire's mother did not survive her own labor, as it happened in conditions much more precarious than Gaëlle's. In this case, the analogy works; it was not the heat that caused Claire's mother to die, but the poverty that is also a result of coloniality, like climate change is. As such, it is clear that we need another model, and the decolonial hope present in the narrative might be the answer. The idea of a Fourth Industrial Revolution is itself questionable, as it is being described by more than biased texts like Schwab's, who, in his writing, associates "the world" to "the West" and "civilization" to "Western culture," and largely relies on the linear progression of time. Instead, according to decolonial scholars, who unlike postcolonial scholars focus on an epistemological deconstruction of the colonial worldview (Ferdinand *Decolonial,* 176; Quijano 31), there are other terms by which to apprehend the world and its events such as for example a spatial epistemology (Mignolo 2), the world-systems perspective in detriment of "the linear evolution of modes of production from pre capitalist to capitalist" (Grosfoguel 72), the new connections across the American hemisphere instead of the old colony-metropolis relations (Fernández Jiménez 3) or the exploration of understudied historical landmarks such as the Haitian Revolution "as sources of vision for the future" (Escobar 38). As this last example shows, there is a particularly high number of other knowledges coming precisely from the Caribbean because of how its foundational myths stem from what Ferdinand calls the slave ship to contrast it with Noah's Ark.

Caribbeans do not limit themselves to imagining their history reduced to the legacy of "the Guinea Basin, Europe, or the pre-colonial Americas" (Ferdinand *Decolonial,* 132), but have created a non-linear imaginary of what is born from under the sea—from the "womb abyss"

(Glissant, *Relation* 6)—as a result of all the was lost in the Middle Passage (Ferdinand, *Decolonial* 133). This knowledge is not recorded in history books or stored in museums; hence it is not identifiable through a linear logic, but emerges from the sea at different times, never fully present but never fully gone. For Ferdinand "[b]etween modern and indigenous people, the Caribbean presents these third terms, who are symbolized by the enslaved colonial Negroes [sic], with a genesis of their own that is based in the transatlantic slave trade and colonial slavery" (*Decolonial* 132). Bill Ashcroft explains how awareness of this historical identity is present in the literature of the archipelago in how the collective memory of a slave past is often invoked in order to choose how to live the present and strive for the future

> For those Caribbean writers and artists working in the borderland of language, race and identity the past is the constant sign of the future. One of the most common, and popular, examples of this is the limbo dance, a performance of slave history, which re-enacts the crossing of the Middle Passage in a continual reminder of memory, survival and cultural resurrection [...] The dance is a metaphor of slave history that celebrates the present with the continuous re-enactment of future hope. (53)

As I said, this is not a historical memory, but an archipelagic memory in which the snippets from the past make an incursion on the island like the waves of the sea do on the sand of the beach, only to erase them minutes later with a new wave. Therefore, the sea—and the beach—proves a central setting for many parts of the narrative, because "the currents between and among islands reveal a wider horizon," as Jonathan Pugh would put it (11). And, eventually, the novel's own structure resembles Pugh and Chandler's island theory of relationality that "recasts the world as rich and full of creative possibilities" (84). As I mentioned in the introduction, the novel is structured around Claire's disappearance at the beginning, just to later span the rest of the area where she lives and explore the lives of those supposedly unconnected to this event. According to Robyn Cope, the way in which all the apparently fragmented parts of the novel in the end are related to one another despite the characters not knowing it reflects the fact that "not just for Haiti but for the whole world [there is an] interdependent nature of human interaction and history [...] a powerful poetics of relation in which no person is separate from

humanity and no moment exists outside the temporal continuum" (101). It is these connections that the narrative makes that also provide the greatest elements of hope, in particular the connection with non-human actors and with the past.

This is nowhere more present than in the last chapter, which adopts Claire's point of view to show the reader her thoughts at the decisive moment of her disappearance. During this chapter, Claire ceaselessly wonders about her mother. She seems to ponder the reasons why she died during childbirth and Gaëlle did not. In an act of allegiance to her origins Claire considers whether she should follow her mother's essence and become a presence by the shore of the sea:

> She'd heard some of the fishermen's wives say that the spirits of those who's been lost at sea would sometimes come ashore to whisper in their loved ones' ears. She would make sure [Nozias] felt her presence too. She'd sneak down at dusk to collect fallen coconuts and grab salted fish left out to dry and she'd stop by and say a few words in her father's ear while he slept. That way she would always be in his dreams. She would go away without really leaving, without losing everything, without dying. (235)

Claire's plan for disappearing lies in conflating her identity with that of her lost mother, who in the narrative is sometimes presented as the maternal figure of "Mami Wata (Mother Water), an Afro-Caribbean water-spirit" (Montgomery 316). In the same way that these characteristically Afro Caribbean figures, orally-transmitted as part of the creole folklore of the islands, "provid[e] continuity for the dispossessed" (Dayan 5), they also ground Claire to her identity "in the face of maternal absence or loss" (Montgomery 318). Claire's loss is an allegory for the collective loss of the Afro-Caribbean subject and also for those dispossessed in the present such as Nozias. Like Mami Wata, Nozias also suspects that his fate lies in the sea, not an uncommon destiny for the fishermen of the town, whose crumbling boats do not offer enough protection.

Another idea that Claire has as a response to her own and her father's situation is re-enacting the lives of the maroons in the mountains of Haiti. This is an interesting part of the narrative, because early on it is explained that when Claire's mother died, before being handed to Nozias, she had lived for three years with her mother's family in the mountains. This can be read literally or can also be interpreted as an example of magical realism in Danticat's narrative,

a feature common in this author. This last interpretation comes from the fact that this family never appears again in the novel and is not considered as an option for taking care of Claire when Nozias worries that he will not be able to. Instead of looking for her relatives when she comes back to the mountains at the moment of her disappearance, Claire explains that this is where the maroons lived:

> Like the fugitives in Madame Louise's stories—les marons—she would hide inside what was left of Mòn Initil
> She would be the first at the foot of the sky. She would find a cave large enough inside Mòn Initil to live in, and at night she would lie on beds of ferns and listen to the bats squeal and the owls moan. She would dig a hole to catch rainwater for drinking and bathing. And she would try very hard not to disturb the marooned spirits who had found refuge there before her. (*CLS* 234)

Since the times of the American plantation maroons were the escaped slaves that usually hid in the nearing mountains and developed an alternative social organization (Roberts 4; Hantel 88; Ferdinand, *Decolonial* 146). Together with the constant references to water spirits, the maroons also hold great relevance in the story, again exemplifying the equal importance of humans, non-humans, and historical memories in the novel. This particular episode merges personal and collective memories as equally relevant characters and foregrounds the importance of natural elements—the mountains in this case—in the (hi)story that is trying to be transmitted.

Maroons have become crucial figures in black utopian thought (Zamalin 169) because they represented the possibility to escape the oppressive society and "create a fully autonomous community" (Roberts 4). Together with creolization—and possibly on the opposite side—marronage has become a key concept in Caribbean anthropology defining "a form of cultural opposition to European-American culture" (Wing xxii). Andreas Malm (3) and Ferdinand ("Colonial Silence" 184) underscore the historical importance of natural elements in the resistance against colonial capitalism as was the case of the maroons in the mountains, since their success greatly depended on geography (Ferdinand, *Decolonial* 147), hence the conflation of the mountains and compassionate relatives in the novel. Claire seems to explore this possibility but her eventual return, however, seems to align with criticism on the concept of marronage as a cultural model in the present. Ferdinand in fact contends that

Malm's article ignores the forced nature of such retreat and does not consider which other ways of inhabiting the world may have arisen had the slaves not been deprived of their own cosmogonies and ontologies ("Colonial Silence" 185). Édouard Glissant does not consider marronage fit to the Caribbean existence in the present because of "its inability to think about the existential conditions and effects of futurity on the formation of subjectivity, choosing instead flight at expense of the beginning again *with* history's pain" (emphasis in the original; Drabinski 79). According to Glissant, marronage does not strive towards the future and does not make use of trauma and pain, despite their existence, to articulate the present. This is what Claire seems to understand when she decides to go back, "go down to the water to see [the villagers] take turns breathing into this man [that had fallen in the sea], breathing him back to life" (*CLS* 238). Like Ferdinand who contends that "the Maroons put into practice another way of living together and relating to the Earth" (*Decolonial* 147), Glissant appreciates some aspects of marronage such as the right to a culture's opacity, but advocates for the need to move beyond it.

This is where the beach—not an uncommon Caribbean sight—that appears at the end of the novel comes into play. Between the mountains and the sea lies the beach in the landscape of this narrative, and that brings us directly to Glissant's own articulation of hope and futurity. Glissant's ideas, despite his characteristic philosophy of creolization, a concept close to postcolonial hybridity, are not incompatible with decolonial philosophies. The decolonial hope that I have been describing so far refuses to rely on Western epistemologies. However, that does not imply a return to precolonial forms of inhabitation. Just like Ferdinand proposes the "enslaved colonial Negro [sic]" as the ethnogenesis of Caribbean culture and society, Glissant's ideas are all about finding newer options in between. In the same way as the maroons created something new, becoming "children of the Americas" in their flight (Ferdinand, *Decolonial* 151), Claire explores her possibilities after going through the passage that the mountains represent—a rebirth—to finally arrive at this beach where the last scene develops.

For Glissant the beach is an element that unites the mountains, that is, the past, "the historical home of the Maroons, who escaped slavery to set up their own society," with the Caribbean Sea, the future, "the island's opening onto the rest of the world" (Hantel 88). In her brief interlude in the mountains Claire, like Glissant, "links the tradition of the Maroon repudiation of the plantation to a new

future whose synthesis transcends both that gesture of refusal [and of] submission" (Wynter 638). The novel is not defeatist, it is full of hope. This hope is situated in current Haiti and points towards those real examples which provide the key for articulating a better future. When Ashcroft contends that invoking pre-colonial memory might help to situate post-colonial communities "outside of imperial structures of linear history," he does not mean that those communities must retreat from the system of which, like it or not, they are participants. It rather advocates for alternative and new decolonial ideologies and explanatory myths that might improve the daily lives of the inhabitants of these communities. As seen, all these elements are present throughout the novel and especially at the end, where a hopeful decolonial option is proposed for imagining the future of Haiti.

CONCLUSION

Descriptions of the impending Fourth Industrial Revolution emphasize "connected life" (Xu, David and Hi Kim 91); decolonial hope emphasizes relationality. For a myriad of scholars, what makes the Caribbean cosmogony so special and informative is relationality, a non-linear worldview associated with the geography of the archipelago in which past, present, and future knowledges coexist. Relationality thus transcends linear epistemologies that inform narratives of neoliberal progress such as rag-to-riches immigrant novels. In *Claire of the Sea Light* Danticat has created a narrative which is relational in its very structure, where the community rather than the individual is the protagonist of the story, in turn apprehending Haiti as part of an island, the island as part of an archipelago, and the archipelago as part of a hemisphere, one dominated by complex hierarchical relations.

In an interview with Jeffrey Brown, Danticat explains that the novel is about "showing this way of life [...] this communal system that's really maintained the country where people don't have that many [sic] support except from one another" (Danticat, "New Novel" n.p.). The resolution points towards these small moments that provide the possibility of (emotional and material) healing when all the members of the community—including non-human ones—share their resources and their knowledge. As Danticat put it in the same interview, talking about the possibility for resilience in small communities, "the town is the hero [where] you get to see the mayor, who is also the undertaker," but there is a lot to be done. She insists

on showing this aspect of human organization in Haiti "that is not talked or heard about" ("New Novel" n.p.). Danticat's energy reminds us of Glissant's hopeful statement that he "still believe[s] in the future of small countries" (*Caribbean Discourse* 3). The text rather wonders what would happen if the forgotten fishermen, who are "at the bottom of the social hierarchy" (Gibby 357) of Ville Rose's but an integral part of the Haitian community, were provided with "a bigger boat […] where the crazy waves would not get them" (Danticat, *CSL* 221). What if the resources that are needed by the islanders were kept rather than being exported with all the rest, enriching the American elites but impoverishing the lowest classes? This discourse emphasizes Haitian resilience but also the need for its global participation in equal terms (Cope 100) rather than the Fourth Industrial Revolution's celebration of technological advancement without a change in the system.

     Claire of the Sea Light enlightens readers with the portrayal of a real and critical situation—the environmental and humanitarian crisis of Haiti as a peripheral country of the American hemisphere— through a lens not often explored: decolonial Caribbean ontology. Furthermore, the world that Danticat presents readers with is not a hopeless one, but rather all the opposite. By apprehending all those elements that have sheltered and protected Caribbeans throughout their history—African and indigenous knowledges in the mountains are the clearest example—as part of the same community, *Claire of the Sea Light* imagines futures for the community of Haiti which so far has been abandoned by the powers that be in their quest for wealth acquisition. The image at the end makes it clear: the sea that had swallowed so many returns Max Jr. to a caring community where divisions seem to be suspended. Claire, who has gone through an enlightening experience in the Maroon mountains, looks at the scene from the beach, that represents adaptation and rebirth. This is the community that is ready to face the earthquake and other ecological crises that might approach. This is where the future takes shape.

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OTTESSA MOSHFEGH'S *MY YEAR OF REST AND RELAXATION* IN A WORLD WITH NO REST NOR RELAXATION: NARRATIVE PROSTHESIS AND HYPERREALITY

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ABSTRACT
The representation of a form of disability in literature can be used not only as a way of distinguishing the character and setting the narration in motion but as a metaphor of social and individual collapse. Following this idea, I will focus on Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, a 2018 novel that narrates the experiences of a privileged woman in a context of growing aestheticism and its consequent loss of political meaning in the American society of the 90s. In it, I argue, the depression that she suffers from can be observed to work as the engine of the narration and the result of the emptiness derived from the current society of spectacle.
I use David T. Mitchell's and Sharon L. Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* to delve into the role that the depression the main character suffers from plays in the novel and how she follows the pattern traditionally found in disability narratives. I also use Jean Baudrillard's analysis of the current state of simulacra to explain her disabled experience.

RESUMEN
La discapacidad en literatura puede usarse no solo como elemento distintivo de un personaje y motor de la narración, sino también como metáfora de colapso social e individual. Siguiendo esta idea, me centraré en la obra de Ottessa Moshfegh *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, una novela de 2018 que narra las vivencias de una mujer WASP estereotipada en un contexto de creciente esteticismo y su consecuente pérdida de significado político en la sociedad americana

de los años 90. Sostengo que en esta novela la depresión de la
protagonista impulsa la narración y encarna el vacío producto de la
actual sociedad del espectáculo.
Utilizo *Narrative Prosthesis* de David T. Mitchell y Sharon L. Snyder
para profundizar en el papel que la depresión del personaje principal
juega en la novela y cómo esta sigue el patrón tradicionalmente
encontrado en las narrativas de discapacidad. También uso el análisis
de Jean Baudrillard sobre el estado actual del simulacro y los efectos
de la misma en el individuo para explicar su experiencia
discapacitada.

INTRODUCTION

Before pandemic times, the epidemic of depression was already
present among us. The prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder
(MDD), proved to be higher in developed countries than in developing
ones (Kessler and Üstün), is considered a phenomenon directly linked
to the society of spectacle present in Western countries and linked to
the neoliberal system. That is, in a system where products and life
itself have turned into "merchandise to be consumed" (Nico et al. 34),
images represent the dominant model of social relationships. The
transformation of the real into unreality through mass and social
media has encouraged the constant comparison of contemporary
subjects with an unreachable model of life as the final strategy of
promoting the immoderate consumerism present in late Capitalism.
The incapacity of reaching the impossible illusion of "a life with full
consumer power, constant state of happiness and pleasure,
continuous well-being, high productivity, and professional fulfilment"
(Nico et al. 35) explains the increasingly extended feelings of
unhappiness, inferiority, and dissatisfaction with oneself (Nico et al.
37) directly linked to the development of depression.

When examining the representation and analysis of
vulnerability during the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the trauma,
grieving, and structural oppression of those considered as struggling
through precarious lives offer a valuable field of study in which the
consequences of the advance of capital and its strategies can be
observed. However, through the digital gaze—described by Luciano
Floridi among the characteristics of the latest revolution that Karl
Schwab pointed out we are living in— "the self uses the digital
representation of itself by others in order to construct a virtual identity
through which it seeks to grasp its own personal identity" (Floridi 71).
Taking this into account, the codified nature of globalized capitalism

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also includes the privileged among those in which the emptiness of the reproduction of images leaves the burden of a meaningless existence. Through Judith Butler's understanding of vulnerability, not as passivity but as "an invariable feature of social relations" that exposes the human "condition of dependency and interdependency that challenge the dominant ontological understanding of the embodied subject" (21), it can be observed that the globalized and codified nature of postmodern times absorbs even the most privileged ones into the darkness of its disillusionment without a chance to recognize their vulnerability in isolation.

Because there are also those who do not have an image to aspire to, those who already are the image of perfection. Ottessa Moshfegh provides us with this different perspective in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. In a pinpoint critique of the apparent subversiveness pervading the advances of neoliberalism in pre-9/11 America (Dirschauer), the narrator of Moshfegh's novel has been interpreted as representing positions as different as the wider signifier of a postmodern rebellious character who will not conform to the rules of "an unhealthy late capitalist society" nor "what novels do" (Greenberg) and, applying Hannah Arendt's ideas, another victim of the extreme alienation from political life (Keeble). She has also been presented as an example of an unpleasant female character that will not show the kindness taken for granted in women (Bernt and Ivana).

Although previous analyses of the novel have explored the possibilities of reflection on the reader's inner perceptions that *My Year* offers (Kukkonen), none of the readings carried out so far provide an analysis based on the significance psychology and mental illness play in the novel, nor do they question the post-postmodern honesty and achievement of reality that the main character seems to conquer. In contrast to them, my analysis sets the main character's depression as a key aspect of the narration and questions whether her return to life is such or just another mirage in the maze of staged authenticity where the modern subject believes it has found a core of reality (MacCannell 18), yet only goes deeper into the spiral of pseudo-events.

Based on theories recently developed within the field of disability studies, I argue that *My Year* can be read as a case of narrative prosthesis. Following this concept, the depression of the character appears as the "stock feature of characterization" that sets the narration in motion and provides the narration with the crux it requires to call for a story (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 47). The scheme that Mitchell and Snyder provide in *Narrative*

Prosthesis will serve as the structure of the analysis of Moshfegh's novel, on which basis, Baudrillard's ideas will be used to explain the disabled existence of the postmodern subject. Once this article has described how the difference of the narrator is depicted, Baudrillard's ideas on the current state of the image and its effects on current life experience will explain how Moshfegh's narrative consolidates the need for its own existence by calling for an explanation of the origin of her narrator's deviation and its formative consequences (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 53). The role played by depression as narrative prosthesis may be observed to represent the emptiness derived from the stage of simulacra as formed by signifiers without signified. When reality turns into the dream of hyperreality, the insomniac subject is propelled towards disjunction, i.e., disability, which can only be made to disappear through the prosthesis of pill-induced sleep.

The communication between the field of disability studies and Jean Baudrillard's ideas illustrated in *My Year*'s narrative proves to be a fruitful analysis of the non-essentialist understanding of depression and disability and their function as the metaphor of the general alienation and emptiness produced by simulacra. In this line, the prostheses in the form of the pills, the narrative engine, and the reincorporation into the dream of simulacra through nostalgia challenge the understanding of the narrator's sleep as inactivity and expose the hyperreal nature of any attempt at escaping the paralyzing effects of neoliberalism.

CRITICAL BACKGROUND: DISABILITY STUDIES AND HYPERREALITY

Disability, understood as the "cognitive and physical conditions that deviate from normative ideas of mental ability and physiological function" (Mitchell and Snyder, *The Body* 2) and in contrast with the invisibility suffered by other minorities, has been frequently used in literature (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 2). As this definition shows, the critics in this field of study view disability as "part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances" that, far from the essentialist reclusion of the disabled into otherness, "involves everyone with a body that lives in the world of the senses" and "regulates the 'normal' body" (Davis 2) too.

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In literature, Mitchell and Snyder claim that many writers have made and continue to make use of disability as a "complicating feature of their representational universes" (*Narrative Prosthesis* 2) as well as the signifier through which other socially disempowered communities make themselves visible, the signified beneath the "'real' abnormality from which all other non-normative groups must be distanced"[1] (Mitchell and Snyder, *The Body and Physical Difference*[1] 6). Having observed this, they define "narrative prosthesis" as "the prevalence of disability representation and the myriad images ascribed to it" in narrative works (*Narrative Prosthesis* 4). This "perpetual discursive dependency upon disability" can be frequently found as "a stock feature of characterization" and "opportunistic metaphorical device" that both differentiates the character from the uniformity of the norm and serves as a "signifier of social and individual collapse" (*Narrative Prosthesis* 47).

From this perspective, the use of disability in narrative attempts to prostheticize "a deviance marked as improper to a social context" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 53). The impairment serves to mark out the character and justifies "[t]he very need for a story [...] called into being when something has gone amiss with the known world" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 53). However, by doing so, their exceptionality ostracizes them or "inaugurates the need for a story but is quickly forgotten" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 56). Narrative prosthesis impulses the story, and narrative pays it back either by leaving disability behind or punishing it for its lack of conformity (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 56).

Mitchell and Snyder acknowledge that contemporary American literature breaks down with this stigmatizing manipulation of disability and "references the disabled body through an exposé of the social discourse that produces it as aberrant," by making a portrayal of disability as "socially lived, rather than a purely medical phenomenon" (*Narrative Prosthesis* 166). Still, in some cases, even these works maintain the traditional narrative scheme of disability Mitchell and Snyder described as:

> first, a deviance or marked difference is exposed to a reader; second, a narrative consolidates the need for its own existence by calling for an explanation of the deviation's origins and formative consequences;

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[1] From now on, *The Body.*

third, the deviance is brought from the periphery of concerns to the center of the story to come; and fourth, the remainder of the story rehabilitates or fixes the deviance in some manner (*Narrative Prosthesis* 53)

These stages and the ideas here referred will be used in my analysis of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* to demonstrate that, while still making use of narrative prosthesis, the novel challenges traditional notions of "disabled," "mentally ill" and "normalcy." In conjunction with Baudrillard's ideas, the novel will be dissected to unveil the meaning behind the label of "depression" that the main character seems to be holding on to.

In order to study a novel that delves into the postmodern subject, Jean Baudrillard's ideas present a useful theoretical framework. In 1981, the French philosopher discussed simulacra as the representative postmodern paradigm. In contrast with previous times, when metaphysics was still present in the difference between the concept and the real, he sustains that, since the last decades of the 20th century, we live in the era of simulation, where the real has been substituted by the signs of the real in an "operation of deterring every real process via its operational double" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 2). Since the publication of *Simulacra and Simulation*[2] in 1981, the development of the Internet and its extensive use in every human sphere have only continued to accelerate the state of simulation and the already-empty-of-meaning image.

This increasing disappearance of representation and destitution of the real by the hyperreal in the process of simulation explains the current obsession with the resuscitation of the real. Baudrillard claims that society, incapable of mourning the death of reality, clings to the perfection of eternal simulacra as the only "reality" left. According to him, everything, from history —the last great myth (*Simulacra* 50)— to politics, is dead, with fewer relics left. According to his ideas, we live in the copy of a universe purged of death, a universe of perfection in which everything can be eternally simulated because nothing is any longer subject to violence and death, only to the law of supply and demand (*Simulacra* 27). No escape can then be found out of the hyperreal, as every attempt of counteracting simulation with reason or morality only serves to reinforce the system and credibility of simulation (*Simulacra* 15). In this line, power, also dead,

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[2] From now on, *Simulacra.*

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resuscitates in scandal, and every reaction against it results in the underscoring of the "reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 23) so that we end up with nothing but the "radical law of equivalence and exchange, the iron law of [capital's] power" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 23). Baudrillard argues that the social has disappeared too, and it is now produced through the multiplication of exchanges in the same hyperdensity of information that simultaneously destroys and makes history eternal as a chain of indifferent events (*The Illusion of the End*[3] 3). It is in this context that he contends that the original essence of the real has disappeared in the fulfilment of the perfection of its simulation model (Baudrillard, *Illusion* 6).

In *The Illusion of the End*, Baudrillard observed that the final decade of the 20th century, in which the action of the novel develops, was being lived as a failed mourning work of revision of the past: events were being resuscitated and rewritten in a process that destroyed them in their conception as irreversible, exceeding meaning and interpretation (*Illusion* 13). This need came from the same impossibility of accepting the death of reality explained above. Events became disconnected and absolute, and, with them, time turned into a void that left the individual alone, with no past nor memories, only "the catastrophic memory failure" (Baudrillard, *Illusion* 20). The world where "there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 79) drives us to the constant remaking and whitewashing of the scandal of the past (Baudrillard, *Illusion* 11-12) as the only thing to hold on to when the present no longer bears truth, but only credibility (Baudrillard, *Illusion* 54).

Even though he sustained that things were already dead and that the apparent unfolding of events observed was nothing but the artificial product of the denials of death (*Illusion* 116), with only radical illusion ahead of us (*Illusion* 123), Baudrillard's opinion changed with the terrorist attack to the World Trade Center: "the 'mother' of all events" (*The Spirit of Terrorism*[4] 4). According to him, terrorists made use of the strategies of the system to directly attack globalization as such, exploiting the weapons of power — "money and stock market, speculation, computer technology and aeronautics, spectacle and the media networks" (*Spirit* 19)— to direct an attack to its heart. The Twin Towers went from being the former symbol of omnipotence to, by their

[3] From now on, *Illusion.*
[4] From now on, *Spirit.*

absence, representing "the symbol of the possible disappearance of that simulation" (*Spirit* 47), bringing back images and events with their gift of death. As Keeble explains, in *My Year*, the 9/11 attacks appear decentred, which sets the novel apart from "9/11 novels" (*Spirit* 3). Instead of the unexpected disruption of a time of peace, innocence, and abundance, Moshfegh can be observed to use it as the logical corollary of the depressing neoliberal system portrayed throughout the narration. Jean Baudrillard's ideas on the World Trade Center attacks similarly situate them as the implosion and disruption of the perfection that the Twin Towers embodied and, therefore, will be paralleled in the analysis of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.

FROM DEPRESSION TO REHABILITATION: ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL *MY YEAR OF REST AND RELAXATION*

My Year of Rest and Relaxation recounts the life of a nameless 26-year-old woman between the years 2000 and 2001. Despite her apparently successful life, the recent death of her parents, the traumas associated with them, and her present disillusion and boredom with life, make her feel strong disenchantment and frustration with everything and everyone that surrounds her. That is why she only keeps contact with her psychiatrist, Dr Tuttle; her only friend, Reva; the doormen at her apartment block, and the Egyptian men working at the bodega that she frequents.

Dr Tuttle is an unusual psychiatrist that offers the narrator unlimited medication for the false insomnia that she claims to have. The protagonist feigns insomnia in order to get the anti-anxiety and anti-psychotic medication that she takes to sleep during most of the day. The protagonist of *My Year* does so as the only available alternative to death until, after an episode of true insomnia caused by an excessively strong pill, she decides to hibernate for four months, hoping to wake up to a renewed, meaningful life. Once she does so and "resuscitates" as a person able to enjoy life, the attack on the World Trade Center happens and the novel ends. In the disaster, her friend Reva commits suicide, which the main character interprets as an "awakening."

The protagonist and narrator of *My Year* describes herself as someone who "looked like a model, had money [she] hadn't earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history, so [she] was 'cultured'" (Moshfegh 13). She represents the embodiment of the female beauty canon, the intellectual elite, and the privileged class in

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the mind of a depressed character, which apparently contradicts the idea of the body as "surface manifestation of internal symptomatology" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 59) commonly found in the representation of disability in literature.

Instead of the "disruption of acculturated bodily norms" pointing to "a corresponding misalignment of subjectivity" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 57), the narrator has a beautiful bodily signifier that mismatches the depressingly dark void her mind as signified represents: "Since adolescence, I'd vacillate between wanting to look like the spoiled WASP that I was and the bum that I felt I was and should have been if I'd had any courage" (Moshfegh 35). Despite the privileged situation and perfect appearance of its narrator, the readers get inside the mind of a person who, according to the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-5), fits into the description of a patient with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD).

The narrator exhibits most of the symptoms of MDD throughout the novel: she has a "depressed mood most of the day" (APA 125): "I thought that if I did normal things […] I could starve off the part of me that hated everything" (Moshfegh 35), and a "[m]arkedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day" (APA 125). Nevertheless, the most pervasive symptom throughout the novel is "hypersomnia nearly every day" (APA 125), which functions as the engine of the narration. Although her desire to sleep is mostly motivated by her "[r]ecurrent thoughts of death" (APA 125): "It wouldn't be that bad to die, I thought" (Moshfegh 170); "If, when I woke up in June, life still wasn't worth the trouble, I would end it" (Moshfegh 260), and produced by the more than a dozen pills she takes a day; she considers herself "a somniac," "a somnophile" (Moshfegh 46). With regards to her "[f]eelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt" (APA 125), her rejection of herself pervades the whole novel: "I would risk death if it meant I could sleep all day and become a whole new person" (Moshfegh 26).

In her case, the universally desirable corporeal norm (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 29) does not function as the signifier of an able individual. In contrast with the affirmation that "[o]ne cannot narrate the story of a healthy body […] without the contrastive device of disability to bear out the symbolic potency of the message" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 63-64) and that "[t]he materiality of metaphor via disabled bodies gives all bodies a tangible

essence in that the 'healthy' corporeal surface fails to achieve its symbolic effect without its disabled counterpart" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 64). The model-like body of the narrator, along with the despair of her mind, function as the best corporeal representation of the individual and social collapse the novel narrates; her canonical appearance still functions as a corporeal metaphor and "anchor in materiality" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 63). This novel, therefore, provides an "alternative perspective on what it means to live with a disability in a culture obsessed with forging equations between physical ability, beauty, and productivity" (Mitchell and Snyder, *The Body* 7).

Her normative body becomes as much of a cage of depersonalization as the disabled one: "Being pretty only kept me trapped in a world that valued looks above all else" (Moshfegh 35). Even though diagnostic labels contribute to the stigmatization of the disabled individual, as Wolframe explains, the lack of them turns invisible and illegible the experiences they conceptualize (34). In the case of the narrator, the signifier of her beauty and the lack of an official diagnostic record continuously hide her from the ableist gaze of psychiatrization. Even her only friend, Reva, discards the narrator's possible mental problem and focuses on her physical aspect, like when she compares her friend to a character whose central feature is suffering from borderline personality disorder (BPD) before, once again, referring to the perfection of her body: "But you look more like Angelina Jolie in that. She's blond in that" (Moshfegh 11).

Similarly, although the narrator took hour-long naps in the supply closet at work and was always "sloppy and lazy […] grayer, emptier, less there" (Moshfegh 39), nothing but her looks were perceived in her. This not only offers us a vision of the protagonist in line with other disabled characters but also highlights the paradigmatic hyperreal nature of signifier without signified that she and the world surrounding her came to represent:

> Natasha had casted me as the jaded underling, and for the most part, the little effort I put into the job was enough. I was fashion candy. Hip decor. I was the bitch who sat behind a desk and ignored you when you walked into the gallery, a pouty knockout wearing indecipherably cool avant-garde outfits. (Moshfegh 37)

Far from the narratives that frequently "sentimentalize [the impairment] and link it to the bourgeois sensibility of individualism

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and the drama of an individual story" (Davis 3-4), the situation of the narrator acquires social relevance and there is no victimization nor sentimentalism in her story. Despite her anhedonia and lethargic state, she is in charge of her life and has the medical treatment she wants to receive, as her relationship with Dr Tuttle shows.

The narrator starts seeing her therapist in January 2000 out of her "wish to escape the prison of [her] mind and body" (Moshfegh 18). In order to heal the depression that her metaphorical insomnia —or the awakened vision of reality as disenchantment with hyperreality— has caused her and reincorporate herself into the normalcy found in the dream of simulation she is deprived of, she pretends to suffer from clinical insomnia. From the very first session, she lies to the therapist to get "downers to drown out [her] thoughts" (Moshfegh 17). These downers would induce her to chemical sleep and function as the prostheses that help her fit back into the dream of hyperreality.

In their sessions, the psychiatrist embraces the current biomedical discourse that understands mental illness as a brain disorder linked to "genetic vulnerabilities, early childhood illness and adversity, or other traumas" (Jones and Brown) ("'[o]rphans usually suffer from low immunity, psychiatrically speaking'" [Moshfegh 92]) and poses medication as the only solution: "do you mean you're reading philosophy books? Or is this something you thought up on your own? Because if it's suicide, I can give you something for that" (Moshfegh 111). However, this attitude does not seem to annoy the protagonist. Being aware of the common perception of trauma victims, she adopts the discourse normatively associated with that model and expresses what is expected from her in order to get her pills:

> "I want downers, that much I know," I said frankly. "And I want something that'll put a damper on my need for company. I'm at the end of my rope," I said. "I'm an orphan, on top of it all. I probably have PTSD. My mother killed herself." (Moshfegh 21)

By adjusting the report of her symptoms and the possible origin of her disorder to the expectation of medical practice, the narrator "exposes a pleasure at the heart of professional activity that results in the will to produce a pathological subject of diagnosis" (Mitchell and Snyder, *The Body* 19). She gives Dr Tuttle what she needs as a psychiatrist in order to get what she wants as a patient. It can be observed that she does not try to overcome liability but employs

"apparent liabilities as weaponry in the rhetorical dispute over [her] intentions and ambitions" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 104). Even though she could have been diagnosed with depression had she received any attention, she does not stand as a victim of medical discourse and excessive medicalization. Instead, the narrator instrumentalizes and plays along with medical diagnostics in order to get the treatment she has already prescribed herself to get back to life in sleep.

From the very first page, there are already hints at the second point of the structure proposed by Mitchell and Snyder. The "explanation of the deviation's origins and formative consequences" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 53) is present in the link established between her vital exhaustion and the unstoppable intrusion of consumption in her unconscious ("I'd wake up to find voice messages on my cell phone from salons or spas confirming appointments I'd booked in my sleep. I always called back to cancel, which I hated doing because I hated talking to people" [Moshfegh 1]). Once established that she is a disabled character, Moshfegh's narrative exposes that the disabling element in her life is her awakened vision of reality, as will be analyzed in the following lines.

When considering lived experience through his ideas on simulation as the current phase of the image and the death of reality it hides, Baudrillard concludes that "[t]he reality of simulation is unbearable" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 41). In the novel, simulation is portrayed as the disabling origin of the narrator's depression in her incapacity to adapt to simulated normalcy. Far from reducing disability to an individual experience, the systemic dimension of simulacra pervades her narration. Her living experiences can be read as a metaphor for the state of the social system, and her use of sleep as prosthesis points to the socially induced need to fit into normalcy as part of hyperreality.

The readers are aware of such a disconnection from reality in the detachment from the common aspects of life that she expresses throughout the narration. The need to disconnect from the pretense of reality that simulation represents is settled on at the beginning of the novel: "I took a shower once a week at most. I stopped tweezing, stopped bleaching, stopped waxing, stopped brushing my hair. No moisturizing or exfoliating. No shaving. I left the apartment infrequently" (Moshfegh 2). Her decision to stop taking care of her body can be interpreted as the only way of stopping the production of value without meaning that her corporeal normalcy had come to embody.

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Like the body of a cripple in the literature on disability analyzed in *Narrative Prosthesis*, her bodily perfection was emptied of meaning and conceived "as anything but a message, as a stockpile of information and of messages, as fodder for data processing" (Baudrillard *Simulacra*, 100).

To avoid the discomfort that the awareness of the lack of reality in simulation caused in her, she also stopped watching TV, because it "aroused too much in [her], and [she]'d get compulsive about the remote, clicking around, scoffing at everything and agitating [her]self" (Moshfegh 3). The narrator's rejection of the consumption of television can be understood as her refusal to allow simulation into her life, the "dissolution of TV in life, dissolution of life in TV" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 32) Baudrillard observed in his work. In the conception of reality as simulacra, in media, "[t]he real object is wiped out by news —not merely alienated, but abolished", only the image without meaning remaining, only "traces on a monitoring screen" (Baudrillard, *Illusion* 56).

The same process is observed in the newspaper headlines that the narrator reads. As she explains, they are the only words she reads so as to steer "clear of anything that might pique [her] intellect or make [her] envious or anxious" (Moshfegh 6). In her descriptions of her visits to a nearby bodega, several of the headlines (Moshfeg 104, 179, 191, 243) can be read in lists of disconnected events that help to temporarily situate the narration while pointing to the "storm of events of no importance, without either real actors or authorized interpreters" (Baudrillard, *Illusion* 14-15) that history had become, according to Baudrillard. The events are not presented in action anymore but "in speculation and chain reactions spinning off towards the extremes of a facticity with which interpretation can no longer keep pace" (Baudrillard, *Illusion* 15):

> The new president was going to be hard on terrorists. A Harlem teenager had thrown her newborn baby down a sewage drain. A mine caved in somewhere in South America. A local councilman was caught having gay sex with an illegal immigrant. Someone who used to be fat was now extremely thin. Mariah Carey gave Christmas gifts to orphans in the Dominican Republic. (Moshfegh, 104)

In a system solely concerned with looks, the narrator chooses to close her eyes to the signs around her as an escape from the frustration caused by her incapacity to adapt to the system they

compound. Nevertheless, there still remain representatives of the system of simulacra in the narrator's life, and not all of them are as rejected as the ones explained here, as can be observed in her relationship with her friend Reva.

The narrator's relationship with her best and only friend is a complicated one. Reva's attitude towards simulacra is the opposite of the narrator's, who describes her as "a slave to vanity and status" (Moshfegh 9). Reva does not give up on her belief in the system despite suffering from bulimia and alcoholism and only finding pleasure in chewing gum and the gym. Even though her inability to fit in the unattainable simulation of normalcy makes her unhappy, instead of rejecting the impossible standard that could never bring happiness, she cultivates hatred towards herself and those whom she considers to be in a better position, whom she compares herself with and tries to look down on: "Melanie Griffith looks bulimic in this movie […]. I don't know. I'm kind of out of it. I'm *fasting*"[5] (Moshfegh 82).

Reva's attitude even against the narrator ("I think Reva took some satisfaction in watching me crumble into the ineffectual slob she hoped I was becoming" [Moshfegh 14]) can be observed to distortedly match Bacon's assertion that the deformed individual develops resentment against the world "as nature hath done ill by them, so do they by nature" (Bacon 158 qtd. in Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 106). Living in a hyperreal state not based on meaning nor reason but representation, every individual becomes a disabled one. Unable to fit in nor accept themselves and, in cases like the narrator's friend, developing scorn against the hostile world they are in, it is life itself that becomes an impairment.

However, and despite their incompatibility, Reva acts as the less addictive substitute for television and is accepted as representative of simulacra in the narrator's life. Her internalization of the hyperreal combined with the narrator's awareness of the system of simulation is frequently exposed in the comparisons that underscore the similitudes between Reva and artificial products of communication: "When Reva gave advice, it sounded as though she were reading a bad made-for-TV movie script" (Moshfegh 57), "It always impressed me how predictable Reva was–she was like a character in a movie. Every emotional gesture was always right on cue" (Moshfegh 123), "Everything she said sounded like she'd read it in a Hallmark card" (Moshfegh 165), "She was just as good as a VCR, I

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[5] Emphasis from the original.

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thought. The cadence of her speech was as familiar and predictable as the audio from any movie I'd watched a hundred times" (Moshfegh 204).

Not only Reva's way of expressing herself but also the content of her speech is plagued by simulation. Her visits are always accompanied by her commentaries on beauty, gossip, trends, and pieces of advice on "life wisdom" (Moshfegh 13) that she acquires through workshops and self-help books with titles such as *Get the Most Out of Your Day, Ladies* (Moshfegh 15) and *The Art of Happiness* (Moshfegh 180). Like her taste for gum and the gym, they are recycled products of the social, the resurrection of a lost reality in the hyperreal, just another resurrection of "lost faculties, or lost bodies, or lost sociality, or the lost taste for food" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 14) as the ones Baudrillard pointed to in his work.

In the life of the narrator, Reva represents the accepted intrusion of simulation. Probably tolerated as the source of information on the counterpart state to the protagonist's suffering from insomnia, Reva continuously demonstrates how asleep she is and the deep despair such a dream state causes in her. The narrator finds in Reva the comfort of a shared misfortune and the company of another disabled individual incapable of fitting in.

NOSTALGIA FOR THE REAL

Even though throughout the novel the narrator's clear vision of the hyperreal is exposed as the explanation of her disability's origins and formative consequences (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 53), her deviation from simulated normalcy is not pigeonholed into a representation of mental illness as "an exemplary state of extreme consciousness" (Dash 41 qtd. in Holladay 209). Despite being aware of the reality lost in simulation, the nostalgia for the real is also frequently present in the protagonist's discourse as the product of the panic induced by her nihilistic existence. For the asleep narrator, as a postmodern representative, nostalgia serves as the escape out of the void in which her awakened vision of reality put her. As Baudrillard explained, this panic-produced melancholic state leads us toward melancholia as the fundamental tonality of current systems of hyperreality (*Simulacra* 56). Understanding the difference between melancholy as nostalgia and melancholia as depression, the main character's attempts at clinging onto the vestiges of reality can be observed to not only not save her from disillusionment, but also

reinforce it while trying to avoid it. She is trapped in the endless pursuit of reality that can only feed hyperreality, and, combined with her insomnia, depression, as can be observed in the different instances of the novel in which nostalgia is present.

According to Fredrick Jameson, the latest form of the image in the postmodernist order of simulacra supposes the purest form of capitalism: the elimination of every precapitalist organization, including the penetration and colonization of the Unconscious (35). In Moshfegh's novel, even though the narrator seems to be aware of the hyperreal nature of reality, she and her sleep-walking self still exhibit the irreversible damage of simulacra in its inexorable advance and the recourse to nostalgia as a tempting lifeboat. The strong pills she takes to sleep make her incorporate into the simulated normalcy that her consciousness rejects. In her sleep, she carries out without second thoughts all those things she consciously avoids, "while [she] was sleeping, some superficial part of [her] was taking aim at a life of beauty and sex appeal," "[she] couldn't trust [her]self" (Moshfegh 86): "I'd wake up to find voice messages on my cell phone from salons or spas confirming appointments I'd booked in my sleep" (Moshfegh 1), "I made appointments to get waxed. I booked time at a spa that offered infrared treatments and colonics and facials" (Moshfegh 86).

On another occasion, the narrator woke up from a somnambulist episode wearing party clothes, her body recently waxed, a French manicure in her fingernails, a vinegar and gin smell, and a stamp on her hand from a club she did not know. With her, she found a few dozen Polaroids that documented her night out, the kind of party where you found everyone "pushing toward the ecstasy of the dream of tomorrow, where they'd have more fun, feel more beautiful, be surrounded by more interesting people" (Moshfegh 183). Instead of the vestiges of a lived past, she finds images of a past that never existed for her. Like the events generated by the news and the work created by capital, her experiences disappear in the horizon of its signs (Baudrillard, *Illusion* 16). As Baudrillard observed at a global level, for her, time no longer exists, there is only "an empty actualité where only the visual psychodrama […] was left to unfold" (*Illusion* 16). Her unconscious self, incapable of accepting the meaningless and purposeless nature of past simulated experiences, feels the need of documenting it. Therefore, the Polaroids can be observed to represent for the narrator the same stockpile of the past in plain view that Baudrillard observed humanity needed in order to avoid "[o]ur entire linear and accumulative culture" from collapsing (*Simulacra* 10). They

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worked for her asleep self as the batteries of artificial memory described in *The Illusion of the End*, collectively used to "face up to the absence of a future and the glacial times which await us" (9).

In her sleepwalking episodes, the unconscious, already colonized by the simulacrum system as Jameson described (35), does not oppose resistance to the oasis of reality that nostalgia as trust on the lost vestiges represents. The disabled subject can thus return to normality through the prosthesis that unconsciousness represents, at least until the decisions of the conscious self puts a stop to the nostalgic activity by locking herself in her apartment. However, her nostalgia for lost references is not only present in her sleep-walking experiences. Despite the disillusionment and indifference with the hyperreal normalcy standard, she still consciously recurs to it on some occasions in an attempt to resurrect reality, because "[a]nything is better than to contest reality as such" (Baudrillard, *Spirit* 80). Entirely aware of the work of simulation that she carries out in her own memories, she describes her sadness as an "oceanic despair that —if I were in a movie— would be depicted superficially as me shaking my head slowly and shedding a tear," followed by a "[z]oom in on my sad, pretty, orphan face" (Moshfegh 221). Allured by the hyperreality of happy family relationships provided by television, she makes up memories of her dad pushing her "on a swing at sunset," her mum bathing her, and happy birthdays from her childhood in a "grainy, swirling home video footage" (Moshfegh 221). But nostalgia cannot produce any significant impact on her awakened self. Instead, she can only feel "canned" nostalgia, "[l]ike the nostalgia for a mother I'd seen in television –someone who cooked and cleaned, kissed me on the forehead and put Band-Aids on my knees, read me books at night, held and rocked me when I cried" (Moshfegh 135).

Nevertheless, the trick of nostalgia for the lost real is able to escape the control of the hyperconscious narrator in her views on the social. Her acknowledgment of the illusion of the real beyond simulation gives origin to her idealization of the working class as a core of reality and the rejection of what she regards as instances of the middle-class hyperreal. "[O]rdering a brioche bun or no-foam latte" and "children with runny noses or Swedish au pairs" make her turn into the humble bodega near her house, which she considers to be a vestige of reality, "[t]he bodega coffee was working-class coffee" (Moshfegh 5). Similarly, she indulges in romanticizing the lives of the workers in the pharmacy —being jealous of how jovial and relaxed they looked, as if they had a life (Moshfegh 96)—and even the contact of her

trash with other people's trash in the trash chute made her feel important, "like I was participating in the world. [...] The things I touched touched things other people had touched. I was contributing. I was connecting" (Moshfegh 115). The narrator is thus the representative of the despair suffered by subjects in this hyperreal "excess of reality, this excess of power and comfort, this universal availability, this definitive fulfilment" (Baudrillard, *Spirit* 103), which she faces by falling into the trick of nostalgia, even while being awake.

These ideas on the nostalgia of the main character conclude the analysis of the elements in the novel that identify simulation as the origin of the narrator's disability. The analysis of the representation of nostalgia in *My Year* provides varied instances of such a melancholic state as the ultimate resource to face disillusionment. It has been observed that the depressed protagonist cannot control her prosthetic unconscious self and its utter belief in reality, eventually leading her to lock herself in her apartment. When conscious, she also recurs to nostalgia in an attempt to avoid the memories of her miserable childhood with no result because she is too aware of what she is trying to do. Contrarily, her belief in the lower classes as a core of reality effectively works as the nostalgia that escapes her critical insomnia. In the following point, it will be observed how such desires for escaping disillusionment are resolved and, therefore, as in the scheme provided by Mitchell and Snyder, disability is made to disappear.

REHABILITATION OF THE DIFFERENCE: BACK ON THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW

As Mitchell and Snyder point out, the majority of novels dealing with disability are resolved when the difference that sets them in motion is made to disappear. The options offered by this ableist narrative pattern are that either the deviant subject is rescued from social censure, that a revaluation of an alternative mode of being is carried out or, that the deviant subject is exterminated as "a purification of the social body" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 54). Unable to change the system that disables her or to function as a simulated normate,[6] the narrator of *My Year* sets death

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[6] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson coined this term to refer to those read as abled subjects, "the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural

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as her last available option. Her long hibernation is meant to operate as a simulated death that would allow her to "resurrect" as a renewed, non-deviant person. Thus, although Reva's unexpected visit in the middle of her hibernation is regarded as "the way you'd feel if someone interrupted you in the middle of suicide" (Moshfegh 7), the narrator specifies that what she was doing was "the opposite of suicide" (Moshfegh 7). On this occasion, she makes clear her hibernation was "self-preservational," and that she went through it because "[she] thought that it was going to save [her] life" (Moshfegh 7). Her elimination as a subject that deviates from the system is presented as the only alternative, because putting an end to the simulated system where there is no "representation of death, nor even—and this is the worst—illusion of death" (Baudrillard, *Illusion* 99) is virtually impossible.

Intriguingly, she does not consider her hibernation as reintegration into the system, but as "a quest for a new spirit" (Moshfegh 264). The social dimensions of her impairment remain completely unaddressed, which targets her clear vision of the system as the problem she needs to get rid of in order to emerge from hibernation as a "renewed" (Moshfegh 258) person. For that purpose, she required "a completely blank canvas" (Moshfegh 258), which she envisioned in the form of "white walls, bare floors, lukewarm tap water" (Moshfegh 258-9). She also donated almost all of her clothes to Reva (Moshfegh 255) and almost everything in her apartment to a thrift shop (Moshfegh 259). In her attempt at reincorporating herself into the real, she joins the hyperreal dictation of resurrecting the vestiges of reality in a reinvention of "penury, asceticism, [and] vanished savage naturalness" (*Simulacra* 14) Baudrillard observed in line with the recycling of lost faculties, bodies, and sociality.

These preparations proved useful after her awakening. Then, she was able to perceive that "[t]here was kindness" and pain was no longer "the only touchstone for growth" (Moshfegh 288). The blank canvas on which she worked conceded plenty of space for her new vision of reality, which, instead of pain as the basis for her personal growth and conscience of death and conflict, held nostalgia for reality as the central pillar of her life. In her description of her new life, it can be observed that, instead of disillusionment and nostalgia for meaning in hyperreality, she looks for the already-lost meaning in simple life,

capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (1997, 7).

which she relates to animal life as a more natural way of existence. She slept on the floor (Moshfegh 278) and spent her outdoor time with animals instead of humans (Moshfegh 278-279). After hibernation, she even describes herself as "a newborn animal" (Moshfegh 278).

She renounced cell phones and coffee (Moshfegh 278-279) too, and refurbished her apartment with objects from a Goodwill store. She explains that she "liked looking at things other people had let go of" (Moshfegh 279) and imagining invented strangers using them: "a couple making love on the sofa, thousands of TV dinners, a baby's tantrums, the honeyed glow of whiskey in an Elks Lodge tumbler" (Moshfegh 279). She uses second-hand objects in the same way ideologies or retro fashions make a comeback or, in Baudrillard's own terms, as a resurrection of "the period when at least there was history" (*Simulacra* 46). As a result of being able to imagine linear temporality again, she sells her parents' house, because she can picture the future of someone else in it: "I could survive without the house. I understood that it would soon be someone else's store of memories, and that was beautiful" (Moshfegh 288).

Even though she thinks that with her renewed purer life she has escaped from her source of disillusionment, her appreciation of asceticism and recycling of old furniture are no more than the last of utopian desires in simulation (Baudrillard, *Illusion* 117). Baudrillard explains that, in the age of simulacra, "[t]he more we seek to rediscover the real and the referential, the more we sink into simulation, in this case a shameful and, at any event, hopeless simulation attempt of escaping the system through the resurrection of reality" (*Illusion* 117). In her healing, she concludes her trajectory as part of the pattern of narrative prosthesis in the extermination of her difference. With the narrator's hibernation, the impairment her insomnia represents is annihilated, and she is absorbed into the simulation of normalcy from which not only did she not escape, but actively engaged with, letting the system remain undamaged, unaltered, and continuously turning every vestige of reality and dissidence left into another part of its eternal cold perfection. She is "healed" once she is able to go back to the dream in which, in comparison to the lack of fittingness of her friend Reva, her privilege allows her to live.

Still, the narrator's "unawakening" into simulacra is neither the end of Moshfegh's narrative nor its only awakening. In a reversal of the narrator's pseudo-suicide, Reva's death by jumping off from one of the Twin Towers signifies an awakening from simulacra. In contrast

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to the protagonist's final solution, Reva's was not planned, but sudden and unexpected, and, more importantly, it was real.

Throughout the novel, her development follows the completely opposite trajectory to the narrator's. The frustrated friend of the successful WASP narrator always played along the rules of simulacra. The system set what she was and aspired to be, it was both the cause of her despair and the supplier of the solutions. In the novel, Reva represents what Baudrillard called the "neo-individual," "the purest product of 'other-directedness'" (*Illusion* 106). In his words, she would not be an individual but "a pentito of subjectivity and alienation" (*Illusion* 106) devoted to "the sacrificial religion of performance, efficiency, stress and time-pressure," the "total mortification and unremitting sacrifice to the divinities of data [l'information], total exploitation of oneself by oneself, the ultimate in alienation" (*Illusion* 106).

On the 6th of January, Reva told the narrator that the company in which she worked, Marsh, started "a new crisis consulting firm" (Moshfegh 203) in the Twin Towers because of terrorist risks, which proleptically anticipates her suicide as much as explains her presence in the World Trade Center the day of the attacks. Working at the buildings that had become the embodiment of simulacra inscribed her life in the system even deeper, "a system that is no longer competitive, but digital and countable" (Baudrillard, *Spirit* 38). The Towers were the representation of the disappearance of competition in favor of networks and monopoly, and their twin nature worked as the signifier of "the end of any original reference" (Baudrillard, *Spirit* 39).

Baudrillard analyzed the 9/11 attacks in the context of simulacra and the impact they exercised on the system. In contrast with other terrorist attacks, which he perceived as mere signs without any other function apart from their recurrence in images anticipated in simulacra (*Simulacra* 22), the conscious manipulation of the precedence of simulacra the terrorists carried out drastically imbued the attacks to the World Trade Center with meaning. The control of the media and resources along with the kamikazes' deaths, which were not only real but also sacrificial (Baudrillard, *Spirit* 17), added the power of symbolism lost in the current hyperdensity of information in news to the attacks and turned them into the "absolute, irrevocable event" (Baudrillard, *Spirit* 17). Baudrillard's analysis contends that the terrorists understood that the game played by the system was always "on the ground of reality," so, in order to dismantle its power, their attacks should be carried out instead in "the symbolic sphere [...]

where the rule is that of challenge, reversion and outbidding" (*Spirit* 17). This way, the 9/11 disaster became the resuscitation of images and events as such (Baudrillard, *Spirit* 27). The terrorists in their attack "restore[d] an irreducible singularity to the heart of a system of generalized exchange" (Baudrillard, *Spirit* 9).

In the novel, such a signifying event is developed on the last page in less than twenty lines, offering an enigmatic and encouraging ending in Moshfegh's short last chapter. In it, the narrator introduces the topic by saying that she bought "a new TV/VCR" to "record the news coverage of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers" (Moshfegh 289) and, afterwards, she points out that "Reva was gone" and that, probably, the woman in the videotape "leap[ing] off the Seventy-eighth floor of the North Tower" (Moshfegh 289) was her. As when Reva announced her mother's death ("'My mom died,' Reva said during a commercial break" [Moshfegh 109]), her own death is inscribed in television.

However, taking into account Baudrillard's ideas explained above, what the narrator plays on repeat is not just another "indefinitely refracted" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 23) hyperreal event. Even though the precession of simulacra did not disappear in the extensive coverage of the event in the news and the image still consumed the event, "absorb[ing] it and offer[ing] it for consumption" (Baudrillard, *Spirit* 27), the narrator was observing what Baudrillard described as the crystallization of "the orgy of power, liberation, flow and calculation which the Twin Towers embodied, while being the violent deconstruction of that extreme form of efficiency and hegemony" (*Spirit* 59). Reva's death, as horrific as the image of one's only friend committing suicide may seem, was perceived as an awakening by the narrator, understood in Baudrillard's terms as Reva's release from "the horror of living and working in sarcophagi of concrete and steel" (*Spirit* 41) and the "institutional violence, both mental and physical, in homeopathic doses" (*Spirit* 59) that she went through as neo-individual.

When confronted with the impossibility of keeping on living, the protagonist chooses the simulation of death, inscribed as she is in a system that, in Baudrillard's terms, "hounds out any form of negativity or singularity, including that ultimate form of singularity that is death itself" (*Spirit* 94). On the other hand, the co-protagonist, when confronted with the collapse of life as she understood it, takes her life in her own hands and "against a system that operates on the basis of the exclusion of death, a system whose ideal is an ideal of zero

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deaths" (Baudrillard, *Spirit* 16), she kills herself, exercising the most singular event as the finishing touch of a life of serial production.

CONCLUSION

The use of disability as narrative prosthesis in literature has contributed to and exposed the construction of disability throughout history. In some cases, as it can be observed in the treatment of it in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the image offered, far from contributing to the stigmatization of the impaired subjects, can help in understanding the social dimension of disability.

The objective that this analysis sought was to demonstrate that the disability of the narrator serves as narrative prosthesis and engine of the novel in the reflection of the disillusionment the system of simulacra produces in individuals and that her hibernation was not a rebellious act but another failed attempt at escaping from reality when playing by its rules. Conversely, the attack on the symbolic realm represented by Reva's suicide actively works in the unveiling of hyperreality. The narrator's development throughout the novel shows that her depression is not an individual disturbance but a socially induced one, serving as representative of the damaging effects of normative simulacra on individuals. The narrator's disillusionment with life is explained by her perception of the lack of meaning in the hyperreal. Her frequent exercises of nostalgia when attempting to escape from simulacra during her somnambulist episodes, her whitewashing of the vestiges of reality, and the ascetic life she carried out after her awakening serve as representation of the widespread resurrection of the lost past as a substitute for the mourning reality that pervades contemporary culture. The final chapter, with Reva's death in the 9/11 attacks, gains a social dimension as Reva's "diving into the unknown" (Moshfegh 289) becomes a singular instance of the collapse of globalization.

In my analysis, I intersect Baudrillard's views on simulation with the field of disability studies to explore the disabling effects that late capitalism has on individuals by imposing simulacra as the normalcy standard of social and economic health. Furthermore, as the counterpart of the visible metaphor that disabled bodies traditionally represent, the analysis of invisible disability here carried out proposes an interesting turn on the disabled condition in times when the emptying of meaning in images encompasses every aspect of life.

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CONSTRUING ACTS OF VOICING IN CHRISTINA DALCHER'S *VOX* THROUGH VULNERABILITY METAPHORS

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ABSTRACT:
In the digital era, and especially in the context of the fourth industrial revolution, where everyone's digitally mediated voice can, potentially, reach the entire world, Dalcher's dystopian novel, *Vox*, expresses a very real fear of being silenced. In modern America,[1] a purist movement voted into power has silenced all women and girls overnight. The novel investigates the intersection of physicality and the immateriality of spoken words. The narrator's voice, sober but without restriction, contrasts sharply with the limitations imposed around her and uncovers the silent horror of a dystopian America where half the population has lost all rights of self-disposal, both physical and discursive. Employing the conceptual metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson (2003), this study explores metaphors in *Vox* that shape discourse(s) on voicing vulnerability and on voice as visibility through an interdisciplinary discourse analysis that draws on the fields of literature and linguistics.

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[1] Although the novel's plot clearly takes place in the US, the term 'America' is used throughout the text. Specifically, Canada, Mexico and Cuba are referred to as free countries where American citizens are trying to take refuge, while the Slogans of the Pure Movement include MAKE AMERICA MORAL AGAIN! (135), an obvious reference to Trump's America. In our text we have chosen to use 'America' maintaining the original language choice of the author.

RESUMEN:

En la era digital, y especialmente en el contexto de la cuarta revolución industrial, donde la mediada voz digital puede potencialmente alcanzar cualquier parte del mundo, la novela distópica de Dalcher, *Vox,* expresa el miedo muy real a ser silenciado. En la sociedad americana contemporánea, un movimiento purista llega al poder y silencia a todas las mujeres y niñas en el transcurso de una noche. La novela investiga la intersección del carácter físico e inmaterial de las palabras habladas. La voz narrativa, sobria pero sin restricciones, ofrece un contraste pronunciado a las limitaciones que encuentra impuestas a su alrededor y destapa los horrores silenciosos de una América distópica donde la mitad de la población ha perdido todos sus derechos de autogestión tanto físicos como discursivos. Siguiendo la teoría de la metáfora conceptual de Lakoff y Johnson (2003), este estudio explora las metáforas que modelan aquellos discursos que dan voz a la vulnerabilidad e investiga la voz como visibilidad desde un análisis del discurso interdisciplinar que hace uso de las áreas de literatura y de lingüística.

> "A word after a word/ after a word is power"
> Margaret Atwood, *Spelling*

The above lines from Margaret Atwood's poem *Spelling* (1981) echo the power of words and draw attention to the power of superfluity, redundancy, reiteration even, to make a voice heard. Words can carry one's action beyond the limited space the body can reach. They are the means to tell one's fear, to assume one's vulnerability and work towards alleviating it. Imposed silence then emerges as a mechanism of oppression. Processes of silencing have been extensively addressed by social-anthropological and sociolinguistic research focusing especially on minorities such as women (see for example Jaworski, 1992). Moreover, in the information economy of the new media, word limits and practices of algorithmic censorship are becoming increasingly popular (Bamman, O' Connor & Smith, 2012; Cobbe, 2021). Although a word limit is a common practice permeating all levels of activity, it is seldom thought upon. Electronic forms of various importance allow only so many words as answers, Twitter has a (recently increased) 280 sign-limit for its users, educational institutions have rigid wordcount requirements, and the same holds for academic and other publications.

In addition, contemporary literature in the context of what has been recognized as the "fourth industrial revolution" (see for example Schwab, 2016; Johannessen, 2019) problematizes sociopolitical and human rights issues anew (Manugeren, 2019). The fourth industrial revolution not only refers to connected machines but includes breakthroughs, among others, in gene- and nano-technologies. The diffusion of boundaries between physical, digital and biological domains thus renders the fourth industrial revolution fundamentally different from previous revolutions (Schwab, 2016). From a literary perspective, it inspires transhumanist visions of science fiction dystopias (Cuadrado Payeras, 2022). More specifically, it is in this digitalized context where medical robots, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience data tend to redefine what is human that Dalcher's dystopia is grounded, integrating a transhumanist vision of women's control and silencing.

In the digital era, where everyone's voice can potentially reach the entire world, Christina Dalcher's dystopian novel expresses a very real fear of being silenced. In modern America, a purist movement voted into power silences all women and girls overnight, using an electronic device on their wrist that allows them a limit of a hundred words per day, administering electroshocks for any additional words pronounced. Reading and writing are banned for all women and language is further used as a brain-washing tool with an obligatory mantra to be spoken daily into the counter devices. With the conception of this device, the novel draws our attention to the nature of spoken words and investigates the intersection of physicality and their immateriality. Indeed, with the counters, words become physical entities detected as pulses as they are being produced and come out of the physical body. Although reduced to its physical expression, speaking is recognized by the authoritarian government as an act– more precisely as a threatening political act. The narrator, a former neurolinguist working on aphasia (the loss of the ability to speak due to brain damage) constitutes a further link between physicality and speech. The focus on this physiological ability (speaking) that is a prerequisite to language use (i.e., to access the communicative code that is language) is also viewed in the context of pragmatics, namely the relation between language's literal and non-literal (and, in our case, more specifically metaphorical) meanings. Uttered language thus becomes the subject matter of the novel, which is, in its turn, at least partly constructed on the mechanisms of metaphor. Throughout the novel the constant play between metaphor and literal meaning allows

Dalcher to view metaphorical concepts in their literal manifestations, which uncover the power of metaphor to shape views and policies affecting everyday life.

Employing conceptual metaphor theory in literary analysis, we explore those metaphors in *Vox* that shape discourse(s) on voicing vulnerability through an interdisciplinary discourse analysis drawing from the fields of literature and sociolinguistics. We have analyzed the notion of vox in Christina Dalcher's novel identifying different *acts of voicing* that are metaphorically constructed in the novel through vulnerability metaphors. Drawing on bioethics we perceive vulnerability through the metaphor of layers as a context-defined and therefore fluid concept[2] (Luna 2009, 2019) in contrast to essentialist approaches. More specifically, we have taken vulnerability as F. Luna has defined it in "Elucidating the concept of vulnerability. Layers not Labels." The metaphor of layers she proposes and the notion of "cascade vulnerability" help us understand the function of this concept in multiple levels that work cumulatively (2019, 88).[3] She shows how, when it comes to social policies, different layers of vulnerability arise that are often interconnected in all aspects of life: from economic to plain physical, as well as communicational and emotional (2019, 92). For the notion of metaphor, we have drawn mainly[4] on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT).

According to CMT, there are two types of conceptual domains that come into contact in the formation of a metaphor: a) the SOURCE DOMAIN, from which we draw elements to produce metaphorical expressions, and b) the TARGET DOMAIN, that we try to understand through the use of the produced metaphor. The method consists of identifying a set of correspondences between elements of the source and the target domain.

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[2] "For example, we could say that the fact of being a woman does not in itself imply that one is vulnerable. A woman living in a country that does not recognize or is intolerant of *reproductive rights* acquires a layer of vulnerability (that a woman living in other countries that respect such rights does not necessarily have)." (Luna 2019, 88)

[3] "These layers may overlap: some of them may be related to problems with informed consent, others to violations of human rights, to social circumstances, or to the characteristics of the person involved." (Luna 2019, 88)

4 Due to the interdisciplinary nature of our literary analysis, we have applied CMT in a more divergent way than it is traditionally used (for recent experimentations in this field, see Fludernik 2011).

In our analysis of vox (voice) as a notion in the novel, we have identified the following vulnerability metaphors: a) aphasia as a biological/biopolitical weapon; b) words as physical entities controlled by smart devices; c) euphemism and catachresis (strained use or semantic misuse of a word) as silencing (covering meanings); and d) metaphorical discourse as feminist dystopian fiction.

APHASIA AS A BIOPOLITICAL WEAPON

Dalcher uses linguistic science (such as Critical Sociolinguistics and Neurolinguistics) as a source domain to construct vox as a metaphor for a collective act of voicing. The existing sociopolitical issue of gendered oppression appears in the novel as the threat of a totalitarian government that plots to pursue even further this silencing practice by creating an aphasic world, where women are no longer silenced metaphorically, but also in the very literal sense both from without (imposed word counters) and from within (induced aphasia). While the word counter prohibits them from uttering words, induced aphasia would ensure that they no longer have the capability of intelligible speech.

The links between totalitarianism and dystopian literature have long been established. Dystopian discourse has been fed by the ideas of totalitarianism and scientific and technological progress that have often been fundamental in the establishment of dictatorships (Vieira, 18). In this context, the political voice is the one that is silenced and the freedom of speech as a political right is violated, often with language playing a key role (see for example Orwell's "Newspeak," in *1984*). To represent this in her novel in a new light, Dalcher turns aphasia into a biopolitical weapon. Aphasia is a language disorder caused by brain damage. It

> involves one or more of the building blocks of language, phonemes, morphology, lexis, syntax, and semantics. [...] At the most severe end of the spectrum, a person with aphasia may be unable to communicate by either speech or writing and may be able to understand virtually nothing. (Edwards & Salis, 1)

Dr Jean McClellan, the narrator, a former neurolinguist working on aphasia, is forced to participate in a secret mission to create a serum that can induce aphasia. Through this plot, the process

of prohibiting freedom of speech in a totalitarian state in this feminist dystopia threatens to become literal through the phenomenon of aphasia; in other words, science is weaponized to "silence" women (to deprive women of their right to free speech). Vox appears then as a collective act of voicing, performing the right of free speech, which takes here an embodied (i.e.,physical) form.

The image of the body is also present in the larger metaphor that runs throughout the entire novel. The Pure Movement's gaining control of the US is described quite early on in physical terms. Dalcher describes its ascent to power as a conquest of the social body, activating the well-known metaphor of the body politic.[5] We are told that it all started with the "Bible Belt" when "that swath of Southern states where religion ruled, started expanding. It morphed from belt to corset, covering all but the country's limbs." (17) Soon "the corset turned into a full bodysuit, eventually reaching all the way to Hawaii" until the Bible Belt "had expanded and spread and grown into an iron maiden." (18) The social body is here seen as a feminine body–the corset certainly alludes to it, and while a bodysuit could refer to both genders, the final image of the restriction of this body as enclosed in an iron maiden brings again the female body shape in mind, along with all the horror associations that this torture device carries. The vulnerability of the people takes, here, the shape of a woman.

On the plot level, the metaphor of the body-politic is taken in its literal meaning as the new government's policy focuses on the physicality of the individual in its enforcement of the word-counters that regulate women's expression.[6] Further in the story, we learn that the ultimate plan of the government extends this literalization of the body politic metaphor by plotting to implement a physical and permanent 'cure' to the 'illness' that is 'afflicting' it. The reverse engineering of Dr Jean McClellan's work on aphasia will allow the Pure Movement to put, once and for all, any individual who resists in their 'proper' place, i.e., shut them out of both public and private speech. Aphasia is then presented as both a biopolitical weapon and as the

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[5] For a thorough analysis of the body politic metaphor and how it can be converted into action see A.D. Harvey, *Body Politic: Political Metaphor and Political Violence*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.

[6] For a discussion on the female body as a site of power relations see Maria Pinakoulia, "Female Struggle and Negotiation of Agency in Christin Dalcher's *Vox*," Ex-centric Narratives: Journal of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Media, no 4, 2020. https://ejournals.lib.auth.gr/ExCentric/article/view/7670/7710

ultimate metaphor of "silencing" through *languag-ing*[7]: if the plan succeeds, there will be no more need for silencing, the loss of meaningful languaging will render rebellious women a marginalized group unable to utter anything comprehensible.

WORDS AS PHYSICAL ENTITIES CONTROLLED BY SMART DEVICES

A second metaphor of vox in the novel moves from the abstract level to the concrete and draws from phonetics and morphophonology, focusing on the literal meaning of voice as speaking. Here the author follows the reverse path: vox is understood in its literal meaning as production of sounds/words; that is as a speaker's language use. It is an immaterial entity[8] that metaphorically becomes material, receiving the properties of material objects, i.e., physical and thus countable by the smart device. The process of speaking becomes a 24-hour cycle that is renewed for women who are compliant with the new rules. The individual is surveilled through a kind of acoustic Panopticon–or, to be linguistically accurate, a *Panacousticon*–incorporated to their body, and which represents the literalization (in the shape of a material device) of the internalized surveillance described by Foucault (1977 [1974]). The act of speaking is limited to 100 words per day and is furthermore regulated by sanctions following non-/appropriate lexical choices (women's speech is expected to remain within decorum, while words considered unbecoming are penalized).[9] In case of a word limit violation, physical torture is enforced by the word counter with increasing levels of torture leading to brain damage and even death. Technology is weaponized to silence women literally (that is to deprive women of their ability to even speak/right to speech).

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[7] Using this gerund we refer to language as a process, namely doing language, from a sociolinguistic perspective.

[8] Drawing on acoustic phonetics we understand speech as "made up of continuous bursts of sound. Not only are there no breaks between the sounds of which spoken words are composed; the words themselves are not usually separated by pauses." (Lyons, 2002, 67).

[9] "We like to think of it as a gentle nudge, nothing more. Just keep things clean, and everything will function normally. No four-letter words, no blasphemy. If you slip up, that's okay, but your quota reduces by ten for each infraction. You'll get used to it." (*Vox*, 81). Concerning the relationship of gender with politeness (polite language use by women indexing inferiority) and offensiveness (used by men indexing power), see for example Lakoff, 1973; Brown 1980.

Non-compliant women who defy the new laws have zero words to use; they are deprived of the possibility to speak and they are isolated and imprisoned in special camps that become heterotopias of silence. Heterotopia–this neologism borrowed originally from the medical field and referring to a misplacement of organs within the human body– brings us back to the metaphor of the body politic (Vieira 19). In *Vox*, the literal silencing within both the social and private sphere is not enough to guarantee that the government will not encounter any resistance, hence the establishment of camps for dissidents. Imprisonment has of course always been the way of eliminating political opponents in totalitarian regimes; what is of interest here is that the camp as a real space confining the bodies of unsubmissive women gains an added layer of meaning as a metaphor for the physical silencing that has already occurred through the word counters; this is emphasized by the zero-word tolerance policy. Those camps thus constitute a heterotopia signaling both a real detention space and a place that is "unreal," denying the embodied self of those women of its wholeness by depriving it of one of its main attributes: its potential to communicate. It is the space where self-alienation occurs for those women stripped of their words. It is therefore a literal (i.e., real) space, that of a prison camp, that will ensure the removal from the social body of those physical bodies capable of bringing unrest through their physical utterances (speech acts) let alone their actions. A space real for those imprisoned and symbolic for the rest of the society; "a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live," as Foucault defines heterotopia in "Of Other Spaces" (24).

The metaphor of the physicality of words is acknowledged on a very tangible level that is represented by the counter device, as it detects each word while it is being emitted by the body. The physical pulse corresponds to a mechanical pulse which detects–and subtracts from the daily allowance–each separate word. The literary metaphor of the words as physical entities *performs*[10] the conceptual metaphor of the body as a container. Once thought, the words materialize in a sense, they become restless and seek a way out of the body that contains them and into existence. The words that do not come out of the heroine's mouth hit the narrow boundaries of their vessel: "All my words ricochet in my head as I listen, emerge from my throat in a

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[10] This word choice reflects the tension of integrating the literary and linguistic registers of metaphor; oscillating between the artistic and the cognitive.

heavy, meaningless sigh" (16), thinks Jean. In another instance, the words "*useless mother*," which do not necessarily seek a way out, restlessly "ping-pong" in her head (27). Indeed, thoughts are also made of words, and they have the same physical substance:

> Except, before I talk, I think. I think all of these things, imagining the words bouncing off the tiled walls of our kitchen. In reality, there is no perpetual motion; all energy eventually gets absorbed, morphs into a different shape, changes state. But these words that I'm about to unleash, they'll never be absorbed. Each syllable, each morpheme, each individual sound, will bounce and ricochet forever in this house. We'll carry them with us like that cartoon character who's always surrounded by his own dirt cloud. Patrick will feel them prick like invisible, poisonous darts. (240)

The words' independence and their capacity to move around on their own accord are further exemplified in a representation of word association which leads, inevitably, to the well-known expression of the violent physical silencing of Lewis Carroll's red queen. The heroine muses: "Offering, I think, and words tumble around in my head like Scrabble tiles. Officious. Official. Offensive. Off. *Off with her fucking head.*" (65, italics in the original)

Words retain their physical substance also when coming out, and their representation reinforces their individuality. When Jean's daughter has a nightmare and speaks in her sleep, Jean rushes to quiet her daughter before she reaches the limit; every word that brings her baby girl closer to an electroshock is experienced by Jean as a physical assault:

> The words continue pouring out, flying through the hall toward me like poisoned darts from a million hostile blowpipes. Each one stings; each one pierces my once-tough skin with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel, driving directly to my gut. How many words has she said? Fifty? Sixty? More? (26)

In another instance, when Jean aims to admonish her son, her words as weapons "fl(y) out, little daggers aimed at my oldest son, who had begun acting less like my son and more like Reverend Carl Corbin" (136). Considering the workings of metaphors and particularly the two-way direction of the conceptual information between source and target domain (Biebuyck and Martens, 60), we can observe that the well-known metaphor of language as a weapon is here being activated

and extended to encompass its physical effect on the body. The allusion to Shakespeare's metaphor, "I will speak daggers to her but use none" (*Hamlet*, Act III, Scene II) reinforces the tension between literal and metaphorical meaning that runs through the entire novel. Words are presented also as self-destructive weapons. This common metaphor is literalized through the word counter that induces an electroshock after any excessive word. A particularly poignant and gory scene, where Jean's neighbor, Olivia, tries to commit suicide through a recording of her own voice set on a repeating loop, gives literally flesh and bones to this aspect of words as self-harming weapons when the device reduces Olivia's wrist to a mass of burned flesh, blood and bone (189-190).

As Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated, because "(t)he essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (13) the very concept of a notion we conceive through metaphor is metaphorically structured in a way that influences not only its description in words and our understanding, but also our actions concerning it. They give as an example the metaphorical understanding of argument as war:

> It is important to see that we don't just talk about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we do in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument—attack, defense, counterattack, etc.—reflects this. It is in this sense that the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing. (12-13)

With this in mind, we could view Dalcher's argument materializing in a literary dystopian world as a weaponized male minority. The male-ruled government has devised to win this war using neuroscience as a biological weapon. In this society the war metaphor (ARGUMENT IS WAR) is taken literally. More specifically, in this militarized dystopic environment another way to disarm female citizens is to deprive them of the possibility to argue, either in public or in private. The elimination of the 'weapon' that is language in the process of arguing allows the right of speech only to those who do not argue.

The traces of the war metaphor are numerous throughout the novel. We have already discussed the concentration camps for the dissidents. Other elements contributing to a warlike atmosphere are the appearance of government officials always accompanied by guards wearing military uniforms and carrying guns, the youth recruitment organized in schools where students are awarded pins as medals of honor for their loyalty to the values of the Pure Movement, arrests, public court martial processes and executions taking place daily, an organized resistance working undercover to overthrow the government.

EUPHEMISM AND CATACHRESIS AS SILENCING

Vox has an ambivalent attitude towards metaphor both on the level of subject matter and on the level of language use. Dalcher bases her novel on the literalization of the metaphorical expression of silencing that is used here to draw attention to a real social issue, that of women's struggle for their voice to be heard. This common metaphor is turned into the main plot, with women being literally either partially or completely silenced. This indirect mistrust of metaphor goes hand in hand with an open mistrust of a certain aspect of metaphoric language, the kind that tends to disregard the accuracy of words. Throughout the novel there is a marked tendency to call things by their names and to refuse euphemisms–"Don't you dare call it a bracelet" Jean snaps at Patrick, her husband, reminding him that things should be called by their names (57). The narrator points here to a different silencing that is actualized through euphemism (in the form of catachresis) put to the service of government propaganda: "They call them bracelets in school, at the doctor's office, in the advertisements they show before movies. (...) Advertisements for electric-shock inducing silencers: pick your own color, add some sparkles or stripes." (87) Jean repeatedly 'wastes' some of her precious few words to correct such use of language that diminishes the horrific aspect of this imposed silencing by a totalitarian government.

The dystopian *topos* of technology in the service of oppression, while not discussed in the novel, is what has enabled the dystopian world described in *Vox* to materialize. It is the "novum" on which the novel is constructed, to borrow Drako Suvin's term with which he refers to the thing or condition imagined to exist by scientific means that marks the difference between our world and the one described in the science fiction genre. In the collective imaginary, this literary

device corresponds to an already existing vulnerability amplified through the means of technology in the fictional world. The novel plays constantly between the literal enforcement of oppression through technology and the metaphoric reading of this silencing.

The word counter, a tangible item and potential torture device, functions as a metaphor for the repression of women's voice. Its presence on the wrist of every woman is a constant reminder of the silencing and of the punishment of both literal and metaphorical transgression. The expression "metaphorical collar" (95), as well as the constant metaphor – or rather catachresis – of "bracelet" (pointing at women's stereotypical adornment), gives an added layer. The counter is thus at the same time a digital tool of surveillance, a potential torture device and a symbol of oppression ("on the days we became shackled by these shiny steel bracelets" 29). The role of the device in the dystopian world is revealed through the use of three different descriptions, which correspond to three different functions: to count, to control, to aestheticize and propagandize. These descriptions grow in intensity as the device is described firstly as a "word counter" referring to its actual/literal technical function, while hiding the implications of word counting (word limit-punishment; algorithmic, controlling, censoring). Secondly, as a "metaphorical collar," the device reveals its function as exercising control (literal function of the collar) but metaphorically applied here (usually worn on the neck; revealing; resisting, awareness-raising). Thirdly, as a "bracelet," the device reveals its embodied use, while hiding its controlling function (misleading, propagandistic, catachrestic).

We note here a specific kind of metaphoric use of language, that of catachresis. In its original meaning, this figure of speech is identified as a "necessary misuse" in the sense of "the application of an already existing word to something not yet lexicalized" caused by a lexical gap (Chrzanowska-Kluczewska 39). A variation of catachresis takes the form of a figure characterized by a "strong clash or incongruity, conflict or discordance between its two constitutive elements, the vehicle and tenor or the source and target domains." (Chrzanowska-Kluczewska 41). In the case of the term "bracelet" for the counting device that gives electroshock, both of those conditions come into play. Michel Foucault has drawn attention to the "pancatachrestic nature of figurative language" (Chrzanowska-Kluczewska 48) by identifying catachresis

> as a figure whose defining properties are *incongruity, juxtaposition of incompatible entities, and distortion of categorization;* in a word, catachresis is defined by what Foucault calls *atopia* (or *heterotopia*): a displacement that provokes the most remote things to approach one another, 'a worse kind of disorder than that of the incongruous, the linking together of things that are inappropriate' (Foucault 1966). (Chrzanowska-Kluczewska 48)

In theories of metaphor, catachresis is considered to have three functions according to classical rhetoric: cognitive, ludic and expressive. In *Vox* it is clearly used in its cognitive function, as a means to draw attention to the dangers (political and social) of misusing language.

In our effort to understand ambiguity and vagueness in language use as a vulnerability metaphor here, taking as a case in point the expression "metaphorical collar," we came up with alternative wordings of interpretation on the basis of interdisciplinarity. Dalcher invents alternative words to denote the word counter corresponding to varying layers of beautifying the function of this device at women's expense (namely silencing). Analyzing these words in order to make sense of them (word counter, metaphorical collar, bracelet), we also used alternative wordings performing an analogous negotiation of clarity addressed by metaphoric against literal wordings, while reflecting on the power of metaphor to shed light on the phenomenon of catachresis.

A literal wording (using an established metaphor "to uncover meaning" reflecting the point of view of a sociolinguist):

> "Here metaphor uncovers meaning compared to the previous examples"

A metaphorical wording (using a paradox "a literal metaphor" reflecting the point of view of a literary scholar):

> "Here metaphor is more literal than the literal wording"

This argument materialized in our effort to understand ambiguity and vagueness in language use while communicating disciplinary knowledge in a common interdisciplinary space of analysis. More precisely, studying language through an interdisciplinary lens–in this paper through an assemblage of literary and linguistic filters–entails heteroglossic elements that need to be communicated–and made sense

of–through negotiation. This may even involve areas of negotiation where, although both scholars have the same idea in mind, its wording takes the "discursive shape" of the respective discipline, as for example the above-mentioned case that led to metalinguistic reflection and discussion. Arguments, both as sets of claims and as negotiations among a sociolinguist and a literary scholar, seem like "disciplinary wars" (to apply the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR as described by Lakoff and Johnson). Aiming to achieve interdisciplinarity while examining a specific metaphor in *Vox*, the sociolinguist appears to fight for literal wordings (e.g., in the phrase, "Here the metaphor *uncovers meaning* compared to the previous examples," using the verb "uncover" to denote an unusual function of the metaphor to uncover instead to obscure meaning), whereas the literary scholar supports a metaphorical wording (e.g. "Here the metaphor is *more literal than* the literal wording," using "is" to attribute a stronger ontological characteristic to the metaphor as more literal than the non-metaphor/literal wording; a linguistic paradox).

More generally, the process of speaking as language use in a communicative context is evaluated through metapragmatic comments on the importance of being accurate and literal. In this dystopia to call things by their name is a political act. This practice does not allow reality to hide behind beautified words, euphemisms, and other manipulations of language. It also draws attention to inaccuracy betraying even good-intentioned speakers such as Jean's activist friend, as it appears in the following passage:

> Jackie always called political situations—elections, nominations, confirmations, speeches, whatever—'things.' That court thing. That speech thing. That election thing. It drove me insane. You'd think a sociolinguist would take the time to work on her vocabulary every once in a while, (…) I never spoke to Jackie again. On nights like this, I wish I had. Maybe things—the election thing, the nomination thing, the confirmation thing, the executive order thing—wouldn't have turned out the way they did. (12)[11]

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[11] Some other examples:
"It wasn't supposed to happen."
         It.
I make a silent promise never to use this word again." […] What if you told them it was Steven's fault? That he started it and Julia said no, and he went on anyway. That they were confused. Or that it didn't actually happen." There's that *It* again." (150-151, italics in the original)
""What is it?"

Literal language use is evaluated as a more authentic process to convey meanings and read the social, while non-literal language use is considered to be obscuring meaning. Reading the word becomes reading the world (Freire & Macedo 1987). The act of voicing here is the communicative competence of the language user. And silencing is understood as political correctness or deliberate miscommunication. The extreme form of this takes, in the novel, the shape of induced aphasia, verbal chaos, an aphasic chaos of unintelligible sounds.

METAPHORICAL DISCOURSE AS FEMINIST DYSTOPIAN FICTION

In their article entitled "Literary Metaphor between Cognition and Narration," Benjamin Biebuyck and Gunther Martens see literary metaphor (and other figures of speech) as endowing the text with "a surplus metaphorical dimension" (65), an "*additional layer of narrativity*" (emphasis in the original) that they have termed *paranarrative* (Biebuyck & Martens, 120). The paranarrative "expands its actional, temporal, spatial and aspectual scopes in ways that are not necessarily congruent or equivalent" (65) to those of the primary narrative (*epinarrative*) and allows the reader access to "alternative segments of the storyworld" (66). They argue that the cognitive approach of metaphor in literature covers only partly the various extended figurative constellations, and propose an approach to literary metaphor from its narrative angle. In this spirit, we have approached the cognitive metaphors that construct vox/acts of voicing in the novel as multiple layers of vulnerability, which constitute what we have identified as *vulnerability metaphors*.

When approaching metaphor in *Vox* in this wider comprehensive view that integrates cognitive, rhetorical and narratological approaches (i.e., metaphor in correlation with the primary narrative and in its own narrative potential), we see emerging as a dominant extended metaphor the female physical body as the social (paranarrative level); Jean's individual silencing and subsequent actions (epinarrative level) reflect also the wider collective both in its vulnerability and in its strength.

Dystopia as a *genre* belongs to a kind of speculative fiction that projects the reader into a future world in which things have gone

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It again. Everything has become one looming *It*." (155, italics in the original)

wrong and acts as a cautionary tale. The important role of language both as a means and as a theme in dystopias has also been widely acknowledged. David Sisk has even argued that "language is so crucial to dystopia that we are justified in labelling it a generic structural element: without its inclusion, a fiction cannot be considered a dystopia" (174); and Ildney Cavalcanti has suggested dystopias could "be viewed as the verbal hygiene literary genre *par excellence*, due to the pervasiveness of their representations of verbal hygiene practices (and counter-practices)" (156). She asserts that the theme of language is, in the case of dystopia, the theme of metalanguage, in the sense of struggle over language, and concludes that "(j)ust as the dystopias are markedly metafictional, so too they are markedly metalinguistic" (174).

Feminist dystopia deals more specifically with the silencing of women, taking as a theme a historical fact of societies past and present, and bringing to our attention the difficulties women face even today in being heard (*cf.* "Me too" movement). In the case of *Vox*, the right to language is contested and speech is denied to the entire female population and presented as an act of social hygiene, highlighting how one social policy can bring "a cascade of vulnerabilities" (Luna 2019) to a large part of the population (in the novel loss of political rights, financial dependency, illiteracy, and loss of the capacity of speech in infants, etc.). Taking as its plot the literalization of the metaphor of silencing, the novel creates a dystopian world based on a metaphor. However, due to its implicit warning message and its use of metaphor in a wider sense which encompasses the entire meaning of the narrative, dystopia itself as a genre could be interpreted as a vulnerability metaphor in metaphorical discourse, as a kind of heterotopia, a fictional place that materializes all vulnerability metaphors. The dystopian fictional narrative is then viewed as a speech act aiming to communicate a literal meaning through metaphorical discourse.

Literary theory has approached genres through a variety of metaphors. Borrowing on pragmatics and applying speech theory in fiction analysis, Marie Louise Pratt has pointed out that there are enormous advantages in talking about literary genres as speech acts (Pratt qtd in Fishelov 120ff)[12] since "genres and subgenres can, to a great extent, be defined as systems of appropriateness conditions"

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[12] Fishelov also mentions the works of Bruss (1976), Lejeune (1975), Petrey (1990) and others (n.5, 121).

(121). While through a pragmatic/linguistic aspect a text in itself can be described as a macro speech act literally, with its illocutionary act and its perlocutionary effect, in the literary tradition, the "speech act" conception is recognized as one metaphor among others. Therefore, the literary text as a speech act is not self-evident. In *Metaphors of Genre*, David Fishelov presents four important metaphors that have served as analogies for the study of genres (genres as biological species, as families, as social institutions and as speech acts).[13] As he points out, different analogies help us shed light to different genres and their different aspects. Following this schema, we would like, in conclusion, to elaborate on the speech act metaphor and approach the genre of dystopia as a metaphorical speech act that is performing an extended metaphor. In making voice in both its literal and its metaphorical meaning the center of her novel, Dalcher is inviting us to see her novel also as a metaphor that has materialized through the plot. She is thus drawing our attention to this genre's dominant "didactic and moralistic"[14] attribute. As the dystopian world always tries to make visible and interpret emerging tendencies and phenomena with reference to the current real world while reimagining it through (science) fiction, it could also be read as a metaphor seeking to understand the future. In this extended metaphor, today's real world would correspond to the source domain and its future to the target domain. Paul Ricœur considers metaphor as "the privileged instrument in that upward motion of meaning promoted by mimêsis" opening "the kingdom of the as if" (qtd by Pettersson 96). His work on metaphor as a displacement of meaning from the level of words to the level of *mythos* supports this reading of dystopia. It shows how, moving from the textual local level into the wider literary/mythical level, metaphor becomes an intellectual tool for thinking contemporary sociopolitical issues through the literary genre of dystopia.

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[13] Fishelov refines the analogy based on speech act by insisting on two different theoretical approaches, one seeing literary genres "as complex, written, but genuine speech acts and the other, emphasising that literary genres artistically imitate or represent, but are not genuine, speech acts" (131).

[14] "although the images of the future put forward in dystopias may lead the reader to despair, the main aim of this sub-genre is didactic and moralistic: images of the future are put forward as real possibilities because the utopist wants to frighten the reader and to make him realise that things may go either right or wrong, depending on the moral, social and civic responsibility of the citizens" (Vieira 17).

Indeed, Ricœur sees metaphor as a way to "re-describe" reality (Ricœur "Huitième étude"). Taking into account the speculative nature of the dystopian genre, we could say that mimesis here opens the door, through the metaphorical trope (*as if*) to a speculative future (*what if*), presenting a potential future which, viewed as an extended metaphor, is a criticism of trends of the present. This tentative interpretation does not purport to pinpoint the genre of dystopia to this one specific function, but it could perhaps help explain why language as a theme is particularly prominent in it. As Fishelov notes, "even when we reject a specific analogy we may, during the process of evaluating its potential explanatory force, still gain some fresh insights" (158), and it is in this spirit that dystopia as metaphorical speech act is here put forward.

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POETRY IN PANDEMIC TIMES: MOURNING COLLECTIVE VULNERABILITY IN SUE GOYETTE'S *SOLSTICE 2020. AN ARCHIVE*

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ABSTRACT
Focusing on Canadian poet Sue Goyette's collection *Solstice 2020. An Archive* (2021), this article examines how dealing with the effects of a global pandemic through the medium of poetry can act as a powerful catalyst in raising awareness about collective vulnerability and mourning. During the locked-down days of 2020, Goyette felt it was her responsibility as a poet to find words to convey the sense of shared vulnerability people experienced in the face of a momentous event that confined them to their homes for days on end. Drawing on vulnerability theory, ecophilosopher David Abram's thinking on the more-than-human world, Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, as well as on recent theorizations on the COVID-19 pandemic, this article argues that Goyette's *Solstice* 2020 is a most interesting sociological document that represents collective vulnerability, testifies to the conundrums posed by the still ongoing pandemic, and makes visible the deep affinities between humankind and the more-than-human world.

RESUMEN
Centrado en el poemario *Solstice 2020. An Archive* (2021), de la poeta canadiense Sue Goyette, el presente artículo analiza de qué modo el abordaje de los efectos de una pandemia mundial a través de la poesía puede llegar a actuar como un poderoso catalizador a la hora de avivar la conciencia de la vulnerabilidad y el luto colectivos. Durante los días de confinamiento de 2020, Goyette entendió que era responsabilidad

suya como poeta encontrar las palabras que expresaran el
sentimiento de vulnerabilidad compartida que experimentó la gente
ante un acontecimiento transcendental que la confinó durante días
en sus hogares. Hallando inspiración en la teoría sobre la
vulnerabilidad, en el pensamiento del ecofilósofo David Abram sobre
el mundo más que humano, en el concepto de transcorporeidad de
Stacy Alaimo, así como en recientes indagaciones teóricas acerca de
la pandemia por COVID-19, este artículo sostiene que *Solstice 2020*
es un documento sociológico de gran relevancia que refleja la
vulnerabilidad colectiva, pone de manifiesto los interrogantes
planteados por una pandemia aún en desarrollo y hace visibles las
profundas afinidades entre la humanidad y el mundo más que
humano.

POETRY, PANDEMIC, WINTER SOLSTICE

Based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Sue Goyette (b. 1964) is one of
the most distinctive voices in contemporary Canadian poetry. To date,
she has authored eight poetry collections, including *The True Names
of Birds* (1998), *Undone* (2004), *Outskirts* (2011), *Ocean* (2013), *The
Brief Reincarnation of a Girl* (2015), *Penelope* (2017), *Anthesis: A
Memoir* (2020), and *Solstice 2020. An Archive* (2021), as well as a novel
titled *Lures* (2002). Focusing on Goyette's *Solstice 2020*, this article
examines how dealing with the effects of a global pandemic through
the medium of poetry can act as a powerful catalyst in raising
awareness about collective vulnerability. As Goyette explains in a brief
textual threshold to her collection, during the first 21 days of the
locked-down and uncertain month of December 2020, she wrote a
prose poem each morning that was published by Halifax's *The Coast*
in the afternoon. Her plan was to give the newspaper's readers "[a]
daily microdose of poetry, [...] to mark the calendar's march towards
Winter Solstice" (Mullin, "Light a Candle"). Endowed with a strong
sense of commitment to her art and her community, she felt obliged
to fill citizens' lives with hope and help them make sense of what it
meant to live amidst a pandemic that instilled in people a sense of
vulnerability and uncertainty. As she noted herself, "If I'm a poet in
the community, I can contribute some words" (Mullin, "Light a
Candle"). Gaspereau Press would then publish the resulting 21 prose
poems in a beautifully handbound letterpress collection titled *Solstice
2020. An Archive*. Spread out on the page, the poems have "the
immediacy of journal entries, but they are rich, allusive meditations
by a poet with a nimble mind and an open heart" (Carey). They have

dates as titles and dwell on global vulnerability at a time of darkness
when people were faced with an unprecedented event in the history of
humankind. Yet they also shed light on the ordinary gifts of our
existence and offer a way to move forwards with an enhanced
awareness of our species' sociality, collective vulnerability, and
human/nonhuman interdependence. All of this is suggested by
Goyette's skillful use of words in making poems that seek to reconcile
our fragile lives with a momentous event that has affected humankind
on a planetary scale.

As Sylvia Hamilton notes in a perceptive review of *Solstice
2020*, "[t]he early poems signal themes that recur throughout the
month: light and darkness; mourning and the work of remembering;
mystery and the unknown; time and laughter" (2021). On December
1, the very first day of her advent calendar of poetry, Goyette writes:
"we are the words left intact surrounded by darkness in this new
version of December" (Goyette), highlighting from the very outset a
sense of hope. She ponders the etymology of the word *dark*, which
turns out to be central to the whole collection, both literally and
figuratively, as December 21 is the shortest day of the year and the
pandemic symbolized a time of darkness for humanity. Looking closely
at the roots of the word, Goyette reveals that "*dark* comes from the
Middle English *derk*, from Old English *deorc*, a distant relative to the
German *tarnen*, 'conceal'" (Goyette), trusting that language can help
humans make sense of this dramatic event. On December 2, she
thinks deeply about humans' need for connection and contact in
moving terms: "I miss you. I miss the crowd of you, the eloquence of
how we move together, the collaboration of motion" (Goyette),
gesturing at sociality as one of the defining traits of humanity. On
December 3, she ponders the sense of collective mourning unleashed
by the pandemic: "And here we are: up to our ears in it—the unknown
and its cut. And the grieving, burying what we knew as normal. This
mourning is no small thing" (Goyette). Amidst utter uncertainty and
chaos, Goyette insists that poetry can offer solace and spiritual
comfort, even in the darkest of times. Therefore, she is determined not
to give up on hope: "At the heart of mourning is an inlet with small
boats for us to row forward. This is the work of remembering"
(Goyette), she writes on December 6. When winter solstice comes,
Goyette is amazed at "how our feet are ahead of us, making a new
path" (Goyette), away from the darkness brought about by the
pandemic and into the promise of light a new year may bring.

Minimalist in style, *Solstice 2020* is a collection marked by brevity and concision, as well as by deep thinking about what it means to be human in hard times. Readers are invited to immerse themselves in the experience of each poem as related in sequence, leading to the climactic moment represented by winter solstice. Not in vain, Goyette comes up with a handful of poems that she calls "an archive" for a good reason. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an archive is "a collection of historical documents or records of a government, a family, a place or an organization; the place where these records are stored." In this way, *Solstice 2020* is the chronicle and testimony of someone truly alert to what happened at a turning point in the recent history of humanity. Ultimately, the poet performs an essential service for citizens: delivering the news, archiving the day (Hamilton). In so doing, she might be someone not just concerned with the art of deftly tessellating words to form poems of lasting value and beauty, but also someone who speaks on behalf of her community to come to terms with a new reality that eludes our grasp and refuses categorization. As Goyette confesses in a 2014 interview, poetry is "a vocation more than a job" and "resides in a poem's silence, where its reader meets the words with their own experience and imaginings" (Poetry in Voice). As representations of (collective) vulnerability and meditations on loss, hope, and human/nonhuman interdependence, her poems are thus meant to actively engage the reader's mind and imagination in their decoding.

Drawing on vulnerability theory (Butler 2004, 2009; Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 2014), on ecophilosopher David Abram's (1996, 2010) thinking on the more-than-human world, on Stacy Alaimo's (2010, 2011) concept of trans-corporeality, as well as on recent theorizations on the COVID-19 pandemic, this article argues that Goyette's *Solstice 2020* is a most interesting sociological document that deftly represents collective vulnerability, testifies to the conundrums posed by the still ongoing pandemic, and makes visible the sense of shared vulnerability experienced by humanity on an unprecedented scale. It aims to explore whether poetry can help our species make sense of reality when coping with a dramatic event like a global pandemic brought about by a highly contagious virus. Furthermore, it interrogates whether lyric thinking is able to instill hope and resilience in people in the face of excruciating moments in their lives and cultivate a form of attention sensitive to the nonhuman world. Lastly, it examines whether poems can have any redeeming power in times of chaos and uncertainty. Goyette believes that the

pandemic is a "real masterclass in being vulnerable and not knowing" and that poetry "understands all these feelings" (of loss and grief) and is "a great genre and way of thinking into the unknowable" (Mullin, "Six Questions"). Reckoning with silence, poetry "gets us to the edge of what is sayable, or what is legible, or what can be contained in words" (Mullin, Six Questions"). Most importantly, poetry cultivates an enhanced form of attention that goes beyond the self, as it has the power to invite us to "be alert in the most vital way we can as a human being" and to change "how we engage with each other and the planet" (Mullin, "Six Questions"). As Goyette explains in an interview, poetry cannot save us, but "it can keep us company, it can help us endure and persevere" and "it can revive us [and] articulate the anger, frustration, exhaustion and grief we're all feeling collectively and individually and that's a pretty important thing to be able to do" (Green). In what follows, this article addresses the power of poetry to help humans cope with vulnerability and loss in the light of some of the most relevant insights of vulnerability theory, whilst emphasizing the centrality of the more-than-human world in Goyette's ecopoetics.

HUMAN NATURE AND VULNERABILITY

As "a concept of enormous ethical salience" (Gilson 4) and normative significance for sociologists, moral theorists, political philosophers, and bioethicists (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 1), vulnerability "forms the basis for any ethics," since "it is precisely because we are vulnerable […] that we feel any compulsion to respond ethically" (Gilson 11). The concept has been discussed in three main areas: in the work of feminist theorists on dependency and the ethics of care; in the field of research bioethics and its core principles; and in the ethics of corporeal vulnerability (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 2-3). To varying degrees, all three areas seem to share a set of fundamental assumptions that can be summarized like this:

> Human life is conditioned by vulnerability. By virtue of our embodiment, human beings have bodily and material needs; are exposed to physical illness, injury, disability, and death; and depend on the care of others for extended periods during our lives. As social and affective beings we are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to others in myriad ways: to loss and grief; to neglect, abuse, and lack of care; to rejection, ostracism, and humiliation. As sociopolitical beings, we are vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, oppression,

> political violence, and rights abuses. And we are vulnerable to the
> natural environment and to the impact on the environment of our
> own, individual and collective, actions and technologies. (Mackenzie,
> Rogers and Dodds 1)

Human vulnerability is primarily predicated on the human body's
frailty or fragility. However, humans are vulnerable not only because
of their very corporeality and exposure to the environment, but also
because of their inherent sociability and interdependence. As Judith
Butler puts it, "[t]he body is constitutively social and interdependent"
(*Frames of War* 31). In other words, we are vulnerable because we are
"embodied, social beings" and as such are "vulnerable to the actions
of others and dependent on the care and support of other people"
(Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 4). A look at the etymology of the word
"vulnerability," from the Latin *vulnus, -eris*, meaning "wound," reveals
that it is "a capacity for damage, a liability to harm, an exposure to
risk, aggression, or attack" (Ganteau 5). In short, vulnerability defines
human nature: "[t]o be vulnerable is to be fragile, to be susceptible to
wounding and to suffering," that is, vulnerability is "an ontological
condition of our humanity" (Rogers, Mackenzie, and Dodds 12). For
Nathalie Maillard, humanity is marked by what she terms
"vulnérabilité ontologique" (198), which accounts for humans'
dependence on other people, resources, and forces. At any rate, central
to the definition of vulnerability is "a vision of the human as essentially
interdependent and in no way autonomous" (Ganteau 5).
Theorisations as varied as Emmanuel Levinas's (1961, 1978) and Paul
Ricoeur's (1960, 1990) ethics of alterity, dependency and the ethics of
care (Gilligan 1982; Held 1987; Kittay 1999; Nussbaum 2001, 2006),
the ethics of vulnerability (Goodin 1985; Gilson 2014; Butler 2004,
2009; Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 2012, 2014), and affect theory
(Ahmed 2004) all pivot around the notion that humanity is essentially
vulnerable and "starkly relational" (Ganteau 2), which is to say that
we need the presence of our fellow human beings to live a flourishing
life. As early as 1985, in his book, *Protecting the Vulnerable,* Robert E.
Goodin pondered the "special responsibilities" (186) that humans have
for other individuals who are not members of their family or friends,
but rather part of a community or society at large, including
"vulnerable compatriots, foreigners, future generations, animals, [and]
natural environments" (186). For him, the duties to protect the
vulnerable were the core of moral obligation. Heteronomy and
interdependence are, in fact, "the cornerstone of the ethics of care"

(Ganteau 9), which is based on the fundamental insight that "self and other are interdependent" (Gilligan 74). It is only natural that the ethics of care should actively cultivate values such as solidarity, solicitude, and interconnection (Ganteau 9). In the field of affect theory, Sarah Amed emphasizes the power of emotions and "sociality" (8) and interprets vulnerability as a kind of openness to "spaces where bodies and worlds meet and leak into each other" (69). Along the same lines, Martha Nussbaum claims that the human being is a "needy enmattered being" (*Frontiers of Justice* 278) and posits a relational model of humanity as she observes that "We live for and with others and regard a life not lived in affiliation with others to be a life not worth living" ("Human Functioning" 219). In her close readings of literary texts, including canonical texts of the Greco-Roman tradition, she conceives of literature as the space *par excellence* to interrogate, represent, and express vulnerability.

Whereas *precariousness* as theorized by Judith Butler refers to "human vulnerability to the actions of others" (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 3), *precarity* refers to "the increased economic vulnerability experienced by some social groups as a result of globalization, the ideology and influence of neoliberalism, and the effects of the global financial crisis" (3). In the framework of an ethics of corporeal vulnerability, Butler argues that the human body is intrinsically vulnerable and explores the ethical implications of such vulnerability as one of the defining traits of the human condition: "we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life […] This vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 29). The COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point. At the inception of the pandemic, there was a concerted attempt on the part of media and scholarship to describe it as "something inherently new, capable of crossing and erasing the economic, racial, gendered, and religious divides that stratify societies around the world" (Duncan and Höglund 115). It was argued that the virus was just "a leveller of racial, gendered, and economic divides" (117), as no one was immune to potential infection. In the light of the alarming spread of the COVID-19 and the increasing figures of infected citizens, the deliberate focus was on our shared sense of vulnerability at the hands of a highly contagious virus for which there was no vaccine yet. Thus, Hari Bapuji et al. suggested that "susceptibility to the virus reveals how equal we are, despite the differences in our age, education, wealth and many other characteristics […] While the effects of the virus may vary, what

appears fairly certain is that individuals are equally vulnerable"
(1068). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some particular
lives were regarded as being disposable, lesser than or inferior to
others, particularly those of people in "'high contact, high risk' jobs"
(Sandset 1419) considered essential at the time. As Butler puts it,

> To say that a life is injurable [...] or that it can be lost, destroyed, or
> systematically neglected to the point of death, is to underscore not
> only the finitude of a life (that death is certain) but also its
> precariousness (that life requires various social and economic
> conditions to be met to be sustained as a life). (*Frames of War* 14)

Despite the colossal magnitude of this global crisis, the pandemic was
not a "great equalizer" (Bowleg 917), but evidence of a deeper crisis at
work in capitalist societies. Environmental historian Jason W. Moore
has observed that the roots of the planetary emergency humanity is
facing are to be found in the dynamics of extractive and predatory
capitalism, which disproportionately affects "women, people of colour
and (neo)colonial populations" (Moore, "The Capitalocene" 54),
pointing thus to the fact that some lives are more precarious than
others. As perceptively argued by Duncan and Höglund, the pandemic
is "not new or egalitarian, but fuelled by, and fuelling, crises already
under way on a global scale" (115). Building on Achille Mbembe's
thinking on sovereignty as "the capacity to define who matters and
who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not" (Mbembe 27;
emphasis in the original) and on necropower as "subjugation of life to
the power of death" (39), Sandset argues that the COVID-19 pandemic
has evidenced how a "necropolitical regime of health care" has led to
health care systems which have "created an environment not
conducive to life but to slow death" (1411). In a way, the pandemic
created "*death-worlds*" where "vast populations [were] subjected to
conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*"
(Mbembe 40; emphasis in the original). Conditions that make certain
bodies more vulnerable are ubiquitous in specific contexts where
neoliberalist policies reign supreme. Thus, the failure of some states
to sustain high-quality public health, the increasing privatization of
health care provision and the neoliberalist determination to end state
welfare have resulted in "conditions where 'slow death' is an
omnipresent danger" (Sandset 1412), a reality that the COVID-19
pandemic has made even more palpable. In this context, slow death is
a variety of slow violence, which Rob Nixon defines as "a violence that

occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). What humanity is currently witnessing in the aftermath of the most destructive waves of the pandemic is precisely a form of slow violence in Nixon's conceptualization of the term.

The pandemic has revealed how structural violence is endemic and deeply entrenched in the socio-economic relationships constitutive of today's world order, whose hallmarks are capitalism, predatory formations as defined by Saskia Sassen in *Expulsions* (2014), and a shameless overexploitation of the Earth and its dwellers driven by resourceist thinking. This style of thought has been prevalent in the West over the last five centuries and has treated human beings, nonhuman species and land as resources susceptible to exploitation (Duncan and Höglund 116). Treating certain lives and environments as expendable or plunderable results in "material states of socio-ecological degradation and vulnerability" (116), which is an effrontery to life and human dignity. In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic can be understood, "along with other crises unfolding in the earth's biosphere, as evidence that the extractive and exploitative processes through which capitalism works are currently failing" (116). The pandemic appears to be part of the endless litany of woes manifesting in the Anthropocene, environmental and otherwise, at a point in human history when the planet is close to a state of exhaustion. Yet, from a different perspective, the pandemic gestures to the logic behind what has been termed *Capitalocene*, which Moore defines as "a multispecies assemblage, a world-ecology of capital, power, and nature" (*Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* xi). Whereas "[a]t its best, the Anthropocene concept entwines human history and natural history" (*Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* 3), the Capitalocene as a conceptual tool illuminating the current climate crisis points to a new vision of "human organization as something more-than-human and less-than-social" and as "utterly, completely, and variably porous within the web of life" (5). The Capitalocene "signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology" (6), capitalism being "a system of getting nature […] to work for free or very low-cost" (11). In constellating capital, power and nature, the notion of Capitalocene underscores the entanglements of society and nature, whilst it also envisions "humanity-in-nature" (6) or humanity as part of "the web of life" (6). In fact, Moore believes that we are witnessing "the flowering of an ontological imagination beyond

Cartesian dualism" (11), capable of transcending the binaries *res cogitans*/*res extensa*, mind/body, or culture/nature, so deeply ingrained in the Western mindset. In this regard, in *Solstice 2020* Goyette embraces a way of relating to the nonhuman that goes beyond Cartesian dualism, one marked by humility and the awareness that humankind is a part *of*, not apart *from*, the world at large. Acknowledging the entanglements of culture and nature, the poet cultivates a sense that it is a matter of the utmost urgency to dwell on Earth with duty, respect, and gratitude. She does so by drawing readers' attention to the piecemeal destruction of the biosphere as the *oikos* of humanity. For instance, in her December 15 entry, the poet ponders ice melting as evidence of the impact of anthropogenic action on Earth: "Ice, as we know, is now a memorial, one of the last elemental clocks, melting its last gasp of vaporous blue mingling with the smell of a new and ancient mourning" (Goyette). The mourning for the current environmental crisis is thus conflated with the mourning unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

COLLECTIVE VULNERABILITY: TRAINS, DARKNESS, AND HOPE

There is no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic has represented a turning point in the history of our species. It has brought to the fore that humanity is extremely vulnerable and imaginatively resilient. Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds propose a taxonomy of three different sources of vulnerability (i.e., *inherent, situational,* and *pathogenic*) and two different states of vulnerability (i.e., *dispositional* and *occurrent*) which acknowledges that whilst vulnerability is inherent to the human condition, there are also "context-specific forms of vulnerability" (7). The pandemic is evidence of the overlapping of all three different sources of vulnerability. First, it is expressive of humans' inherent vulnerability, a kind of vulnerability stemming from "our corporeality, our neediness, our dependence on others, and our affective and social nature" (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 7). Secondly, it also illustrates situational or context-specific vulnerability, as certain social groups have revealed themselves to be more susceptible to precarity on the basis of such factors as household conditions, material infrastructures, government assistance, and financial security, among others. And thirdly, the pandemic has also triggered pathogenic vulnerabilities, i.e., those generated by a variety of strategies and measures intended to ameliorate people's lives and yet resulting in the

exacerbation of "existing vulnerabilities or generating new ones" (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 9).

At any rate, ticking clocks stopped during the lockdown brought about by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. As if suspended in a province where time did not reign supreme any longer, people living comfortably in the Western world all learnt to kill time in the seclusion of their homes—cooking, reading, taking physical exercise, listening to music, tidying up, sending each other messages via WhatsApp, videocalling or videoconferencing—so as to restore some sense of normalcy back in their lives. In fact, the pandemic has taken place amidst the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, which, according to Klaus Schwab (2016, 2017), will profoundly impact how we live, work, and interact with each other. Building on the digital revolution brought about by the Third Industrial Revolution, which made use of electronics and information technology to automate production since the mid-twentieth century, the 4IR is characterized by a fusion of technologies blurring the borders between the digital, physical, and biological realms (Schwab 2016). With billions of people connected by mobile devices, the breakthroughs we are witnessing these days in the spheres of "artificial intelligence, robotics, the Internet of Things, autonomous vehicles, 3D printing, nanotechnology, biotechnology, materials science, energy storage, and quantum computing" (Schwab 2016) are simply unprecedented in scale, complexity, and speed.

In her prose poem for December 4, Goyette captures the uncertainty and radical hope that must have surely been experienced by an anonymous global collectivity. Though secluded in their homes, people all over the world must have felt a sense of belonging to a planetary community facing a novel situation that paralyzed normal life for weeks. A sense of paralysis is precisely conveyed by Goyette in her entry for December 4. As the poet watches and takes notes on what looks like a documentary on "the seven and a half-hour train ride from Bergen to Oslo" (Goyette) in an act of "slow television" (Goyette), she comes to the realization that, amidst a global pandemic, "we are pixelating; that our way of being is moving through chaos and is breaking into particles" (Goyette). The poet's words allude to how people relied on electronic devices and social media to keep in touch with each other, with screens becoming an extension of their bodies. In this context of "slow television," the train becomes an emblem of hope. Built in 1909, the Bergen Railway runs for 308 miles over the highlands between Oslo and Bergen, the two largest cities in Norway,

crossing some of the most inhospitable terrain and offering one of the most spectacular scenic experiences in Europe. The Bergen-Oslo train "travels through mountains by tunnel" (Goyette) across Hardangervidda National Park and onto the Hardangervidda plateau, Europe's largest high mountain plateau, in what seems an endless ride, and serves as a most eloquent metaphor for hope, so badly needed in pandemic times. In Goyette's depiction, the train advancing towards the growing dot of light that can be seen at the end of the tunnel is an apt metaphor for the hope that life might go back to normal once the pandemic is over. As the dot grows (on the TV screen and in the readers' imaginative faculty), so does a sense of deep gratitude in the face of what promises to be "a version of the way out. As in: the end of the tunnel. Of course, this is just another version of a beginning, which explains the fear" (Goyette)—fear in the face of the unknown, fear that yet another tunnel (i.e., another wave or another virus mutation) might be waiting ahead for the train passengers. Wave after wave, it remains a fact that the COVID-19 pandemic instilled in people a sense of fear and vulnerability worldwide.

In her December 4 entry, Goyette ultimately offers a lesson in vulnerability. As Erinn C. Gilson observes, vulnerability is to be understood as "a pervasive immanent condition" (11), namely, "as definitive of life, a condition that links humans to nonhuman animals, and an experience that roots us in the corporeality of our existence" (4). It is "defined by openness," since "to be vulnerable is to be open to being affected and affecting in ways that one cannot control" (2) and entails exposure to unfamiliar or unexpected situations like a global pandemic. Though *vulnerability* is not synonymous with *fragility* or *frailty*, all three terms gesture towards humans' corporeal existence and their dependence on external factors that may affect them. Bodies are literally the places of existence—that is, the locus of grief, loss, violence, and death. From the entries that cumulatively follow each other to form her personal advent calendar, it is obvious that Goyette is not oblivious to the emotions and feelings triggered by the pandemic in people's embodied minds. In the December 4 entry, like in many of the poems gathered in *Solstice 2020*, Goyette's poetic persona wavers between fear and hope in the face of the ongoing pandemic. In *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2008), philosopher Jonathan Lear dwells on a people—the Crow Nation—faced with the end of their way of life and raises a profound ethical question that transcends specific civilizations and concerns how one should face the possibility that one's culture might collapse. This is a vulnerability

shared by humankind—insofar as we are all inhabitants of a civilization, and civilizations are themselves vulnerable to historical forces. He ponders how we should live with this vulnerability and face up to such a challenge courageously. His philosophical inquiry into a peculiar vulnerability that is part of the human condition reveals itself inspiring to Goyette's meditation on the COVID-19 pandemic. With Lear's thinking somewhere at the back of her mind, the Canadian poet writes thus: "Jonathan Lear tells us that hope is radical when we lack the appropriate concepts to properly understand it. Tunnel after tunnel: a study of darkness" (Goyette). At this point, the December 4 entry in Goyette's lockdown poetical diary reveals that the lyrical subject is seeking to grasp a new experience for which she lacks an appropriate compass or measuring rod. In much the same way the Bergen-Oslo train slowly advances towards its destination in the dark, surrounded by a hostile environment of vast tracts of forest and blinding white snow, so does humanity towards an uncertain fate on account of the high infection and mortality rates, as the virus inexorably spreads across the globe. The World Health Organization's regular updates on the evolution of the pandemic worldwide only added more uncertainty to this bleak scenario. The train, a symbol of modernity and industrialization, takes on new nuances of meaning in Goyette's poem as it becomes a symbol of hope amidst collective grief.

"Being apart is not good for us" (Goyette), writes the poet in her December 11 entry, emphasizing the sociability inherent in humanity. Time and again, Goyette draws readers' attention to human vulnerability and our need for human contact. Thus, the December 16 entry dwells on the vulnerability of "aging women" (Goyette) amidst the pandemic. After confessing her desire to listen to Joni Mitchell singing "River," the poetic persona acknowledges that "[t]here aren't many grandmothers in this December. The sweet and salty bundle of them making their way through another winter" (Goyette). Secluded in the solitude of their homes for months, frightened of the unpredictable effects of COVID-19 upon their health, they are not to be seen anywhere outdoors, struggling with a viciously cold winter. Their fragility is made even more visible owing to the ongoing pandemic, which had an even greater impact on already precarious lives, including those of the elderly in need of assistance. However, Goyette finds room for hope amidst the bleakest of scenarios as she praises Joni Mitchell's capacity to move people with her voice and her music: "Joni rivers a longing that is tributary for all longing" (Goyette). The image of the river as longing is an apt metaphor to signify hope and

resilience, as also suggested by the image of "frozen rivers and the plants beneath, pushed up close for the sun" (Goyette) in the same entry. Just like beings and entities of the green world survive and persist despite adversity, humanity is to overcome the difficulties posed by a global pandemic. Not all metaphors in *Solstice 2020* are that bright, though. In the December 19 entry, with the winter solstice approaching, the pandemic is conceptualized as darkness and a sinister hunter: "The dark is fifteen hours long now. It's a keen hunter and follows a sure river. Its pelt is thick, its eyes planetary. […] We are the widest territory it covers" (Goyette). With daylight getting more and more scarce, the menace of the pandemic is further exacerbated. If darkness is a hunter, then humanity in its entirety is its prey.

ATTENDING TO THE NONHUMAN: OCEAN, BIRDSONG, AND SNOWFLAKES

Though we still lack the critical stance only the passage of time affords, coronavirus has had a deep impact on humanity. According to Jude L. Fernando, the COVID-19 pandemic signals the beginning of what he has termed the Virocene, "*a distinct epoch that demands fundamentally rethinking the relationship between humanity and nature at the global level*" (637; emphasis in the original). As Robert Bringhurst has lucidly observed, nature has room in it for *homo sapiens*, but it does not need anything from us and "cannot tolerate human domination" (10). Owing to humanity's interdependence with the nonhuman world, he also suggests that we ponder how we relate to the biosphere as the home life has built for itself: "The earth's life is much larger than our own lives, but our lives are part of it. If we take that life, we take our own" (Bringhurst 12). Put succinctly, immersed as we are in the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, we need to urgently rethink Eurocentric ways of knowing and understanding the world, an epistemology of control that seeks to take dominion over the land and the nonhuman world. The origins of such epistemology can be traced back to the emergence of Baconian science at the beginning of the Modern Age with the publication of works like Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) and to the Cartesian divide between *res cogitans* (*us*, mind, humankind) and *res extensa* (*them*, matter, nature) expounded in René Descartes's *Discourse on the Method* (1637). Moved by a territorial imperative, the main concern of this kind of epistemology is measuring, scrutinizing, and taking control over reality. There are, however, other forms of relating to what

ecophilosopher David Abram has termed the "more-than-human world" (*The Spell of the Sensuous*) or "Eairth" (Earth + air = breathing Earth) (*Becoming Animal*), one comprising human and nonhuman beings that have a fundamental trait in common: they are all earthbound creatures that are participant in a "Commonwealth of Breath" ("Afterword" 313). Abram has convincingly argued that language and meaning are not the sole prerogative of *homo sapiens*, but rather a property of animate earth, that the world has a mind of its own, and that all beings have "the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings" (*Becoming Animal* 172). What human and nonhuman beings share is vulnerability, one stemming not only from their bodily existence and sociality, but also from the current climate crisis we are all faced with in the Anthropocene.

Confronted with a widespread sense of utter devastation, uncertainty and fear brought about by COVID-19, it is no wonder Goyette should have turned to the more-than-human world in a handful of poems central to the overall architecture of *Solstice 2020* in search of solace and hope. As Paula Jessop claims, the Canadian poet "believes that each individual has a relationship with the vast and ancient wildernesses we often neglect—oceans, forests, plains and prairies—and these provide some of the major themes she explores in her poetry." Goyette's "knack for seeing the unusual in the usual" (Hamilton), including nature, is palpable in a number of her poems that gesture towards the impossibility of dividing "human corporeality from a wider material world" (Alaimo, "New Materialisms" 281). These poems suggest that Goyette is particularly sensitive to "the lively, agential, vast, material world, and the multitude of other-than-human creatures who inhabit it" (Alaimo, "New Materialisms" 281). Thus, her piece for December 10 is a moving eulogy of the ocean that directs readers' attention to the overwhelming presence of the Atlantic Ocean, to the rhythm of advancing and retreating waves on the shore, and the tableau represented by a boat and gulls elegantly floating in a blue sky as if by magic. An essential presence in her life, the ocean teaches her "a master class on humility and wildness (…), the long look and beauty" (Kerricull). A moment with the texture of transcendence is experienced by the lyrical subject as she ponders

> how the gulls were held aloft above the boat like an aerial exhaust of bird-knot lace or a sophisticated mobile of contraptions with wings. And how every once in a while the sun would use them to mirror itself and they'd transform into this miraculous beacon of bright. (Goyette)

Mesmerized by the gulls hovering over the sea and illuminated by sunlight, Goyette's lyrical subject comes to the sudden realization that human and nonhuman animals are inextricably linked to each other as part of the web of life. As if to underscore both the deep kinship between humans and nonhumans and our shared vulnerability, Goyette writes: "That's when I thought of you, of us, and how we're occasionally okay. And how when we share the shine we're even brighter" (Goyette). Like her poems on the Atlantic gathered in her acclaimed collection *Ocean*, the poem for December 10 maintains "its wildness and its breathing" (Medley) and keeps good company with the other poems preceding and following it. Upon closer inspection, Goyette's poems in *Solstice 2020* represent acts of attention in the face of the awe-inspiring presence that seems to be pervasive everywhere she turns to look, as if the COVID-19 pandemic had honed her attention skills to unimaginable levels. They testify to her astonishment at the grandeur of what-is and "the entangled materializations of which we are a part" (Barad 384). As the poet writes in her December 1 entry, "[t]he world continues to be wondrous in unexpected ways" (Goyette). Small details that might have gone unnoticed before, in pre-pandemic times, are now the focus of her attention raised to its utmost power: the seagulls effortlessly hovering over the ocean, the sun illuminating the waves and the seagulls' backs, the way humans might participate in such radiance and shine themselves are all aspects of reality tessellated into a poetic vortex of maximum intensity in Goyette's December 10 entry. Like human beings, this assemblage of nonhuman animals and entities is also vulnerable and fragile and hence all the more precious. The persistence of beauty and rhythm embodied by the ocean waves are a reminder that there is room for hope amidst chaos and death, or so the poet appears to suggest, even with a devastating pandemic in progress.

In this regard, Goyette is not just the laureate poet speaking on behalf of her citizens, giving voice to communal concerns, but also one of the guardians of Being. In Heideggerian thought, "man is the shepherd of Being" (Heidegger 210), not the lord of Being, and poets' primal speech is capable of shedding light on areas of existence that often remain in the dark. As shepherds of Being, poets respond to the delicacy and vulnerability of everything that exists and seek to capture their astonishment through the medium of words the best way they

can. However, they are aware that words will not do full justice to the vastness of the experience. A poem might be an "inexhaustible artifact" (Strand 74) woven out of carefully selected words, endowed with the capacity to invoke a constellation of simultaneous meanings and persist in time, but reality is always vaster than whatever poets might have to say about it. The poet *qua* guardian of Being is discernible in Goyette's December 18 entry. The entry draws readers' attention to the complex beauty and determination of the more-than-human world to persist in time. She writes with moving simplicity: "Consider the pinecone. Imbricated in design much like fish scales. Thin bract scales beneath seed scales. Each seed scale has two ovules; a miniature forest maker" (Goyette). Looking closely at a particular tree species, she emphasizes the unstudied elegance of the nonhuman, as well as the self-sufficiency of the wild to perpetuate itself. Unlike humanity, "churning out bladed things at an alarming rate" (Goyette), overconsuming goods and plundering resources beyond the Earth's carrying capacity in the Capitalocene, the wild (i.e., everything that is undomesticated) does not tolerate human control, but rather requires our attention and respect instead.

Goyette also instills in readers a sense of ontological horizontality by focusing her attention on nonhuman animals. As Abram notes, "[w]ith the other animals […] we're all implicated within this intimate and curiously infinite world" (*Becoming Animal* 158). Pondering human overdependence on electronic devices to keep them connected to the outer world during lockdown, she writes in the December 5 entry: "I have a cat who has never seen me do anything but sit at a screen all day. He is concerned and verbs and vogues to get my attention" (Goyette). The cat ultimately teaches the poetic persona an important lesson in voicing these words of wisdom: "*Leave the window and come to the floor*, he says, *it is the only way to wile these hours*" (Goyette; emphasis in the original). Playing and staying close to the ground (*Gea* or *terra matrix*) seems to be the only effective trick to kill time during the COVID-19 lockdown. Similarly in the December 12 entry, Goyette resorts to animals and their symbolical value to shed light on the pandemic. She ponders the meaning of "three roosters abandoned in the woods near Hubbards" (Goyette), a town in Nova Scotia: "In Norse mythology, three roosters are significant. In Buddhism, they symbolize greed" (Goyette). In Norse mythology, the three roosters announce the beginning of Ragnarök, that is, Doomsday or the Twilight of Gods, a series of natural disasters and a terrible battle that will kill many deities. Alongside with

ignorance and hatred, greed is one of the three main causes of suffering in Buddhist thinking. The lesson the lyrical subject ultimately gains from the three roosters and their ominous associations is captured in these words: "*I can't rest if I know something's out here and needs to be helped*, says the voice of reason we need to bury as part of our cache we'll dig up when this pandemic has gone back to its cave" (Goyette; emphasis in the original). Conceived as being a beast that will hide underground once humanity goes back to a new normal, the pandemic has taught humanity to stay alert to impending dangers lurking in the dark.

Many of Goyette's poems are acts of attention and works of art "ultimately grounded in a sense of wonder at the natural world" (Jessop). They invite readers to ponder how humans are deeply immersed "within the material flows, exchanges, and interactions of substances, habitats, places and environments" (Alaimo, "New Materialisms" 281) that make up the Earth. For instance, in her December 11 entry, the lyrical subject senses the power of vibrant matter and the vitality inherent in the world in the presence of water in the city: "The buried waterways beneath Halifax are showing up in my dreams. [...] There is water beneath this land we're walking on" (Goyette). Goyette embraces what Alaimo calls *trans-corporeality*, by which she means "the movement across human corporeality and non-human nature" (Alaimo "New Materialisms", 282) and "the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures" (Alaimo "New Materialisms", 282). Thus, in her poem for December 17, she ponders the astonishment she feels in the presence of birdsong, snow, and other small details of the green world:

> What else is surrounding us that we can't yet apprehend? It's going to snow today. The sky has that low-ceiling feel, burdened with forecast. Wilson Alwyn Bentley was the first person to photograph snowflakes on black velvet. He was also the first to record raindrop sizes. (Goyette)

Folded in within the fabric of Goyette's poems are often allusions to historical figures, thinkers, authors, and artists in ways that recall a common practice in Modernist poetics. The allusiveness, plurilingualism and intertextuality of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* are the canonical examples that first come to mind. In a very subtle manner, Goyette is heir to the kind of poetical practice embodied in the masterworks of Modernism. Though the language is kept clear and understandable, though Goyette goes for

brevity and simplicity rather than for convoluted syntax in her prose poems, relevant information might be lost on readers if references are completely ignored. In the preceding quotation from the December 17 poem, American meteorologist and photographer Wilson Alwyn Bentley is a case in point. A pioneer in the study of crystal formation and snowflake photography, he was the first person to capture detailed images of snowflakes on black velvet before they vanished into nothingness. Despite the technical limitations of the equipment he deployed at the time, he perfected the method to such an extent that for well over a century nobody else bothered to take pictures of snowflakes (BBC News 2010). Fascinated by such ephemeral works of art, he captured more than 5,000 images of crystals that he considered "tiny miracles of beauty" and "ice flowers" (Watson). In so doing, he was responding to the fragility of the more-than-human world and capturing its beauty for posterity in the best way he could. In much the same way Goyette responds to the poetry of what-is through the medium of words, Bentley resorted to the use of photography to preserve the perfection of ephemeral snowflakes. Cultivating a scientific method and empirical observation, he argued that no two snow crystals were identical. Bentley was also the first American to record raindrop sizes and one of the first cloud physicists.

This wealth of information is elegantly packaged into Goyette's prose poem, which hints at the deep affinities between human beings and nature, and indirectly evokes the fragility that snowflakes and humans have in common. Vulnerability is thus part and parcel of everything that exists on Earth, Goyette seems to imply. The ultimate message the poet seeks to get across to her readership is crystal clear. As Claire Caldwell puts it in an eloquent review of Elena Johnson's *Field Notes for the Alpine Tundra* (2015), "no matter how much we attempt to quantify, qualify, explain or analyze the natural world, there will always be something ineffable and mysterious about it, something that escapes our grasp" (1). Abram puts it in most illuminating words: "After three and a half centuries spent charting and measuring material nature as though it were a pure exterior, we've at last begun to notice that the world we inhabit […] is alive" (*Becoming Animal* 158). It seems Goyette is well aware of the ineffability of certain aspects of what-is; her prose poems convey a sense of the elusive, eel-slippery nature of the more-than-human world. However, she is inevitably attracted to how poetry "asserts wildness back into language. Poetry reminds words of their fur and their hoofs, of their seaweed and their hurricanes and, in the same way, reminds us of the

more complete version of ourselves" (Green). In other words, poems might as well be an outgrowth from nature itself; if there is wildness in poems it is precisely because they were born out of the wilderness in the first place.

TAKING WIDER VIEWS OF THE UNIVERSE

"Man is altogether too much insisted on. The poet says the proper study of mankind is man. I say study to forget all that—take wider views of the universe. That is the egotism of the race" (369), writes the Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau in a journal entry dated April 2, 1852. As if following the Thoreauvian injunction, in two of her most accomplished poems in *Solstice 2020* Goyette turns to the mystery of the universe humans are a part *of*, not apart *from*. Thus, on December 13, she writes about the mystery of a 'comet-asteroid hybrid' by the name '3200 Phaethon' whose orbital path the Earth would be passing through in the next few days. Resisting all categorizations, the poet explains, this asteroid happens to be "the bluest of all similarly coloured asteroids" (Goyette); it has "a comet tail and continues to perplex scientists by being the source of the Geminids meteor eleganza" (Goyette). As pointed out above, the dominant epistemology of the West is an epistemology of control that seeks to categorize, anatomize, systematize, and digitize everything that is to be known. It was in the opening lines of his *Metaphysics*, a seminal text in the history of Western Philosophy, that Aristotle claimed that the desire for knowledge is a universal *cupiditas naturalis*. "All men by nature desire to know" (1552), he wrote. However, no matter how hard we may try to pin it down, 3200 Phaethon eludes our understanding and resists all attempts at reductive interpretations. What is at stake in this poem is the hunch that the "material world is never merely an external place but always the very substance of our selves and others" (Alaimo *Bodily Natures*, 283). As Goyette notes in powerful metaphors, humans are participant of the mystery represented by 3200 Phaethon, although we might have forgotten it during the pandemic:

> This glorious contraption takes the long way to get close to the sun and is carrying on being itself by defying being trapped into category. And in its wake: galactic tinsel, sacred zippers undoing the night. May the sky be clear so we can receive a taste of it to fuel our own mystery. Or, at least, to wake it up. (Goyette)

Goyette seems to imply that everything in the universe bespeaks beauty, vulnerability, resilience—the macrocosmos echoes thus the microcosmos, or the microcosmos is a blueprint of the macrocosmos in miniature. If everything is entangled and mutually constitutive, then the mystery Goyette senses as intrinsic to the universe is also present in humanity. Emphasizing the vitality of the cosmos and the agency of matter, the new materialisms as theorized by Barad (2007) and Bennett (2010) have precisely reminded us that life is but a continuum ranging from the smallest inanimate entities to the most complex animate life forms. What they share is a common substratum of what Bennet has termed *vibrant matter*. For Bennett, matter is not "raw, brute, or inert" or "passive stuff" (vii). She claims that "[t]his habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings) is a "partition of the sensible"" (vii) which does not hold true anymore.

In yet another poem, the one composed for December 15, Goyette muses on space and the moon, on what it must feel like to watch locked-down life from outer space: "I read somewhere that space smells of metal, a simmering aluminum with a hint of hyacinth and its damp greenness" (Goyette). Looking at life on Earth "from the moon's point of view" (2021), the poet writes: "Waxing towards full, it's trying hard to loosen the structure of things or remind us to be rivers. Everything about this season is loosened in this way" (Goyette). The celestial body silently looks at human commerce on this speck of dust adrift in the universe, with a pandemic in progress. The implication seems to be that if humans cared to direct their gaze to the moon, we might as well learn to remember that everything is connected to everything else and that "there is, ultimately, no firm divide between mind and matter, organism and environment, self and world" (Alaimo, "New Materialisms" 283). The reference to rivers subtly evokes Heraclitus' notion of *πάντα ῥεῖ*: everything is in permanent flux, as suggested by the metaphor of the river. We are also rivers, even amidst "this season" when "days are tearing from their masts and blowing out to sea" (Goyette). As Goyette has admitted in a lucid interview with Annick MacAskill, she is "enamoured/inspired by how we are constantly emerging into who and how we are" (MacAskill), which explains the mystery that the self-as-part-of-the-world represents.

Solstice 2020 is "no pessimist's archive" (Hamilton); a current of hope is pervasive from beginning to end. This might be partly

accounted for by the fact that the universe holds endless fascinations for Goyette, as evidenced by the collection's closing poem. The piece written to commemorate December 21 is a moving lesson on the mystery of light. Daylight is precious and scarce on December 21, the day marking the winter solstice and the shortest day of the year: "Light is so condensed on this shortest day, it's a honeyed version of itself. And if a single bee can visit up to 5,000 flowers, this day is 3,695 flowers long" (Goyette), writes the poet using flowers as her measuring unit. On winter solstice, "Jupiter and Saturn […] are conjoining so close they will spark a porch light for the mourning cave we are in" (Goyette), says the poet, alluding to the pandemic once again, conceptualized here as being a "mourning cave." The poem tessellates allusions to scientific data concerning the behavior of planets on winter solstice, to René Char (who wrote "To be of the leap, not to be of the feast, its epilogue") and to the amazing skill of spiders for constructing their webs mid-air. Resuming life after the havoc caused by the pandemic requires a leap that Goyette characterizes as being "the work of imagining a way forward so there's a bowl for everyone. […] What can this feeling be but awe at how our feet are ahead of us, making a new path, a desire line to this knowing?" (Goyette), which is tantamount to saying that humankind is vulnerable and resilient; it will find a way to move on. *Solstice 2020* closes on a note of optimism, with a lesson on spiders' ballooning, an act of bravery that is to be emulated by human beings. The voice speaking in this excerpt "longs for a world that recognizes a duty of care for the young and for each other" (Hamilton 2021):

> Ballooning is a behaviour spiders use to navigate the in-between to the next. To be on the move and of the leap. This is why we're here. Together and apart. They release gossamer threads and are at the mercy of air currents and electric fields. And this is where we leave each other, at the mercy. I'll meet you at the feast. (Goyette)

For many poets from different cultures and literary traditions, poetry is a form of knowing, possibly the purest one. Like science or philosophy, it helps us make sense of the world and our place in the larger mesh of things. During the locked-down days of 2020, Goyette felt it was her responsibility as a poet to find words to convey the sense of shared vulnerability people experienced in the face of a momentous event that confined them to their homes for days on end. *Solstice 2020* is her personal archive or advent calendar chronicling the effects of

the pandemic on humanity. As such, the collection is both a treatise on vulnerability as a defining trait of humankind and an anatomy of hope. What her poems emphasize time and again is not only our shared vulnerability when faced with the unknown and the sheer size of this unprecedented event, but also our need for human contact and a sense that hope is possible even in the bleakest of scenarios. She reads signs of hope in humankind's sociality, capacity for resilience, and creativity. Humans are vulnerable, yet they are also extremely versatile and creative, as evidenced by Goyette's multiple allusions in the living fabric of *Solstice 2020* to scientific discoveries in the fields of astronomy and physics and to humankind's multifaceted talent as represented by singers like Joni Mitchell, writers like René Char, scientists like Wilson Alwyn Bentley, and philosophers like Jonathan Lear. She turns her attention to the mesmerizing effect of waves in the Atlantic Ocean, to seagulls floating above the sea, to spiders ballooning whilst releasing their threads to build cobwebs, and to ephemeral yet perfect snowflakes as emblems of a more-than-human world that is simply wondrous to her imagination. Bearing witness to the universe and its mysteries is what Goyette does best. Transcending the Cartesian body/mind dualism, she acknowledges that there is always more than meets the eye. Populated by agentive and communicative entities that bespeak the vitality intrinsic to matter, the Earth reveals itself to be a continuum of relationships and entanglements that blurs the dividing line between perceiver and perceived, self and other, human and nonhuman. In the more-than-human world the poet finds inspiration as well as evidence that our species is part of something larger than ourselves and that the beauty of what-is persists despite the havoc caused by COVID-19. She feels that, in her capacity as a poet laureate, it is her mission to listen attentively to the world and to deliver such elemental truths to those fellow human beings who might care to listen to her poems. What she argues is that the world is real and holds endless fascinations for us all, if only we keep our eyes wide open and pay attention to the awe-inspiring beauty of the more-than-human world we are part of. What she claims is that life and poetry will persist, and that humanity will move on and hopefully overcome the pandemic together.

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