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UTOPIAN IMAGINATION

Power to Change the Present

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Power to Change the Present

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Preface

JOANA CAETANO

Executive Editor

"For many people, utopia is a dream without a
place, a forever unfulfilled desire.
For me, I imagine that *that* place exists and that
I am evermore approaching it."

Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo[1]

Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo (1930-2004), to this day the only woman to hold the Prime Minister office in Portugal, is one of my personal heroes. Sometimes, we are lucky to find role models who seem to embody those ethical principles we deem essential to our daily praxis: an unbreakable sense of responsibility that impels you to use your privilege to help those who have little or nothing, courage, honesty, incorruptibility, the audacity to imagine a more just and free world and, of course, the strength to act upon that vision. When utopias were perceived as either unattainable or ridiculous, she was a politician unafraid to speak of them as *a path*, a path she was determined to walk towards, sometimes even at a high personal cost. As a leader, she believed that utopia was indissociable from politics and without it, there was no realisation of the human person. For Pintasilgo, utopia was a right (the right to pursue happiness) and a duty (a responsibility to fight for freedom and justice for all). It rests at the centre of a web, transforming individuals into a system of relationships, into a community, into a constellation.

Every time I am asked, usually by the students, whether utopia is useful, I reply: "In times such as these, are the sun and the air useful? Is hope useful? Is it desire?" It is an unfair reply, I know, but it does the trick. And then, they are usually ready to talk about complex things, such as the utopian paradox – as I call it – that tension between "personal freedom" and "social responsibility". Something that Pintasilgo knew a lot about.

THE THEMATIC SECTION

During my reading of this issue of *VIA PANORAMICA*, Pintasilgo and the utopian paradox came to mind a lot. The thematic section that gives us the title of this issue, "Utopian Imagination: Power to Change the Present", perfectly illustrates the relevance and usefulness of utopia as a tool to read and revise the present as well as imagine alternatives for the future. In this section, we have not only articles that address this combination of critique and imagination inherent to utopia as "social dreaming", but also contributions by creatives and photographers who, through their art, add a more "personal" layer to our understanding of utopianism. What is striking about Maryana, Inês and João's work is, indeed, this ambivalence they portray that makes us feel, at once, embedded in the involving space (urban or natural) and yet in complete solitude, like stars of a constellation that represent both connection and separateness. In this lies the utopian paradox: to be, at the same time, *part* and *apart*.

THE VARIA SECTION

VARIA is a special section. It is a sort of window to the personal and professional interests of our colleagues from within and without our research centre. It is a barometer of what has piqued their interest or what has caused them angst. This issue's articles' selection is, thus, as varied as it is stimulating.

Marisa da Silva Martins brings us a revision of the North American canon by introducing a counter-narrative to Laura Ingalls-Wilder's popular *Little House on the*

Prairie. By adding a Native American voice and story through Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House*, we, the readers, start to discover how much more complex and multilayered the so-called "American" experience is, and how many cultures remain invisible still.

On a different note, "Echoes of the Unconscious: Freudian and Modernist Readings of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*" is a re-reading of a classic through the lens of psychoanalysis. Raquel Correia de Souza leads us through this popular tale of doubles and duplicity to show us how it continues to be "a timeless exploration of human nature and social expectations".

To close this issue, I selected a deep dive into "The Many Masks of Emily Dickinson". In this article, Marinela Freitas unveils Dickinson's poetics of excess as "a means of negotiating identity, authority, and desire". Like the utopian paradox that leads us to confront the needs of the self with the needs of others, Dickinson's poetic ambiguity makes us confront what we want to unveil and what we want to conceal. Either way, her poetry, like the utopian imagination, leaves us with a longing for more: more to be imagined and more to be desired.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Liam Benison for guest-editing the thematic section on utopian imagination and the authors who have accepted *VIA PANORAMICA*'s invitation to contribute: Matt York, Tânia Cerqueira, and Catarina Almeida. To the authors who entrusted their research to us, it was a privilege and a great responsibility: Marisa da Silva Martins, Raquel Correia de Souza, and Marinela Freitas. Your articles enriched this issue immensely, broadening the scope and the depth of this volume. To the nameless reviewers, who have offered us their time and knowledge in return for only private recognition (by us, the editors), my appreciation. And a humble thanks to our General Editor, Professor Gualter Cunha, for a renewed vote of confidence.

Finally, a very special thanks to the artists who have accepted my challenge to illustrate the idea of UTOPIA. Maryana Kovalchuk, João Bento Soares and Inês Doutel, thank you so much for finding the time to collaborate with us and for sending your versions

of utopia from around the world (Japan, Portugal, and Norway/Croatia/Italy), proving that utopia is an undercurrent that – undeniably – unites us all.

END NOTES

[1] Pintasilgo, Maria de Lourdes (1985). *As Minhas Respostas: em diálogo com Eduardo Prado Coelho, Jaime Nogueira Pinto, João Carlos Espada*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote; my translation.

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UTOPIAN IMAGINATION

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THEMATIC SECTION

Introduction to thematic section

The Potential of Utopian Imagination

LIAM BENISON
University of Verona / CETAPS-University of Porto

> "Utopians do not believe frustration, poverty, and privation to be necessary for creativity."
>
> Lyman Tower Sargent

The concluding words to Lyman Tower Sargent's revised essay on the "three faces" of utopianism published in 1994 are worth recalling in this grimly dystopian moment of world history. The agents of state terror who believe the opposite are in the ascendancy. Their tanks, bulldozers, and snipers, masked kidnappers and lying politicians abuse their power to deprive others of dignity, freedom, and life. But every baker who continues baking; every child who laughs; every grandmother who resists; every nurse and doctor who insists on caring; every journalist who documents their crimes for human memory proves that the human spirit of quotidian endeavour, creativity, and joy is stronger. As human greed and ignorance threaten the very tapestry of life on our planet, can we still inspire hope in the utopian imagination? How are we to know what it is and how to use it responsibly? The articles in this thematic section of *VIA PANORAMICA* on the utopian imagination cannot give any kind of definitive answer to these questions; but they aspire to engage readers in serious reflection on the nature of utopian imagination and its power in helping to address the grave political and social challenges of our time.

There are many definitions of utopianism. Sargent defines it as "social dreaming", understanding it as a phenomenon that is "among the basic strata of the human experience"

(1994). By this he means that it "expresses deep-seated needs, desires, and hopes". Sargent highlights utopianism's origin in the sincere and creative expression of the human individual. Ruth Levitas emphasizes the wish to change the social sphere. For Levitas, utopia is "the expression of desire for a better way of living and of being", one that can be developed as a method for the "reconstitution of society in imagination and in reality" (2013, xi–xii).

For Tom Moylan, the utopian imagination has revolutionary potential. This insight, he argues, was "revived and deepened" in the twentieth century by Ernst Bloch (2014, 20). Moylan discusses the notion of the "utopian impulse", which is a dissatisfaction with the present social reality, an unconscious yearning for something better. He explains that Bloch enables us to perceive the utopian impulse as the driver of desire for freedom from oppression through a "radical rupture" with the status quo. The negative aspect of utopian imagination is critical for Moylan. The utopian impulse is provoked by a consciousness of "the radical insufficiency of the present", which can kindle an imaginative critique of the present social order (Moylan 2014, 15–27). Hence, while Sargent affirms that suffering is not necessary for creativity, Moylan perceives the importance of placing hope for social change in the power of the utopian impulse to inspire creative resistance in the confrontation with oppression.

The expression of utopianism is multifaceted. For Sargent, it has three "faces": literary utopias, utopian social theory, and intentional communities; that is, communities set up and run according to an interpretation of utopian principles. Sociological utopianism ranges from the revolutionary socialist theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to twentieth-century theorists such as Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse, and Karl Mannheim. Literary expressions of utopianism have produced a vast corpus, one that is generally held to encompass dystopian fiction, utopia's "generic sibling" (Moylan). In simple terms, where utopias envision a better society for contrast with the author's and reader's present, dystopias envision a worse one. However, dystopias encompass a wide spectrum of visions, from utopianism to anti-utopianism. As Moylan explains, their meaning lies somewhere between a progressive affirmation of the utopian impulse to reject oppression, and a conservative, anti-utopian dismissal of the possibility of any alternative (Moylan 2000, xiii). The three articles of this thematic section explore the potential of utopian imagination

from three perspectives and approaches that broadly correspond to Sargent's three faces of utopianism.

In "Be Here Now: Immanent Utopias and Permanent Revolution", Matt York draws on the experience of intentional communities. He includes insights from his work with the "Deep Commons" project, in which activists and scholars from across the world come together to imagine and enact forms of utopian solidarity.

York critiques "the nature of our current political utopias" and the gap between current social challenges and imagined futures that might overcome them. His provocative argument is that a "predominantly 'transcendent' form of contemporary political utopianism", which he defines as "situated in an ever-receding future or past, or otherwise in an alternate reality altogether", is ill-suited to the purpose of critically addressing the polycrises of our times. Using anarchist theory, York argues that utopian imaginaries need to be "grounded" in the here-and-now, that is, based in social practices that "cultivate ecologies of solidarity and care" and avoid the destructive consequences of "capitalism, anthroparchy, patriarchy, racism, and the State".

York's approach reflects a significant thread in utopian thought—one that includes Bloch, and Marx and Engels—which is sceptical of the value of the literary expression of utopianism. For York, utopian efforts of transformation need to adopt the same social measures and practices that are envisaged to bring about an improvement in social relations and outcomes. He raises the question whether it is possible for literature to serve as a utopian practice in the present.

For this reader, the greatest joy in York's analysis is his engagement with individual people's experience of the Deep Commons. These voices affirm his hope in the possibility of positive social change through co-imagined, intentional utopian communities. The communities he describes are far from perfect. Forms of misogyny, racism, inequality and exploitation persist; but hope is found in community members' ongoing commitment to work consciously, in solidarity for a better horizon. For York, then, the utopian imagination must be used to seek and live "grounded" alternatives to everyday problems rather than to envision fictional alternatives to the present society in another place or time.

Tânia Cerqueira focuses on the literary face of utopianism in her article "'*Amor Deliria Nervosa*': The Erasure of Love in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction". Cerqueira

considers the utopian potential in young adult (YA) dystopias' representation of the challenge that adolescents' sexual awakening poses to prevailing laws and social customs. Sexual awakening is a topos of YA fiction, typically represented as a dynamic of liberation and discovery, written for readers experiencing their own urge to challenge the norms and boundaries expected of them as they grow into adult society. In many dystopian fictions, the repression of love and sexual freedom by authoritarian regimes is a common theme, along with the instrumentalization of reproduction to serve ideological control of the population. In her exploration of YA dystopias, including Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* series, Cerqueira explores how the energy of repressed love and sexuality in projections of authoritarian societies is represented as posing a challenge to power.

Cerqueira's subtle exploration of the texts demonstrates how the utopian imagination animates the YA dystopian fictions that she explores through the centrality of desire, in particular, love and sexual desire. Hence, these works can be seen as being animated by the utopian imagination, in the sense of evoking "the expression of desire for a better way of living and of being" (Levitas). As Cerqueira argues, the role of emotions in the narratives, in particular, of love, is "framed as a catalyst for critical awareness and potential resistance". She concludes that, in these works, "love is not merely a personal experience but a foundational element of collective resistance and societal transformation, playing a critical role in the pursuit of social dreaming". These YA fictions then can be regarded as projections of dystopian societies, which through the representation of scenarios of both repressed love and love as utopian impulse, animate the utopian imagination to inspire resistance against the status quo.

Like Cerqueira, Catarina Almeida discusses dystopian fiction in her article, "Weaponizing Women's Bodies for Authoritarian Power: The Handmaid's Tale and Anti-Abortion Politics in the USA". However, Almeida's approach is sociological, using Margaret Atwood's well-known work as a cognitive map for an analysis of "the current crisis in women's reproductive rights in the USA". Almeida's discussion shifts between the fictional dystopia and the current dystopic reality of Trump's authoritarian rule. In this way she highlights the complex implications of the Supreme Court's decision in June 2022 to overturn the Roe v. Wade ruling, which has protected the right to abortion in the USA since 1973.

Atwood's dystopia was published 40 years ago, and represents a more extreme authoritarian society even than the harsh restrictions on women's reproductive autonomy now imposed in a majority of states of the union. However, Almeida succeeds in demonstrating how the dystopia can shed light on a number of mechanisms of political control and media propagandizing that prevail in Trump's USA. Almeida highlights the shared motivations of political power and of the religious movements that support them in both the dystopia and contemporary US society. It is in the area of the impact on women's autonomy that Almeida's analysis is most revealing. She sheds light on how surveillance is used not only for overt control, but also covertly, to manipulate women's compliance and complicity in their own oppression. She unpicks the mechanisms of dystopian power that impose grave physical and emotional consequences on women.

For Almeida then, the power of the utopian imagination lies in Moylan's notion of dystopias as "challenging cognitive maps" that help readers understand the present world (Moylan 2000, 11). Her article also highlights the power of authoritarian regimes to manipulate a population's social imaginary, using media and the mythic power of religious narrative to oppress and control.

CONCLUSIONS

Fernando *et al* (2016) offer some social scientific evidence for the real-world value of exercising the utopian imagination. They conducted a questionnaire study of 341 residents of the USA and the UK to investigate the psychological function of utopian thinking. The UK residents were interviewed shortly after the Brexit referendum; the US residents both before and after the first election of Trump as president in 2016. The authors found that "utopian thinking resulted in motivation to engage with society in line with Levitas's (1990) functions of utopia" and had "an overall negative effect on [satisfication with society] and system justification". They concluded that "engaging with … utopia, tends to elicit [a] broader social change motivation". This finding that utopian thinking has a negative valence associated with social dissatisfaction and critique of the status quo offers support for Moylan's argument that the utopian impulse expresses desire for rupture with the

present social order. Among their conclusions, the authors observe that research on utopian thinking in social psychology is new, as the field has favoured the study of social conservativism over investigating people's interest in social change. Perhaps the conservative, anti-utopian assumption that people dislike change is overstated; conveniently, for those in power.

In the conclusion to his 1994 essay, Sargent highlights the importance of both utopian expression and a clear understanding of it, warning that "[f]ailure to heed the urgings of [utopian social dreaming] produces both personal and social pathology, grotesques of the imagination and of politics". I commend the three articles in this thematic section to the reader, and hope that they will help improve understanding of the nature of utopianism and kindle utopian desire to continue the struggle to change a grim political world.

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BE HERE NOW

Immanent Utopias and Permanent Revolution

MATT YORK

TASC: Ireland's Think-tank for Action on Social Change

ABSTRACT: With the breathtaking proliferation of polycrises unfolding around us, the central problem this article takes as its starting point is the nature of our current political utopias—that they are transcendent rather than grounded. Or, to put it another way, rather than being here-and-now, they are nowhere, situated in an ever-receding future or past, or otherwise in an alternate reality altogether. They are impossible. This article's argument is that, if we are to move beyond our current states of bewilderment, disorientation, and denial, we must set new political trajectories which aim not at our current utopias (which are not-now and nowhere) but toward those that are both now and here, and therefore possible. Drawing on classical and contemporary anarchist theory, and from participants of the ongoing Deep Commons collective visioning project, the perceived antinomy of revolutionary and evolutionary theories of political and social change will be questioned, and the anarchist concept of permanent revolution—an ongoing process without end—will be explored as an alternative model for radical social transformation. The temporal gap between current struggles and imagined futures will be problematized, prefigurative praxes critiqued, and a politics of immanence explored as a remedy. Finally, this article considers reframing the sequencing of means and ends from a linear to a non-linear temporal form. Thus, rather than prefiguring a path which leads to a particular goal, we reframe *the path* as the goal.

KEYWORDS: Utopia, immanence, (deep) commons, prefiguration, freedom.

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> It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that revolution is in vain unless inspired by its ultimate ideal. Revolutionary methods must be in tune with revolutionary aims. The means used to further the revolution must harmonize with its purposes... Revolution is the mirror of the coming day; it is the child that is to be the man of tomorrow.
>
> – Emma Goldman (1925, 433)

We are living in perilous times. The dizzying scale and pace at which human beings are consuming and fighting over resources is literally destroying our web of life, constructed over billions of years, upon which all of us, human and non-human, depend for survival. Despite our best (and worst) efforts, the consequent proliferation of polycrises we can observe unfolding around us has now brought humanity to an existential cliff edge. The central problem this article takes as its starting point is the nature of our current political utopias—that they are transcendent rather than grounded. Or, to put it another way, rather than being here-and-now, they are nowhere, situated in an ever-receding future or past, or otherwise in an alternate reality altogether. They are impossible. This article's argument is that, if we are to move beyond our current states of bewilderment, disorientation, and denial, we must set new political trajectories which aim not at our current utopias (which are *not-now* and *nowhere*) but toward those that are both *now* and *here,* and therefore possible. I will draw on classical and contemporary anarchist theory, and from participants of the ongoing Deep Commons collective visioning project[1] that brings together activists and scholars from across the world to co-imagine and cultivate ecologies of solidarity and care beyond capitalism, anthroparchy, patriarchy, racism, and the State. These voices will be used to bring the theory to life. The perceived antinomy of revolutionary and evolutionary theories of political and social change will be questioned, and the anarchist concept of permanent revolution—an ongoing process without end—will be explored as an alternative model for radical social transformation. The temporal gap between current struggles and imagined futures will be problematized, prefigurative praxes critiqued, and a politics of immanence explored as a potential remedy.

In 1898, twenty years before the October Revolution, Élisée Reclus prophetically warned his "revolutionary friends" in Russia of the dangers of conquering state power

and in turn adopting the very tools of domination that their revolution was seeking to displace:

> If the socialists become our masters, they will certainly proceed in the same manner as their predecessors, the republicans. The laws of history will not bend in their favor. Once they have power, they will not fail to use it, if only under the illusion or pretense that this force will be rendered useless as all obstacles are swept away and all hostile elements destroyed. The world is full of such ambitious and naïve persons who live with the illusory hope of transforming society through their exceptional capacity to command. (Reclus 2013, 145)

These words of Reclus are as pertinent now as they were then, perhaps even more so. For as Murray Bookchin similarly reminded us: "political parties are *products* of the nation-state itself, whether they profess to be revolutionary, liberal, or reactionary" (1996, 7). Thus, the fundamental difference that distinguishes one party from another is merely the kind of nation-state it wishes to establish. Yet in spite of this, conventional political histories examining revolutions have focused exclusively on the rivalries between liberal, radical, and revolutionary parties for control of the state, ignoring this far more important political battle which takes place between the state-centric revolutionary party and the new, usually directly democratic institutions co-created by the people on the ground.

It was witnessing at first hand the French revolution of 1848 being subverted in this way by the provisional government that confirmed for Pierre-Joseph Proudhon that "all parties, without exception, as they affect power, are varieties of absolutism", leading him to conclude: "the political revolution, the abolition of authority among men is the goal; the social revolution is the means" (1849, 3). Proudhoun thus called for a "permanent revolution". Unlike the Marxist-Trotskyist use of this term, which maintained the need for a vanguard party seizing state control (Marx and Engels 1850; Trotsky 1931, Chapter 4), Proudhoun's permanent revolution involved "the people alone, acting upon themselves without intermediary" in order to break this cycle of partial revolution (1848, 9). For contemporary activists and scholars, our revolution must become similarly permanent if it is truly to be resolved to imagine, co-constitute, and then sustain free society. It must become (r)evolution, an ongoing process without end.

If, however, a free society is to be founded without "assistance" from a vanguard revolutionary party, then what of a manifesto? What of strategy and planning? In a

famous attack on the revolutionary ideas of Marx, Mikhail Bakunin addressed this question by setting himself in opposition to what he saw as the foolishness of rigidly aligning to a preconceived idea of how revolutionary change should occur:

> We do not, therefore, intend to draw up a blueprint for the future revolutionary campaign; we leave this childish task to those who believe in the possibility of the efficacy of achieving the emancipation of humanity through personal dictatorship. (Bakunin 1973: 357)

From this perspective then, and without a clear map to guide us, the question of how to get from the *here* of struggle to the *there* of free society continues to present us with a perplexing dilemma. It is not a question of whether political means and ends *should* be linked, because "they *already are*" (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, 36). Ugandan activist Namazzi, a participant in the Deep Commons collective visioning process, argues that the reason why so many revolutionary movements have failed is because "the people were clear about what they wanted to move from, but they were not clear on where they were heading", and, therefore, those in power have been able to "take advantage of this gap in strategy". But this very sense of trajectory—from here to there or somewhere, as expressed by Namazzi—perhaps illuminates a more central problem. As long as freedom is deferred while in transit between a past we aim to escape and an imagined utopian future, there indeed remains such a gap to be enclosed and colonized by oppressive forces. But it is this very sense of trajectory from here to there, and the resultant gap between the two temporalities which obscures what might be the ground upon which free society can at long last be constituted in the immanence and accessibility of the now.

In his work on "grounded utopias", Laurence Davis builds on Friedrich Kümmel's idea of time as a temporal coexistence between past, present, and future, with the relation of these temporal components not merely conceived as one of succession but also as one of conjoint existence—with both past and future intertwined with the present (2012, 130–32). From a movement perspective, this state of profound contingency calls on us to open many more spaces for radical imaginaries focused on building political projects in the here-and-now, grounded in historical praxis and extending toward an ever-changing yet hopeful future. This relocation to the present is by no means a rejection of utopian thinking, for visions of future worlds animate struggle

in the present. The real danger lies in clinging to and concretizing any one fixed vision of the future (or of the past) as it will implicitly trap us within what David Abram calls "the oblivion of linear time" (2017, 272). It will trap us, that is, within the same illusory dimension that has already enabled us to lose connection with, and fragment apart from, the natural world. Temporally speaking, then, the most strategic and efficacious location for constructing a free society is in this moment, and then the next, and the next, in perpetuity. And so, as Anna, an eco-activist from Mexico participating in the collective visioning, explains:

> Acting from the here and now is revolutionary. Rather than having a fixed vision that the future will look like XYZ, it is left open, really trusting in where we are coming from and what our intentions and motivations are. More humane, more relational, more caring.

From this perspective, any truly inhabitable utopia can only be arrived at, or lived, as a dynamic process in the here-and-now. Kurdish (r)evolutionary Bager Nûjiyan describes his own struggle in Rojava as such a grounded utopia, firmly rooted in the present. For him and his comrades, free society is not just an abstract idea, but their "concrete way of living", and their "way of connecting with struggle and utopia on a daily basis" (Nûjiyan, 2018). From Nûjiyan's perspective, the temporal gap between that which we struggle to escape and our imagined destination has been closed, and the free society relocated to the immanence of the here-and-now, where it can finally be reclaimed and occupied.

There are, of course, a number of well-argued critiques of such a politics of immanence which deserve further engagement. Uri Gordon has argued that a politics of the here-and-now leads our struggles to become trapped in a "recursive prefiguration" (2017, 521). He explains elsewhere that, similar to that which can be found in Christianity, a future "radiates backwards on its past", as an "absorption of the revolutionary/utopian horizon into the present tense" (Gordon 2009, 261). Such a temporal framing, he argues, works to "undermine a generative disposition towards the future", allowing a collective denial of both the "absent promise" of revolutionary transformation in the near future and the very real prospect of imminent ecological and societal collapse (Gordon 2017, 522). Prefiguration from this perspective is little more than a way of modelling an imagined future in the present moment, as a way of dissociating from the very real and immediate ecological and social crises that cascade

around us; it is "fiddling while Rome burns". Gordon argues that adherents to such "presentism" sidestep these crises by "avoiding any disposition towards the future altogether" (2017, 532).

Darren Webb similarly critiques what he describes as attempts to "reconfigure utopia" and to "rid it of its totalistic and prescriptive dimensions" in order to avoid the risk of "closure and control". He claims that such an approach merely succeeds in nullifying its utopian potential. He believes that much of the "vitality, power and direction" that a utopian approach might offer is lost when attempting to circumvent its perceived "bad" connotations (Webb 2009, 757). He repeatedly rejects what he refers to as "the standard liberal critique" of blueprint utopianism, a tactic often utilised in order to ridicule similar arguments made by those on the left, without acknowledging that such a critique has a long and established history in anarchist thought (*idem*). Moreover, the many anarchist revolutionaries and theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who were clear in their opposition to such vanguardist, concretized visions of a future society, were making their observations within living memory (and often through direct experience) of the devastating consequences of such an approach. He is right, however, in his assertion that, without visions of the future, utopian praxis risks becoming "an empty and endless project that romanticizes the process while losing sight of the goal" (*idem*, 287). In his critical case study of Occupy Wall Street, he makes a similar argument:

> Movements heralding themselves as cracks in capitalist space-time through which transformed social relations are emerging here-and-now might just end up becoming dead spaces in which the inchoate utopian desires that originally gave them life wither away through neglect. (*idem*, 358)

He is correct to observe that they *might*. But *must* they? Are a politics of immanence and a generative praxis, as these scholars claim, so mutually exclusive? The dangers are certainly real and must be taken seriously. A politics of immanence could well be (and at times is) subverted to provide reassurance and denial in the face of ecological and social systemic collapse. However, such an impatience with our collective lack of revolutionary progress in the present, while entirely understandable, might just as easily lead us yet again into a blinkered march towards a frozen future image conceived of in the past, the

abandonment of the now, and the repetition of previous mistakes. Any future utopia we might imagine through the limitations of our current conceptual frameworks will inevitably at some point be found lacking, as our capacity to imagine better worlds evolves beyond our original starting point, condemning us to a future "caught within the paradigms of the present" (Newman 2009, 211). As Rosi Braidotti points out, "[w]e cannot even begin to guess what post-anthropocentric embodied brains will actually be able to think up" (2013, 104). So, although it might be possible to identify the impacts and successes of previous struggles with the benefit of hindsight, it is never possible to envisage the whole process in advance (Swain 2019, 59).

It is therefore through the co-creation of living, vibrant, material alternatives in the here-and-now that we can tangibly express the utopian potentiality always within grasp, as an immanent feature of the present moment. Such approaches are of central importance, Simon Springer asserts, because they remind us of the latent agency present in the here and now: "all we have is immanence, this precise moment of space-time in which we live and breathe, and because we are *it*, we can change, reshape, and ultimately transform *it*" (2014, 161). As another collective visioning participant, UK activist Jack explains, "what we are bringing into perception in this moment, that is the world we are living in. That is the relationship". For Jack, the idea of an abstracted yet concrete utopia is "a bit silly". Our struggles must remain dynamic or else they end up being "in opposition to life and the dynamism of who we are".

But many—as we have just discovered—will still be asking how realistic such a profound reconfiguration of our social ecologies can actually be? And the answer, somewhat unsurprisingly given the sheer scale of struggle visible today, is that it is entirely possible to find living, vibrant examples of such societal formations across the world right now that might inspire us. Perhaps, as Ariel Salleh suggests, political theorists have simply been "too culturally blinkered to see it" (2017, 269). For instance, the indigenous cosmovision that so radically transformed the original Marxist insurgency, and, consequently, the entire trajectory to date of the Zapatista revolution in Chiapas, Mexico has been the Tsotsil concept of *O'on* or "collective heart" (Fitzwater 2019). In the Tsotsil language, thoughts and feelings are considered to be one and the same, thus better framed as *thought-feeling*, and are understood to manifest in this collective heart as the realization of its "inherent potentialities". This underlying potentiality is called

ch'ulel; that is, a means of describing the "inherent or immanent potentialities" that are always present and ready to shape and form the "dynamic relationships that compose reality" (Fitzwater 2019, 32–33). Xuno López Intzin, a contemporary Tsotsil scholar and activist, explains how *ch'ulel* thus potentiates the kind of profound interrelationality that resonates with the politics of immanence this article explores:

> From this understanding of the ch'ulel in everything, the human being establishes relations with all that exists, in other words the human being interacts with their environment and the environment with the human being on a material and immaterial plane. From this plane or universe of ch'ulel existence is ordered, and social relations are ordered with all that exists. (qtd by Fitzwater 2019, 33)

The creation of a free ecological society from a Tsotsil perspective can therefore be seen as an ongoing reciprocal process of nurturing and developing both this underlying potentiality and our collective heart. And this process of "bringing one another to greatness" (*ichbail ta muk*) in turn creates "the life that is good for everyone" (*lekil kuxlejal*), as Dylan Eldredge Fitzwater explains: "For the Zapatistas, dignity, autonomy, and democracy for each people, as well as the creation of this people as a collectivity, arises through the growth of the heart, through bringing one another into one collective heart, through *ichbail ta muk*" (2019, 36). And so more than mere abstract theory, these deep commons can be seen as animate in the actually-existing anarchistic practices of the ongoing Zapatista revolution, a political project that has been described by John P. Clark as "one of the most radical and far-reaching conceptions of democracy yet to appear" (2019, 103).

The centre of Zapatista autonomous governance is in "every Zapatista community", existing as multiple dialogical processes that work openly on the tensions between different actors while simultaneously constructing a framework of "shared aspirations born from a collective heart" (Fitzwater 2019, 49). Moreover, this process includes at its centre an ongoing radical reconfiguration of gender relations within these communities. Taking seriously the shared commitment to engage in struggle *juntos y a la par* ("together and side by side"), there is a shared recognition that any struggle against colonialism and capitalism is also "necessarily a struggle against patriarchy" (Gahman 2020, 518). Material results of this can be seen in the increased engagement by Zapatista men in reproductive work and emotional labour, and the increased involvement

of women in positions of responsibility and decision making in community life, political organising, and autonomous governance (Gahman 2020, 519). While (as in all contemporary societies) there remains a long way to go in terms of fully overcoming masculine domination and *machismo* forms of masculinity, the strides they are making in these communities towards women's collective empowerment, claims Levi Gahman, are "nothing short of miraculous": "Rebel women, and the socially reproductive labour they do each day, are at the heart of both the movement and lifegiving world they are creating" (Gahman 2020, 521).

The Zapatista governance structures have no central constitution, only principles arrived at through collective agreement. Community representatives who serve in the Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Municipalities (MAREZ), for instance, follow the seven principles of autonomous government or "Command by Obeying", which are: (1) serve and not be served; (2) represent and not supersede; (3) build and not destroy; (4) obey and not command; (5) propose and not impose; (6) convince and not defeat; and (7) come down and not go up (Moisés 2018, 169-70). Thus, the system of assembly (*Ichbail ta muk)* maintains a "constant process of creation and re-creation" in order to remain free and open, with each community free to imagine for themselves what unique form their democracy might take. When the smaller collectives that constitute the collective heart find themselves in disagreement or imbalance, an assembly is convened in order for all constituents to participate in the formulation of a new agreement, resulting in the co-creation of a new collective heart. It is this process of direct community approval of all decisions that ensures the flow of communication (and power) between the various levels of autonomous government remains in perpetual movement, thus continuously weaving the multiple collective hearts of the communities into the one collective heart of the Zapatista organization (Fitzwater 2019, 69-71). Moreover, as a further tactic for combatting the ever-present danger of the accumulation of power in any one community or by a new governing elite, a complex rotation system for assembly representatives has been established that ensures no one person has the opportunity to develop disproportionate power or influence. The governance structures and communities thus remain part of "the same social body" (Fitzwater 2019, 136). Fitzwater's conclusion that autonomous structures of government such as this cannot/must not have an end point supports the argument of this article for utopia as process. Such structures, he argues,

must be created by the "constant creation and re-creation" of governing systems that respond to the "desires and problems experienced by the communities themselves" (Fitzwater 2019, 160).

Another contemporary example of such an approach is offered by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, also known as Rojava—an extraordinary experiment in horizontal participatory democracy involving a multicultural population of around three million people. This is a utopia of the here-and-now, a political process firmly grounded in (and generative of) the day-to-day life and struggles of the communes. The Rojava process, much like the Zapatista process just examined, remains deeply rooted in the cultural imaginary of the region. Nazan Üstündağ (2020, 253) argues that Abdullah Öcalan—the Kurdish Workers Party leader imprisoned by the Turkish state since 1999 and a key architect of this social revolution—has been greatly influenced by the indigenous epistemologies transmitted through religious-cultural traditions such as Alevism and Sufism, which can be crystallized in Öcalan's aphorism "Truth is Love; Love is Free Life". Positioning this love as central to the revolution, Üstündağ describes an expansive more-than-human matrix containing an inherent promise of freedom:

> This love is not a form of love that can be sexually consummated, contained by household, property, and nation, or reproduce a lineage. Love and eroticism are lived in relation to nature, the world, and revolution, in people, living matter, and society—in other words, in all kinds of relationships—as a movement and a flow (Üstündağ 2020, 253).

But as inspiring as the examples of the Rojavan and Zapatista revolutions might be for many of us around the world, we must remain vigilant. As specific federalized networks achieve a certain level of success, we must consciously resist the temptation to overly reify and essentialize them, and abstract yet more fixed blueprints for future social formations. As we are now starting to understand, it will remain crucial that the co-constitution of free ecological society remains an ongoing process—pluralized, open, responsive, and grounded in the here-and-now. These deep commons thus offer an alternative frame of reference to that of the state by eradicating arbitrary static borders (in fact making them an absurdity), and by honouring both the local and the global without reifying either. The concept potentiates the formation of multiple coherent local

identities, communities, and regions, developing in unique forms according to localized conditions, yet avoiding isolationism due to the need for mutual aid and cooperation with neighbouring communities in order to survive and flourish. Top-down governance becomes nonsensical in relation to this locally responsive ongoing co-production of the world, as does any form of homogenous culture. Such a community of communities is what Sian Sullivan has referred to as "holonic", in the sense that each community is part of the broader scales of a more global organization while at the same time constituting a localized autonomous whole (2005, 380).

Benjamin Franks asserts that locating our struggles in such prefigurative political praxes will act to "collapse the problematic distinction between means and ends", which we have seen as leading to tragic consequences for multiple failed revolutionary movements (2006, 114). Gustav Landauer went so far as to claim that there is ultimately no separation between cause and effect. He conceived of cause and effect flowing from one to another in an "eternal" process that he termed "reciprocal effect". He even proceeded to suggest getting rid of the word "cause" entirely, exclaiming: "The cause is dead, long live the living effect!" (2010, 100). Inverting Schopenhauer's claim that all reality is effectiveness, Landauer instead asserted that "effectiveness is reality", and therefore all that can be actual and existing is "also present and in the moment" (2010, 103).

However, a politics of immanence need not (indeed must not) displace the future. On the contrary, it should recognize it as an entangled aspect of what we term the present. Thus, what is generative must also be processual, with imagined future(s) and an ever-changing present in a constant dialogical process. Therefore, rather than prefiguration, perhaps a more useful frame might be that of an imagined future being constantly *refigured* in a process of entangled relationality with the continually shifting present, which in turn, refigures itself in relation to this new trajectory, and so on and so forth. Such a reframing might then ensure that the "anxious and catastrophic forms of hope", which Gordon rightly argues will be necessary to create the urgently needed radical alternatives to our current dystopia, remain firmly grounded in the possible while generative of what, for some, might seem the impossible (2018, 14).

Sullivan refers to such an approach as an "enfolding-unfolding, implicate-explicate" model of social organization, which potentiates a "proliferation of democratic

processes" in which distribution and emergence can occur simultaneously (2005, 380). It realizes Élisée Reclus' vision of a "globalisation from below" in which humanity might finally undertake an "open ended and creative project of liberatory self-realisation" (Clark and Martin 2013, 4). Mirroring Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's vision of a free society in which the "centre is everywhere, its circumference nowhere" (1989, 282), it is literally impossible to find a medial point or a periphery as each socio-ecological system flows into the next in a dynamic interconnectedness. There is thus no beginning and no end, no us and no them. It is the ultimate realization of *O'on*—the flourishing of the global collective heart.

From this perspective, we might reframe the sequencing of means and ends from a linear to a non-linear temporal form. Rather than prefiguring a path which leads to a particular goal, we reframe the path *as* the goal. Thus, if our goal is freedom, praxes must be established which realize freedom in the present moment, not as a distant promise, but as the liberation of the now. Consequently, it will be in this space between the *no longer* and the *not yet* that we must locate our shared political project, and the free ecological society it pursues.

END NOTES

[1] See: https://www.deepcommons.net/about

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NO PLACE LIKE UTOPIA

Living in today’s world, where truth is only attainable in plural form, would it be possible to free our environment from ideological forms and superstructures? Utopian thinking might not be the key to ending this problem rather than revealing its true nature.

Is it possible to draw inspiration from the way nature appears to human beings and aspire to create an environment that flows and floats, one that is infinite, light and transparent, dissolving and having hardly any substance? Imagine a space that transforms depending on the time and weather. Rainy days offer impressive scenery as the rain flow comes in through the unglazed openings, forming water pillars and adding an element of sound to the experience. Infinite ceiling openings create a playful light filtering effect mimicking the way the sun shines through the clouds on a dim day. Rather than being defined by boundaries, it is a space oscillating between those boundaries, where the human being becomes the scenery, inspiring to live, dream and create endless possibilities.

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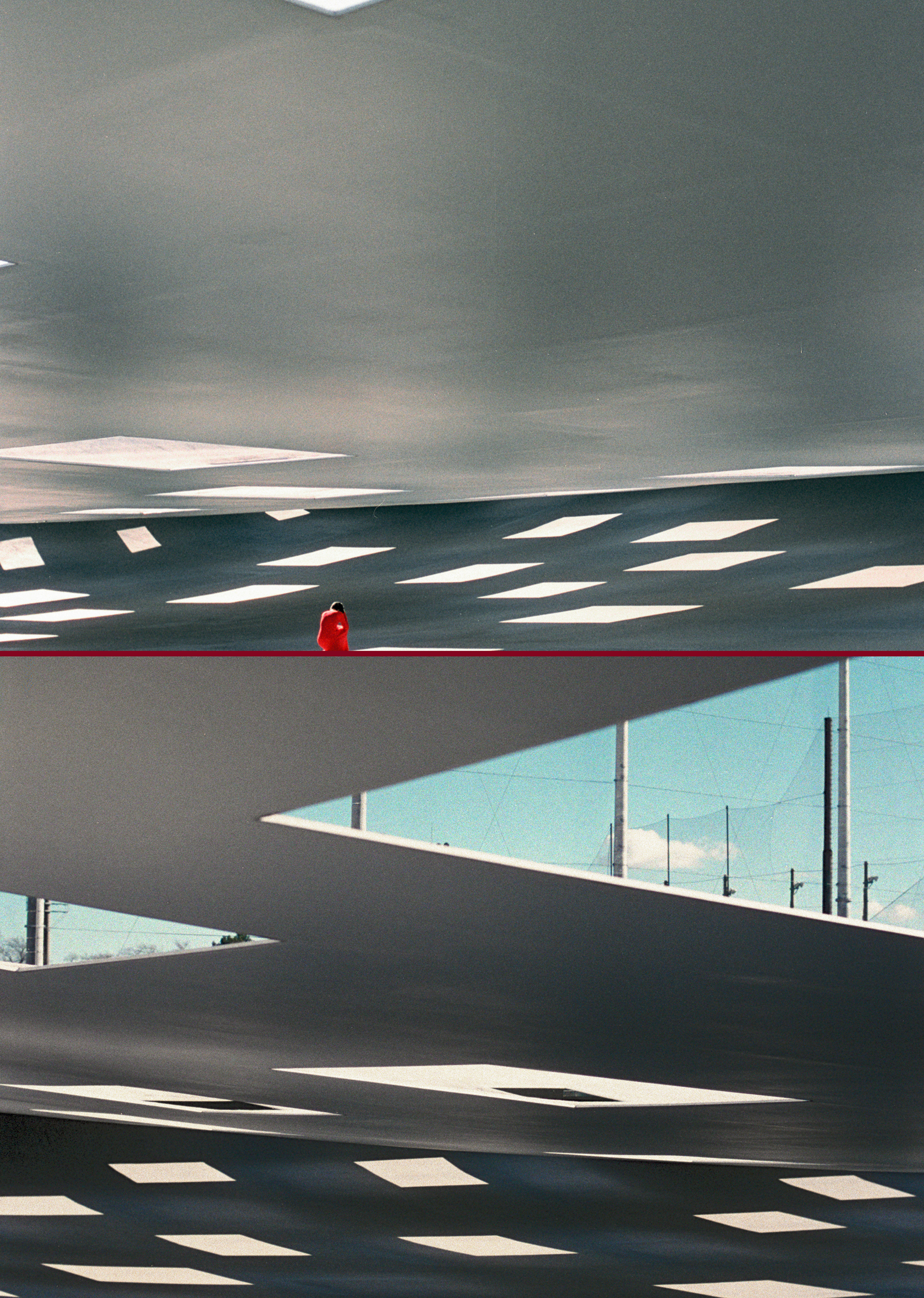

Amor Deliria Nervosa:
The Erasure of Love in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

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ABSTRACT: In Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* series (2011–2013), love, or *amor deliria nervosa*, has become the most dangerous disease in the world. Lena, the novel's protagonist, has been told all her life that love is the deadliest of all deadly things and cannot wait to go through the medical procedure that will cure her of it. Without romantic love, relationships are chosen by the government, which pairs heterosexual couples by considering the results of an evaluation. The erasure of love is present in other young adult (YA) dystopian texts. In Ally Condie's *Matched* Trilogy (2010–2012), society bases its decisions on optimal algorithmic calculations, and a person's forever match is determined by probabilities that exclude love. In Anna Carey's *Eve* Series (2011–2013), girls are taught to fear men so that they can be easily manipulated out of romantic relationships and willingly accept becoming breeders for a society decimated by

RESUMO: Na trilogia *Delirium* de Lauren Oliver, o amor, *amor deliria nervosa*, tornou-se a doença mais perigosa do mundo. Lena, a protagonista do romance, durante toda a sua vida ouviu que o amor é a mais mortal de todas as coisas mortais e mal pode esperar pelo procedimento que a irá curar. Sem a possibilidade de amor romântico, as relações são escolhidas pelo governo, que emparelha os casais heterossexuais tendo em conta os resultados das avaliações. A supressão do amor está presente noutros textos distópicos para jovens adultos. Em *Matched* de Ally Condie, a sociedade baseia as decisões em cálculos algorítmicos otimizados e o par perfeito de cada um é determinado através de probabilidades que excluem o amor. Em *Eve* de Anna Carey, as raparigas são ensinadas a ter medo de rapazes e homens, de modo a serem facilmente manipuladas e a aceitarem engravidar e aumentar a população de uma

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a plague. More insidiously, in Beth Revis's *Across the Universe* (2011–2013), the inhabitants of the spaceship are drugged to suppress their emotions. By undertaking an analysis of YA dystopian texts, I examine how love is represented in these future totalitarian societies, and the consequences of its erasure. This article critically engages with frameworks that explore romantic relationships as catalysts for political awakening, highlighting the interconnections between rebellion and sexual awakening. Since love is often represented as undesirable to the regimes that go to great lengths to eradicate it from society, I contend that the experience of love in these narratives is essential for social dreaming.

KEYWORDS: YA dystopian fiction, YA Studies, emotions, utopianism, rebellion

sociedade dizimada por uma praga. Em *Across the Universe* de Beth Revis, os habitantes da nave espacial são drogados para suprimir as suas emoções. Ao analisar textos distópicos de YA, exploro a forma como o amor é representado nestas sociedades futuras totalitárias, assim como as consequências resultantes da sua supressão. Esta análise explora criticamente quadros teóricos que discutem relações românticas como catalisadoras de um despertar político, destacando as ligações entre a rebelião e o despertar sexual. Como o amor é frequentemente representado como indesejável para os regimes, que se esforçam por erradicá-lo da sociedade, defendo que a experiência do amor é, nestas narrativas, essencial para o sonho social.

KEYWORDS: Ficção distópica para jovens adultos, Estudos YA, emoções, utopianismo, rebelião

AMOR DELIRIA NERVOSA: THE ERASURE OF LOVE IN YOUNG ADULT DYSTOPIAN FICTION

Emotionless futures are a defining feature of fiction and visual media that depict societies governed by totalitarian governments. The premise of suppression of emotions or emotional restrictions is central to young adult (YA) dystopian fiction, as observed in the following trilogies: Ally Condie's *Matched* (2010–2012), Anna Carey's *Eve* (2011–2012), Beth Revis's *Across the Universe* (2011–2013), and Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* (2011–2013). These texts represent authoritarian governments that implement systems of emotional regulation, reflecting and adapting portrayals of emotionless societies found in dystopian science fiction films such as *Equilibrium* (2002), directed by Kurt Wimmer, and *Equals* (2015), directed by Drake Doremus, and novels such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993). In these narratives, authorities implement extreme measures to eliminate emotions: they destroy artwork, ban music and literature that might incite emotional reactions in the populations, and resort to medical procedures and neuropharmacological methods to eliminate and/or suppress emotions. Across these narratives, emotions are perceived as the root of all societal conflicts; thus, authorities strive to eradicate emotional depth from citizens' lives to maintain society under their strict rules.

YA fiction often centres the motif of emotional repression around the teenage protagonist to question the morality of a society where emotions are suppressed. Indeed, it uses this motif as a lens through which the adolescent protagonist questions their own humanity in the absence of emotions. As Elaine Ostry notes, in YA science fiction, "losing total control over one's emotions, or having them controlled for you, puts one's humanity in question" (2004, 236-37). The question of humanity becomes complex when emotions are either lost or manipulated, a notion that resonates with Sara Ahmed's suggestion in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* that emotions play a significant role in shaping identity and behaviour, particularly in politics (2004, 12). In The *Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed further contends that specific emotional configurations can instigate social and political change: "we need to think about unhappiness as more than a feeling that should be overcome. Unhappiness might offer a pedagogic lesson on the limits of the promise of happiness. If injustice does have unhappy effects, then the story does not

end there. Unhappiness is not our endpoint" (2010, 217). While happiness can be interpreted as an acceptance of the status quo, unhappiness can fuel change; that is, unhappiness can be socially and politically transformative. Emotions are framed as a catalyst for critical awareness and potential resistance. Totalitarian governments recognize the subversive power of emotions and enforce laws aimed at suppressing feelings that foster communal bonds or that may incite individuals to rebel against the system. Moreover, "[e]motions, beliefs and knowledge are tools by which humans make decisions" (Hemmingson 2015, 11). Without emotions, citizens lose the ability to make choices or express themselves, becoming automatons of the system in power. The ultimate objective of erasing emotions is to create submissive and obedient citizens.

In the YA dystopian series under analysis, *Matched*, *Eve*, *Across the Universe*, and *Delirium*, the control, suppression, and erasure of emotions serve as a controlling mechanism. Authoritarian forces construct systems and employ tools that not only suppress emotions but also threaten to obliterate love, which is depicted as a source of interpersonal connection and an impulse for rebellion against the oppressive structures. Within this framework, the suppression of romantic love often takes precedence over the repression of other emotions.[1] In YA dystopian fiction, Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz observe that romance "can play a key role in shaping the dystopian narrative and the possibilities for social change enacted in the novel. [It] may advance the political aims of the narrative when a new boyfriend or girlfriend encourages the protagonists to develop a new perspective or embark on a new experience" (2014, 8). Similarly, Nicole Maruo-Schröder emphasizes that "[t]he forbidden love is in many cases a catalyst for revealing the shortcomings of the society the [teenager] lives in; [romance] attains political significance, above all in its function as a boundary transgression and rejection of social control" (2018, 55). Relationships that authorities consider unacceptable lead the protagonists to recognize the inherent injustices within their constrained lives, driving them to question the legitimacy of the societal prohibitions imposed upon them. Thus, the representation of romance in YA dystopias challenges societal norms and fosters critical reflection and action against oppressive systems.

Through an analysis of the first novels of the eponymous YA dystopian trilogies *Matched*, *Eve*, *Across the Universe*, and *Delirium*, I examine the mechanisms by which emotions, particularly love, are suppressed and/or erased within a totalitarian society,

along with the resultant consequences of such erasure. My focus on love is informed by Ahmed's claim that "[l]ove is crucial to how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an ideal, an alignment that relies on the existence of others who have failed that ideal". Ahmed continues, stating that "the pull of love towards an other, who becomes an object of love, can be transferred towards a collective, expressed as an ideal or object" (2004, 124). This examination critically engages with theoretical frameworks that position romantic relationships as catalysts for political awakening and highlight the intricate relationship between rebellion and sexual awakening. I contend that the experience of love is essential for the emergence of social dreaming, the basis of utopianism for Lyman T. Sargent (1994, 4). Positive utopianism[2] can only materialize through the experience of love, as the narrative's protagonists are motivated to transform their world not solely for themselves and the person they fall in love with, but also for their families, friends, and all individuals yearning to break free from the strict regulations that govern every facet of their lives.

(RE)CLAIMING LOVE, RESISTING CONTROL

In *Matched* (2010), society bases its decisions on optimal algorithmic calculations, and an individual's forever match is determined through probabilities that exclude love. The government, the Society, and its Officials control every little aspect of the citizens' lives: how much someone can eat, how long someone can exercise, whom to marry, and when to die. As an Official says, if people were allowed to choose, "everything would fall apart" (340). This extreme control over someone's choices leaves no time for individuals to question the Society and, consequently, rebel against it.

On her sixteenth birthday, Cassia Reyes attends her Match Banquet, a ceremony in which the Society designates her a partner for life. She is matched with her best friend, Xander, and is initially elated about being paired with someone she knows, as well as the fact that she will not have to abandon her family. In this society, family bonds are severed through marriage since the wife must move to the husband's Province, losing ties with her parents and siblings. After moving away from their home, most do not contact or speak with their families regularly. However, when Cassia views the micro card she

was given at the Baquet, there is an error. Another familiar face appears on the screen: Ky, a boy who has been labelled an Aberration.[3] Cassia grows closer to Ky, who teaches her how to write by hand, an activity forbidden by the Society. They fall in love, and Cassia begins to interrogate the Society, gradually losing faith in its decision-making process. Indeed, when an Official confronts her about kissing Ky, Cassia shows the sparks of rebellion:

> "Cassia. Do you regret your decision to be Matched? Do you wish that you had chosen to be a Single?
>
> "That's not it."
>
> "Then what is it?"
>
> "I think people should be able to choose *who* they Match with," I say lamely.
>
> "Where would it end, Cassia?" [the Official] says, her voice patient. "Would you say next that people should be able to choose how many children they have, and where they want to live? Or when they want to die?" (246)

Falling in love with a boy that the Society deems can never be hers instigates change in Cassia, who was initially a believer in the Society; when the narrative begins, Cassia wants to be part of its societal machine as a Sorter.

It is important to mention that Cassia's belief in the Society was first shaken by familial love with the loss of her grandfather. In the Society, Elders pass away on the day they turn eighty. At her grandfather's Final Banquet—a gathering where loved ones and friends reunite with the dying Elder to bid him farewell—Cassia notices how he loses his vitality throughout the day. She later learns that her grandfather's food was poisoned by the Society, causing his premature death. On his deathbed, Cassia's grandfather asks her to see the compact he gave her. Cassia discovers that a piece of paper is hidden inside it. When her grandfather gives her back the compact, with the paper safely inside, he tells her: "'I am giving you something you won't understand, yet. But I think you will someday. You, more than the rest. And, remember. It's all right to wonder'" (83). The paper contains a passage from a poem by Dylan Thomas (1914–1953), "Do not go gentle into that good night" (1951). Cassia realizes that the Society forbade the poem because it "tells you to fight" (98). In his last moments, Cassia's grandfather gives her the possibility to question the Society and its practices.

Arranged, loveless marriages as a means to control and purge love from romantic relationships are common in YA dystopian novels. Joanna Simpson and Bryan Gillis suggest that "[u]nder an authoritarian government, sexual activity and procreation are often rigidly monitored as a way to gain control over the people. This may be done to increase or decrease the population, manipulate the type and/or quality of the individuals being created within that society" (2015, Chapter 5). For instance, in *Matched*, arranged marital unions involve eugenics, matching genes to eradicate genetic differences. At work, while sorting eye colour, Cassia contemplates the possibilities: "Blue, brown, green, gray, hazel—these are all of the options for eye color, even with many ethnicities represented in the population. Long ago there were genetic mutations, like albinos, but those don't exist anymore" (134). The Society chooses which physical characteristics are desirable in its citizens. In Carrie Ryan's *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* (2009), Mary, the narrative's protagonist, claims that "[m]arriage in our village is not about love—it is about commitment". She explains:

> Every year I wonder at the couples pairing up around me. At how my former childhood friends suddenly find partners, bond, prepare for the next step. Pledge themselves to one another and begin their courtships. I always assumed the same would happen to me when my time approached. That because of the sickness that wiped out so many of my peers when I was a child, it would be even more important that those of us of marrying age find a mate. (...) I even hoped that perhaps I would be lucky enough to find more than just a mate, to eventually find love like my mother and father. (4–5)

Although in Mary's village those of marrying age are instructed by authority, the Sisterhood, to find a partner of the opposite sex, they can still choose someone they might harbour feelings for. Nevertheless, Mary does not have that choice and is forced to marry the brother of the boy she loves. In Amy Engel's *The Book of Ivy* (2014), in the aftermath of a civil war between two surviving groups of a nuclear war, the dominant government establishes that children from the winning and losing sides would marry each other to maintain peace and control. Ivy, a direct descendent of the leader of the losing side, explains that the practice of arranged marriages is twofold:

> There is a practical purpose: people don't live as long as they used to, before the war. (...) It's important that we procreate, the earlier the better. The second is even more pragmatic.

> President Lattimer's father was smart enough to know that peace only lasts when the unhappy side still has something left to lose. By marrying our daughters to his side, he ensured we would think twice about rising up. (...) The strategy has worked thus far; we have remained at peace for two generations. (Chapter 1)

In these societies, marriage has the purpose of procreating and repopulating a world where human life was almost exterminated by war and/or disease.

As a consequence, arranged marriages endanger the female character's sexual awakening since sexual activity has the single function to reproduce to increase population numbers. However, even procreation may be jeopardized: in *Matched*, Cassia refuses to marry Xander and escapes from the Society to the Outer Provinces in search of Ky; in *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, Mary's love interest dies after being bitten by an Unconsecrated, a zombie-like creature that roams the forest surrounding her village; and in *The Book of Ivy*, Ivy and her husband do not engage in sexual activity at all.[4] This theme reaches a disturbing extreme in Carey's *Eve* (2011), where teenage girls are forcibly impregnated to repopulate society.

After a plague annihilates the human population in *Eve*, The New America rises, and orphan girls are taken to isolated, fenced schools where they are taught to fear men: they attend classes named "Dangers of Boys and Men" and "Manipulation and Heartache". They are warned about the manipulative, conniving, and dangerous ways of men. On graduation day, Eve is confronted with what is expected of her after leaving school. While attempting to escape, Arden, a fellow student at the all-girls school and Eve's sometime rival, tries to make Eve understand that there is something insidiously wrong with the place: "Ninety-eight percent of the population is dead, Eve. Gone. How do you think the world is going to continue? They don't need artists... They need *children*" (Chapter 1). Horrified, yet wanting to uncover the truth, Eve sneaks into the windowless compound where students are taken after graduation to learn a profession, and is confronted with a nightmarish vision and realization:

> There were rows of girls in cots, most with massive stomachs beneath the white sheets. A few had their middles bandaged. One had scars that snaked over her side, deep pink and puffy. Across the room, another girl writhed in pain, trying to free her wrists. Her mouth was open, yelling something I couldn't hear beyond the glass.
>
> ...

> There would only be babies cut out of my womb, ripped from my arms and shuttled somewhere beyond these walls. I'd be left screaming, bleeding, alone, and then plunged back into a dreamless, drug-induced sleep. (Chapter 2)

In The New America, teenage girls are locked up, impregnated by artificial insemination, and forced to give birth as many times as their body allows.

Eve decides to escape and is helped by a teacher, who explains to her how the schools for girls and the forced pregnancies came to be :

> The King believed the science was the key to repopulating the earth quickly, efficiently, without all the complications of families, marriage, and love. (...) He thought that if you feared men, you girls would breed willingly without them. And when the first Graduates went into that building, some of them did. (Chapter 3)

At school, fear is drilled into the girls so they can be easily manipulated out of romantic relationships and willingly consent to becoming breeders for a society decimated by disease. As a consequence, in Eve's world, girls are not expected to experience romantic love or sexual awakening. Sara K. Day explores the parallels YA dystopian fiction draws between sexual awakening and social resistance, asserting that "female protagonists have internalized social expectations regarding sexuality and desire; though their trepidation in facing those desires initially reflects that internalization, it eventually gives way to increased confidence and willingness to pursue larger forms of social rebellion" (2014, 88). Eve, as well as Cassia in *Matched* and Lena, the main character of *Delirium*, are initially afraid of facing their desires because of the teachings of the authorities. However, the experience of first love, followed by sexual awakening, changes their views. During her escape, Eve meets Caleb, a boy who lives outside the oppressive regime. Although she is initially wary of him, Eve finds herself trusting Caleb and falls in love with him. The romantic feelings Eve develops reveal to her all the lies she was told, initiating her political awakening.

The merging of sexual awakening and political rebellion is a far-reaching trend in YA dystopian fiction, as well as in YA fiction as a whole. "Political awareness", Clémentine Beauvais argues,

> and erotic love follow a similar ascent in the life of the enamoured teenagers: the romantic transgressive focus on the loved object coincides with a political combat: breaking away from the conflicting groups. In other words, the increasing erotic tension between the two teenage bodies is the physical manifestation of a political desire to modify the configurations of their dialectical world. (2016, 62)

In YA dystopian fiction, totalitarian authorities create structures that work to erase (romantic) love, resulting in the non-experience of the romantic awakening that leads to political awakening. Hence, romantic love and sexual awakening are represented as an impulse for female agency and social resistance. In *Eve*, robbing the young girls of the experience of romantic love and sexual awakening works to keep them docile, passive subjects, and suppresses any potential for rebellion.

Although dystopian governments build mechanisms to control and repress love, in both *Matched* and *Eve*, citizens can still experience it. Whether it be romantic, familial, or affectionate love, they can feel it and, if they are willing to, use it to rebel against society. However, Revis's *Across the Universe* (2011) and Oliver's *Delirium* (2011) take a more sinister turn, where any emotion becomes inaccessible.

SILENCING DIFFERENCE AND ERASING THE SELF

In the first novel of Beth Revis's *Across the Universe*, Amy Martin, the main female protagonist, is cryogenically frozen to travel to a new planet, Centauri-Earth, with her family. She is woken up before the spaceship lands on Centauri-Earth to find herself in a society where the ship's inhabitants live under the strict control of its leader, Eldest. ("Eldest", as well as "Elder", are not personal names but roles within the hierarchical succession structure for leadership within Godspeed. "Eldest" is the title given to the leader of the spaceship, and "Elder" is the title of the chosen successor. The individuals in these roles are named after their position and do not have personal names.) To maintain order in the spaceship, named Godspeed, those in control decided to erase individual differences, which they viewed as a cause of dissidence: the ship's inhabitants are all monoethnic, any form of religion has been expunged, and everyone speaks the same language (30). Amy's physical difference (she has red hair, pale white skin, and green

eyes), combined with her ability to think critically, destabilize the order within the spaceship. Her presence influences Elder, the future leader of the ship, to raise questions about the societal system of Godspeed. In contrast to the typical portrayal of female characters in YA dystopian fiction, who, according to Sarah K. Day, "first encounter and learn about the possibilities of social rebellion through their relationships with young men who have already established their own rebellious paths" (2014, 90), Amy emerges as a character who defies the sociopolitical system, thereby giving Elder the option to explore the possibilities of social rebellion. As he confronts the harsh realities of his society, Elder is ultimately compelled to question the societal constraints that have governed Godspeed and rebel against them.

In addition to erasing all differences, to keep the individuals under control, every Eldest mixes Phydus, a drug that suppresses people's emotions, with the water system. Phydus "ensures that people's emotions do not override their instinct for survival [controlling] extreme emotions" (337), and it "takes away individual thought" (339). Due to their emotions being strictly controlled, individuals are led into blind obedience. However, not everyone is under the drug's effect, as the spaceship still needs individuals who can steer it (the Shippers) and others who can produce culture, since those who are under the effect of the drugs (the Feeders) need entertainment. Individuals whose DNA is augmented with the ability to imagine and create are deemed mentally unstable and live in the hospital, separated from the Feeders. As Amy is told when she tries to explain how people behave, "we're the ones who aren't normal. It's us—who can't focus, who can't work together, who can't do Feeder or Shipper jobs—we're the ones who aren't normal. We're the ones who have to take the mental meds just so we don't go loons" (259). Those who live in the hospital are given Inhibitor pills so they are not affected by Phydus, and because they cannot take direction or follow leadership, they must be kept away from the Feeders, who are always calm and content. The Feeders are nothing more than mindless drones, as Amy describes them.

Through building a relationship with Amy, for whom he develops romantic feelings, Elder begins to suspect that all is not as it seems within the spaceship. Because of Amy, he comes to understand that the mating season is not a natural occurrence and that individuals do not lose their sanity due to overwhelming lust (230, 238); individuals have feelings and individual thought, as opposed to being perpetually obedient and

complacent, blissfully unaware of anything beyond their manufactured happiness (259, 285). After Eldest dies at the hands of Orion, who was once in Elder's place, but due to his reckless behavior Eldest ordered his death, Elder finds himself in control of the spaceship and its dwellers. Instead of continuing the system that controlled and manipulated individuals, Elder decides to govern Godspeed without Phydus, giving Feeders access to their emotions for the first time and granting them free will and the ability to make choices.

Nevertheless, access to one's emotions is not always reversible. In Oliver's *Delirium*, love has become the most dangerous disease in the world and has a scientific name, *amor deliria nervosa*. Lena Haloway has been told all her life that love is the deadliest of all deadly things, and she cannot wait to go through the medical procedure that cures her of it. Without the ability to feel romantic love, relationships are chosen by the government, which pairs heterosexual couples through a formal evaluation that every teenager takes to determine not only possible partners but also their educational future. According to *The Book of Shhh* (short for *The Safety, Health, and Happiness Handbook*), a fictional, sacred, state-sanctioned manual mandated for every citizen, the evaluation's "criteria include intelligence, intellectual and social interests, economic strata, temperament, age, ethnicity, physical health, and general attractiveness" (Oliver 2016, "Excerpts from Part III: The Role and Purpose of Society"). Feelings are out of the equation, and sex also becomes primarily about procreation.

The surgery to cure people of love not only erases romantic love: individuals also lose the capacity for familial and affectionate love, and they lose the ability to experience any emotion. This emotionless state of being has nefarious consequences. On a raid night, Lena sneaks out of her house to warn her best friend, Hanna, who is at an illegal party—a party where teenage girls and boys mingle and can catch *amor deliria nervosa*. In the ensuing madness of the raid, Lena is caught: "The dog has got its jaws around my calf, and I turn and that's when I see him, the regulator with the massive red face, eyes glittering, smiling—*oh, God, he's smiling, he actually enjoys this*—club raised, ready to swing" (218). After being saved by Alex, the Invalid[5] she falls in love with, Lena contemplates how an Invalid saved her from being beaten by the raider, "[f]rom the people who are supposed to protect us and keep us safe" (221). Without the ability to feel compassion, raiders are vicious and enjoy engaging in violence. The inability to

experience love also has consequences for family unity. Parents raise their children because it is their function, without nurturing feelings for them. As a consequence, some parents even reject their children:

> in the absence of *deliria nervosa*, some people find parenting distasteful. Thankfully, cases of full-blown detachment—where a mother or father is unable to bond normally, dutifully, and responsibly with his or her children, and winds up drowning them or sitting on their windpipes or beating them to death when they cry—are few. (7)

Elaine Ostry argues that "[l]osing control over emotions is frightening because, without emotion, especially empathy, a moral base is felt to be impossible" (2004, 237). Unable to feel love, empathy, sadness, anger, shame, regret, or pleasure, individuals are prone to accept society's indoctrination and have violent, deviant behaviours that are (mostly) not reprehensible due to this lack of emotion.

While most children are raised by emotionally detached parents, Lena experienced a different upbringing. She was raised by an affectionate mother, who went through the surgery multiple times but without success. Lena's understanding of love as painful is the reason she wishes to be cured, as she witnessed her mother's grief and suffering following her father's death. This awareness profoundly influences Lena's perception of *amor deliria nervosa*, rendering it as something repugnant:

> I don't like to think that I'm still walking around with the disease running through my blood. Sometimes I swear I can feel it writhing in my veins like something spoiled, like sour milk. It makes me feel dirty. It reminds me of children throwing tantrums. It reminds me of resistance, of diseased girls dragging their nails on the pavement, tearing out their hair, their mouths dripping spit. (2)

Lena is terrified of love and wishes to go through the surgery to be happy and safe, a promise the government makes. She seeks to be emotionally detached from her past and, through the surgery, "the past and all its pain will be rendered as smoothly palatable as the food we spoon to our babies" (41), enabling individuals to sever themselves from the memories and the emotions that are such an intrinsic part of their identity and existence. However, Hanna tells Lena: "You can't be really happy unless you're unhappy sometimes. You know that, right?" (23). Emotionless, pleasureless happiness cannot be

considered genuine happiness. This view aligns with Ahmed's reflections on the need for unhappiness to rebel. The promise of happiness, as offered by the cure, is devoid of an awareness of unhappiness, and it ultimately confines individuals within a rigid regime that restricts their freedom.

Falling in love with Alex transforms Lena. When Alex confesses his feelings for her, Lena ultimately comes to terms with the emotions she has long dreaded, depicted in a scene that evokes the nuances of sexual awakening:

> all the fear I have carried with me since I learned to sit, stand, breathe—since I was told that at the very heart of me was something wrong, something rotten and diseased, something to be suppressed—since I was told that I was always just a heartbeat away from being damaged—all of it vanishes at once. That thing—the heart of hearts of me, the core of my core—stretches and unfurls even further, soaring like a flag: making me feel stronger than I ever have before.
>
> I open my mouth and say, "I love you too." (378)

Through experiencing romantic love, Lena can no longer accept that love is a deadly disease, something terrible she must be afraid of. She questions everything she was ever told by the government, turns her back on society, chooses not to be cured and runs into the Wilds, where she promises to resist (441).

"LOVE OBEYS NO LAWS OTHER THAN ITS OWN"

In these YA dystopian narratives, love is portrayed as fundamentally undesirable to totalitarian regimes, which recognize its potential to disrupt political and societal order. Authorities devise mechanisms to contain love, effectively trapping characters within the system, as the erasure of love creates citizens loyal only to the government. In the absence of love, meaningful connections among individuals—whether romantic, familial, or platonic—are severed, enabling oppressive societies to maintain their authoritarian control.

The experience of romantic love serves as a transformative force for the protagonists of YA dystopian fiction. It is the source of individuality and freedom,

instilling agency in the subjects contaminated by it. Cassia, Eve, Elder, and Lena are no longer passive subjects, mindlessly following the authority's indoctrination. This newfound agency, which emerges from their experience of romantic love, empowers them to challenge and resist the controlling, dehumanizing practices. They discover within themselves the power to disturb society's totalitarian systems, fighting against government-determined marriages, forced breeding, and being stripped, not only of the capacity to love, but to feel any emotion at all. Hence, the novels discussed illustrate how a romantic relationship becomes both a personal and a political act that destabilizes systems of control and reclaims individual agency.

Ultimately, love is represented as fundamental for the construction of a better future. These dystopian narratives assert that the realization of utopian visions and dreams is unattainable without the presence of emotions—especially love—since it is only through such emotional connections that communities can be built. Without the ability to feel, individuals become self-absorbed or exist in a state of daily monotony, oblivious to the injustices perpetrated by their leaders and the extent of the control exerted over their lives. In this context, love is not merely a personal experience but a foundational element of collective resistance and societal transformation, playing a critical role in the pursuit of social dreaming.

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END NOTES

[1] The prominence of romantic love in these dystopian narratives can be attributed to its relationship with YA fiction, wherein romance is particularly pronounced. Adolescence represents a transitional phase characterized by the negotiation of romantic relationships and the exploration of emerging or re-emerging sexuality (Horne 2018).

[2] In *The Utopian Reader*, Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent argue that utopianism can be positive or negative. They state that "utopianism generally is the imaginative projection, positive or negative, of a society that is substantially different from the one in which the author lives" (1999, 1).

[3] An Aberration is a status received if the person has committed an Infraction. They are not seen as full Citizens and do not get the privilege of being Matched. Aberrations are usually assigned to the Disposal Department, where they are slowly poisoned.

[4] Ivy and her husband Bishop eventually consummate their romantic relationship only in the second book of the series, *The Revolution of Ivy* (2015). Across the series, their relationship is depicted as evolving from distrust and a sense of obligation to profound intimacy and affection. As a result, their eventual sexual relationship is characterized by emotional depth, transcending mere physicality and the biological imperative to procreate.

[5] An Invalid is someone over eighteen who chooses not to be cured as society demands and lives mostly forgotten in the Wilds (Society denies their existence) outside the city's fences.

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A EVOLUÇÃO DA UTOPIA

Eu nem sempre fui assim, sonhava todos os dias, tinha um corpo, uma forma permanente. É no tempo em que a vida passou a ter uma forma desmaterializada que começo esta transmissão. Quando me refiro em desmaterializar não me refiro ao Sistema económico que caiu há dois séculos, fez a espécie humana vaguear a terra até evoluirmos ao ponto de perdemos a nossa materialidade. Passamos ao estado de névoa energética e a consumir energia. Através de uma rede de comunicação de micélios cósmicos, navegamos e falamos pelo infinito. Fazemos parte de uma comunidade universal a fluir pelo cosmos num manto de esporos. Com o Universo estamos na nossa plenitude.

Pode ser um sonho, uma esperança de vos voltar a ver, os sobreviventes desta metamorfose e explorar convosco outras regiões do Universo, assim deixo a minha história.

© JOÃO BENTO SOARES

é um artista multifacetado. Criador de fotografia, ilustração, música e vídeo, o seu trabalho está “a par de sinfonias como a arte e a comunicação, o digital e o analógico”.

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Weaponizing Women's Bodies for Authoritarian Power: *The Handmaid's Tale* and Anti-Abortion Politics in the USA

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ABSTRACT: Since the United States Supreme Court overturned the Roe v. Wade decision in June 2022, the USA has faced a crisis in women's reproductive rights that has intensified following Donald Trump's reelection. This article asks why women's bodies are instrumentalized to fulfil the political goals of authoritarian regimes. It explores the role that attacks on women's reproductive freedoms play in Trump's political agenda by using Margaret Atwood's dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale,* as a cognitive map to understand the political instrumentalization of women's bodies and its consequences for women. It considers the manipulation of religion and ideas of womanhood, family values, and sexual morality as means of reproductive coercion, and how the state surveils those who try to circumvent the law. The article also examines how the undermining

RESUMO: Desde que o Supremo Tribunal reverteu a proteção Roe v.Wade em junho de 2022, os Estados Unidos têm enfrentado uma crise nos direitos reprodutores das mulheres que se intensificou desde a reeleição de Donald Trump. Este artigo questiona porque é que os corpos das mulheres são instrumentalizados para cumprir objetivos políticos em regimes autoritários. A pesquisa explora o papel que os ataques às liberdades reprodutoras das mulheres têm na agenda política de Trump ao usar a distopia de Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, como um mapa cognitivo para perceber a instrumentalização política dos corpos das mulheres e que consequências isso tem para as mesmas. O artigo debruça-se sobre a manipulação religiosa e reflete sobre a condição da mulher, valores familiares e moralidade sexual como meios de reprodução coerciva analisando como é que o Estado vigia

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of women's bodily autonomy is fostered by socioeconomic divisions that marginalize and divide women, limiting resistance, and how the media disseminate propaganda that manufactures women's consent to their own repression.

KEYWORDS: Abortion, Reproductive Rights, Dystopia, Propaganda, Authoritarianism, Motherhood

aqueles que tentam contornar a lei. A pesquisa também examina como é que a desvalorização da autonomia corporal das mulheres é acentuada por divisões socioeconómicas que marginalizam e dividem as mulheres, limitando resistência, e como os media disseminam propaganda para fabricar o consentimento das mulheres na sua própria opressão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aborto, Direitos Reprodutores, Propaganda, Autoritarismo, Maternidade

INTRODUCTION

The concept of dystopia has been widely explored in literature and has become more relevant as we reflect and argue about the state of our social conditions as human beings. According to Tom Moylan, the dystopian narrative emerged as a genre in the early 20th century, as the world faced the chaos of shifting global politics, two world wars, and rapid economic transitions. The "horrors of the twentieth century" provided a thriving environment for the development of dystopian fiction, which enables "its writers and readers to find their way within (...) the conditions that mask the very causes of the harsh realities in which they live" (Moylan 2000, 12).

Moylan explains that dystopias present the reader with "challenging cognitive maps of the historical situation by way of imaginary societies that are even worse than those that lie outside their authors' and readers' doors" (*idem*, 11). That is, dystopian fiction allows the reader to navigate fictional scenarios as if they were maps, and trace how power works; how populations are manipulated with propaganda and made complicit with repressive practices and rituals the regime defines as moral and just; and how the experience of the dystopia affects the psychological experience of characters. Through comparison, dystopian fiction provides readers with insights into the dystopian aspects of their own world and enables them to think critically about them "in ways not sanctioned by hegemonic institutions and ideologies" (*idem*, 17).

The Handmaid's Tale was first published in 1985 by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood. The story is set in the dystopian Republic of Gilead (formerly the USA), where fertile women are used as reproductive vessels for the Commanders and their Wives. The former government of the USA is overthrown in a military coup by a white-supremacist, Christian movement called The Sons of Jacob, who, seeking to strengthen the white birth rate, assassinate the President, declare a state of emergency, and found the Republic of Gilead. Through the focus on fertility, Atwood's dystopia sheds light on a system that eliminates women's reproductive freedom, allowing the modern reader to imagine "a future cataclysmic society, characterized by oppression, dehumanisation, fear, and often government control" (McGuire 2024, 73).

As Christabelle Sethna explains, all "women are slotted into a caste system based entirely on their reproductive utility to the state" (2020, 2). The caste system is divided into Handmaids, Wives, Econowives, Marthas, Aunts and Unwomen. The Handmaids, who wear hoods to prevent their peripheral vision, are used as reproductive vessels as long as they are fertile; the Wives maintain the social status of elite households according to the idea of the "traditional family"; Marthas handle the domestic labour in each household; Econowives are women married to the poorer men that can take the roles of Handmaid or Martha; the Aunts are an unyielding conservative force responsible for the indoctrination of future Handmaids; Unwomen represent women outside the regime's normalized concept of woman, for example, lesbians, sex workers, and feminists. "Unwoman" is also a term that can be used to punish the Handmaids. If they do not follow the rules, they can be reclassified as unwomen and sent to work in the colonies, where they will die from exposure to toxic trash. *The Handmaid's Tale* helps us understand how an authoritarian society can be built upon the annihilation of women's reproductive rights, and deepens our understanding of the political crisis underlying the repression of women's reproductive rights in the USA today. In this article, I ask what *The Handmaid's Tale* can tell us about why women's bodies are weaponized to fulfil political agendas.

Although published in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* continues to serve as a symbol of resistance against the abortion bans that have been introduced since Roe v. Wade was overturned in June 2022 (Sethna, 2020). Most recently, many women wore the Handmaids' red gowns during the 'No Kings Protest' on 14 June 2025 (President Trump's birthday), which mobilized more than five million people. This shows that *The Handmaid's Tale* continues to address the same feminist concerns that moved Atwood to write the novel in the 1980s. At that time, former President Ronald Reagan had gained support from "the rise of a pro-life, right-wing, Christian fundamentalist movement" (Sethna 2020, 1). However, the current situation feels different from the 1980s: now that Roe v. Wade has been overturned, states across the USA have legislated a variety of measures to restrict abortion.

Although dystopian fiction does not reflect reality per se, because it presents worst-case scenarios that highlight the unseen dynamics and possibilities of current social

conflicts, Atwood's fiction remains relevant as it enables the reader to compare the repression of women's reproductive rights in Gilead with the situation in the USA today. Readers may recognize in the prohibition and criminalization of abortion in Gilead, the normalization of rape, and the use of propaganda to indoctrinate women's compliance, similar patterns visible in today's USA.

WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS: RELIGIOUS MANIPULATION

During the US presidential elections in 2024, one of the most debated issues of the campaigns was abortion laws and women's reproductive rights. This topic was critical because in June 2022, Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973), an important federal ruling of the US Supreme Court protecting women's right to abortion, was overturned by the Court in the case Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, 597 U.S. 215 (2022), leaving the power to regulate the level of access to abortion to each state. Because the Roe v. Wade protection no longer exists, many states have made new laws to restrict or abolish abortion, while other states are passing legislation in order to protect it. In states with bans or severe restrictions, those women who have the procedure face serious health and legal consequences. The complex differences in state laws also create obstacles for women who seek an abortion across state boundaries.[1]

There are currently 41 states with abortion bans in effect (12 with total bans), although all of them recognize exceptions that allow the procedure to be performed if there is a threat to the life of the pregnant person (Curhan 2024). However, because "these exceptions are not clear how much risk of death or how close to death a pregnant patient may need to be for the exception to apply", health-care providers are apprehensive of using their "reasonable medical judgement". The ambiguous interpretation of the exception under the ban "allows a court to review circumstances after the abortion has been completed and rely on the testimony of other medical experts to determine whether the treating physician met the standard". Physicians in the states of Idaho, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas have filed lawsuits to challenge

"the vagueness, narrowness, and lack of deference to physician judgment of the medical exceptions in state abortion bans" (Felix *et al.* 2025).

There are other situations that constitute exceptions under the abortion bans. These exceptions highlight differences in the definition of women's health. While 41 states allow the procedure when there is a "threat to the life of the pregnant person", only 22 states recognize this threat to the "physical health of the pregnant person", while another 13 states recognize risk "to the *general* health of the pregnant person" (my italics). Only ten states allow abortion in cases of rape, and nine states allow abortion in cases of incest. If a fetal anomaly is diagnosed, only 13 states have exceptions in the law (Curhan 2025).

It is not only the overturning of Roe v. Wade that threatens women's reproductive rights and health. In 2017, during his first administration, President Trump signed a bill into law giving power to companies to choose whether or not to cover the cost of birth control "based on the employer's religious beliefs" and providing "an exemption for organizations and small businesses that object on the basis of moral conviction rather than religious belief" (ABC News, 2017).

This brings forward an important aspect in Atwood's dystopia, which is the regime's coalition with Christian movements, and how they define the fundamentalist patriarchal values that guide the society. The regime institutionalizes Christian patriarchal values by using a biblical verse to manufacture consent for the treatment the Handmaids have to endure. This religious endorsement as the foundation of Gileadean values reinforces the idea that a women's use of their body is conditioned by the interpretation of religious texts.

> And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he Said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And She Said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (Genesis, 30:1–3)

This passage from the Book of Genesis is recited by the entire household before the "Ceremony" occurs, a ritual in which the Handmaids are forced to engage in sexual acts

with the Commanders to produce babies for their Wives, while the Wife holds the Handmaid down by the hands to be inseminated. The recitation of the biblical quotation implies that what is about to happen is natural and a result of divine providence. It also establishes the idea that the three people involved in the violent act are connected by God.

Indeed, the use of the Old Testament illustrates how Gilead appropriates religious scriptures to strengthen the authority of the regime. This portrayal of sexual violence in *The Handmaid's Tale* illuminates the consequences of not separating religious concepts, beliefs, and systems from the administration of a country. Laura Reynolds supports this perspective by arguing that "selective interpretation [of religious passages] serves to maintain the status quo, providing a divine rationale for the systemic oppression and exploitation of women" (Reynolds 2024, 2). This argument applies to Atwood's story as it illustrates the extent to which a religious mindset can excuse routine sexual abuse. As a worst-case scenario, it may offer some insight into what the alliance between Christian fundamentalism and anti-abortion legislation could mean for women in US society. It might serve as a warning of where restricting women's reproductive rights as a means to advance the Christian conservative ideology might lead. Arguments for abortion bans are grounded in religious beliefs, mostly affiliated with anti-abortion Christian movements. An example is the Personhood Alliance, an anti-abortion Christian movement, which defines abortion as the "killing of an innocent human being", which, in their perspective, "is a direct violation of their Personhood". They argue that "the right to life originates from God and not the state" and therefore "the State is limited in its authority to authorize the taking of a life" (Personhood Alliance 2025). As well as appropriating the religious propaganda of Christian fundamentalism, the anti-abortion regime under President Trump is also informed by the radically conservative agenda of the Heritage Foundation, the architects of Project 2025, and the policy recommendations for a Trump presidency. Project 2025 not only recommends rules to reinforce conservative policies and increase executive power, but also ways of implementing more restrictions on abortion.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (2024), Project 2025 includes plans to "revive a 19th-century law, the Comstock Act, to ban any abortion

medications and materials ... from being sent through the US Postal Service" and reverse the approval of mifepristone by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Mifepristone is recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2022) as an important part of safe medical abortion care and is licensed for use in 96 countries. It is generally used with another drug, misoprostol (sometimes misoprostol is used alone). Mifepristone reduces the need for surgery, empowers women to safely self-manage their own abortion care if they wish to, and can therefore reduce demand on health-care services, which is important in regions with limited health resources (WHO, 2022; Sedgh and Taqi 2023). At present, it is unclear what will change regarding the availability of mifepristone since the Trump administration has taken what seems to be a step back, asking the court to dismiss the abortion pill lawsuit on grounds that "the case does not meet the legal standard to be heard in the federal district court in which it was filled" (Belluck 2025).

A cross-sectional survey study of US women of reproductive age indicates that, after the Supreme Court decision in 2022, the use of self-managed abortion increased significantly from 2.4% to 3.3% (Ralph et al, 2024). The same study showed that, besides the self-use of the abortion pill recommended by the WHO, many women seek harmful ways to terminate their pregnancy, such as "herbs", "hitting themselves in the stomach" and "alcohol or other substances". As a result of such measures of self-managed abortion, in 2023, 14.9% reported complications (mostly bleeding and pain) "requiring treatment by a physician or nurse", but only 4.7% of those surveyed sought emergency medical care for a complication (Ralph *et al* 2024).

Although the specific details of reproductive coercion in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the USA today are different, Atwood's dystopia helps us understand how authoritarian laws and religiously inspired propaganda from extremist campaign groups and the state can combine to reshape the behaviour and thinking of women so that they become complicit in a regime that denies women rights and bodily autonomy.

The Handmaid's Tale can be used as a framework to critically examine modern US society because it presents worst-case imaginary examples of measures to restrict women's reproductive rights and illustrates their harmful consequences. Trump's USA does not stray far from the conditions that define Atwood's dystopian vision: from

permitting the interference of religious movements in presidential decision-making to forbidding the transportation of abortion medication and limiting access to birth control.

PROTECTION AND BODY SURVEILLANCE

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, body surveillance plays a significant role in maintaining the regime's order, for nothing the Handmaids do goes unnoticed by the Eyes, the regime's police. The use of surveillance as a means of control is common in dystopian fiction. There are two types commonly portrayed: overt and covert surveillance. In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the population is aware of being watched and knows where Big Brother is watching them from, because surveillance equipment is installed everywhere (Searles 2022, 20). This is overt surveillance. By contrast, in Atwood's dystopia, surveillance is mostly covert. Policing is achieved through impressing the idea on the Handmaids that they might be observed, but they do not know when, how, or by whom.

The Handmaids are sometimes watched through a combination of overt and covert surveillance. There is a rule that a Handmaid cannot leave the house alone: she must wait for another Handmaid. As the protagonist Offred observes, "This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers" (25). In this instance, Offred is referring to Ofglen, the Handmaid who accompanies her on daily walks to the grocery store. The implicit dynamic is that, if one Handmaid makes a mistake, the other is there to report it. The rule about not leaving the house alone, therefore, enables both types of surveillance because, while the Handmaids know they are being observed by another Handmaid (overt surveillance), they do not know when the other Handmaid might report them (covert surveillance).

E. Ç. Öykü explains that, because the women in Gilead are trained to report any minor deviation from the rules, the system fosters "a culture of fear and suspicion that effectively prevents the formation of any bonds of solidarity or trust" (2024, 26). This system also produces coercive solidarity where Handmaids are forced to be in each

other's company to serve as alibis. The system creates distrust among people, ensuring that no opposition to the regime arises.

Surveillance becomes more invasive when it goes beyond the work of spies and political police. Offred undergoes monthly gynaecological examinations. In Gilead, where values are deeply rooted in the exploitation of women's bodies, a routine visit to the doctor is also a means of surveillance and control over the Handmaid's body. The routine exams allow the doctor to "regularly inspect the interior of [Offred's] body", as Pamela Cooper explains. "Offred's vulnerability," Cooper observes, "is realized as the repeated experience of intrusion" (1995, 4). Although the Handmaids' experience of surveillance is extreme in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women's experience of fear of being discovered for having an abortion, where it is illegal in the USA, is not far removed from Atwood's dystopian vision. Through the representation of covert and overt surveillance, the doctor's invasion of the female body, and the everyday violations the Handmaids are conditioned to accept in Gilead, Atwood engages with issues familiar to women in US society.

A parallel can be observed between Atwood's dystopian representation of surveillance and the persecution of women who try to obtain abortions in the USA. US women are also watched, generally covertly. Because of the complexity and diversity of the laws against abortion introduced in various states, women who have an abortion do not know when they may be criminally charged, depending on which state they are in, or when they may have contact with health care or other state-run services that may denounce the procedure. There are many cases of women who have faced legal repercussions for seeking an abortion.

In July 2024, it was reported that a woman in Texas was arrested for murder after conducting a self-managed abortion in 2022. She is now suing the local sheriff, claiming that the "hospital staff violated patient privacy rights when they reported the abortion" and that she was interviewed and arrested by the sheriff's office "under direction from the prosecutors" (Gonzalez 2024). A woman in the state of Louisiana faced criminal charges for providing an abortion pill to her teenage daughter. The New York doctor who facilitated her access to the abortion pill is also facing criminal charges (The Associated Press 2025).

A recent case in Texas illustrates the power of covert surveillance discussed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. On 9 May 2025, a police officer in the state of Texas used a nationwide network of automatic licence plate readers to locate a woman who had self-managed an abortion. The officer accessed thousands of cameras, including devices in Washington and Illinois (where abortion is legal). He later claimed his intention was not to stop her from leaving the state to get an abortion. He declared he was motivated by her safety and that he initiated the search because her family was "worried that she was going to bleed to death and we were trying to find her to get her to a hospital" (Marcus 2025).

In the state of Texas, people are encouraged to report on anyone who has helped a woman get an abortion. Texas Senate Bill 8 encourages civilians to file civil lawsuits against anyone who assists or supports the procedure, rewarding them with $10,000 if they win the lawsuit. Although a woman who has had an abortion cannot be sued under this law, this "bounty" is aimed at those who intervene in the process, and it can affect anyone from the person who drove the woman to the clinic to the physician who performed or suggested the abortion (Bowman 2022). This law has already affected women, as the possibility of facing lawsuits has deterred health-care providers from performing abortions. This resulted in the number of abortions falling by half in the month after the law's enactment (*ibidem*). The possibility of being reported to the authorities for providing abortion ensnares health-care workers, too, in the system of surveillance.

By illustrating the extremes of a society built on consensual violence and surveillance of moral values, *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a framework to analyse what McGuire defines as a "future cataclysmic society" under extreme government control (2024). The Handmaids' fear of being caught violating the regime's values is a fictional dystopian scenario that illuminates the current situation in the USA regarding surveillance and repression of women's reproductive autonomy. The fear and retaliation that women face under the surveillance regime of US abortion laws echoes Atwood's dystopian vision.

MOTHERHOOD AND SEXUAL MORALITY

In Atwood's novel, personhood and motherhood are denied to women through the use of their bodies as reproductive machines. Their day-to-day existence is deprived of everything, including friendships, which cannot be formed even with others of the same social status. The regime strips them of their womanhood by "controlling the most fundamental aspects of their existence—their bodies, their sexuality, and their right to choose" (Öykü 2024, 23). The result is the instrumentalization of women. Offred observes that "[w]e are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (103). Offred's perspective on her body epitomizes what Öykü defines as the "commodification of motherhood". Women in Gilead are rewarded according to their ability or failure to conceive a baby. Women's fertility is "a form of currency" (Öykü 2024). As Öykü further explains:

> Handmaids who fail to conceive are publicly shamed, labelled as an "unwoman", and threatened with exile to the toxic Colonies, where they face a slow death. Those who succeed in giving birth are granted temporary privileges (...) yet their status remains precarious and entirely dependent on their continued reproductive function. (2024, 24)

The commodification of motherhood can also be seen today in the USA, through the story of Adriana Smith. In February 2025, the 30-year-old nurse was declared brain dead after blood clots were detected in her brain. Adriana, who was pregnant at the time of her hospitalization, was kept on life support because abortion laws in the state of Georgia do not permit doctors to allow her to die once a fetal heartbeat has been detected. The "Heartbeat Law", as the act in question is called, allows an abortion to be performed in the event that the life of the pregnant woman is at risk, or if the fetus itself is not viable or presents low chances of a viable life after birth. The situation, exposed in an article by National Public Radio (NPR), is an example of the consequences women face because of abortion restrictions (NPR, 2025). The baby was delivered at 25 weeks on Friday, 13 June 2025, via C-section, since Adriana's body was no longer viable to continue carrying the fetus (Halpert 2025). This extreme example alerts to the commodification of motherhood as a dystopian symptom of a Christian fundamentalism

that defines morality based on a narrow ideal of womanhood. As Dayei Oh expresses it, abortion "represents a contest over the meaning of personhood, motherhood, family values, and sexual morality" (Oh 2025, 7).

The Handmaid's Tale provides an insight into what happens to those women who rebel against the extremely narrow moral norms of Gilead. Jezebel's is a brothel outside the city perimeter where women are taken to work as prostitutes. It is an underground network that operates in a hotel. The brothel allows men to evade the facade of Gilead's sexual morality and laws perpetrated by themselves. The existence of Jezebel illustrates the double-standardness and hypocrisy of a male-dominated society that is too focused on women's sexual morality to admit its own sexual desires. It also sheds light on how political leaders perpetrate predatory behavior while advocating moral values. The current scandal surrounding President Trump's alleged connection to Jeffrey Epstein's sex-trafficking ring of underage girls is a sordid example that underscores how male rulers can evade the moral rules of their own regime while exacting harsh penalties for women who do not conform.

By addressing the commodification of motherhood, *The Handmaid's Tale* enables the reader to gain insights into the consequences of reducing motherhood to a negotiable concept, one in which only a single party benefits. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is the Commanders who profit from the transformation of motherhood into a motive for the exploitation of women's bodies as a social necessity. The case of Adriana Smith invites a reflection on the parallels with *The Handmaid's Tale*, and raises the question of who benefited from the use of Adriana's dead body as a container/vessel. In turn, the critique of sexual morality expressed in Atwood's dystopia prompts an examination of the character of those in power. It demonstrates that, despite the moral image they project in public and their defense of Biblical tradition and propriety, the Commanders are equally susceptible to judgment for their transgressions. This analysis goes beyond Atwood's dystopian fiction, inviting the reader to reflect on similar patterns of behavior among contemporary world leaders.

SOCIOECONOMIC DIVISIONS

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, besides the religious manipulation and surveillance, the regime uses a policy of "divide and rule" by separating them within their own community. Women are fragmented into opposed groups: those who have privileges and power to avoid the full consequences of the suspension of their rights and freedoms, and those women who have lost their rights and freedoms and autonomy over their bodies: "As the architects of Gilead knew, to institute an effective totalitarian system or indeed any system at all you must offer some benefits and freedoms, at least to a privileged few, in return for those you remove" (316).

In Gilead, the Wives are part of the privileged few as they hold high social ranks, meaning it is permissible for them to circumvent the legal system to obtain benefits such as smoking, which a Handmaid cannot do. Offred reflects upon these benefits when alone in the room she was given in the Commander's house: "The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances" (14). Atwood shows the impact of how the Gileadean regime disempowers women through divisions between them. The Wives intervene to maintain the Commanders' status, as well as to defend and regulate Gileadean values. The Wives collude in the depersonalization of the Handmaids by supporting the Ceremony or by taking responsibility for the punishments of the Handmaids when they break the rules. By representing the divisions between women, Atwood illuminates the motivations of authoritarian regimes in granting privileges to only a segment of society. She deconstructs the complexity of interpersonal relationships within a subordinate community, demonstrating how they are shaped by an authoritarian regime which derives its power from disunity and the suppression of solidarity.

Daniel Puglia and Aline Bonezi observe that this example reflects historical moments where "setting women against each other seems to be a strategy to keep them disunited—in a minority position with regard to instances of economic, political and cultural participation" (2019, 45). By allocating privileges to select groups, the regime ensures its stability in power, stratifying women according to their usefulness to the regime. The Wives secure their usefulness by embodying the idea of a traditional family

and by acting as a compass for moral order. Inequality between women ensures that they will never unite for a common cause against the regime.

A parallel may be found in Trump's USA. A study by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD) examined the wave of misogynist expression on social media that followed Trump's reelection in 2024. This study found that several women, along with their male counterparts, appeared in posts defending Trumpist views. Especially prominent were women influencers in the sphere of traditional values; that is, women who have achieved privilege, power, and financial security by promoting a far-right agenda aligned with Trump. The ISD study identified a phenomenon of female complicity that contributed to the legitimization of the misogynist speech. This had the effect of fragmenting society into opposite poles: those who resisted the Trump regime and those who were complicit (ISD 2024). Although the divisions and alliances within contemporary US society are more complex than the women's caste divisions in Atwood's Gilead, the dystopia's clarity helps readers perceive how privileged groups use their influence to support Trump's control over the majority.

The Handmaid's Tale can also help decode how the socioeconomic effects of such imbalances in privilege shape the restrictions on access to abortion in Trump's USA. The restrictions in the 41 US states with abortion bans are severe, but women of higher socioeconomic status may have the means to evade anti-abortion laws, for instance, by travelling across state borders to a place where abortion is legal. This is more difficult for women with lower incomes and those living in peripheral or minority communities. This scenario mirrors the depiction of social inequalities in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although the polarization in Atwood's dystopia is more about social imbalance than economic disparity (given the absence of currency), the social stratifications create gaps in access to certain privileges. These divisions, in turn, reflect the challenges women face in accessing abortion.

According to data from the US Department of Labor (2024), there are large differences in women's earnings, depending on race. Asian women earn almost as much as many men (94.2% of White, non-Hispanic men's earnings), while Hispanic women earn barely half that of White, non-Hispanic men (57.8%). White non-Hispanic women (79.6%) and Black women (66.5%) fall in between (US Department of Labor, 2024).

Such imbalances mean that the capacity to circumvent laws restricting abortion is not equal for everyone. Women with low incomes are disproportionately affected because of the "increased likelihood of being uninsured and decreased likelihood of having jobs with adequate wages or employer-based coverage" (Seervai *et al* 2023), which limits access to the abortion pill and medically assisted abortion and might also make it difficult to pay for a legal defense to fight criminal charges.

The parallels between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the US government's legislation against abortion are striking. Atwood's dystopian narrative highlights why abortion is central to power. It divides people because it strikes at the core of deeply held belief systems, whether moral or religious. By framing abortion restrictions as serving a biological purpose determined by nature, far-right Republicans and Christian fundamentalists find it easier to justify the punishments and restrictions that women and health professionals may face while trying to fight a system that neglects women's reproductive health.

SHAPING DEMOCRACY: MEDIA AND PROPAGANDA IN THE USA AND *ESTADO NOVO*

Authoritarian regimes resort to the manipulation of the media to promote controversial laws and moral values, namely reproductive rights and abortion. Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman developed a propaganda model to explain how media manipulation functions. Their model highlights the extent to which dominant media are reliant on the resources of elite interests because they "are fully embedded in the market system". As Herman explains:

> The power of the U.S. propaganda system lies in its ability to mobilize an elite consensus, to give the appearance of democratic consent, and to create enough confusion, misunderstanding and apathy in the general population to allow elite programs to go forward. (2018, 9)

This description of the US media landscape also applies to the more systemic propaganda of the dystopian regime of the Republic of Gilead. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the media are used to manufacture women's consent to their own repression through propaganda that advances the narrative that the suppression of freedom is in everyone's interest. On the other hand, information is conditioned. The only access the protagonist has to news occurs before the Ceremony, when Serena Joy, a Wife, turns on the TV. While watching the news, Offred admits that she doesn't know if any of it is true, but keeps watching "hoping to be able to read beneath it" (88). The news report Offred watches concerns the wars in Gilead, and how a prisoner is used to show the success and mercy of the regime:

> The prisoner accepts a cigarette from one of the Angels (...) He knows the camera is on him: is the grin a show of defiance, or is it submission? (...) They show us only victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news? Possibly he's an actor. (89)

Obviously, the aim of the TV news is not to inform the population about what is happening in the world but to make them feel comfortable and secure.

It is possible to draw a comparative historical parallel with the representation of women in the media during many authoritarian regimes, namely the *Estado Novo* regime in Portugal. Formed by the Constitution of 1933 and led until 1968 by dictator António de Oliveira Salazar, it ruled Portugal from 1933 until 25 April 1974, when it was brought down by a military coup. Marques *et al* (2019) analyse how Salazar's authoritarian regime used propaganda in women's magazines to exalt an image of the domestic woman as mother of the family, in charge of the education of her children and the maintenance of traditional values. The authors explain that, by constructing and shaping a feminine ideal, the regime disseminated a transmissible idea about what the role of women in society ought to be, using it, at the same time, as a distraction mechanism to shift attention away from the socioeconomic poverty of many Portuguese after the Second World War. For the regime, the feminine ideal was a way of reassuring the population that everything was fine, in a scenario where access to information was restricted and the media were censored.

During Salazar's dictatorship, married women needed their husband's approval to obtain birth control. Abortion was illegal and punishable by two to eight years in prison, according to articles 358–360 of the 1886 penal code. Although this penal code was revised in 1954, the criminalization of abortion was maintained (Ministério da Justiça, 1954). Salazar's motto was "God, Homeland and Family", since Portuguese education was deeply rooted in Catholic values. The organization Obra das Mães para a Educação Nacional (OMEN) (Work of Mothers for National Education) played, for example, an important role in disseminating the ideal of the submissive and domestic woman, especially among younger generations, due to their work with schools and with the women's youth organization, Mocidade Portuguesa Feminina.[2]

Women's reproductive rights were also attacked during *Estado Novo*. Those who wanted to work as nurses, for example, could not get married and have children, because the regime deemed it not proper for a married woman to work (Pinto *et al* 2014). In an interview with António de Ferro in 1932, Salazar stated that, "In countries or places where married women compete with men for work (...) the institution of the family, for which we fight as the cornerstone of a well-organized society, is in danger of ruin" (Ferro 2007, 90).[3]

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the repression of women's freedoms is likewise presented as necessary to keep everyone secure from the anarchy that existed in the USA before the coup by the Sons of Jacob. As Aunt Lydia tells Offred: "There is more than one kind of freedom (...). Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of the anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (30). As Flörke *et al.* explain, the Gilead regime's religious mindset is imposed on the women via a fusion of state and church power, and by inculcating the false notion that women have a choice: "[T]he role of a Handmaid is forced on women under the pretense of having the choice between breeding and going to the colonies, which is in fact a death sentence" (2017, 23). The statement by Aunt Lydia highlights how the propaganda of the Gilead regime manipulates the notion of a pre-regime society of chaos and a present one of security. A Commander explains the rationale: "This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement" (227).

Aunt Lydia's redefinition of freedom reminds us of the manipulation of language in other dystopian fictions such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell. Newspeak is developed as "a language meticulously designed by the state to restrict thought and communication" (Youvan 2024, 2), so that the regime's slogan of "War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength" becomes logical and normalized. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, all written language is eliminated and replaced by signs. New words are invented to assign women to separate classes, subconsciously framing their role in society: "The creation of a new vocabulary assigns new roles that women are supposed to play" (Lone and Zafar 2024, 257).

The redefinition of the repression of women's freedoms as "freedom from" chaos and insecurity highlights similarities with Trump's USA. Trump has claimed several times to be advocating for women's rights. For example, at a Wisconsin rally during his 2024 campaign, he declared he would "protect women whether they like it or not" (Hubbard 2024). Other examples include signing an executive order on 18 February 2025 to reduce IVF costs (The White House 2025). As he signed Executive Order 14201 on 5 February 2025 to ban trans women from practising female sports, he promised to "[k]eep men out of women's sports" (Flath and Van Gelder 2025). Trump's propaganda is referred to as "genderwashing". Bjarnegård and Zetterberg have explored the connection between the narrative of freedom from chaos and the continued oppression of women's reproductive rights. They explain how many autocratic regimes use genderwashing to mask the harsh reality they create for women by manipulating "gender-equality reforms to seek procedural legitimacy or to claim international prestige or domestic performance" (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022, 71). Despite Trump's claims to protect women, the reproductive health of women has been severely undermined by the bans and restrictions on abortion imposed since Roe v. Wade was overturned.

CONCLUSIONS

Although this paper is restricted to specific historical and geographic contexts, it seems that the female body has always been instrumentalized by power, and women's reproductive rights have always been dictated by those in charge.

However, *The Handmaid's Tale* (and other feminist dystopian stories) may help readers discern how women's bodies are weaponized by authoritarian regimes. It shows how subtle the manipulation of women's bodies and minds is, even though it is done in front of our eyes, and how it helps create a social imaginary that manufactures consent from women themselves to comply with laws and moral norms that serve the regime's interest, not their own. It also reveals that in societies like the USA, which aim to implement socially conservative reforms, by attacking women's reproductive rights and using them as a propaganda means, ensures control over the population. At the same time, it marginalizes women, fragments ethical values and a sense of community among people, while driving society closer to an acceptance of authoritarianism.

Margaret Atwood's feminist dystopia is surgical in illustrating these political, social, and media dynamics because it extrapolates the worst scenarios in a male-dominated theocracy where women confront sexual violence under the pretense of fulfilling their biological nature. *The Handmaid's Tale* encourages readers to think about the consequences that the attack on these rights and freedoms can have for women in modern society. Atwood's representation of an extreme, but realistic, scenario of the personal and social consequences of the annihilation of women's reproductive health and freedom helps readers navigate the current crisis in women's rights in the USA, and decode the political propaganda that makes it possible.

END NOTES

[1] This scenario puts women's reproductive health in jeopardy, hampering access to professionally trained health-care providers, not only because of state laws that forbid access to abortion, but also for fear of retaliation. For example, eleven states impose big penalties for those who undergo the procedure and the health-care providers who help them. According to Felix et al (2025), in the state of Alabama, "violation of the total ban constitutes a Class A felony and carries a minimum prison sentence of ten years and a maximum sentence of 99 years" for the physician. In Texas, there is a life sentence penalty that puts abortion in the same legal category as murder and domestic violence.

[2] Mocidade Portuguesa Feminina was an institution created during the *Estado Novo* regime to disseminate its values among young girls. It was a branch of the Mocidade Portuguesa which was similar to the Hitler Youth, but focused on girls.

[3] "Nos países ou nos lugares onde a mulher casada concorre com o trabalho do homem [...] a instituição da família, pela qual nos batemos como pedra fundamental duma sociedade bem organizada, ameaça ruína" (author's translation).

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ANGLO-AMERICAN STUDIES

VARIA SECTION

Writing Back to the Canon:

The Birchbark House as Counter-Narrative to *Little House on the Prairie*

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on two children's novels: *Little House on the Prairie* (1932) by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and *The Birchbark House* (1999) by Louise Erdrich. Both works are set in the nineteenth century, specifically during the westward expansion, and during the forced displacement of Indigenous communities. This article aims to read the two novels as opposing narratives, particularly regarding the ways in which settler-colonialism and Native Americans are represented. Through a postcolonial lens, this article aims to show Louise Erdrich's novel as a counter-narrative, in which the culture and way of life of the Ojibwe community is put in the foreground, as well as its resistance toward white settlers.

KEYWORDS: Louise Erdrich, Laura Ingalls Wilder, counter-narrative, postcolonialism, Native Americans.

RESUMO: Este artigo centra-se em dois romances infantis: *Little House on the Prairie* (1932), de Laura Ingalls Wilder, e *The Birchbark House* (1999), de Louise Erdrich. Ambas as narrativas decorrem no século XIX, especificamente durante a expansão para o oeste e durante o deslocamento forçado das comunidades indígenas. Este artigo visa analisar os dois romances como narrativas opostas, particularmente no que diz respeito às formas como os colonos e os nativos americanos são representados. Através de uma leitura pós-colonial, este artigo pretende apresentar o romance de Louise Erdrich como uma contranarrativa, na qual a cultura e o modo de vida da comunidade Ojibwe são colocados em primeiro plano, assim como a sua resistência aos colonos brancos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Louise Erdrich, Laura Ingalls Wilder, contranarrativa, pós-colonialismo, nativos americanos.

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INTRODUCTION

Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean marked the beginning of European exploration of the Americas, reshaping the geopolitical power of the globe (Townsend 2019, 30). The first European expeditions aimed at establishing colonies in the New World, seeking valuable resources, e.g. land and labor, and quickly initiating contact with Indigenous populations. Following Columbus's arrival in the so-called New World, the establishment of various trade routes caused the dissemination of diseases, namely smallpox, measles, influenza and tuberculosis (Teuton 2018, 14). Since the Indigenous people had no immunity to these illnesses, their demographics decreased considerably. Similarly, the Columbian Exchange also introduced new diseases to Europe, as is the case with syphilis (Townsend 2019, 33).

The colonization of American territories from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century was characterized by a systematic process of expansion and dispossession, marked by treaties and land dispossession, legitimized by narratives, such as the Doctrine of Discovery, the *Virgin Land* or the *Right of Conquest* (Teuton 2018, 15-16). The Indigenous populations resisted in numerous ways, which often led to warlike conflicts. Others contended that acculturation represented the best strategy to ensure their survival (Townsend 2019, 30). The nineteenth century introduced a new way of colonizing the American territory, pressuring Native Americans to adopt the European way of life, through agricultural practices and permanent settlement promoted by Thomas Jefferson. The works of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Louise Erdrich are set in the nineteenth century, when the U.S. federal government displaced Native Americans from their lands. The gradual removal began in the Southern lands, where the Cherokee and the Seminole tribes resided. The Cherokee occupied large territories that were then claimed by white settlers for mining purposes, whereas the Seminole resided in fertile lands for agricultural purposes, as well as for the cotton trade business (Townsend 2019, 202). Although the Nonintercourse Act of 1790, signed by George Washington, aimed at prohibiting the purchase of native land without federal consent (Cozzens 2016, 13), it became difficult to halt settlers' illegal acquisition of Native Americans' lands. Ultimately, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson's policy aligned with the civilization program, heavily embedded in the myth of Manifest Destiny. Within this ideology, the Euro-American way of life would have influenced Native Americans to assimilate and integrate into the white society, as

agreed with the Civilization Fund Act (1819), signed by James Monroe. This was also known as the Indian Civilization Act, whose main intent was to provide funding for missionary groups to establish schools for Native American children. However, in these schools, Indigenous children were forced to learn English and to convert to Christian values, leaving their culture and traditions behind. However, the acculturation efforts were superseded by removal policies upon the emergence of the Jacksonian Democrats (Townsend 2019, 202). According to them, Indigenous people would never integrate into the American way of life. The shift of federal policy from acculturation efforts to removal was undoubtedly motivated by the discovery of gold near Georgia around 1820. Firstly, the state of Georgia began to challenge the Cherokees, refusing to recognize their nation (*idem,* 212). Secondly, with the declaration of the Indian Removal Act (1830), signed by Andrew Jackson, the political administration sided with settler colonialism. This Act legally authorized Jackson to negotiate with Native communities, prompting them to exchange their ancestral lands in the South for new lands west of the Mississippi River. The forced displacement led to various tragedies, namely the Trail of Tears, where the "Five Civilized Tribes", Choctaws, Chickasaws, Cherokee, Creeks, and Seminoles, were resettled. This is one of the many examples of the Native Americans' genocide.

Celebrated as one of the most famous works of American children's literature, *Little House on the Prairie*, comprising nine books, was published between 1932 and 1971, and it is based on Laura Ingalls Wilder's childhood and adulthood in the Mideast of the United States. During that period, Wilder's family had moved from Wisconsin to the Kansas prairie, as other families had chosen to do, during the westward expansion. Therefore, the narrative is significantly influenced by the historical and social context of the time. Praised at the time of its publication, Wilder's book series is now more contested, since it is not exempt from the ideology of the epoch. As Sharon Smulders explains, the books are based on the "un-American Indian" myth, which reinforces the western expansion, formulates a dichotomous view of settlers and natives, foregrounding frontier culture as the quintessence of the American identity (2002, 192). Although some authors have warned about the complexity of the racial issue in the work (Heldrich; Miller), *Little House on the Prairie* mostly complies with the colonial project.[1]

In opposition to Wilder's work, Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* follows the story of the eight-year-old Omakayas, an Indigenous girl living in the 1840s. Louise Erdrich

has expressed discomfort with the ideological underpinnings of *Little House on the Prairie*, particularly in how it omits Indigenous perspectives and perpetuates racial stereotypes. As noted by Stewart, Erdrich was critical of the *Prairie* books for their lack of awareness regarding the displacement of Native peoples and for their reinforcement of settler-colonial narratives (2013, 216). This critical engagement played a formative role in shaping *The Birchbark House*, which seeks to offer a more accurate and culturally grounded portrayal of Ojibwe life during the same historical period. Therefore, the author intended to portray Native Americans more accurately, deconstructing stereotypes and offering new perspectives on Ojibwe culture.[2] The first book in Erdrich's *Birchbark* series focuses on the context of the decline of the fur trade among northern tribes. As Carolyn Podruchny and Stacy Nation-Knapper state: "By the latter half of the 19th century, North American fur sources had been depleted by overhunting and the settler nations of Canada and the United States had constructed and were enforcing political boundaries that interfered with Indigenous mobility and trade routes" (2016, 5). Highlighting the Indigenous people's resilience, *The Birchbark House* can be considered as a counter-narrative, broadening the young reader's perspective about the westward expansion era. This shift in approaching Native American children's novels in contemporary times needs a theoretical framework that takes into account concepts, such as cultural resilience and counter-narrative as forms of resistance. Thus, the present study will rely on postcolonial theory to recontextualize the presence of settler colonialism in historical children's fiction. After providing the main theoretical concepts on postcolonialism, mostly regarding symbolic and cultural resistance, the article will be divided into three parts. The first two parts will compare the representation of space/land in *Little House on the Prairie* and *The Birchbark House*, as well as the portrayal of Native Americans. Lastly, this article also aims to examine how Erdrich approaches and subverts the frontier culture, more accurately rewriting the history of Indigenous people.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to understand how *The Birchbark House* functions as a literary response to settler-colonial narratives, it is of paramount importance to engage with postcolonial theory,

particularly the foundational work of Edward Said. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said demonstrated how the Orient is not merely an idea stemming from a European construction, but also a mode of discourse (1979, 2). In other words, the colonial discourse operates as a framework through which the West exerts control over the East by shaping knowledge, representations, and systems of authority in ways that reinforce domination and cultural hierarchy (*idem*, 3), and consequently, it constitutes a binary discourse. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said further develops the idea that culture and literature are particular means in the establishment of an imperial ideology. Through the analysis of Victorian novels, Said concludes that literature is imbued with imperial themes, such as white supremacy, legitimized by social Darwinism and scientific racism, and, in this way, fostering the perpetuation of power relations.

The *Location of Culture* (1994) by Homi K. Bhabha expanded on these conclusions, while emphasizing tensions and contradictions within the colonial discourse. Bhabha has significantly contributed to postcolonial theory, working on concepts such as ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry, and Third Space, and deconstructing the binary conception of the world (West-Orient, colonizer-colonized, oppressor-oppressed). This stems from the mutual interaction between cultures, and because the colonizer has given the necessary tools for the colonized to subvert the colonial discourse (e.g. mockery and power negotiations within a Third Space). Notwithstanding Said's emphasis on the domination of the Orient, Bhabha conveys that cultural resistance emerges from colonial encounters.

Richard Terdiman also delved into cultural resistance, adopting the term 'symbolic resistance'. Validating both Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci's perspectives on discourse as a system of language and knowledge through which power hierarchies emerge, Terdiman proposes the analysis of counter-discourses as "a certain mode of cultural resistance" (1985, 52). According to the author, "discourses are what give differential substance to membership in a social group or class or formation, which mediate an internal sense of belonging, an outward sense of otherness" (*idem*, 54). Although Terdiman examines the discourse and political struggles of nineteenth-century France, his insights on counter-discourse are valuable to study symbolic resistance. In fact, the concept of counter-discourse as a form of resistance can be applied to other contexts, namely children's literature. This is most distinct in the work of Clare Bradford, which focuses on

examining colonialism, as well as the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in contemporary children's books (2011, 4).

Over recent years, there has been a greater production of children's literature by Indigenous authors who address the legacy of colonialism in their communities (*idem*, 47). Nevertheless, a significant number of texts still perpetuate fallacious portrayals of Native Americans, reinforcing stereotypes (Sabis-Burns 2011, 134). Thus, such stereotypical representations contribute to historical and cultural distortions and, ultimately, highlight the dominant discourse which, in turn, continuously erases Indigenous cultural values. Assessing Indigenous children's literature as counter-narratives of canonical (white) children's books is therefore crucial to eschew the paradigm. One of the leading critics who addresses this imperative need is Debbie Reese, providing a reevaluation of indigeneity in children's narratives, promoting not only inclusion and diversity but also reaffirming Native American identity. In this sense, Reese's advocacy for Native American accurate representations in children and young adult fiction furtherly challenges the dominant discourse. Similarly, this resonates with symbolic/cultural resistance through postcolonial storytelling. One of the hallmarks of postcolonial narratives is the phenomenon of 'writing back' to canonical literature, resisting its ideology.[3]

Children's literature represents a powerful site for ideological formation because it plays a central role in shaping young readers' understanding of history, identity, and cultural norms. Thus, children's literature has served as a vehicle for national, moral, and cultural education. In settler-colonial contexts, it has also been a tool for transmitting ideologies of land entitlement, cultural superiority, and racial hierarchies. As Perry Nodelman and Peter Hunt have long argued, children's books are rarely neutral; they often carry implicit messages about power, morality, and belonging. This makes the genre especially significant in colonial and postcolonial contexts, where the stories children encounter help to reinforce, or resist, dominant narratives about race, land, and national identity. Within this framework, children's literature becomes a space where ideology can be both absorbed and subverted. As P. Jane Hafen notes, "Indigenous authors have taken English and made it their own language and used it for their own unique expression of tribal nationalism" (2009, 26). Embracing change and using literature as a form of resilience (Porter 2005, 40), Indigenous authors of children's fiction, like Louise Erdrich, are continuously indigenizing this genre of literature to reassert cultural identity, challenge settler myths,

and cultivate awareness of difference and survivance (Bradford 2011, 332). Works like *The Birchbark House* destabilize white settlers' narratives by offering a view from within Indigenous epistemologies. In this sense, children's literature becomes a contested terrain for cultural memory and postcolonial resistance.

Crucial to the act of indigenizing children's literature is the literary reimagining of land/space. More than a mere physical setting, the representation of land plays a fundamental role in characterizing Native American culture, identity, and spirituality. The following section explores how both narratives construct the image of the natural world that surrounds them, as well as how this portrayal is influenced by settler colonialism, in the case of *Little House on the Prairie*, and communion with nature, in *The Birchbark House*.

CONTESTED LANDSCAPES: LAND/SPACE REPRESENTATION

According to Jane Suzanne Carroll, landscapes encompass natural, geographical, and historical aspects. Landscapes are not merely physical terrains, but they also embody human culture. Therefore, the author concludes that landscapes should be understood as a construct, since they are shaped by both natural/physical and cultural inferences (2011, 2). Land, space or landscape is a central feature of settler colonialism. In fact, the doctrine of *terra nullius* can be seen as an essential part of the westward expansion. The concept derives from Latin, signifying land which belongs to nobody. In this regard, *terra nullius* is used to describe a terrain where there is neither sovereign nor tenure, and it was used within colonial contexts, in order to legitimize the dispossession of hunter-gatherers and nomadic societies. Similarly to this doctrine, the idea of the frontier/boundary is also integral to colonization. Within the framework of Manifest Destiny, the frontier functions as both a conceptual and physical space where interactions between American white settlers and Indigenous peoples unfolded—often violently. This notion was famously theorized by Frederick Jackson Turner in his 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", in which he argued that the frontier was central to the development of American democracy, character, and exceptionalism. Turner's thesis helped solidify the frontier as a mythic space of progress and civilization, while simultaneously erasing

Indigenous presence and legitimizing settler expansion. The frontier culture, long associated with adventure, conquest, and self-reliance, became central to the myth of American exceptionalism — what Turner famously framed as the crucible in which American democracy, individualism, and national identity were forged. This "frontier thesis" contributed to the romanticization of westward expansion while simultaneously masking the violence and dispossession experienced by Indigenous peoples. Within this ideological framework, the frontier marked a symbolic boundary between so-called civilization and wilderness; between the white settler and the Indigenous 'other'. As Ashcroft *et al.* observe, "the distinction of one place from the other implies a civilization where rules of law and social graces wither as man reverts to a state of nature; the frontier then becomes a place of savagery" (2013, 123). On the one hand, the frontier was imagined as a space of opportunity and progress; on the other, it justified the erasure of Indigenous peoples and the appropriation of their ancestral lands. U.S. foreign policy reinforced this vision through treaties that were systematically designed to displace Native nations and legitimize settler occupation. In fact, there was a clear distinction between theoretical conquest (occupancy) and actual conquest (dominion), as Patrick Wolfe explains: "The right of occupancy entitled natives to pragmatic use of a territory that Europeans had discovered, even though ultimate title, on dominion, vested in the European sovereign" (2016, 131). The physical boundary of the frontier not only distances lands/spaces but also separates white settlers from native people (Smulders 2002, 192).

The myth of the frontier is central to *Little House on the Prairie*. The opening chapter of the book, entitled "Going West", provides an account of the Ingalls family's departure from the Big Woods of Wisconsin as they embark on a journey to establish a new home on the western frontier. Charles Ingalls, referred to as Pa, made the decision to relocate to the Indian Territory, since the increasing population density in Wisconsin rendered hunting less fruitful and plentiful. The journey to the West was long and challenging. Although the novel's narrator is a young child, the perspective corresponds to the ideological framework of the Westward Expansion. Firstly, the landscapes encountered by the Ingalls family are depicted as vast, empty, and devoid of civilization, as if expecting transformation by the white settlers: "Kansas was an endless flat land covered with tall grass blowing in the wind. Day after day they travelled in Kansas and saw nothing but the rippling grass and the enormous sky" (Wilder 9). Here, the prairie is depicted as a boundless

territory, reinforcing the myth of *terra nullius*. This conception is further developed in the novel, when the narrator observes: "That prairie looked as if no human eye had ever seen it before. Only the tall wild grass covered the endless empty land and a great empty sly arched over it" (*idem,* 20), as well as "There was only the enormous, empty prairie... and on the whole enormous prairie there was no sign that any other human being had ever been there" (*idem,* 31). In these examples, the narrator underscores the perception of the prairie as both untamed and untouched by humans. Thus, these passages highlight a romanticized perception of the prairie, and ultimately of the frontier: a place to be tamed, dominated, and settled by the colonizers.

The land encountered by the Ingalls family, which they afterwards select for their new residence, is continuously depicted as vast, uninhabited, and with no trace of civilization. Consequently, this portrayal reinforces the myth of Indigenous lands as vacant, devoid of sovereignty and, as such, available for the white settlers to claim. This aligns with imperial discourse, which, as argued by Ashcroft *et al.* actively constructed territories through both cartography and textual representation:

> Colonial frontiers were created as imperial discourse sought to define and invent the entities it shaped from its conquests. The numerous ruler-straight frontiers of imperial maps indicate how colonial cartography existed as much to invent as to record actual features and distinctions between various places and peoples. The frontier or boundary that limited the space so defined was a crucial feature in imagining the imperial self, and in creating and defining (othering) those others by which that 'self' could achieve definition and value (2013, 123).

By imagining the frontier as *terra nullius* (an uninhabited wilderness), settler narratives like *Little House on the Prairie* reinforce a discourse that erases Indigenous presence, whether intentionally or not. While Wilder may not have consciously aimed to promote dispossession, the narrative participates in a tradition that normalizes settler entitlement and marginalizes Native claims to land. The connection between the doctrine of *terra nullius* and colonial cartography played a pivotal role in legitimizing imperial conquest. By imagining Indigenous lands as vacant or uninhabited, settler narratives such as *Little House on the Prairie* aligned with a broader imperial discourse that used maps and textual representations to erase Indigenous presence and assert colonial authority. As Ashcroft *et al.* note, colonial frontiers were not merely recorded—they were invented

through discourse and mapping practices that constructed clear spatial and cultural boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized (2013, 123). These visual and narrative tools helped define both territory and identity, positioning Indigenous peoples as outsiders to the emerging American nation. Similar to several other families of that time, the Ingalls began encroaching on Osage lands after the Civil War (1861-1865). The Osage Nation occupied extensive territories, like present-day Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri. The outcome of the Civil War resulted in escalating tensions, as white settlers sought land control. The federal government significantly supported the westward expansion, and white settlers deemed Indigenous lands as auspicious for occupation. Both federal policies and the railroad development brought an influx of white settlers, exploiting the fertile and prosperous Osage lands. Ultimately, the Osage's experience of displacement reveals a pattern in American colonization of Indigenous people and their lands. Throughout the novel, Laura Ingalls is caught in the paradox of her family's decision to settle in Indian Territory, despite their evident disdain for Indigenous people. This contradiction reflects a broader pattern in American settler-colonial narratives, where settlers simultaneously deny Indigenous legitimacy while occupying their lands. According to John E. Miller, one of the central themes of *Little House on the Prairie* is this tension between the settlers and the federal government over who has the right to claim land (310). For example, when Pa says, "Pa had word from a man in Washington that the Indian Territory would be open to settlement soon. It might already be open to settlement" (Wilder 36), the narrative presents settler appropriation as both uncertain and inevitable. In this way, the novel reflects and normalizes the historical process of encroachment on Indigenous lands—particularly in the case of the Osage territory—while sidestepping the legal and moral implications of that occupation.

As previously observed, colonial frontiers, or the geography of adventure and conquest, function as a cultural space "in which identities and geographies are constructed, and its spatiality is reflected in those constructions" (Phillips 1997, 14). These spaces embody an exercise of power, asserting imperial authority. Despite this, geography can also be used as both a literal and a metaphorical site of resistance. Instead of perpetuating the myth of Indigenous lands as vacant, Louise Erdrich counter-narrates this by providing a map to the readers, thereby placing her characters in a defined and inhabited space. Thus, the map at the beginning of *The Birchbark House* plays a crucial role in reasserting

Indigenous presence. By marking specific geographic and cultural features, such as the location of docks, homes, and trade routes, it situates the narrative within a clearly defined and inhabited Indigenous space. This contrasts sharply with the portrayal of land in Wilder's novel, which presents the prairie as empty and untouched. Erdrich appropriates a convention often used in imperial literature, cartographic framing, but subverts it by emphasizing cultural continuity and Indigenous knowledge of the land. In doing so, the map contributes to a reconfiguration of spatial imagination, challenging the settler-colonial view of Indigenous lands as vacant and available for conquest. According to Richard Phillips, "the geography of adventure has been used as a site of resistance by a range of post-colonial critics, who unmap (literally) the geographies of empire, and (metaphorically) the identities, particularly the imperial masculinities, constructed in that geography" (1997, 20). Thus, the map situates the narrative in a specific geographical and cultural context, highlighting the relevance of Indigenous perspectives. Not only that, but Erdrich also appropriates and subverts this element closely associated with imperial literature. Furthermore, Erdrich's map contrasts and reconfigures the portrayal of land in Wilder's novel which, in turn, frames Indigenous lands as *tabula rasa*, ready for conquest and cultivation.

In *Little House on the Prairie*, Indigenous lands are consistently described as prosperous and fertile, and the narrator compares the new lands and their fauna, composed of rabbits and prairie chickens, with the reality she experienced in Wisconsin. Apart from describing these livestock animals, highlighting the fertility of the Kansas prairie, the novel also narrates the encounter between the Ingalls family and wild animals, such as wolves: "She had never seen such big wolves (...). Everything about him was big – his pointed ears, and his pointed mouth with the tongue hanging out (...). His coat was shaggy grey and his eyes were glittering green" (Wilder 74-75). The wolves, in contrast to rabbits and chickens, reinforce the idea of the frontier as a place of savagery. Correspondingly, the narrator's lively depictions of the howling wind and the wolves' cries at night also emphasize Laura's sense of discomfort and unease on the prairie. As observed by Mowder:

> Indians and wolves represent the undomesticated, uncivilized native inhabitants of the landscape; while they dwell within the frontier's space, the family cannot remain. Indians and wolves, recognized by their howls and cries, are speaking to each other in a language which cannot be understood by their civilized settlers of the frontier (2009, 18).

In opposition to these descriptions of Indigenous lands, nature and animals, *The Birchbark House* portrays the natural world not as savage, but as vital to the Ojibwe lifestyle. In the opening chapter of Erdrich's novel, the narrator depicts nature as a realm of peace and serenity. The Great Lakes are both silent and solitary. Nonetheless, the vastness and openness of this territory do not mean that it is empty; on the contrary, the village of LaPointe, Lake Superior, is inherently beautiful and serene. The land is also closely connected to the nomadic traditions of the Ojibwe people, since both their residences and hunting patterns are dependent on seasonal migration (Sparks 2022, 416). This seasonal rhythm is also reflected in the novel's structure, each chapter corresponding to a season.

The Ojibwe people's relationship with nature is characterized by a deep dependence on its resources, and this is exemplified by Omakayas's family's use of birchbark in order to construct their winter homes. Nokomis (the protagonist's grandmother) addresses the birchbark tree with both tenderness and respect, referring to it as 'Old Sister'. Even though the family needs the tree's skin for shelter, Nokomis leaves a tobacco offering at the base of the tree (Erdrich 7-8). This episode shows the respect that the Ojibwe people have towards the natural world, emphasizing how humans and nature can coexist in a relationship of reciprocity. On the other hand, it also recognizes "the stark contrast between Indigenous and settler approaches to land use in the early nineteenth century" (Sparks 2022, 409). In opposition to the previous description of the wolves in *Little House on the Prairie*, Omakayas's encounters with animals are respectful and even spiritual. When the girl meets two bear cubs and their mother, she offers them berries and refers to the latter as "grandmother" (Erdrich 26-32). This episode not only demonstrates how Omakayas is selfless by sharing the cherished fruit with the bears, but also shows how the girl had no intention of hurting the animals. The encounter left Omakayas deeply changed:

> The longer she thought about her encounter with the mother bear, the more Omakayas was convinced that something she did not understand had passed between the two of them. Not words. Perhaps they had communicated in smells. Or maybe in a language of feelings (...). Nokomis had told her that the bear must be addressed with greatest respect, as a treasured relative, that the bear had human qualities, and nobody quite understood the bear (...). Nobody on the island ever tossed the bones of a bear aside. Every bear bone was gathered respectfully and buried, all together. At a

> bear feast, the bear's skull was ribboned and set out on a good red cloth, spoken to, honored (*idem,* 34-35).

Thus, the natural world is central to Indigenous cultures, grounded in a deep respect for all living beings. Although hunting is part of survival, it is traditionally accompanied by acts of gratitude and spiritual acknowledgement, often involving a prayer or offering to thank the animal and ask for forgiveness for taking its life. In *The Birchbark House*, animals are not depicted merely as sources of food; they are also portrayed as companions and beings with spirit, as seen in the character of Andeg, the crow, who becomes Omakayas's pet and friend. This profound connection to the natural world emphasizes that the environment is not external to Ojibwe life, but rather integral to their daily practices, cultural identity, and spiritual wisdom.

OTHERING: THE PORTRAYAL OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

The Other is distinct from oneself, but it is essential in defining the latter. Regarding discourses, including primitivism or cannibalism, the colonized is characterized as Other (Ashcroft *et al* 2013, 186). In other words, within colonial discourse, Indigenous people are framed as Other, as a means to legitimize colonial domination. Therefore, "othering" is a process which reinforces the binary savage/civilized. This binarism between civilization and savagery has its roots in Enlightenment thought, particularly in the eighteenth century, when Jean-Jacques Rousseau advanced the concept of the "noble savage", an idealized figure imagined as living in a pure, pre-social state and maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature. With the American westward expansion, the dualism savage/civilized is also used to justify power dynamics, depicting Indigenous people as inferior to white settlers. *Little House on the Prairie* operates within this ideological framework, thus considering Native Americans as the inferior "Others" to be dominated.

Although Laura frequently inquires her family about when they will encounter Indigenous people, or see a baby papoose, it is not until the eleventh chapter, entitled 'Indians in the House', that the protagonist's wish is finally fulfilled. The narrator firstly describes Indigenous people as "tall, thin and fierce-looking men" (Wilder 106), wearing leather moccasins, a leather thong and the smelly skins of skunks (*idem,* 110). The

eleventh chapter of Wilder's novel depicts Indigenous people wearing minimal clothing apart from animal skins, positioning them closer to a primitive state, and emphasizing a lack of civilization. Both Heldrich (100) and Smulders (196) point out how the animalistic portrayal of Indigenous men in this scene is not only meant to emphasize their supposed primitiveness, but also to evoke a sense of sexual threat. This is especially evident in the way their minimal clothing and physical appearance are framed by the narrator, who describes their sudden entrance into the domestic space during Pa's absence as intrusive and unsettling. The underlying fear is gendered: Indigenous men are portrayed as a danger to white women, reinforcing colonial anxieties about racial and sexual boundaries. This first encounter with Indigenous people relates to the binary savage/civilized examined above, ultimately aiming to dehumanize natives, as well as to justify Manifest Destiny. In addition to this portrayal, the narrator also describes Laura's deep fear as she observes those Indigenous men: "Her heart jumped into her throat and chocked her with its pounding. Two black eyes glittered down into her eyes. The Indian did not move, not one muscle of his face moved (...). Laura didn't move, either. She didn't even breathe" (Wilder 110-111). Laura's outright fear might be seen as a way of "othering" Native Americans, consequently reinforcing the settler colonialism. Besides this characterization, the eleventh chapter portrays Indigenous people as not only intrusive, but also exploitative: "Indians ate the cornbread that Ma had baked. They ate every morsel of it, and even picked up the crumbs from the hearth" (*ibidem*). According to Smulders, "by depicting supposedly real Indians as consistent with the stereotype, Wilder does, however, reproduce those ideas that shaped the settlers' perception of and contact with native peoples" (*idem,* 196). Furthermore, the narrative represents Native Americans as excessive consumers of white settlers' resources, underlining the stereotype of laziness and dependency. For example, they are repeatedly depicted as stealing food and supplies from the Ingalls family (e.g. taking tobacco, cornmeal, and other household items), often without direct confrontation or consequence. These moments not only construct the Native characters as burdensome intruders but also serve to justify the settlers' occupation by casting Indigenous presence as parasitic. If Wilder's book perpetuates certain stereotypical images and ideas regarding Native Americans, Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* does the opposite, acting in a deconstructionist way and attempting to provide a more just, and less simplistic, depiction of Native Americans.

The Ojibwe people demonstrate a deep understanding of seasonal cycles. This knowledge not only influences the location of their residence, but also their food and cultivation practices. If the white settlers in *Little House on the Prairie* try to convey the idea that Native Americans do not cultivate their soil, Erdrich debunks this fallacy. Not only do Ojibwe pick the fruits of the season (for example, heartberries and blueberries), they also cultivate corn and rice. Furthermore, the male hunting activities, especially of beaver and otter, were also corresponding to the Ojibwe seasonal migration, and they were a fundamental revenue for their economic well-being (Erdrich 124-126). Throughout the narrative, there are numerous references to labor-intensive practices, from skinning birchbark trees to preparing pelts and hides, which require several and methodical steps. These depictions reveal the care, skill and meticulousness inherent in Ojibwe's day-to-day life. In such manner, Erdrich subverts the colonial stereotype of Native Americans as lazy, dependent, and exploiters of white settlers' resources. Moreover, through the character of Deydey, Omakayas's father, Erdrich illustrates Ojibwe's active involvement in the fur trade, underscoring their agency, adaptability and negotiation skills in the broad American economy. In turn, this portrayal also deconstructs white settlers' narratives, since *The Birchbark House* challenges the stereotypes which depict Native Americans as isolated and passive people.

Erdrich also debunks the idea of Indigenous people as "naked wild men", showing that the characters take pride in clothing. In fact, Erdrich meticulously describes the crafting of moccasins and the use of deerskin for clothing purposes, while also mentioning that Ojibwe wear different types of clothing depending on the season. The character of Old Tallow, in particular, demonstrates these differences. At the beginning of the novel, when Omakayas goes to visit her, Old Tallow wears a blue dress "trimmed with the teeth of fox at the collar, beaded halfway around the scraggly, ripped hem" (*idem,* 22). Later in the novel, during winter months, Old Tallow wears a long and beautiful woven coat from various pelts, such as lynx, beaver, deer hide and dogs: "She had pieced together old blankets, one a faded red, one brown, discarded shreds of unidentifiable stuffs were sewed patch on patch, including some black beaded velvets and bright calicos" (*idem,* 124). Furthermore, there is also great attention to the embellishment of the clothing, as it is possible to notice from the following statement:

> Mama had made him a new suit of clothes – a calico shirt, skin leggings, a set of blue broadcloth britches trimmed with red wool. Onto the shirt, she had sewn four carefully hoarded brass buttons, gleaming, each marked with the French flower which the voyageurs called fleur de lis (*idem,* 54).

The detailed descriptions of Ojibwe's clothing deconstruct the colonial stereotypes and, in turn, emphasize not only the cultural identity of Indigenous people, but also the skill required for such traditional practices. From Wilder's novel, Erdrich crafts another side of the narrative, the westward expansion from a different side, in this way demonstrating some of the consequences of the white settlers' dominion over ancestral Indigenous lands, and, ultimately, underlining the resilience and adaptability of their people.

REIMAGINING THE FRONTIER: VERSIONS OF HISTORY

Both novels under analysis here engage with the history of westward expansion, through different lenses. Throughout Wilder's novel, there are hints of the settlers' wait for the government's legal permission for the Ingalls and other families to formally occupy the Osage lands. Although there are rumors that the federal government would be supportive of Native Americans, Pa believes that white settlers will keep the land, and the government will push the natives to the west. This moment in the narrative opens the way for further discussions on the tension between the settlers and the Indigenous people. In the chapter "Indian Jamboree", a conversation between Pa and Ma reveals that the Osage have gathered nearby – a fact that increases the family's unease and anticipates the scene of war cries that follows. Upon hearing the warfare cries, Laura describes it as a queer sound: "It was the sound of quite a lot of Indians, chopping with their voices. It was something like the sound of an axe chopping, and something like a dog barking, and it was something like a song, but not like any song that Laura had ever heard" (Wilder 207-208). Unsurprisingly, Wilder's narrative dismisses the dual practical and spiritual use of war cries. Through Laura's perspective, war cries are threatening and queer, reinforcing the stereotype of Native Americans as savage, wild and even animal-like. In the last chapters of the novel, Soldat du Chêne prevents bloodshed between Native American tribes and the white settlers. This Indigenous soldier persuaded the Osage not to participate on the killing of white people, initiating consequently a conflict between the Osage and the other

Native American tribes (*idem,* 235-236). The following chapter describes the Osage departure from their ancestral lands, due to the federal government's pressure. Therefore, settler colonialism is most evident here, since Native Americans, firstly portrayed as obstacles to settlement, were forced to go west.

The topics of displacement and dispossession are also used in Erdrich's novel, focusing on the Ojibwe's perspective, rather than ignoring the part of the history which relates to the Native American experience (Stewart 2013, 220). Upon Deydey's return from the fur trade business, his friends go to visit him. The reunion leads them to discuss Chimookoman (the Ojibwe's word for non-Indian or white people), and the conflicting opinions on the presence of settlers in their lands. Fishtail reports that white settlers are building "cabins, forts, barns, gardens, pastures, fences, fur-trading posts, churches, and mission schools" (Erdrich 76-77). While Fishtail advocates for the removal of white settlers from the island, Albert suggests that Ojibwe should migrate westward, since the federal government funds those relocations (*idem,* 77-78). However, Fishtail warns that western lands are populated by spirits of the dead, pointing to a possible spiritual downfall of the displaced. Before their conversation resumes, Fishtails remarks on the white settlers' pursuit of Indigenous lands, as well as their hunting grounds, fishing streams, gardens and rice beds (*idem,* 80). Ultimately, the dialogue demonstrates the tension between Native Americans' resistance and surrender to acculturation. Whereas *Little House on the Prairie* depicts the Osages' surrender to both federal government and white settlers' pressures, *The Birchbark House* shows how Ojibwe maintain their ancestral lands, despite the settlement's pressures.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to examine *The Birchbark House* as a counter-narrative to the canonical settler-colonial story presented in *Little House on the Prairie*. Through a comparative analysis, I explored how both novels construct representations of Native Americans, land, and settler expansion, ultimately arguing that Erdrich's work functions as a form of resistance literature. Her novel revises the myth of the American West by offering a more complex, situated, and culturally grounded portrayal of Indigenous life.

In particular, Erdrich shifts the narrative focus toward the Ojibwe community's daily life, spirituality, and ecological relationships, foregrounding cultural resilience. While *Little House on the Prairie* depicts Native Americans as marginal and vanishing, *The Birchbark House* centers them as enduring and adaptive in the face of settler encroachment. This contrast is especially significant given the historical backdrop of Ojibwe removal from the Great Lakes region, which Erdrich addresses more explicitly across the later volumes of the *Birchbark* series.

Erdrich's narrative foregrounds the daily rhythms and cultural practices of the Ojibwe community at a time when federal removal pressures were intensifying. In doing so, she resists the teleological arc of settler expansion and instead affirms Indigenous presence as active and enduring. While *Little House on the Prairie* reinforces the myth of Manifest Destiny through its depiction of the prairie as empty and available, *The Birchbark House* reclaims that same historical terrain as inhabited, storied, and sovereign. Although environmental themes are present in Erdrich's work, this article has focused primarily on the narrative, historical, and ideological dimensions of Indigenous representation in children's literature. The goal has been to highlight how *The Birchbark House* functions as both a literary and cultural intervention, reshaping how history is told to young readers and reclaiming space for marginalized voices.

Nonetheless, Erdrich's contribution extends beyond historical correction. By reclaiming Indigenous epistemologies and voicing women's and children's perspectives, her work highlights the capacity of children's literature to engage with themes of colonialism, identity, and memory. As scholars such as Clare Bradford and Debbie Reese have shown, children's books are never ideologically neutral; they are powerful sites where cultural values are negotiated and challenged. In this regard, *The Birchbark House* serves not only as a literary intervention but also as an educational tool for revisionist historiography, empowering younger generations to critically engage with the silences and omissions of dominant narratives.

Ultimately, Erdrich's work affirms the potential of children's literature to engage critically with colonial histories and to foster a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the past. It invites us to reconsider not only whose stories are told, but also how they are framed—and for whom.

END NOTES

[1] It is important to note that *Little House on the Prairie* is based on Laura Ingalls Wilder's autobiographical recollections of her family's life. However, scholars have pointed out that Wilder was under the age of three during her first encounters with Native Americans, meaning that the memories presented in the narrative are likely drawn from family stories rather than direct personal experience. As such, the novel occupies a complex space between memory and fiction, filtered through adult retrospection and mediated by cultural attitudes of the time. This layered autobiographical discourse, adapted for a child audience, complicates the narrative's historical accuracy and ideological implications.

[2] While this article does not delve into the concept of autoethnography, it is worth noting that *The Birchbark House* can be situated within that framework. Although fictional, the novel draws on collective Ojibwe memory, oral tradition, and cultural experience, blending historical fiction with communal autobiography. This narrative mode resonates with testimonial works such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), where personal voice represents a broader community. Unlike Wilder's autobiographical account, shaped by settler nostalgia, Erdrich's storytelling reclaims Indigenous memory through a communal and intergenerational lens.

[3] Some examples are William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1988).

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Echoes of the Unconscious:
Freudian and Modernist Readings of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

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ABSTRACT: Considering Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* the present article aims to analyze the novella through the lens of Freudian psychoanalytic theory and modernist literary elements. Additionally, this article situates Stevenson's work within a broader context of modernist literature by examining its exploration of critiques of Victorian moral rigidity and the fragmented identity. The novella's use of Uncanny elements, unconscious mind and other concepts later developed by Freud highlights its avant-garde nature that also offers a narrative that delves into the psychological depth of the human mind. This article underscores the significance of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* not only as a timeless exploration of human nature and social expectations but also reveals its contribution to both psychological literature and modernist narrative techniques.

KEYWORDS: *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Freudian analysis, Modernism

RESUMO: Considerando *O estranho caso de Dr. Jekyll e Mr. Hyde* de Robert Louis Stevenson, o presente artigo tem como objetivo analisar a novela pelas lentes da teoria psicanalítica freudiana e de elementos literários modernistas. Além disso, este artigo situa o trabalho de Stevenson num contexto mais amplo da literatura modernista, examinando as suas críticas sobre a rigidez moral vitoriana e a identidade fragmentada. O uso de elementos do *Uncanny*, do inconsciente e de outros conceitos desenvolvidos posteriormente por Freud destacam a sua natureza vanguardista, que também oferece uma narrativa que investiga a profundidade psicológica da mente humana. Este artigo ressalta a importância de *Dr. Jekyll e Mr. Hyde* não apenas em sua exploração atemporal da natureza humana e das expectativas sociais, mas também revela a sua contribuição tanto para a literatura psicológica quanto para as técnicas narrativas modernistas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Dr. Jekyll e Mr. Hyde*, Análise Freudiana, Modernismo

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MODERN PERSPECTIVES ON STEVENSON'S *DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE*

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is a novella written by Robert Louis Stevenson in 1886. It explores the duality within human nature and the struggle between good and evil. Doctor Jekyll is a respected doctor in Victorian London who has been conducting experiments to create a potion that enables him to split the good and evil aspects of his personality. Mr. Hyde is the personification of his dark side, but progressively Doctor Jekyll loses control over the transformations leading to tragic consequences. This article will explore how Stevenson's novella can be interpreted through Freudian psychoanalytic theory and modernist perspectives, highlighting how the narrative anticipates key concerns about repression, the unconscious mind, and the complexities of human identity.

The story portrays a dichotomy also present in Victorian society, the "outward respectability and inward lust" (Hammond 1984, 125). It is a society which sought to maintain a façade of moral refinement while keeping dark secrets behind the walls. Stevenson's novella becomes even more interesting to analyze when we start to consider the modern elements present in the story. Even though it predates the full development of modernism, the novella often delves into the complexities of the human mind, exploring the central duality and the split between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. These internal conflicts mirror modernist concerns with the fragmented self and the multiplicity of human identity.

Therefore, we may wonder what modernism means. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word modern has its origin from the Latin word *modernus*, which means just now. As stated by Richard Hand, "the word appears towards the end of the fifth century AD and was used for centuries in order to differentiate between what is here and now and what has become the past" (2012, 61). Different authors diverge in their interpretations of this movement, but they seem to agree that the modern stands in opposition to the traditional. Peter Childs, for example, states that "with regard to literature, modernism is most readily understood through the work of the avant-garde authors who wrote in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century" (2019, 5). Furthermore, he argues that one of the defining features of modernist writing is the way authors immerse readers in a world that feels unfamiliar, offering little guidance, unlike the detailed descriptions and explanations typical of nineteenth-century realist writers. As a result, readers find themselves in a world they do not initially understand and

must progress through the narrative to gradually uncover its mysteries and grasp the rules and meanings of this new reality (*idem,* 6).

This sense of disorientation and gradual revelation is central to *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Stevenson does not immediately present the duality of Jekyll and Hyde, but instead constructs a fragmented narrative, much like the modernist texts described by Childs. The novella withholds clear explanations, leaving readers to piece together the psychological and moral complexity on their own. By resisting a straightforward narrative and focusing on the inner turmoil of its protagonist, the story anticipates many of the modernist concerns with subjectivity, fragmentation, and the instability of identity. Moreover, the typical modernist opposition to tradition is also reflected in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.*

By attempting to divide and control the conflicting parts of his psyche, Dr. Jekyll disrupts traditional religious and ethical conceptions of human nature. In doing so, he assumes a godlike role — creating a new self, Mr. Hyde, through scientific experimentation rather than divine or natural means. This act challenges long-standing beliefs about the unity and sanctity of the soul, echoing modernism's broader tendency to question inherited truths and dismantle established systems of thought.

Virginia Woolf, a central figure in literary modernism shared a similar thought on her essay *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (1924), where she claims "On or about December 1910 human nature changed. All human relations shifted, and when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature" (1978, 4-5). This remark reflects the profound transformation in the way individuals understood themselves and their place in the world. In Stevenson's novella, this change is already represented through the figure of Dr. Jekyll, who no longer relies on divine or moral frameworks to define human nature but instead turns to science and personal experimentation.

Other characteristics of modernism outlined by Childs that are deeply embedded in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* are the questioning of reality, uncertainty in a Godless universe, and the tension between societal conventions and inner pass[66] (2019, 8). The novella destabilizes the notion of a unified, knowable self and presents reality as fractured and elusive, particularly through its structure of unreliable narratives and hidden truths. In a universe where humans get closer to the role of God, Dr. Jekyll

takes it upon himself to manipulate the very core of human nature, challenging moral and metaphysical certainties. This scientific overreach reflects the modernist uncertainty about spiritual frameworks and the disillusionment with traditional beliefs.

Dualism in Jekyll and Hyde opposes the Victorian idea of the mind as a unity (Houghton 1985, 165). Instead, the novella explores a modernist perspective that the mind has different phases of development, and it contains distinct divisions that define our personality. These divisions and phases will be better explored throughout the article with the support of Freud's theories. As Whitney May suggests in her essay *Through the Cheval-Glass: The Doppelgänger and Temporal Modernist Terror in The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Dr. Jekyll's evil half is not a medieval monster haunting ruined castles, but a distinctly modern figure born from internal fractures within the human psyche. Hyde's emergence from Jekyll reflects a broader literary shift from external horrors to internal anxieties—a hallmark of the *fin de siècle* Gothic and a forerunner of literary modernism. As a modern monster, Hyde embodies fears not of the supernatural past, but of psychological fragmentation, moral collapse, and the destabilization of identity. Jekyll's transformation can be read as a *psychomachia*, a spiritual and psychological battle within a self divided by the conflicting demands of instinct and morality, desire and repression. This internal conflict mirrors the Victorian and early modernist audience's own confrontation with a rapid social and scientific landscape shift (2018, 123). Moreover, May defends that understanding *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as a modernist text and its complex dynamic between Jekyll and his double is vitally important to understand the narrative. Although chemically separated into distinct identities, Jekyll and Hyde remain intimately bound—a dual consciousness that embodies what Marshall Berman describes of modernism: "a unity of disunity" (1982, 51). Jekyll does not initially reject Hyde with disgust; on the contrary, he welcomes him with a sense of relief and recognition, admitting that Hyde felt more authentic, more vivid, than the fractured identity he had previously inhabited. This moment of self-recognition challenges traditional notions of monstrosity and instead reveals how deeply the other is part of the self. The novella thus reconfigures the Gothic monster, not as an external threat, but as an internal inevitability. Jekyll's final failure to destroy Hyde stems from this inescapable entanglement: the two are not opposites but reflections. As May highlights, "neither Jekyll nor Hyde, neither Gothic past nor modern future, can exist without the other" (2018, 124).

Therefore, Stevenson also develops a more modern Gothic view in his novella. Unlike traditional Gothic literature, where monstrous figures typically inhabit dark castles or old mansions, the "scaring creatures" in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* are not external but are internal, existing within the characters themselves. This reflects a shift in Gothic writing, where the focus moves away from reviving medieval spirituality and instead engages with a more modern sensibility — one that questions the idealization of past centuries, often viewing them as periods shaped by superstition and oppression (Baldick & Mighall 2012, 271). In this sense, the Gothic becomes a space to explore psychological fragmentation, repressed desires, and the hidden aspects of human nature, themes that resonate with modernist concerns about the complexity of the self. This dynamic is illustrated by the way Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde portray a fractured identity, where "Stevenson's novella and modern man at the same time suffer from a case of fragmentation as [the] subordinate dominates over the dominant" (Kemaloğlu 2020, 97).

Fragmentation in the novella goes further than the fragmentation of the human mind. A very common aspect of modernism is the use of fragmented and non-linear narrative structures that reflect the complexities of the human psyche and perception. The novella is structured through documents, letters and narratives with different characters' perspectives, creating a fragmented panorama of the own storyline. The depiction of space in Stevenson's novella also embodies modernist characteristics. Dr Jekyll's house has two entrances, a main door linked to the main street, which is used by the doctor and a lateral backdoor, dislocated like its user: Mr. Hyde. Despite the two different doors that serve two different purposes, they still belong to the same house, like the two distinct personalities that belong to the same man. It disrupts the conventional unity and coherence of Victorian societal norms (Lightman 2010, 14). Alienation and isolation are frequent themes of modernism. As Dr. Jekyll loses control throughout the story, he becomes more isolated from his friends and society. Similar to some modernist works, the doctor's private space, in this case his laboratory, reflects his own internal duality and conflict, as can be perceived in the following passage: "Once crowded with eager students and now lying gaunt and silent, the tables laden with chemical apparatus, the floor strewn with crates and littered with packing straw, and the light falling dimly through the foggy cupola" (Stevenson 31).

Once established how the modernist nuances of the novella are important to the analysis of this paper, it is relevant to explore Freud's theories. The concepts which will be discussed here are "Id", "Ego" and "Superego", defense mechanisms and the Uncanny. They will be useful to better understand the duality of human nature and the complexities of the mind, recurrent themes in modernist literature, also present in Stevenson's novella.

FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS IN *DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE*

Before Sigmund Freud, thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant had already questioned the idea of "clear" consciousness. In *Emile, or on Education* (1762), Rousseau highlighted the complexity of human nature, suggesting that society represses innate instincts, leading to inner conflict. Kant, in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), argued that human consciousness is shaped by both sensory data and cognitive processes, rather than being transparent or simple. John Locke's *tabula rasa* theory (1689) had already suggested that the mind is a blank slate, influenced by experience. Freud built on these ideas by suggesting that human minds are complex and that they repress many emotions into the unconscious. This new view laid the groundwork for modernists' beliefs that humans have dark and profound feelings, and art needs to represent this facet as well.

One of the most important theories developed by Freud was the Structural Theory, a mental division established between the ID, the Ego, and the Superego. Starting by analyzing the ID, it represents the most primitive part of the human psyche, responding instinctively to basic needs, urges, and desires. The ID seeks immediate gratification without considering consequences or moral values, operating illogically and irrationally, like the impulsive nature of a newborn. The Ego and the Superego are developed later in life. The Ego mediates between the ID's desires and societal rules, trying to balance these conflicting demands. As the author explains, "The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the ID, which contains the passions" (Freud 1923, 25).

Another of Freud's theories that easily relates to the ID's primitive instinct is the "Death drives". According to the psychoanalyst, people were ruled by two distinct forces: the Life instinct, named Eros, and the Death instinct, named Thanatos. The two forces

compete to guide human behavior. Thanatos was the personification of death in Greek Mythology and guided people to the underworld in the Afterlife. “Freud believed that people typically channel this death drive outward, which manifests as aggression toward others” (Jones-Smith 2020, 235). The character of Mr. Hyde manifests in himself both the ID and the Death instincts. He takes pleasure in violence, seeks instant gratification, and follows no morals or rules. This kind of behavior eventually leads him to destruction. One of the first appearances of Mr. Hyde in the novella already supports this idea: “And then, all of a sudden he broke out in great flame of anger, stamping with his foot, brandishing the cane and carrying on like a madman” (Stevenson 27). Furthermore, he transmits a sense of negativity to the characters around him. As Mr. Utterson states, Hyde conveys a sense of “unexpressed deformity” (Stevenson 17). Hyde instills a sense of isolation in Jekyll, since, when the doctor starts to lose control, he also loses contact with his friends. Eventually, he decides to confine himself to his house, which leads him to a lonely existence.

Moreover, Hyde depicts the ID in many different forms. He is constantly eager to gratify his animalistic impulses and, to prove it, the doctor admits: “at once glorying and trembling, my lust of evil gratified and stimulated” (Stevenson 77). By being this incarnation of the ID, his behavior reflects a lack of morals or societal conventions. An example of that is the moment he murders Carew without mercy, never showing any regret or guilt. Hyde is the manifestation of Dr. Jekyll ’s repressed, animalistic side, illustrating the nuances of the unconscious — a crucial modernist element already present in this work. This exploration of inner impulses reflects a broader artistic trend of the period, in which “Artists of the avant-garde art movements of the 20th century explored various ways to delve into their unconscious and express the desires and fears hidden in it” (Egemen 2022, para. 7). The novella also acknowledges that “The primitive is also found in the modern man, in the unconscious part of the mind” (Lagana 2013, 150), reinforcing the idea that beneath the surface of civility lies an untamed, enduring presence.

On the other hand, in Dr. Jekyll, Stevenson portrays the perfect Victorian gentleman who follows the rigid rules of society. Jekyll may be considered the Ego, because, in contrast, it is “that part of the ID which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world” (Freud 1923, 24). The Ego emerges because of the influence of the external world, which is why it develops during childhood. It takes social

norms and rules into consideration to determine human behavior. While both the ID and the Ego seek pleasure, what differentiates them is that the Ego is concerned with creating strategies to achieve this satisfaction within the constraints of reality. The Ego is "like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse" (*idem*, 25). Jekyll is also a representation of the Life Instinct or Eros (the Greek god of love and fertility), because he is engaged in preserving not only his own life and safety but the others around him, especially when he realizes Hyde is out of control. He is rational, ruled by societal principles and, as mentioned in the previous quote, the doctor struggles with keeping the urges of the ID taking form in Mr. Hyde. One of the first descriptions of Jekyll establishes this positiveness on the doctor's character attesting that he is "a large, well-made, smooth-faced man of fifty, with something of a stylish cast perhaps, but every mark of capacity and kindness — you could see by his looks that he cherished for Mr. Utterson a sincere and warm affection" (Stevenson 23). Another important fact about the Ego is that it works by mediating the ID's impulses and the moral restrictions of the Superego. Doctor Jekyll is presented as a mediator between the rules of Victorian society (Superego) and Hyde's ID impulses. As Jekyll says: "But I had voluntarily stripped myself of all those balancing instincts by which even the worst of us continues to walk with some degree of steadiness among temptations" (Stevenson 73). Like the Ego, Jekyll tries to be realistic to balance Hyde's urges and the moralism of Victorian society.

However, as Freud defended, the Ego, or even the Life drive alone, could not explain all human behavior. An individual is cohabited by Ego, ID and Superego, as well as by both Life and Death drives. As Jekyll himself states, "Man is not truly one, but truly two" (Stevenson 66). This is an avant-garde representation of the modern society that "is linked to the negotiation between civilization and desires, and the negotiation between the pleasure principle and the reality principle" (Egemen 2022, para. 4). The Doctor's desire to be totally separated from the ID's urges brings him to a tragic end, emphasizing that men are driven by different instincts, and that denying the ID might be dangerous. One of Dr. Jekyll's biggest mistakes was not previously admitting this duality of human nature. At the beginning, the doctor truly believed he could not only separate himself from the ID but also control it: "The moment I choose I can be rid of Mr. Hyde" (Stevenson 24).

The way Stevenson constructs the physical spaces around Jekyll further reinforces this idea of internal division. The decaying laboratory, hidden behind Jekyll's otherwise

elegant home, suggests that darker instincts are not entirely external forces but intimately connected to the respectable façade. Similarly, Hyde's initially smaller, almost stunted form symbolizes how repressed evil impulses may seem insignificant at first, yet with indulgence, they may expand and begin to dominate the internal "space" of the self. This spatial metaphor extends beyond the house: throughout the novella, Hyde moves through dark, labyrinthine streets in contrast to the orderly and civilized spaces associated with Jekyll's public life, suggesting that the broader society itself mirrors the divided, unstable human psyche.

In a great part of the story, Hyde's influence overcomes the Doctor, and the hostility between them becomes so intolerable that they can no longer coexist. As a final resource, Jekyll once more follows the Ego's logic and solves the situation by killing himself.

Once established, this duality between the Ego and the ID (Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde) — and how they merge — it becomes crucial to recognize that they are not merely opposing forces, but fundamental aspects that coexist within every individual. Therefore, it is important to also explore the third element of Freud's trinity: the Superego. It consolidates the morals and values instilled by one's parents and society. Developed during childhood, the Superego guides behavior in a socially acceptable manner. One of the most important functions of the Superego is to control the ID's desires, encouraging the Ego to follow moralistic goals rather than merely realistic ones. By Freud's own words, "The superego is, however, not simply a residue of the earliest object-choices of the ID; it also represents an energetic reaction-formation against those choices" (1923, 33). The definition of the Superego provided by Ayda Önder offers valuable insight into the role this mechanism plays in human behavior: "The superego acts like an internal censor, leading us to make moral judgements in the light of social pressures" (2019, 32-33). The Victorian Society plays the function of an "internal censor" because it establishes the morals, values and attitudes that must be followed by the citizens. The Victorian Era in England (1837-1901) was marked by rigid etiquette rules that eventually led people to repress certain kinds of behaviors that were not appropriate in public (O' Gorman 2010, 8). In this sense, Dr. Jekyll can be seen as an example of someone who tried to follow the moralistic values of society (Superego), leading him to use his scientific knowledge to be separate from his own irrational desires (ID). Even the supporting characters are

introduced with detailed information about their profession and social standing, accentuating the significance of the Superego in defining their identities. For instance, the opening line of chapter one starts by stating that “Mr. Utterson the lawyer…”, with his profession being also his first characteristic (Stevenson 7). Moreover, Dr. Jekyll is often described as a respectful and influential member of society. As mentioned, while the novella portrays most characters as "true gentlemen" who follow their superego apart from Mr. Hyde, this portrayal might be more complicated than it first appears, particularly when it comes to Mr. Utterson. The lawyer is outwardly reserved, rational, and morally upright, traits often associated with the "gentleman" archetype; however, he seems to superficially adhere to societal expectations, failing to truly embody what makes one a "true gentleman". The opening of the novella suggests this, when describing him as "...cold, scanty, and embarrassed in discourse..." and noting that "At friendly meetings, and when the wine was to his taste, something eminently human beaconed from his eyes, something indeed which never found its way into his talk..." (Stevenson 7). By establishing Utterson in this way, Stevenson does not deny the duplicity of feelings present in the members of that society. Rather, he highlights the internal conflict between outward appearances and hidden desires, suggesting that even those who seem morally upstanding are not immune to the complexities and contradictions of human nature. Although only Jekyll fully demonstrates his restrained eagerness, it is enough to make the readers understand that under the surface of those perfect aristocrats is also hidden a dark side and unsettling ambitions. As Dr. Jekyll states: “I found it hard to reconcile with my imperious desire to carry my head high and wear a more than commonly grave countenance before the public. Hence it came about that I concealed my pleasures” (Stevenson 24). He was bound to hide his desires to satisfy societal rules (Superego). Once more, we can see Jekyll as a moderator figure (Ego) who tries to balance his inner urges with what is publicly acceptable. If his experiment had worked, he would have found the perfect solution to deal with the internal struggles of Victorian Society. The intricate social critique about the hypocrisy of Victorian morality present in the narrative reflects modernist concerns like the disillusionment with social norms and values. Besides, like in modernist writings, there is some skepticism about the novella regarding scientific advancements. Although Jekyll is a man of science, his experiments only brought him misery, with rationality not being able to solve the fundamental problems of human nature. According to Susan Stanford Friedman,

Modernism is grounded in what she calls "crises of belief: loss of faith, experience of fragmentation and disintegration, and the shattering of cultural symbols" (1981, 97). To modernists, humans cannot be completely rational. Indeed, the novella portrays the limitations of rationality in understanding the complexities of human nature, being described as an ambivalent tool capable of great advancements and fatal failures.

In this article, I have argued how the London society of the time repressed some behaviors, because they believed they had a superior mental development, which enabled them to control their actions. However, as it is possible to see when taking the example of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, this repression may lead to dreadful consequences. Freud implied that all humans "share some universal primitive desires and fears" (Leitch *et al.* 2018, 756). "Likewise, canonical works reflect common desires and fears that can be found in everyone" (Egemen 2022, para. 4). The duality of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde reflects the inner struggles to repress the conflicting feelings present in each individual.

To better analyze the outcomes of this repression in the novella, it is relevant to understand Freud's theory of Defense Mechanisms. "Freud argued that, when placed in a psychologically dangerous or threatening situation, the patient was likely to resort to defense mechanisms for protection. In a psychoanalytic context, a dangerous threat is something that challenges the patient's self-concept or self-esteem" (Baumeister *et al.* 1998, 1098). Freud identified several ego defenses throughout his work, which his daughter, Anna Freud, later compiled in a single book called *The Ego and the mechanism of defense* (1936). Indeed, repression is one of those mechanisms. According to Freud's definition, repression is related to the feelings that are hidden and are forced into the unconscious in order to protect the individual from emotional distress or anxiety. These repressed thoughts, often involving desires, memories, or traumatic experiences, are kept out of conscious awareness because they are deemed unacceptable by societal norms or by the individual's own moral standards. However, as illustrated by this novella, the repression of the ID urges does not make them cease. By repressing his darker impulses, Dr. Jekyll's attempt to maintain the stability of the three components of the human psyche is deeply unsettled. Rather than controlling his darker side, he only makes it stronger, as he reflects: "All things therefore seemed to point to this: that I was slowly losing hold of my original and better self and becoming slowly incorporated with my second and worse" (Stevenson 74). As Dr. Jekyll tries to satisfy the Superego, the repression of his internal

urges just makes Mr. Hyde become even more of an escape to the ID's primitive tendencies. Jekyll struggles to separate Mr. Hyde from him, but it is a useless attempt. The ID's instincts cannot be disembodied because they are intrinsically connected to the self. As is stated by John Hammond, "Dr Jekyll is not faced with a simple choice between good and evil; he is compelled to accept that either both exist or neither" (1984, 125).

Another defense mechanism associated with the duality between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is projection, which Freud identified as a psychological process where an individual attributes their own thoughts, feelings, or desires to another person in order to avoid confronting these aspects within themselves. In this case, Mr. Hyde becomes not just a projection but the materialization of Dr. Jekyll's darker, more primal instincts. By projecting his repressed desires onto Hyde, Jekyll distances himself from the parts of his identity he cannot accept. As Jekyll reflects, "At that time my virtue slumbered; my evil, kept awake by ambition, was alert and swift to seize the occasion; and the thing that was projected was Edward Hyde" (Stevenson 70).

Dr. Jekyll, in most parts of the story, uses another of Freud's defense mechanisms, which is denial. As the name suggests, it involves denying events and situations that the person refuses to experience. Dr. Jekyll, as was already mentioned, denies the duality of human nature, refusing to accept his darker side. Besides the denial of his inner conflicts, he also denies the consequences of his actions. He believes he can control the transformations; he seems not to be aware of the potential dangers of his deteriorating control, which leads to tragic outcomes. As Dr. Jekyll states in the quote already referred to: "The moment I choose I can be rid of Mr. Hyde" (Stevenson 24). After Mr. Hyde murders Sir Danvers Carew, the doctor attempts to deny Hyde's power by affirming that he is the one in control. To prove that, he destroys Hyde's papers and stops taking the potion. He also states in the chapter "Henry Jekyll's full statement of the case":

> But for me, in my impenetrable mantle, the safety was complete. Think of it—I did not even exist! Let me but escape into my laboratory door, give me but a second or two to mix and swallow the draught that I had always standing ready; and whatever he had done, Edward Hyde would pass away like the stain of breath upon a mirror. (Stevenson 71)

These passages show the naivety of Jekyll's beliefs. The doctor was certain that he could escape from Hyde anytime he wanted, which reflects his ongoing denial of the

stronger psychological connection between them. However, his resolve is short-lived, because he begins to realize that Hyde is an inseparable part of him that he cannot control or dismiss: “I began to be tortured with throes and longings, as of Hyde struggling after freedom; and at last, in an hour of moral weakness, I once again compounded and swallowed the transforming draught” (Stevenson 71). The quote expresses the inevitable resurgence of Hyde. Jekyll’s denial and attempts to suppress his other half have failed, leading to the uncontrollable emergence of his darker side.

THE UNCANNY SPLIT: DUALISM IN STEVENSON'S NOVELLA

To start discussing the “Uncanny” nature of *The strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* it is necessary to establish the definition of the expression. In his essay *The Uncanny* (1919), Freud affirms that the subject of the Uncanny is “undoubtedly related to what is frightening, to what arouses dread or horror” (2003, 123). The word “Uncanny”, or “unheimlich” in the original German, means something uncomfortably strange, mysteriously difficult to explain. Still according to Freud, the Uncanny is “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (*idem*, 124). The definition of Uncanny goes beyond the feeling of dread and fear; it is related to something that has been repressed, forgotten and is eager to be released even against our will. The uncanny is characterized by both aversion and recognition. In many passages, Hyde is described with hostility; he is considered a “dwarfish”, “doubled-up”, and a “monkey” (Stevenson 17, 37-38). However, the luxury of knowledge, one of the biggest ambitions of Dr. Jekyll as a man of science from Victorian society, culminates in this creature that is Uncanny because, although dreadful, it embodies the true nature of the human. Nicholas Ruddick, in “The fantastic fiction of the fin de siècle”*,* argues that there is a sense of refusal to recognise the existence of familiarity in this other half: “Hyde is Self unnervingly become Other arousing uncanny disgust among men because they refuse to acknowledge consciously that a similar being lives under repression in themselves” (2007, 192). The following statement illustrates how hard it is for the other characters to perceive Hyde:

> He is not easy to describe. There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man so disliked, and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point. (Stevenson 12)

The inability to identify what is wrong with Hyde contributes to the Uncanny feeling. There is a strange familiarity with him, people recognize something human in Hyde, and yet there is something in his nature that sets him apart. The lack of explanation of why Hyde is so detestable amplifies the fear and discomfort that surround him. He has an indefinable sense of wrongness because there is a duality within him. Through the split personality of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Stevenson encapsulates the modern idea of displacement in society. It can be applied not only to the Victorian era, as we see in the novella, but also in the Contemporary world. The split personality of the two men reflects the fragmentation of the Modern world. As Fred Botting explains, "The fragmented modern world of isolated individuals, guilt, anxiety, despair and internalizing fear produce narratives which focus on psychological disturbance and are dominated by fantasy, hallucination and madness" (1996, 11). Through this analysis, I propose that Stevenson's novella aligns with this perspective.

Additionally, regarding the story's structure, the Uncanny as a narrative technique is another modern element present in the novella. It evokes a sense of horror and suspense, which is a characteristic of modernist literature, by focusing on creating psychological depth and exploring the darker aspects of human experience. As Eve Kosofky Sedgwick (1986) defends in a more modern conceptualization, the uncanny is evident in objects and images, but it is particularly significant in the relationships between characters in a narrative. This can be seen in the way the narrative fragments into different perspectives and uses the spaces, especially the private, as a reflection of internal duality, where Dr. Jekyll's two personalities coexist and contend. His house, for instance, becomes a symbolic structure of this split self: the respectable façade conceals the hidden, sinister laboratory at the back, just as Jekyll conceals Hyde within himself. This double perspective of space was not confined only to Victorian society. In today's world, where the complexity of the human mind is increasingly recognized, we also navigate multiple selves across different spaces and narratives—public and private, real and digital. This diverse fragmentation functions like modern equivalents of Jekyll's divided home and psyche, revealing how we

display different facets of our personality depending on the environment. Thus, Stevenson's use of uncanny spaces and symbolic objects continues to resonate, offering a powerful lens through which to explore the fractured, performative nature of identity also in contemporary society. After all, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a prime example of an atemporal narrative that encompasses all those elements, creating a piece of Gothic modern literature about the duality of human nature.

CONCLUSION

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is a great example of a narrative that discusses themes of dualism and fragmentation, efficiently capturing the essence of Freud's concepts and psychoanalytic theories. The novella delves into the complexities of the human psyche, such as the conscious and unconscious mind, the Uncanny, the conflicts of repressed urges and the societal rules. In addition, the narrative also embodies key elements of modernist literature as the novella serves as a critique of Victorian society. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* transcends the Victorian era and bridges with the Modernist thought of fragmented identities and multiplicity of self, while offering insights that are as compelling today as they were at the time of its publication.

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“Dragons – in the Crease”: The Many Masks of Emily Dickinson

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the multiplicity of masks in Emily Dickinson’s poetry, focusing on her strategies of concealment and revelation through tropes of the veil, the dragon, and the volcano. By situating Dickinson within the Victorian dramatic tradition and the cultural expectations imposed upon nineteenth-century American women writers, the analysis highlights her slant poetics as a means of negotiating identity, authority, and desire. Dickinson’s poetic selves often emerge as armored bodies – simultaneously reticent and explosive, veiled and volcanic – whose vitality is dramatized through recurrent figurations of fire, ice, storm, and eruption. The essay argues that Dickinson’s art lies in this poetics of excess, where silence and obliquity become performative strategies that exceed the constraints of gender and culture.

RESUMO: Este artigo aborda a multiplicidade de máscaras na poesia de Emily Dickinson, debruçando-se sobre as suas estratégias de ocultação e revelação através dos tropos do véu, do vulcão e dos dragões. Inscrevendo a sua obra na cultura vitoriana do recurso à voz dramática e considerando as expectativas culturais impostas às escritoras na América oitocentista, esta análise sublinha a importância da obliquidade como forma de negociar questões de identidade, autoridade e desejo. Os “eus” poéticos dickinsonianos surgem muitas vezes como corpos blindados – simultaneamente reticentes e explosivos, velados e volcânicos –, cuja vitalidade é dramatizada através de figurações do fogo, do gelo, da tempestade e da erupção. Este ensaio defende que a arte de Dickinson assenta numa poética de excesso, na qual o silêncio e a

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obliquidade se tornam estratégias performativas para ultrapassar as restrições culturais e de género.

KEYWORDS: Dickinson, masks, slantness, veil, volcano, dragon, excess

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Dickinson, máscaras, obliquidade, véu, vulcão, dragão, excesso

. . . so you see when you go away, the world looks staringly, and I find I need more vail – Frank Peirce thinks I mean berage vail, and makes a sprightly plan to import the "article," but dear Susie knows what I mean.

Emily Dickinson, Letter to Susan Gilbert, March 12, 1853

When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person.

Emily Dickinson, Letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson,
July 22, 1862[1]

To understand how poetic voices speak, split, and disguise themselves in Emily Dickinson's work is to confront one of the central problems of her poetics: the construction of identity through masks. The ontological status of Dickinson's lyric "I," and its relationship with language, remains a central concern for critics, for her poetry persistently fashions dissimulated, fragmented, and performative selves. This practice aligns Dickinson with a long tradition of dramatized lyric voices, many of which were part of her "personal canon". Her reading habits reveal her debts to William Shakespeare, master of disguise and equivocation, and to Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, whose dramatic voices destabilized Romantic notions of sincerity. In this sense Dickinson belongs firmly to a Victorian culture in which fictional personae allowed poets to explore emotions not admissible in public discourse.[2]

For women writers in nineteenth-century America, however, the assumption of masks had an added urgency. While popular and prolific, women authors were often constrained by the didactic function imposed on their writing and by social expectations of reticence and decorum. Literature was expected to project a moral ideal of womanhood, not to represent individual female subjectivity – as though individual reality, opposed to the stereotyped female experience, was inherently disruptive to the social order. As Joanne Dobson phrases it, the duty of the woman writer was "to be both present as a feminine voice and absent as a uniquely female presence" (Dobson 1989, 57). The socially accepted feminine discourse – that erased individuality within the decorous silence of stereotype – was nothing more than a strategy of containment, shaping women's identities through the maintenance of cultural conventions and the inhibition of social change. In the words of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the nineteenth-century ideal of femininity consigned women to an existence akin to that of the "Invisible Lady" – a popular attraction consisting of a mysterious voice without body or face (qtd. in Dobson 1989, 56). Consequently, socially sanctioned images of the female self – such as the personae of the child, the bride, or the wife – pervaded women's textual production, allowing them to inscribe into their writing personal 'nobodies' with social existence.

In Dickinson, however, to be 'Nobody' or 'nought' is to become the very reverse of somebody, as in the poem "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (Fr260).[3] By invoking for herself the condition of "Nobody," the poetic subject simultaneously effaces the body itself ('no-body'), turning it into a blank page – a *tabula rasa* – upon which other bodies may be inscribed to re-fashion it. Indeed, in Dickinson's poetry the multiple selves or 'supposed persons' protect, through embodiment, the poet's personal identity, while rendering the poetic identity fluid by incessantly generating other, non-self bodies. As Sandra Runzo states, Dickinson wholly participates in the obsessive re-conception of her own body, so that, through continuous performances – whether as weapon, bride, animal, ghost, man, or martyr (among many other poses) – her "masquerading personae" explore the possibilities of selfhood, dramatizing the domain of supposition and desire (Runzo 1999, 59).

Forged of irony and ambivalence, Dickinson's masks conceal while revealing, and reveal while concealing, for revelation is nothing other than yet another mask of diversity: "Ourself behind ourself, concealed –", as she would write in another of her poems (Fr407). In

this sense, the image of the veil – or the understanding of the mask as a veil – best captures the construction of personae that never fully unveil themselves, presented as both transparent and opaque, through a language that outlines while refusing absolute visibility. This trope resonated powerfully with nineteenth-century gender ideology. Women were expected to embody modesty and silence, and the veil literalized these ideals: the covered face served as a physiognomic mask in a culture fascinated with reading the soul through features. Yet Dickinson transforms the convention into a tool of poetic seduction. In her letters she remarks that when the world grows too staring, she requires "more vail", as quoted in the first epigraph (L112). A similar idea can be found in the letter-poem "A Charm invests a face –" (L357; Fr430), sent to Maria Whitney, in which the "Lady" dares not raise her veil "For fear it be dispelled –," as fascination depends on concealment:

> A Charm invests a face –
> Imperfectly beheld –
> The Lady dare not lift her Vail
> For fear it be dispelled –
> But peers beyond her mesh –
> And wishes – and denies –
> Lest Interview – annul a want –
> That Image – satisfies –
>
> Emily –

Desire circulates in the mesh that hides as much as it suggests, permitting the speaker to manipulate the domains of supposition and longing. The veil is thus a paradoxical medium: transparent enough to invite vision, opaque enough to refuse full disclosure. As with the goddess Isis, whose veil no mortal could lift, Dickinson's poetic veils promise infinite revelation without ever yielding it completely. They represent the threshold of a knowledge obtained not through revelation but through perpetual unveiling, *ad infinitum.*

Dickinson's very style – indirect and elliptical – contributes to this obliquity. In fact, in her poetry, slantness is at once a state of perception ("a certain Slant of light" that reveals "[the] internal difference – / Where the Meanings, are –" [Fr320]), and the very medium through which that new perspective is attained ("Tell all the truth but tell it slant – / Success in Circuit lies" [Fr1263]). If for Dickinson, slantness is both a mode of seeing and the medium of poetic expression, the mask, then, is never mere concealment. It is revelation staged as performance. The very poetic physiognomies Dickinson offers in lieu of the requested portraits or visits testify to her almost theatrical concern with presenting her self: sometimes eluding the feminine stereotype, as in "[I] am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur – and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves" (L345); at other times excessively embodying it, turning her sexual role into performance. In such instances, the traditional image of feminine reticence and vulnerability is often redefined, invested, in Terence Diggory's words, with "all the strength of armor" (Diggory 1979, 138-39). Indeed, modesty becomes literal armor in poems like "Shame is the shawl of Pink" (Fr1437), as the blush becomes a protective garment, a corporeal armor transforming vulnerability into defense; or a "citadel", as in "I had not minded – Walls –" (Fr554), as each crease of the Lady's veil is guarded by dragons:

. . .
A limit like the Vail
Unto the Lady's face –
But every Mesh – a Citadel –
And Dragons – in the Crease –
(Fr 554)

The lady's veil, instead of marking weakness, becomes militarized and reticence is redefined as strength. Dragons are, thus, threshold guardians, preventing the Other from fully penetrating the self or the page, for as Ryan Cull points out, we can associate the word "crease" to clothing and women's roles, as well as to paper and the folding of paper, fundamental for Dickinson's project of copying her poems into fascicles and sets (Cull 2022,

150). Like Dickinson's slant style, dragons in the crease are never fully seen; they are suggested presences hidden in folds. In this sense, the placement of dragons "in the crease" also dramatizes how even in the smallest fold of concealment (a veil, a dash, a silence) lies monstrous energy.

The fierceness of Dickinson's veil, guarded by dragons, resonates with many other poems in which she challenges the cultural constraints imposed upon women by presenting female poetic subjects so hyperbolic that they transcend external boundaries to create a new performative space where metamorphosis, the grotesque, and excess secure autonomy. Yet the "rebellion" of these bodies is never openly assumed; hence the recurrent image in her poetry of fiercely defending an inner dimension beneath an external cloak of conformity. Not rarely, the pink exterior is but the faded or filtered reflection of a pulsing, explosive red interior that animates the being, as in "The reticent volcano keeps / His never slumbering plan; / Confided are his projects pink / To no precarious man. . . . " (Fr1776). Indeed, if the veil is Dickinson's trope of concealment, the volcano is her emblem of interior vitality. Repeatedly, her poems imagine an eruptive energy hidden beneath calm surfaces: explosive, sublime, and potentially destructive.

"Nineteenth-century American women poets", Elizabeth Petrino explains, "often used extreme geographical settings – tropical jungles and arctic locales –" (Petrino 1998, 7), serving as a metaphor for women's isolation, but also passionate interiority, insofar as emotions and feelings were generally described in terms of released and restrained energies, with temperature and tension emerging as dominant motifs. As Simon Williams states in *Emotion and Social Theory*, the expression of emotion is intimately tied to the notion of bodily imagery, for "discourse does not simply fabricate bodies (...). Bodies also shape discourses and the rational structures of knowledge with which we, quite literally, 'grasp' the world" (Williams 2001, 63). In this process of apprehension, metaphorical oppositions such as 'interior-exterior,' 'body-soul,' 'opening-closure,' 'self-world' often translate the confrontation between the fluid, volatile body and the social order of the body. In Dickinson, the image of the volcano aptly conveys this overwhelming vitality that shapes both world and self, opening itself to a constant play of oppositions by desiring the fluidity of lava – and, by metaphorical extension, of identity. In often uncontainable compositions, the poet identifies the vibrant energy of the self with

the eruptive forces of volcanic mountains, hidden beneath an outward mask of inactivity, in an apparently paradoxical coexistence:

> On my volcano grows the Grass
> A meditative spot –
> An acre for a Bird to choose
> Would be the general thought –
>
> How red the Fire rocks below
> How insecure the sod
> Did I disclose
> Would populate with awe my solitude
>
> (Fr1743)

In "On my volcano grows the Grass", the slopes appear pastoral, a "meditative spot" where even a bird might rest. Yet beneath this sod "the Fire rocks," threatening eruption. The opposition between "on" and "below" dramatizes the tension between social calm and inner force. Even the word "rocks" wavers between noun and verb: the solidity of lava or its restless rocking motion. Green vegetation covers red depths; social surfaces conceal torrid interiors. This duality makes the volcano a metaphor for the self: outwardly reticent, inwardly impetuous. The chromatic opposition – green against red – also suggests that Dickinson values the Sublime over the Beautiful. Dickinson ironizes the cultural expectation that women's writing should remain harmonious, since the speaker only seems to display a "green" veil to shield a red, fervent, violent, discontinuous interiority. In truth, her art pursues the disruptive excess of the Sublime, that domain long reserved for male poets. By embodying both green and red within the same figure, she asserts self-sufficiency: the 'volcanic self' harbors both fertility and destructive spark.

This indeterminacy in the subject's stance toward a possible eruption is reinforced by the double syntactic structure in the verse "Did I disclose." Read as a conditional clause ("How

insecure the sod / Did I disclose"), the possibility of opening to the exterior seems to imply the destruction of the social realm, whether by the volcanic torrent within or by the contained intensity that would certainly shock general opinion; hence the subject's reticent desire, choosing not to break the boundary that protects her social identity. Read as the subject of the sentence ("Did I disclose / Would populate with awe my solitude"), there's a desire for explosion, for the revelation of her singularity. Were she to disclose herself, the poetic subject would see her volcano wholly invaded by "awe". If read as a metaphor for womanhood, the volcano points even to a kind of sexual and intellectual power as formidable as it is underestimated.

The volcano can also be understood as a metaphor for writing itself. The carefully measured lines of the poem cover subterranean torrents of language and an ardent and marginal imagination. "The sod" represents not only the surface of social convention but also the surface of the page. To "disclose" the fire beneath would be to shatter decorum and reveal the speaker's true identity – an act Dickinson repeatedly refused. Hence the suspension at the poem's end: the speaker chooses not to disclose, leaving the possibility of eruption hanging in silence. And much like the Biblical silence that preceded Creation, poetic silence serves as the prelude to revelation – a threshold that lends grandeur and majesty to an event yet to come: fearsome, excessive, awe-inspiring.

Dickinson's eruptions echo the volcanic force of poetry experienced by Aurora Leigh in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's eponymous work. Aurora Leigh describes her first encounter with poetic texts as a moment of revelation that regenerated her world: "throwing flat / The marts and temples, the triumphal gates / And towers of observation," preparing her thereby "to elemental freedom" (Barrett Browning 1998, 29 [Book I, lines 845-854]). In a clear biblical evocation of Christ and the moneychangers in the temple, this passage underscores poetry's regenerative disruption – the word as divine incarnation – which demolishes old conventions, distorted interpretations that limit the clarity of expression and perception essential to the poet's mission: to tell the truth, with art in its service. Dickinson's volcano is quieter but no less powerful: its silence generates tension, a sublime held in reserve. Emerson had already imagined the "American Scholar" as a mind like Etna or Vesuvius, flaming with

knowledge (Emerson 1950, 59). But Dickinson's volcanic image is darker, more inward, emphasizing the destructive risks of such force.[4]

Although this imagery is most prevalent during the period conventionally accepted as spanning 1861 to 1863, and although it is confined to a relatively small number of poems, the volcanic persona is so striking that it resonates residually in other personae throughout Dickinson's work. Yet it is worth noting that the incendiary bodies of Dickinson's poetry are frequently cooled by ice, which delays eruption: Dickinson writes but does not publish, promises but does not explode. Often it is precisely in the dialogue between voices of ice and voices more torrid that one encounters the display of an identity flowing through the Dickinsonian geographical – and physiognomic – map. Fire and ice are complementary terms in their opposition, sometimes even uniting in a single voice, in a strange equilibrium where the excess of one may annihilate being altogether.

If in the volcanic eruption the poetic subject would be destroyed by lava, losing social identity, in the freezing of the self it is the inner vitality that is extinguished, nullifying existence itself. The poem "Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple" (Fr321) even presents these two states – warming and cooling – as principles of natural order. Yet it is always the element of fire that proves most desirable, for it is already rooted within, in that process of cooling enacted beneath the sensuality of purple. A similar tension arises in "Ah, Teneriffe – Receding Mountain –" (Fr752), where the poetic subject longs for the retreat of the snow encasing the volcanic mountain in an icy armor:

> Ah, Teneriffe – Receding Mountain –
> Purples of Ages halt for You –
> Sunset reviews Her Sapphire Regiments –
> Day – drops You His Red Adieu –
> Still clad in Your Mail of Ices –
> Eye of Granite – and Ear of Steel –
> Passive alike – to Pomp – and Parting –
> Ah, Teneriffe – We're pleading still –
> (Fr752)

Teneriffe's "Mail of Ices" imposes not mere silence, but a total muteness that isolates and withdraws the mountain's volcanic force, rendering it impassive before external beauty, with its "Eye of Granite – and Ear of Steel –." Yet this image of closure may be reversed, for the mask of ice contains a double potentiality: if frozen, it becomes lethal, annulling being entirely in the absence of vitality; but if melted by the inner lava, it is also source of water and renewal. It is precisely this fertility that the poetic subject seems to desire, imploring Teneriffe to erupt. Thus, the thermally hybrid persona embodied in this mountain's image – uniting ice and lava in a single body – more effectively translates, in visual terms, the tension underlying the persona commonly considered volcanic: the assertion of a marginal interiority through the display of an icy mask that must not dominate but rather serve an inner combative energy that explodes within. Hence the recurrent desire for the recognition of the volcano within, lest the self be extinguished by the social mask of ice. Volcanic imagery therefore crystallizes what Ana Luísa Amaral called "Dickinson's poetics of excess" (Amaral 1995).

The imagery of fire and ice in Dickinson often shades into the Gothic, where vitality threatens to collapse into terror. Here, storm, bomb, and pit become metaphors for psychic extremity, situating her poetics at the threshold between creativity and madness. In "A Pit – but Heaven over it –" (Fr508), the subject finds herself suspended above an abyss, glimpsing heaven around and above yet unable to escape the depth beneath: "A Pit – but Heaven over it –/ And Heaven beside, and Heaven abroad;/ And yet a Pit –/ With Heaven over it –". The paradox is cruel: the vision of transcendence increases torment, for the pit is also the body, source not of life but of confinement. The subject fears that a single dream, a single slip, might collapse the fragile prop that holds her aloft. The only resource is composure: she must 'hold the Bomb' at her breast, mastering her own explosive vitality lest it annihilate her ("But since we got a Bomb –/ And held it in our Bosom –/ Nay – Hold it – it is calm –"). The poem resonates with Poe's short story "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), where the prisoner of the Inquisition paces the circumference of a circular dungeon, measuring the abyss. Poe's narrator escapes by controlling his body and his terror. Dickinson's speaker faces a similar ordeal: the bomb is both heart and madness, vitality and threat. Imagination, which could liberate, also sabotages. The poem ends not in release but in suspended waiting, the self imprisoned by its own excess.

This Gothic dramatization of consciousness recurs in storm imagery. Thunder, tempests, and earthquakes become metaphors for psychic upheaval. In "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (Fr340), the storm resounds within: mourners tread, a drum beats, a bell tolls, until "I, and Silence, some strange Race, / Wrecked, solitary, here –". The collapse of knowing is figured as both death and storm, the self annihilated in its own imagination. Similarly, in "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –" (Fr867), the brain itself splits under pressure. Nerves become bombs, consciousness a volatile substance threatening rupture. Yet such imagery is double-edged: destructive, but also creative. The same intensity that risks madness fuels poetic invention. To figure imagination as storm or bomb is to acknowledge its dangerous excess, but also its power.

Thus, Dickinson's Gothic dimension locates poetry in a space of perilous vitality. Like Poe, she dramatizes the psyche under extreme duress, but where his tales resolve in external escape or doom, her poems dwell in the suspended instant, the held bomb, the storm within. Here lies the sublime of her art: the recognition that creativity itself is explosive, that the self lives always at the verge of annihilation. The struggle for life – in or through life – depends on the physical and psychological mastery of the self. The mask of horror allows for testing and knowing the limits of identity, while also recognizing the need to control its impulses toward self-destruction.

Dickinson's art is defined by masks that simultaneously conceal and reveal. Through the figures of veil, volcano, ice, storm, and dragon, she dramatizes a poetics of slantness in which identity is never singular, but always multiplied, deferred, and staged. The title image of this essay, "Dragons – in the Crease," crystallizes this paradox. Each fold of the veil, each crease of the page, conceals not passivity but force: guardians of identity, embodiments of sublimity, fiery presences in the smallest spaces of silence. In Dickinson's poetics, even modesty bristles with defense, and every dash harbors the threat of eruption. To read her is to approach these dragons in the crease – to glimpse, within obliquity itself, the inexhaustible energies of being.

END NOTES

[1] Letters 112 and 345, respectively. All references to Dickinson's letters are taken from *The Letters of Emily Dickinson,* edited by Cristanne Miller and Domnhall Mitchell (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2024).

[2] It is worth noting that Thomas Wentworth Higginson famously called Dickinson's style "spasmodic" – "You think my gait 'spasmodic' – I am in danger – Sir" (L341) –, probably associating Dickinson's seemingly unruly and excessive style to the Spasmodics, a group of minor Victorian poets who, although very popular, were often criticized for the extreme states of mind conveyed in their verse (Letter 265). Although sometimes "used derogatorily", as Miller and Mitchell note, "the term was applied to many poets E[mily] D[ickinson] admired, including Barrett Browning, Tennyson, and Longfellow" or Alexander Smith (Miller/Mitchell 2024, 363).

[3] All references to Dickinson's poems are taken from R. W. Franklin's Reading Edition of Emily Dickinson's *Complete Poems* (Franklin, 1999), hereinafter referred to as Fr, followed by the number of the poem.

[4] The volcanic metaphor recurs in multiple guises. In "I have never seen 'Volcanoes' –" (Fr165), natural volcanoes are described as "old" and "still," but human faces can erupt with volcanic intensity – anguish smoldering like Vesuvius before the antiquarian's gaze. Here the volcano becomes a physiognomy of passion, a sign that true vitality lies within.

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