Corso di Dottorato di ricerca

in Lingue, culture e società moderne e Scienze del linguaggio
ciclo xxxi

Tesi di Ricerca

World Literature and the Anthropological Imagination

Ethnographic Encounters in European
and South Asian Writing, 1885-2016

SSD: L-LIN/10

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A Teo e Mimi

JULIE: You know me, Danton.

DANTON: Yes, whatever "knowing" means. You have dark eyes and curly hair and a nice complexion and you always say to me: dear George. But *[He points to her forehead and eyes]* there – there: what's behind that? No, our senses are coarse. Know each other? We'd have to break open our skulls and pull each other's thoughts out of the brain fibers.

– Georg Büchner, *Dantons Tod*, 1835
  trans. Henry J. Schmidt, 1986

JEAN-PAUL MARAT: If I am extreme I am not extreme in the same way as you. Against Nature's silence I use action. In the vast indifference I invent a meaning. I don't watch unmoved, I intervene and say that this and this are wrong, and I work to alter them and improve them. The important thing is to pull yourself up by your own hair, to turn yourself inside out and see the whole world with fresh eyes.

– Peter Weiss, *Marat/Sade*, 1963
  trans. Geoffrey Skelton, 1965

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my Ph.D. supervisor, Shaul Bassi (the most glocal person I've ever met) for his encouragement, guidance and support. He constantly led me to experiment in new directions, and the heterogeneous form of this work owes much to the multifarious ideas he exposed me to during my time at Ca' Foscari. In Venice I also met a host of wonderful people and colleagues. Alice, Cristina and Angelo – my oldest partners in crime – have been the bedrock of my life and work in this city, and there is no way I can thank them enough. A heartfelt thanks goes also to my other colleagues from Ca' Foscari: Giulia, Luca, Serena, Francesca and Laura. In particular, I had the privilege to work alongside these people during the organisation of several graduate conferences, and I had the chance to witness their generosity and creativity.

Pablo Mukherjee and Neelam Srivastava, who supervised my work at the University of Warwick and at Newcastle University respectively, have both supported me in crucial moments of my Ph.D., helping me to develop essential parts of my thesis and pointing me in the right directions when it was most needed. I am equally grateful to Stefano De Matteis, who gave me precious advice at the very start and the very end of my journey. The time I spent in England would not have been the same without Demet, Angus, Gloria, Ju, Sourit, Paola and Marco. Everything I learnt from them over numberless cups of atrocious coffee will always be invaluable.

Alessandro Vescovi has been a teacher, a guide and a friend for years now, and I certainly wouldn't have even thought of doing a Ph.D. if I it wasn't for his enthusiasm and kindness. Among the many people that I've met through Alessandro, I want to thank Letizia and Arianna, whose energy and determination continue to amaze me and whose company has always been a joy.

A special thanks goes to my little clan of physicists (plus partners and affiliates): Bormio, Chiara, Ricca, Carlo, Fulvio, and the Martas. Finally, I want to thank those people whose friendship, help and support has affected my life in more ways than I can possibly count: Elettra, Ilaria, Beatrice, Carlotta, Alessandro, Tommaso, Enzo, Cesy, Nando, Cesin, my parents.

This work is dedicated to my grandmother Mimi, who taught me the meaning of nuance and unconditional love, and to my partner Teo, who keeps teaching me so much me about life, the universe, and everything.

Introduction

This thesis takes its cue from a fairly basic question: how do we make sense of each other? More specifically, it asks what people from different cultural backgrounds do and think when they use their imaginative faculties to try to understand, sympathize, solidarize or connect with cultural others. I try to answer to this question within the field of literature, bringing together three areas of studies – world literature, anthropology and postcolonial studies – and six writers – Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Carlo Levi, Mahasweta Devi, Amitav Ghosh and Frank Westerman.

The thesis also emerges from my personal attempt to respond to the challenge brought up by the debate on world literature. This challenge consists, at its core, in expanding the horizon of our possibilities in the study of literature, increasing both the scope, the geographical and chronological range of our explorations, and the quality, the theoretical substance of the connections that we can forge within this field. If world literature, as an object or an institution existing in the real world, is perhaps relatively easy to grasp, it is also an undefined and contested intellectual enterprise that uneasily gathers under the same roof vastly different political and methodological attempts to create a new literary comparativism, either studying this existing object or trying to create new ones. These attempts range from detached engagements with literature in circulation (Damrosch); the study of texts and books that are born in translation, in the interstices of national literatures (Walkowitz); a reconfiguration of world-systems theory in literary terms, so to explore the literary production of the world in terms of capitalist combined unevenness (WReC); to genealogical studies of the institutions that have created "world literature" in the first place (Mani and Mufti). These interventions (and several others) are explored extensively in the first chapter.

Is world literature the only possible framework in which we can have this conversation? Not necessarily. For better or for worse, however, it is the contemporary debate in which comparative literature – as well as postcolonial literature, up to a point – are being cast. As Neelam Srivastava and Rossella Ciocca sum up with a certain concern:

> World literature has become a hegemonic force in the English humanities. It is fast becoming
> the way to theorize any literary field of the contemporary period that has aspirations to a global

reach, subsuming postcolonial literature, minority literature, and "Anglophone"/"Francophone"

theoretical models. (Ciocca and Srivastava 2017, 10)

World literature, in this sense, runs the risk of engulfing more nuanced, more explicitly engaged or more transparent approaches to comparative literary studies. However, this is something that the practitioners of the field, especially coming from more radical positions, are acutely aware of. In many cases, arguably, their presence in the debate is just as motivated by a desire to re-orientate in specific direction a discussion that is, by now, inescapable, as it is by their intellectual engagement with the genealogies of world literature. Because – and this is perhaps a saving grace – the concept has a history, which allows for a recuperation of a variety of unique and compelling approaches. This is probably one of the reasons why, in Aamir Mufti's words, "the idea of world literature seems to exercise a strange gravitational force on all students of literature, even on those whose primary impulse is to avoid or bypass it entirely, forcing on them involuntary and unwanted changes of course and orientation" (Mufti 2016, x). I cannot help but seeing myself in this description.

As a way to create theoretically meaningful connections across space and time, my own intervention uses, as its two points of departure, two concepts that derive from a parallel engagement with anthropology: the anthropological imagination and the ethnographic encounter. The former, echoing the different ways, approaches and models in which anthropologists have historically attempted to classify or understand the human beings that are the focus of their work, describes the various constellations of epistemic operations that different individuals or groups rely on whenever they are called at making sense of a cultural other. The ethnographic encounter, on the other hand, represents the occasion – in this case the narrative one – in which the anthropological imagination is shaped, bringing together what I call the "ethnographer-figure" – the person whose anthropological imagination is being scrutinized – and the "native" – the object of those imaginative efforts. It goes without saying that these roles are not necessarily stable, and can be either inverted or simply evaporate into mutual observation and interaction. Whether this concretely happens within a narrative largely depends on the kind of anthropological imagination we are talking about.

Anthropology, therefore, is a fundamental theoretical contribution to this work in a number of ways: it is the controlling metaphor through which I approach my texts, which have been chosen, in turn, because they are themselves structured as ethnographic explorations, or at the very least with a

specific epistemological concern that echoes those of anthropologists and ethnographers. Anthropology and ethnography – both applied and academic – also provide useful models to conceive the epistemic operations that concretely make up the various forms of the anthropological imagination: for instance, the typological classification that represents the fundamental epistemic operation of the colonial anthropological imagination derives from the models of Victorian armchair anthropology as well as from the administrative ethnography of British India; and the framing of the cultural other as a political ally that is the basis of the militant anthropological imagination derives from various reflections within anthropology on whether the anthropologist may be rethought as an activist. My point is not that those writers are, strictly speaking, anthropologists and ethnographers – although some of them may be, even under fairly rigorous definitions – but that they enact imaginative processes to make sense of cultural others that a comparison with anthropology is particularly apt to illustrate. Lastly, anthropology is a model for world literature – something that I discuss in the first and concluding chapter of this work – in the sense that its attempts to create unifying perspectives out of disparate, local engagements echo, methodologically, the efforts at the heart of the various projects of world literature.

The main theoretical focus of this thesis is the intersection between world literary studies and anthropology, but a significant contribution is provided by postcolonial studies, which are often an implicit set of reflections that orientate my analyses. My own formation has been in anglophone Indian literature, and also my interest in anthropology has been sparked by the several overlappings between anthropology, ethnography and postcolonial studies (at the time I was blissfully aware that the relationship between the two fields has not always been too civil, something that I briefly touch upon in the first chapter). Moreover, world literature, in its modern incarnation, can be said to derive to a significant extent from the (fairly heterogeneous) field of postcolonial literature. I stress all these aspects to justify how, although I do not engage extensively with specifically postcolonial theoretical formulations in my thesis, some of the central categories of postcolonial discourse are nevertheless present in virtually every chapter.

My thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 introduces the current debate on world literature, starting from its earlier, classical articulations – Goethe, Marx, Tagore, Auerbach – to move to the three initiators of the current debate – Damrosch, Moretti and Casanova. It then provides an overview of some more recent developments in the discussion. At this point I introduce anthropology, first focusing on the various ways in which it can be combined with (world) literature, and then exploring the

categories of the anthropological imagination and the ethnographic encounter. What follows are three chapters of literary analysis and close reading, each juxtaposing a European and a South Asian author that tackle similar or complementary forms of the anthropological imagination. The systematic juxtaposition of various European and South Asian authors is motivated by the attempt to show how the received, monolithic representation of these two areas as a core and a periphery of the world-system, is, to say the least, inaccurate, ignoring various geographies of power at a macroscopic and microscopic level.

Chapter 2 deals with the colonial anthropological imagination, whose main focus is on typological classification and the "scientific" ethnographic authority of the figure that embraces it. I address it through a number of Stevenson's Pacific writings (*In the South Seas*, "The Bottle Imp", "The Beach of Falesá") and some examples of Kipling's fiction on India ("The Phantom 'Rickshaw", the *Letters of Marque*, "The Head of the District", "Kaa's Hunting", *Kim*). I am particularly interested in the way Stevenson and Kipling, while remaining within a fundamentally colonial epistemological horizon, explore different ways of framing imaginatively the native. A crucial element of my analysis are the different ways they approach exoticist discourse and the idea of colonial governance, which crucially inform their overall imaginative systems and enable both authoritarian and dialogical forms of ethnographic encounter and imagination. Their anthropological imagination is further influenced and informed by their relationship with their various global readerships and by various branches of positivist anthropology. In spite of being both, in first approximation, British writers, Stevenson and Kipling represents also two radically different perspectives on their colonial "field": Stevenson is a Scottish writer that chooses Polynesia as his adoptive home and slowly matures anti-colonial sympathies; Kipling is an Anglo-Indian that establishes himself as an ideologically oriented cultural mediator between the British and Indian world.

Chapter 3 deals with the militant anthropological imagination, which sees the native as a potential ally in a political struggle, and focuses on a sense of solidarity that echoes, in many ways, the framework of activism. I deal with this form of imagination through the work of the Italian writer Carlo Levi (*Christ stopped at Eboli*, *Words are Stones*, *All the Honey is Finished* and some reportages from India) and the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi ("Draupadi", *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* and "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha"). Both writers turn their ethnographic gaze towards internally uneven nation-states, dealing with the dynamics of internal colonialism that affect Southern Italian

peasants and the adivasis of India. Although they both attach great importance to a national dimension – perceived as the legitimate platform to carry out the struggle of these populations – Levi and Mahasweta are profoundly critical of the various historical forms of the Italian and Indian state (including, unsurprisingly, their authoritarian and totalitarian versions) and approach distinctively internationalist positions (Third-Worldist for Levi and indigenist for Mahasweta). Both consider their "fieldwork" as the seminal moment for a new political vision and praxis, but their idea on development and history are radically different.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Indian writer, historian and anthropologist Amitav Ghosh and the Dutch writer, agronomist and journalist Frank Westerman. I consider both examples of the multidirectional anthropological imagination. With this term I try to frame their preference for seemingly distant connections – both in geographical and chronological terms – to frame the environments and cultural others that they face in their narratives; and their tendency to illuminate cultural others through a plurality of epistemological paradigms – religion, science, secularism, poetic vision, storytelling, rationalism and irrationalism – in the (variously successful) attempt to find a common ground between those different languages. The chapter deals with Ghosh's travelogue *In an Antique Land*, his novel *The Hungry Tide*, and Westerman's essays/reportages *El Negro en ik* and *Stikvallei*. It focuses in particular on the mirroring of the self into the cultural other; on the relationship between religion, science and secularism; and on the relationship between human beings and non-human agents (most specifically, the environment, animals and "natural" disasters). The last chapter, as a tentative conclusion, suggests that the various forms of the anthropological imagination may ultimately represent models of world literature, and that, at the same time, each form of world literature is also a form of anthropology.

The concept of the anthropological imagination, as I use it in this work, is not normative, but descriptive. While some of the categories that I employ are clearly charged with specific connotations, my aim is to provide a typology of the forms of the anthropological imagination. No typology is ever satisfactory, and I am aware that both the terminology and the groupings could be potentially modified and rearranged in a variety of ways. A point that I want to emphasise is that there is no attempt to create a teleological narrative that goes from the colonial through the militant to the multidirectional anthropological imagination. None of these forms of the anthropological imagination is connected to a specific time: the colonial anthropological imagination, in its various forms, has never died out, as

shown by the fact that virtually *all* the writers that I examine in this work end up dealing with it in some way or another. The militant anthropological imagination is the bread-and-butter of activism – on both sides of the political spectrum (although the examples that I deal with, in this thesis, are all focused on the left). The multidirectional anthropological imagination, the most indisciplined and volatile of the three, is not simply a postmodern aberration, but can appear whenever readings of cultural others are carried out through unexpected or counter-intuitive connections. None of these forms, moreover, is inherently connected to a specific ideology.

Before moving to the first chapter, I want to add two caveats, one on working on translated texts and the other on gender. Let us start with translation. In this work I make use of various levels of linguistic competence. I am a native speaker of Italian, which allows me to read Carlo Levi in the original language. I also read Stevenson's, Kipling's and Ghosh's works in their original language, English. I have a basic working knowledge of Dutch that allows me to read Westerman in the original, but I heavily relied on Italian translations to write my chapter. Instead, I relied entirely on English versions of Mahasweta's fiction for this work. The use of texts in translation allowed me to create juxtapositions that had, I think, particular value. There is hardly any another Indian writer other than Mahasweta Devi that resonates so powerfully with the intellectual, politic, artistic and anthropological operation carried out by Carlo Levi. And if Westerman is an unlikely companion to Amitav Ghosh, it is also true that the Netherlands is an underrepresented European context that offers a unique perspective on colonialism and transcultural encounters, and that fits very well with the pattern of ambiguously (post)colonial perspectives that the other European authors (Stevenson and Levi) can provide with their Scottish and Italian backgrounds. It is worth stressing that I consider Kipling an "Indian" author in the context of this work, for reasons that I explain in the second chapter.

Lastly, on gender: I have explicitly avoided arguing that Mahasweta Devi – the only woman among the six writers – expresses a fundamentally different form of the anthropological imagination from her male colleagues. This is done in an attempt to reject any form of gender essentialism but also to avoid turning her into a token woman writer. That said, there is no doubt that for writers, just as for actual ethnographers, gender and gender identity determine radically different ethnographic experiences, and hence *necessarily* inform the ethnographer's anthropological imagination. In a similar vein, the gender assumptions of an ethnographer-figure before and after an ethnographic encounter are, inevitably, part of the baggage of biases that influences their imaginative construction of the other. I

have tried, therefore, to address how gender plays a role for *all* the writers I consider, how it intersects with other cultural, political and class aspects of their positioning and with the broader dynamics of the ethnographic encounters that they describe.

1. World literature and the Anthropological Imagination

In this chapter I lay out the theoretical premises of my project, more specifically the relationship between world literature and the anthropological imagination. First, I discuss the issues involved in the concept of world literature (both historically and in the contemporary debate) and define which theoretical elements and concerns derived from world literary studies I address and employ throughout this work. Secondly, I outline how anthropology and ethnography can further illuminate the debate on world literature and how an approach based on the anthropological imagination and ethnographic encounters may represent a productive starting point for a project in this field of study.

A short preliminary note. As a rule, when I use the phrase "world literary studies", I mean the totality of the participants to the academic debate on world literature. It is meant to indicate a field of studies and discussion, rather than a discipline – because it lacks internal consistency, a common methodology, or shared theoretical and political assumptions. The term does not indicate a specific school and is meant to be as inclusive and general as possible. Individual scholars, of course, may use the same term in a more restrictive and normative sense, or, conversely, reject the label. Therefore, in reference to a specific author, the phrase usually indicates his or her point of view of what world literature is or should be.

1.1. World Literature

1.1.1. Early Articulations of World Literature: from Goethe to Auerbach

Almost every discussion on world literature starts with the caveat that defining world literature is a complicated affair. The reason is quite simple: the phrase has historically been used – and it keeps being used – in quite a loose way. It has been variously employed to define a number of different objects, ideas, projects and perspectives that are not always compatible, convergent or commensurable. It is an ambivalent as well as contested notion. Things are further complicated by the fact that a

rigorous starting point for the discussion – considering the comparative cultural context that it inevitably involves – should be defining whether there is a shared, general understanding of what "literature" is, whether the term might include, for instance, oral texts or other forms of textual productions, and whether the European idea behind the concept of literature is appropriately translatable to other cultural contexts and languages. Alexander Beecroft, quite consistently, introduces his own intervention on world literature by addressing these issues. Beecroft argues that the different words for "literature" in various linguistic traditions around the world, "while not identical, do all share certain important family resemblances" and "as such, […] the difference in meaning among these terms [do not] prevent our talking about them in parallel with each other" (Beecroft 2015, 10). Beecroft, ultimately, opts for a broad definition of "literature" as "all self-consciously aesthetic use of language" (Beecroft 2015, 14), which also includes orality. For this work, I am happy to adopt this definition of literature, even through I focus exclusively on creative written prose.

But even if we sidestep, by adopting Beecroft's definitions, a broader discussion on what "literature" is, we are still left with the task of defining *world* literature. As Caroline Levine and Venkat Mani ask at the beginning of an introductory piece named "What Counts as World Literature", "is world literature a canon, a collection, a mode of reading, a utopian dream, an impossibility" (Levine and Mani 2013, 141)? If we are to adopt a descriptive approach and take into consideration the different usages of the phrase since its invention, the answer is that world literature is all of these things and many more. If the widespread success of world literature is a recent development, starting at the end of the 20th century, a good way to make sense of the diversity and the divergent trajectories of world literature today is to go over a few seminal moments in which the concepts was articulated before the current debate. Such an operation illustrates how the concept, since its origins, was characterized by what David Damrosch calls a "rich variability" (Damrosch 2003, 6).

The rich variability famously originates with Goethe – a starting point that explains, at least in part, the centrality of the German context in the early history of world literature. Goethe did not invent the term *Weltliteratur*, but he definitely popularized it, employing it in a vast number of letters and essays but without properly defining what he meant by it. The most important piece of Goethian thinking about world literature, however, does not come from Goethe himself, but rather from his secretary Johann Peter Eckermann, most specifically from his *Conversations with Goethe in the Final Years of his Life*, published in 1837. A particular passage, dated 1827, is generally acknowledged as the

starting point for the history of world literature. From a historical perspective, Goethe's intervention must be embedded in a German context that the expanding material circulation of books from all of the world was slowly transforming into an "empire of books" (*Bücherreich*), where print commodities were a key element in granting accessibility to the world (Mani 2017). It is in this context that, as part of a conversation on literature in translation that touches upon Chinese, Persian, Serbian, French and ancient Greek works, Goethe and Eckermann end up discussing a Chinese novel that Goethe is reading. Eckermann's questions on the state of Chinese literature prompt Goethe to declare that "poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men" (Goethe 2014, 19). It is therefore advisable, according to Goethe, to "look beyond the narrow circle that surrounds us" (Goethe 2014, 19), namely the familiar territory of national literature. It is at this point that Goethe exclaims, with prophetic overtones, that "national literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World-literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" (Goethe 2014, 20).

An ill-defined "world literature" is therefore introduced. The idea seems to emerge in the context of a strenuous activity of translation and a sustained practice of reading in translation. It is also conceived, crucially, as a counterpoint to national literature(s). The two dimensions, however, seem to be in a relationship of productive tension rather than of outright opposition. For Goethe this is true in at least two senses. On the one hand, Goethe thinks that the expression of national characteristics is essential even if literature embraces a cosmopolitan dimension. As he writes in a letter: "Poetry is cosmopolitan, and the more interesting the more it shows its nationality" (Goethe 1986, 227). On the other hand, Goethe believes that, even in a world perspective, some national traditions must play a more significant role than others. Greek classical literature, for instance, is considered a formal model of universal significance – "If we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented" (Goethe 2014, 20). Similarly, German literature is supposed to play a privileged role within the system of world literature, as a consequence of the exquisite state of German letters in Goethe's time: "I am convinced a universal world literature is in the process of being constituted, in which an honourable role is reserved for us Germans" (Goethe 1986, 225). Goethe's world literature, therefore, is profoundly grounded in national traditions; and is not immune to notions of ethnocentric universalism and cultural hierarchy, in spite of being – or, perhaps, because it is – based on humanistic ideals.

A later passage further complicates Goethe's understanding of *Weltliteratur*. In an essay on a German translation of Thomas Carlyle's *Life of Schiller*, Goethe seems to imply the existence of two forms of literature on a world scale. Both cross national borders and transcend national particularism, but their aesthetic value differs greatly. Somewhat simplifying, one is commercial/popular literature, the other is high literature. According to Goethe, the former is bound to develop at the expense of the latter: "what appeals to the multitude will spread endlessly and, as we can already see now, will be well received in all parts of the world, while what is serious and truly substantial will be less successful" (Goethe 1986, 227). However, Goethe argues that the very lack of popular recognition towards high literature will promote intimacy and mutual exchange between "serious" writers. Goethe suggests those writers to metaphorically gather in a secret society that should endure in the midst of "the powerful currents of the day" (Goethe 1986, 227). The crucial opposition, here, seems to be between high and low literature, rather than nation and world – perhaps because the international character of literature, at all levels, is at this point taken for granted.

Goethe, in short, does not provide us with proper definitions, but rather with a number of tensions between several concepts: circulation and localism; translations and originals; popular literature and "global masterpieces"; democratic and elitist notions of literature; universality and historicity. The very advent of world literature appears either as a dystopia of commercialism or as a utopia of humanistic cosmopolitanism – and the latter can be either triumphant or forced "underground".

The tension between world literature as a commercial enterprise and as a utopian dimension represents, to an extent, the basis for another seminal moment in the history of world literary studies: Marx's and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848. Differently from Goethe's case, the material history behind this theoretical formulations on world literature is very difficult to ignore, as it is the very topic of Marx's and Engels' intervention. Within a larger section of the *Manifesto* that discusses the expansion of the capitalist system of production all over the world, Marx and Engels describe the establishment of the *Weltmarkt* – the world market, generated by the bourgeoisie's need for ever-expanding commercial connections. The results of this tireless expansion is that production and consumption are given a "cosmopolitan character". The *Weltmarkt* replaces the national and local markets, which are assimilated within the new global horizon or dismantled:

All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by […] industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. (Marx and Engels 1960, 18)

This scenario of cosmopolitan production, importation, exportation and consumption is mirrored exactly, according to Marx and Engels, in the intellectual field:

And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (Marx and Engels 1960, 18)

Not unlike Goethe, Marx and Engels introduce the concept of world literature in the midst of a number of ambiguities. World literature is established, first and foremost, as a commodity, because the system of *Weltliteratur* reproduces the dynamics of the *Weltmarkt*. As such, world literature is impossible to relegate into an autonomous sphere and its political significance must be evaluated as part of the process of capitalist expansion of the market. As a part of this general process, the "worlding" of literature is inherently implicated in different modes of violence. That includes the various forms of cultural assimilation implied both in the "cosmopolitan character" of production and consumption, and in the general imposition of the bourgeois mode of production: "[the bourgeoisie] compels all nations […] to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image." (Marx and Engels 1960, 18)

At the same time, Marx and Engels seem genuinely looking forward to overcoming any "national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness". There is a significant utopian character in their vision of world literature (D'Haen 2012, 97), which stands in stark contrast with the parasitical nature of the expanding bourgeoisie as Marx and Engels describe it a few lines earlier – a creature that must "nestle everywhere". The most likely reason why Marx and Engels mix these registers is to be found in

the historical role of capitalist expansion according to Marxist thought. Although capitalism is inherently exploitative, the passage to a capitalist mode of production and its diffusion over the globe is, for Marx, a necessary prerequisite for the dialectical rise of an international working class that can bring about a socialist revolution. World literature, in this sense, may be evoked as a utopian horizon of international solidarity that emerges in the midst of the assimilative urge of the Weltmarkt.

The expansion of global capitalism is also strictly connected to colonialism. Therefore, if world literature can be seen not only as a mechanic consequence of capitalist expansion, but also as a compensatory gesture for it, it should not come as a surprise that the concept could have some appeal precisely in a colonial context, understood as a transformative, positive force against the cultural politics of imperialism. This is, for instance, the context in which Rabindranath Tagore, in an essay dated 1907, articulates a powerfully humanistic vision of world literature. It is important to point out that the 1905 Partition of Bengal had been just enacted – a culmination of the *divide et impera* strategies of British colonialism, which generated, besides, a wave of violent and divisive identity politics in the Indian public sphere. Tagore reacts by framing the forms of local literary expressions into a broader, universal conversation. His starting point is the idea that "whatever faculties we have within us exist for the sole purpose of forging bonds with others" (Tagore 2014, 48). Of those bonds, the most powerful is the bond of joy, which is "nothing but knowing others as our own, and our selves as other" (Tagore 2014, 48). Tagore thinks that the human soul "has a natural disposition to know itself among others" (Tagore 2014, 49) and ultimately seeks "union of its particular humanness with humanity" (Tagore 2014, 50). Literature, as one of the primary forms of human self-expression, and as a necessity-free form of expression on the top of that, is the ideal realm to become acquainted "with humanity's wealth and abundance" (Tagore 2014, 54). Tagore thinks that literature should represent a universal ideal of man, and only in this way it resists the test of time, as "only those things survive in which all human beings can discover themselves" (Tagore 2014, 55).

This conception of literature requires the rejection of any parochialism: "literature is not viewed in its true light if we see it confined to a particular space and time. If we realise that universal humanity expresses itself in literature, we shall be able to discern what is worth viewing in the latter" (Tagore 2014, 55). Tagore's metaphor of choice is that of a temple built by a universal man, whose plan is unknown by the individual writers – the workers under this master mason. Nevertheless, the writers may still contribute, from their (culturally specific) positions, to the construction of the whole building.

The mark of true artistry, for an individual writer, is to "conform to that invisible plan by exercising his natural talent and blending his composition with the total design" (Tagore 2014, 55). In doing so, a writer is admitted to the ranks of literature, something that is possible only "when the author has realised the ideas of the human race in his own thoughts and expressed humanity's pain in his writing" (Tagore 2014, 55). This is what Tagore calls World-Literature (*Visva-Sahitya*), implicitly opposed to a form of expression that fails to contain the ideals of a universal humanity in itself. Of course also Tagore's conception, like Goethe's, lends itself to a fairly canonical interpretation of world literature as a collection of universal classics and masterpieces.

By now we can delineate two trends: world literature as a global, assimilating system that organizes and overcomes difference; or world literature as a cosmopolitan conversation between different perspectives in which humanity discovers itself. Both possibilities are considered in Erich Auerbach's 1952 "Philologie der Weltliteratur" (famously translated as "Philology and *Weltliteratur*" by Maire and Edward Said in 1969), in which world literature emerges both as a liberating and an oppressive notion. Auerbach argues that Goethe's idea of world literature was founded on what he calls a *felix culpa*, namely "mankind's division into many cultures" (Auerbach 1969, 34). That diversity, however, is increasingly diminishing. Writing between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War as a Jewish refugee in Yale, Auerbach is worried about the increasing standardization of the world within the new geopolitical configuration:

> Standardization […] dominates everything. All human activity is being concentrated either into European-American or into Russian-Bolshevist patterns; no matter how great they seem to us, the differences between the two patterns are comparatively minimal when they are both contrasted with the basic patterns underlying the Islamic, Indian or Chinese tradition. (Auerbach 1969, 35)

This process of standardization is clearly in antithesis with the proliferation of different human cultures and hence, theoretically, with the very premises of world literature. At the same time, if world literature is meant as an overcoming of barriers and differences, the standardization of humankind is nothing more than its extreme consequence:

Should mankind succeed in withstanding the shock of so mighty and rapid process of concentration – for which the spiritual preparation has been so poor – then man will have to accustom himself to existence in a standardized world, to a single literary culture, only a few literary languages, and perhaps even a single literary language. And herewith the notion of *Weltliteratur* would be at once *realized and destroyed*. (Auerbach 1969, 35, emphasis mine)

Auerbach points out that, on the one hand, the concept of world literature is linked with the proliferation of difference; on the other hand, paradoxically, it is also involved in the dismantling of difference. World literature has the potential for both.

Unsurprisingly, Auerbach is unconvinced of the idea of world literature as a transformative intellectual conversation that will bring about "a refinement of customs and […] a reconciliation of races" (Auerbach 1969, 36). Sceptical about the loftier ideals connected to world literature, but still keen on reinvesting the phrase with intellectual energies, he proposes a philology of world literature that is, in its own way, equally ambitious. Auerbach's project is conceived as a sort of "salvage philology", a monumental work of registration of the diversity of human history, on the brink of disappearance through a process of standardization. Consistently, this philology must embrace the world as terrain of inquiry, following the principle that "our philological home is the earth. It can no longer be the nation" (Auerbach 1969, 43).

Auerbach's project arguably represents the first time world literature is approached as a methodological issue, "a limit case for […] ordinary analytical and interpretative practices" (David 2013, 23). In Auerbach's case, the crucial issue is how the instruments of philology can work outside the limited boundaries of national traditions. Auerbach's suggestive (albeit vague) proposal is the search for an adequate *Ansatzpunkt*, a point of departure, as a way to organize an initially daunting sample into a creative synthesis:

In order to accomplish a major work of synthesis, it is imperative to locate a point of departure, a handle, as it were, by which the subject can be seized. [...] The point of departure must be an election of a firmly circumscribed, easily comprehensible set of phenomena whose interpretation is a radiation out of them and which orders and interprets a greater region than they themselves occupy. (Auerbach 1969, 41-42)

A world literary research, therefore, should emerge from a well-chosen point of departure, which allows a scholar to branch out organically into wider areas of knowledge. Although the *Ansatzpunkt* is arguably little more than a glorified guideline rather than a fully flashed-out theoretical formulation, Auerbach sketches rather clearly the crucial problem of preserving expertise within an amplified horizon of research.

This (by no means exhaustive) exploration of the seminal moments that precede and inform the current debate on world literature is meant to foregrounds a few crucial points that may facilitate the understanding of the present situation. Since there has been little sustained discussion on world literature before the present day, the concept has remained rather undefined and open to a variety of interpretations. Goethe, Marx, Tagore and Auerbach do not always refer to the same thing when they talk about world literature. For Goethe it is literature in circulation, literature in translation, a unified utopian perspective, a highbrow network of resistance, a conversation between great writers, and arguably also the spectre of popular literature. For Marx it is a commodity, an offshoot of capitalist expansion, a process of cultural assimilation or the inception of a movement of international solidarity. For Tagore it is the highest form of expression of humankind, a mirror of a universal self. For Auerbach it is a surprisingly ambivalent entity that aims at obliterating or preserving diversity, as well as a methodological challenge.

In Jérôme David's highly insightful synthesis, there is "no linear, cumulative history of what one calls 'world literature' since Goethe" (David 2013, 13), but rather a number of competing genealogies of world literature: relatively isolated intellectual pathways that developed in their own way only to be variously retrieved in the present-day discussion. So we have a philological genealogy, focused on clarifying the function of translation; a critical genealogy, which takes world literature as an oppositional category, resisting either national literature, commercial world literature, or the historical forces behind them; a pedagogical genealogy, which sees world literature as a moralizing force at the basis of a humanistic education; and lastly, after Auerbach, a methodological genealogy, focused on rethinking the practices of literary studies *vis-à-vis* the challenge of a world literary perspective. Crucially, these genealogies are variously tapped upon and are variously combined within the current debate, creating a further proliferation of meanings. The result is that "the misunderstandings in the debates are more numerous at this point than the real exchanges" (David 2013, 13–14).

A further point that I want to draw from this brief cavalcade is that the political and ethical significance of world literature as a concept is not a given. This is also a corollary of having different genealogies – a contemporary conception of world literature that goes back primarily to Marx will most likely have a different political focus than one that goes back primarily to Tagore. It is a *contested* term. But it is also is the very *ambivalence* of the concept – epitomized by Auerbach's linking world literature, simultaneously, with standardization and diversity – that determines the instability of the political and ethical agenda that can be attached to it. This explain why the concept of world literature is attractive to variety of perspectives coming from a wide political spectrum, ranging from the radical left to traditional liberals, while not being immune from right-wing appropriations. Of course the political positioning of the participants to the debate involves not only embracing a certain concept of world literature, but also opposing other established modes of understanding it. Having said that, it is time to turn to the resurgence of world literature at the end of the 20th century.

1.1.2. Resurgence of World Literature: Damrosch, Moretti, Casanova

Arguably, before the last decade of the 20th century, only two ideas of world literature had relatively sustained use. In her introduction to a volume that appeared right before the new wave of interest for world literature, Sarah Lawall spells out these two conceptions: a quantitative notion of world literature, "defining the 'world' as representative global coverage (chiefly in translation)" (Lawall 1994, 1); and a qualitative notion of world literature, which instead "[refers] to an implied 'world-class' standard and universal values" (Lawall 1994, 1) – a global canon. Both concepts were commonly employed not much because of a theoretical engagement with Goethe and the others, but because they constituted the basis of the "world literature" classes typically offered to American undergraduates as introductory courses. The two notions are complementary, especially from a pedagogical perspective: "the geographic scope of international literature educates citizens to function (or 'compete') globally, while the canon itself constitutes an idealized reference point, an authoritative sample of human experience and a guide for those learning to know themselves and the world" (Lawall 1994, 2).

Nevertheless, the concept of world literature started to become more and more appealing as the millennium approached. With the end of the Cold War and neoliberal globalization in full swing, there

was an increased desire for unified perspectives and hence a resurgence of interest in the Goethian phrase. There is definitely a reactionary vein in the interest for world literature as a concept, in the sense that it can work as an "intellectual correlate" (Mufti, 2016, p. xi) of an idea of globalisation as the establishment of a "borderless world" – a view which, to say the least, obscures the fundamental nature of globalisation as a border regime and as a triumph of neoliberal expansion. There is no doubt that part of its appeal is that the label is, in itself, more fashionable and less threatening than more politically-oriented terms – like internationalist, revolutionary or even the relatively institutionalised "postcolonial". Many critics of world literature argue, moreover, that those forms of relatively depoliticized criticism correspond to a depoliticized literary production ("World Lite" 2013). However, even if we do agree that the literary production of "a new literary globalism", developed from the 1990s onwards, may largely rest on a politically-sanitized, inward- and backward-looking aesthetics that do not fundamentally challenge the political status quo ("World Lite" 2013), such globalism must be acknowledged as the starting point of the current critical situation. It was arguably the planetary success of global bestsellers by authors like Rushdie, Pamuk and Murakami, published globally and writing, at least from a certain point of their careers, for a global audience in mind, that reactivated a concern for the circulation of literature, the status of national literature, translation, the global marketplace, issues of cultural hegemony, cultural assimilation, artistic authenticity. It forced a rethinking of the role and practices of readers and literary scholars. All of that could conveniently be held together by the umbrella term "world literature".

This shift towards "world literature" rests on least two other developments, to an extent overlapping with the more general trends that I have described. One is the increased diffusion and gradual institutionalization, from the 1980s onwards, of *postcolonial* literatures and studies. Both brought several challenges to nation-based practices of reading and researching, introducing a critical concern for hybrid identities, diasporic writing, transnationality, as well as a sustained criticism of the idea of the nation state itself. It is not a chance that several postcolonial writers are part of the more general trend of "new literary globalism" (but by no means all of them). Another crucial premise for the rise of world literature was the desire within *comparative* literature to move away from its Eurocentric roots. A prominent move in this direction was made by Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, whose central suggestion was to start a collaboration between comparative literature and area studies in order to save languages and cultures that had no representation, turning comparative literature into a

planetary effort, instead of a Eurocentric one (Spivak 2003, 15). Unsurprisingly, the concept of world literature found particular resonance precisely in the fields of comparative and postcolonial literature (Prendergast 2004, vii), although the idea that two categories should merge into that of world literature is still variously resisted, mostly due to methodological and political concerns about how rigorous and/ or how politically effective world literary studies can be.

At any rate, the resurgence of the concept in the academic discussion is generally tied to three major "initiators": David Damrosch, Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova. Damrosch's *What is World Literature* (2003) reflects a manifest desire to reignite interest for the field, and Damrosch was indeed hugely successful in doing so (the widespread popularity of his Institute for World Literature in Harvard being perhaps his most visible accomplishment). Damrosch's rethinking of world literature, as the title of his book suggests, takes the shape of "an essay in definition" (Damrosch 2003, 281), with multiple attempts at defining what world literature might be. Damrosch's initial definition focuses on circulation: "I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (Damrosch 2003, 4). This initial definition is functional to Damrosch's attempt to move away from both the "qualitative" and "quantitative" notions of world literature illustrated by Lawall, or at least to update and incorporate them within a new paradigm. Literature in circulation is clearly something more specific (and approachable) than a notion of "general" literature, although it still carries the ambition of covering a wide-spanning geographical diversity. Moreover, it does not necessarily imply an aesthetic judgement, although Damrosch repeatedly warns his readers against processes like "the levelling process of a spreading global consumerism" (Damrosch 2003, 18) or "the Disneyfication of the globe" (Damrosch 2014, 1), and clearly states that world literature should not be confused with "a notional 'global literature' that might be sold and read in airline terminals, unaffected by any specific context whatever" (Damrosch 2003, 25).

Damrosch's world literature, on the contrary, interact in crucial ways with local contexts, and he takes a firm stand on the ongoing relevance of national traditions even within a world perspective. Damrosch sees world literature, most of all, as a reading practice that finds a common ground between a local reader (embedded in a national culture/literature) and a foreign/circulating work (that is, a national culture/literature in circulation). Damrosch's image of choice is that of the ellipsis, which he employs to define the relationship between nation and world. The reader/receiving culture is to be put

on one focus, the travelling text/culture on the other. They variously meet within the space of the ellipsis – an (un)homely area created by their interaction, where neither of them is entirely at home. The work of world literature circulates, but while circulating it gets refracted and is received in a form that is not quite the "original" one. This is why Damrosch calls world literature "an elliptical refraction of national literatures" (Damrosch 2003, 281).

World literature, at the same time, is defined as "not a set canon of texts but [as] a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (Damrosch 2003, 281). Explicitly moving away from the "global masterpieces" tradition, Damrosch focuses on the reader, implying that his world literature is necessarily plural: potentially, there are as many world literatures as there are readers, or at the very least as there are receiving (national) cultures. The detachment is the necessary development of reading within the elliptical space, where both reader and text are estranged. In this space, says Damrosch, "we encounter the work […] in the field of force generated among works that may come from very different cultures and areas" (Damrosch 2003, 300).

Damrosch's model includes also a reflection on the role of translation, as he further defines world literature as "writing that gains in translation" (Damrosch 2003, 281). "Gaining", in this case, is to be understood in correlation with the possibility of global circulation: those works that "cannot be translatable without substantial loss" (Damrosch 2003, 289) will most likely remain within a local or national language. In other words they will not engage in a process of transcultural circulation that characterizes world literature in Damrosch's terms. For world literary texts, on the contrary, "stylistic losses [are] offset by an expansion of depth as they increase their range" (Damrosch 2003, 289).

Damrosch's approach – treating world literature as a mode of reading and circulation – is ultimately a way to organize a practice of extensive close reading that takes materials from a variety of times, places, cultures and languages. His politics ultimately amount to a form of liberal multiculturalism, focusing on the "gains" of the increased level of circulation of literary texts, as well as on appreciating the aesthetic particularities of certain world literary configurations between readership and texts. Damrosch's world literature presents itself as a supremely dialogical project that "offers us exceptional opportunities for creative juxtaposition and fresh affiliation" (Damrosch 2005). That is why the contrast with the other two "initiators" of the modern debate – Moretti and Casanova – is often perceived as quite stark, as both are primarily concerned, in their own ways, with the inequalities and conflicts implicated in world literature.

Moretti's seminal article "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000) takes up, in unprecedentedly rigorous terms, the methodological challenge that Auerbach first sketched in 1952. If world literature is to be an incommensurable expansion on our perspective on literary studies, superseding the narrow perspective of national literatures, how can we reach a satisfactory synthesis? How can we avoid amateurism and, at the same time, work in a world perspective? World literature is, once again, a methodological problem, which comparative literature, according to Moretti, has traditionally decided to sidestep, becoming "a much more modest intellectual enterprise, fundamentally limited to Western Europe, and mostly revolving around the river Rhine (German philologists working on French literature)" (Moretti 2000, 54).

While Damrosch makes world literature more manageable by stressing how it is always an enterprise undertaken from somewhere, and reframing it as a mode of reading, Moretti insists on seeing it as a totality: a global system that must be studied in its entirety. Consistently, his starting point is to establish a parallelism between the world literary system and the world-system of international capitalism as conceived by Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis. Wallerstein conceives the world-system, in Moretti's words, as "simultaneously one, and unequal: with a core, and a periphery (and a semiperiphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality" (Moretti 2000, 55-56). The world literary system follows a similar pattern: "one literature (*Weltliteratur*, singular, as in Goethe and Marx), or perhaps, better, one world literary system (of inter-related literatures); but a system which is different from what Goethe and Marx had hoped for, because it's profoundly unequal" (Moretti 2000, 56). The inequality between those inter-related literatures stems from the asymmetry of literary exchanges – with core literary cultures being disproportionately influential when compared to peripheral ones.

Seeing literary form, after Roberto Schwartz, as "the abstract of social relationships" (Moretti 2000, 66), Moretti wonders which methodology might enable him to follow the metamorphoses of literary forms within the (uneven) system and therefore unveil its intrinsic social inequalities. The methodological strategy that he suggests is distant reading, which is defined, at least within "Conjectures", as "a patchwork of other people's research, without a single direct textual reading" (Moretti 2000, 57). In other words, distant reading consists in relying almost exclusively on second-hand research – other people's (close) readings, other people's analyses, other people's informed conclusions – in order to reach a synthesis that encompasses a much wider area than an individual first-

hand reader might hope for. Distant reading is still a formalist strategy: it is still interested in form, but avoids the close analysis of texts, because this shift in critical practice "allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems" (Moretti 2000, 57). It is possible, of course, to interpret distant reading as a regulatory idea, a suggestion, a provocation, a call for reading collectively; however it is worth noting that, over the years, Moretti himself, rather than backing down from his initial premises, has radicalised them: his distant reading, especially within the context of the Stanford Literary Lab that he founded in 2010, has been reinvented as a branch of digital humanities, more specifically as "computational criticism", reconfiguring itself not much as a synthesis of second-hand analyses of literary history, but as quantitative analysis of large digital databases of literary texts.

Both Damrosch and Moretti were preceded by Pascale Casanova, whose earliest (and, to date, best-known) reflections on the topic of world literature can be found in *The World Republic of Letters*, published in French in 1999, and in English in 2004. Casanova's thinking resonates with Moretti's "Conjunctures", in the sense that it is also primarily concerned with the power inequalities within the world literary field. Differently from Moretti, who considers the world literary system a mirror image of Wallerstein's world-system, Casanova suggests to look at literature as a relatively autonomous world. She postulates the existence of a world literary space – the "world republic of letters" that gives the title of her book – which is not to be confused with world literature itself, meaning "a body of literature expanded to a world scale, whose documentation and, indeed, existence remains problematic" (Casanova 2005, 72). This space, in her narrative, emerged from Western Europe in the 16th century, expanding in the rest of Europe in the 18th and 19th century and in the rest of the world in the 20th century, as a result of decolonization (see Casanova 2004; Casanova 2005, 195). Just as Moretti takes Wallerstein as his starting point, Casanova is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of the literary field and relative autonomy of art, whose mechanism she expands on a global level through Fernand Braudel's idea of world-economy (Casanova 2005, 80).

Casanova's world literary space has a number of distinctive characteristics. As anticipated, it is a relatively autonomous space, meaning that "issues posed in the political domain cannot be superimposed upon, or confounded with, those of the literary space, whether national or international" (Casanova 2005, 84). It is *relative* independence because the world literary space starts historically from a situation of dependence on the national-political, from which it must gradually emancipate

(Casanova 2005, 85). The autonomy of literature, however, does not imply a democratization of the literary space itself, as the world literary space is defined also by hierarchy and inequality. Its resources – understood in terms of cultural capital and international prestige – are unevenly distributed, and tend to be concentrated within national frontiers, especially in cultural capitals like Paris. The gathered prestige can be invested in inter-national competition, whose winners are able to gather even more prestige and autonomy, freeing themselves from a number of constraints. In this way, prestige and domination perpetuate themselves (Casanova 2005, 82-84).

Casanova believes that only a transnational approach may reveal the mechanisms at work within the world literary space as well as its forms of domination. At the same time, like Damrosch, she still considers the nation a crucial player and an essential level of analysis. As she argues, "each writer is situated once according to the position he or she occupies in a national space, and then once again according to the place that this occupies within the world space" (Casanova 2005, 78). She also shares with Damrosch an interests for texts – unlike Moretti – and her sociological approach goes back to the text after grasping the workings of the world, especially through the analysis of formal rebellions that manage to oppose the established system of literary domination. Casanova's model has faced a significant amount of criticism over the years, but the prominence of her work in the early phases of the debate is arguably responsible for establishing world literature as a prominent branch of sociology of literature, and for forcing the participants to the debate to pay particular attention to the institutions at work within the world literary field.

The three "initiators" – Damrosch, Moretti, Casanova – variously tap into different genealogies underlying different sets of concerns, and follow radically different political and ethical agendas. I want to stress two crucial differences between them, the fist regarding the time-frame of the various "world literatures" they describe. Damrosch, whose book starts with a history of the discovery and reception of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, does not set chronological limitations for his world literature. The detached engagement works both in time and in space, and, as the chapters of his manual *How to Read World Literature* (2009) show, reading across time, across cultures and in translation are all forms of refractions that force us into different (but comparable) forms of estrangement. Both Moretti and Casanova, instead, see world literary studies as rooted in modernity. Moretti needs the capitalist world-system, whose global expansion starts in the late 15th century, really takes off in the 19th century and triumphs with the latest phase of globalisation. Casanova bases her model on the development of the

world literary space, whose dynamics and workings are different from the world-system, but whose chronology is pretty much comparable. Depending on their genealogical affiliations, also other theories of world literature generally adopt one of the two time-frames.

The other point of contention goes back again to the ambivalent nature of world literature as a protean, shifting (or contested) notion. It should be noted that Damrosch, Moretti and Casanova do not talk of world literature as a future perspective, as Goethe, Marx and Auerbach did. Their intervention are concerned with something that is already here, already at work. So, is world literature today a utopian or dystopian dimension? The responses, of course, vary, and much is determined on whether one of the crucial factors at work in contemporary conceptions of world literature, namely globalisation, is conceived by the various theorists. Damrosch, always wary of commercialism and homologation, is nevertheless focused on the multicultural opportunities offered by globalization. Both Moretti and Casanova focus on its inherent inequality, which calls, dialectically, for various forms of resistance in reading, writing and critical practices. It goes without saying that much of the political clashes within the debate on world literature stems from the necessity, in Aamir Mufti's words, "to maintain the critical intelligence of the concept" and avoiding, instead, "the easy commodification in the literary marketplace" that world literature (and its related criticism) seems to be susceptible to (Mufti 2016, xi). Is it possible that Damrosch's detached engagement, just to practice a frequent criticism, may ultimately be precisely in line with a corporate approach to world literature, more or less unwittingly supporting a neoliberal agenda masked as cheap cosmopolitanism and talk of "borderless world"? To be fair, even Moretti more recent shift towards computational humanities and big data – his own personal development of the original formulation of distant reading – oscillates between a neoliberal rebranding of literary studies and an attempt to use the tools of the enemy against him.

1.1.3. The Current Debate on World Literature: Translation, Systems, Institutions

After Casanova's, Moretti's and Damrosch's interventions, the debate on world literature quickly developed in multiple directions, signalling the first time in which the concept commanded significant attention for a sustained period of time. However, world literature remains, now more than ever, a contested term, working as a catalyst for a number of interconnected debates.

One crucial area is, quite predictably, translation. Reading in translation is considered by many the enabling mechanism of world literature, expanding the material available at our disposal and allowing transnational comparisons (although we know that Moretti would consider this extension, in itself, ultimately negligible). Damrosch is generally supportive of this approach, stressing how, "in excellent translation, the result is not the loss of an unmediated original vision but instead a heightening of the naturally creative interaction of reader and text" (Damrosch 2003, 291). The obvious counter-argument from specialist scholars is that this creative interaction is still insufficient to compensate for the loss of critical insight that comes from reading in the original language. Moreover, there is a certain recurring concern that the perspective of publishing on a global scale is actively shaping the aesthetics of literary texts. Since global circulation is key, authors are supposedly producing texts that are supremely translatable (not only linguistically, but also culturally).

Tim Parks, for instance, laments the emergence of the "dull new global novel" – a work whose language is simple, whose content lacks local specificity and is easily digestible by international audiences (Parks 2010); Emily Apter, on the other hand, voiced at an early stage her concern for the "problem-based monocultural aesthetic agenda" (Apter 2001, 3) that artists seem eager to adopt to engage audiences transnationally. If an interest in world literature – as reading practice, as academic discipline – is encouraging these tendencies, easy translatability must necessarily be approached, within the world literary system, with extreme care. Apter is perhaps the most vocal opponent of an easy, relaxed approach to translation. She famously wrote *Against World Literature* (2013), but she is arguably not against world literature *tout-court*, but only against those projects that embrace an easy globalism. Those projects tend to rely on "a translatability assumption" that encourages assimilation masked as accessibility, resulting in what she calls "the entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world's cultural resources" (Apter 2013, 347). Her response is instead "to activate untranslatability as a theoretical fulcrum of comparative literatures with bearing on approaches to world literatures" (Apter 2013, 347).

A particularly interesting suggestion that, instead, simultaneously embraces *and* complicates translatability in the world literary system is represented by Rebecca Walkowitz's focus on "born-translated" literature. Walkowitz defines born-translated literature as made up of works that "do not simply appear in translation", but instead "have been written for translation from the start" (Walkowitz 2015, 3). For Walkowitz, however, being born-translated implies something more than purely seeking

"to entice or accommodate translation" (Walkowitz 2015: 6) for commercial reasons, which is, arguably, the way of the global blockbuster. Instead, Walkowitz's born-translated literature is also meant to incorporate and project a certain critical agenda through a variety of strategies centred around the process of translation, which "works as a thematic, structural, conceptual, and sometimes even typographical device" (Walkowitz 2015, 4).

Two recurring features of born-translated works are their reflective, self-aware nature regarding their conditions of circulation and the dismantling of the category of "native reader" in relation to the language, as in this passage:

> Born-translated works are notable because they highlight the effects of circulation on production. Not only are they quickly and widely translated, they are also engaged in thinking about that process. [...] Most of all, whether of not they manage to circulate globally, today's born-translated works block readers from being "native readers", those who assume that the book they are holding was written for them or that the language they are encountering is, in some proprietary or intrinsic way, theirs. Refusing to match language to geography, many contemporary works will seem to occupy more than one place, to be produced in more than one language, or to address multiple audiences at the same time (Walkowitz 2015: 6).

Born-translated works are complex and critically engaged because they register the processes of cultural mediation that are implied in their diffusion; moreover they are actively invested in blurring the boundaries between national traditions, offering a new way to approach literary history. This is perhaps Walkowitz's most interesting point: "once literary works begin in several languages and in several places, they no longer conform to the logic of national representation" (Walkowitz 2015, 30); it follows that, to accommodate theses works, literary history has to change. One of Walkowitz's suggestions is, for instance, "instead of organizing literary histories according to the citizenship of authors, [organizing it] according to the languages and versions of language in which a work is read, whether as original, translation, edition, adaptation, or collaboration" (Walkowitz 2015, 23).

Another interesting area of debate takes its cue from the various "systemic" approaches to world literature. Which theoretical scheme better illustrates the system of literature from a world perspective? Is it the world-system, as Moretti suggests? Is it Casanova's world literary space, the world republic of letters? The "systemic" approaches acknowledge the necessity to provide a scaffolding that guarantees

the organic connectedness of research and compensates for the gaps that world literature, trying to become a planetary affair that supersedes national traditions, inevitably creates.

A particularly intriguing suggestion, representing a radical rethinking (politically speaking) of world literature, is *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (2015), written collectively by the Warwick Research Collective, or WReC. The book takes its cue from Moretti's "Conjectures", specifically from the idea of yoking the discussion on world literature to Wallerstein's notion of the world-system. The preoccupation of the members of WReC is how literature can register, at a textual level, a key aspect of the capitalist world-system: the process of combined and uneven development. This concept is already present in Moretti through the "one-and-uneven" formula, but the collective retraces its origins in Trotsky, who noted how capitalist production does not entirely supplant old forms of productions and social relations, but is rather conjoined with pre-existing forces, archaic methods of productions and local networks of power. This has historically been true also for colonial contexts, where, notoriously, colonial regimes tended to support traditional hierarchies while imposing new forms of production and social relations. As the members of WReC write, capitalist development is uneven, in the sense that "[it] does not smooth away but rather produces unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course" (Deckard et al. 2015, 12). At the same time, it offers a globally unified perspective, because combined and uneven development is a key, if not *the* key aspect of modernity. As they claim, "uneven development is not a characteristic of 'backward' formations only" (Deckard et al. 2015, 12), but it is a phenomenon that invests and dominate both the core and the periphery of the whole world-system, unifying them under a single capitalist modernity.

The crucial point is that literature can register combined and uneven development, and in this process, according to the collective, reveal itself as world-literature (with a hyphen, in reference to Wallerstein's world-system). It is worth noting that the term "registration" is meant to stress the complexity and intricacy of the relationship between literary form and social reality, and indicates that a social reality can be encoded in a text through a multiplicity of formal strategies. This is clearly a very different methodology compared to, for instance, treating world literature as a mode of reading and circulation, but it manages nevertheless to provide a framework to tackle literature on a global scale. A particularly interesting feature of the WReC model is that it does not inherently depend, in its choice of case studies, on circulation: provided that a text manages to register combined and uneven development, it emerges as world-literature. This makes this model, his strategies and corollaries

particularly suited to tackle local narratives that do not necessarily enjoy global circulation but whose insight are relevant on a world scale. The registration of combined and uneven development functions at all levels of the world-system: core, periphery and semi-periphery. It should be noted that this model has very precise (self-imposed) chronological boundaries, since it depends on the world-system of global capitalism and on combined and uneven development. Moreover, as an explicitly materialist intervention in the debate on world literature, starting with a specific agenda and a specific theory of modernity, *Combined and Uneven Development* is inherently suspicious of any notion of world literature that "pushes intrinsically in the directions of commerce and commonality, linkage and connection, articulation and integration, network and system" (Deckard et al. 2015, 5). It is particularly polemical towards any theory of world literature and globalisation that conceives both as level playing field, wishing away the structural inequality of the world-system (Deckard et al. 2015, 22).

Most of the systemic approaches to world literature – including the one that we have just discussed – make use of an economical metaphor – the market, the world-system of capitalism. An alternative take has been recently suggested by Alexander Beecroft in *An Ecology of World Literature* (2015). Economic metaphors, according to Beecroft, have the advantage of reducing a complexity of a system to a single unifying aspect (money). However, *ecological* metaphors are, in Beecroft's view, more suited to tackle the complexity of literary systems, where a number of different inputs (that are not equivalent, or that we might want to keep separate) are at work. As he explains, "any given literature must […] be understood in an ecological relationship to other phenomena – political, economical, sociocultural, religious – as well as to the other languages and literatures with which it is in contact" (Beecroft 2014, 19). The ecological metaphor allows us to recognize that "literatures thrive in a wide variety of ways" (Beecroft 2014, 19).

Beecroft suggests that the concept of biome may constitute an effective basis for another comparative approach. The biome is "a set of typological conditions of climate and terrain found in different locations around the world and generating similar kinds of adaptations in plant and animal species" (Beecroft 2014, 25). Similarly, a *literary* biome identifies a number of challenges and constraints that bear on the literature of a specific region (or rather: several similar regions around the world), determining its life, diversity and circulation. These constraints may be linguistic, political, economical, religious, or related to cultural politics or the technologies of distribution (Beecroft 2014, 25–27). Beecroft proceeds then to list six literary biomes – or literary ecologies – that classify ways in

which literature, responding to ecologically comparable contexts in different parts of the world, has historically circulated. The six ecologies are the epichoric or local; the panchoric (a term modelled after "panhellenic"); the cosmopolitan; the vernacular; the national; and finally the global (Beecroft 2014, 33–36). The advantage of Beecroft's model is that, while being systemic, it has no difficulty in moving from antiquity to the present time (and indeed it was conceived with this objective in mind).

A last, important and diversified branch of world literary studies involves seeing world literature as an institution – or as the object of interest of several institutions. This approach partly derives from the sociological perspective inaugurated by Casanova, but it has ultimately taken a number of different pathways. A common thread between these approaches is that they are less interested in reshaping world literature in new directions according to a specific critical agenda or methodological concerns, but focus instead on mapping the emergence of world literature as a historical object, embodied in a variety of institutional forces. A crucial area of inquiry, for instance, is the literary market, a topic that was explored extensively in the 2016 collection *Institutions of World Literature*, edited by Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen. Exploring the market in connection with practices of writing and translation, the book testifies how world literature, perhaps more than other branches of literary studies, seems suited to a sociological analysis.

A strictly sociological approach is not the only way in which the institutions of world literature can be tackled. Venkat Mani, for instance, has recently published *Recoding World Literature: Libraries, Print Culture, and Germany's Pact with Books* (2017), whose main focus is on libraries as places where books are "recoded" as world literature after being coded as national literature in the first place. Mani stresses how libraries and the books they host represent a crucial material, political and symbolical aspect for the creation of our image of the world, and, in turn, of world literature:

> Books and libraries operate on the probability of imagining the world, as a whole or in parts. They offer the possibility of encoding the universe and the world – including divisions, fragmentations, differentiations – making the world and the universe legible, interpretable, decodable, and recordable. (Mani 2017, 11)

Focusing on libraries necessarily involves, for Mani, an attentive study of the process he calls "bibliomigrancy", namely "the physical and virtual migration of literature as books from one part of the

world to another" (Mani 2017, 10). Bibliomigrancy allows Mani to tackle the role of a vast number of actors, like translators, publishers, librarians, editors, booksellers, and, most importantly, readers. All these actors, in their own way, "shape and inform bibliomigrancy" (Mani 2017, 10).

Both the focus on libraries and on the material migration of books are meant to shift the discussion on world literature to the public sphere, "where it is institutionalized in ways that are not always the same as its modes of institutionalization in the university" (Mani 2017, 14). In particular, Mani is also interested in the relationship between books and linguistic and cultural politics – specifically, in his case, of Germany. This involves exploring how institutions can grant or deny "borrowing privileges" (Mani 2017, 47), namely the access to books and to world literature. Mani's approach is genealogical, in the sense that he reconstructs a history of world literature starting from the material circulation of books and the institutions involved in it. His genealogy ultimately leads to Orientalism – a crucial catalyst, historically, for the migration of books, especially in Germany. Indeed Goethe's interest for world literature, triggered also by "oriental" works like the Chinese novel he was reading, was enabled by the overflow of "oriental" literature that reached Germany as a result of Orientalist enterprises.

In this sense Mani's book shares some common ground with another recent publication, Aamir Mufti's *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (2016). Mufti, whose focus is instead on India, treats the relationship between the institution of world literature and Orientalism as the kernel of his work, arguing that "world literature had its origins in the structures of colonial power and in particular the revolution in knowledge practices and humanistic culture more broadly initiated by Orientalist philology" (Mufti 2016, 19). More importantly, Mufti states that the cultural and social logics of Orientalism are still relevant for world literature today, especially in determining the relationship between the world and its persistent *doppelgänger*, the nation.

Mufti points out that historical Orientalism was responsible "for the fabrication, in non-Western societies […], of forms of cultural authority tied to the claim to authenticity of (religious, cultural, and national) 'tradition'" (Mufti 2016, 27). World literature, as an all-encompassing record of literary history, emerges precisely from the conception that cultures are autonomous, well-defined units that can be grasped and incorporated in a general system as their authentic (traditional, pure) selves – as authentic representatives of a homogeneous national culture. Mufti therefore establishes a historical link between national and world literature, claiming that both world and nation are "in a determinate

relationship of mutual reinforcement" (Mufti 2016, 77), and that "while the historicist-Orientalist ways of thinking canonized an emphasis on the variety of being human, they did so to establish the *same* manner of being different" (Mufti 2016, 77) – namely life within a nation.

This is a prototypical form of colonial epistemological violence, because it classifies the cultural tradition of a specific part of the world within the schemes of Western scholarship. From this colonial paradigms descends a current notion of "diversity" that is ultimately Orientalist in its logic. This idea of diversity is often opposed, in the literary field, to the hegemonic ambition of English – similarly to the way Orientalist and Anglicist positions were opposed in the Indian cultural debate of the 19th century. However, answering to English with an Orientalist conception of diversity – a return to a supposedly authentic, self-contained national self – is hardly a solution, as it lends itself to a connivance with essentialist and majoritarian ideologies. Mufti's point is that world literature needs to rethink itself, in the light of its colonial origins, as "the history (and contemporary workings) of these relations of force and powers of assimilation and the ways in which writers and texts respond to such pressures from a variety of locations in the world" (Mufti 2016, 250).

1.2. Anthropology

1.2.1. Connecting World Literature and Anthropology

World literary studies, as I have shown so far, can adopt a great variety of interdisciplinary and theoretical approaches. However one particular discipline, anthropology, has been largely absent from the debates on world literature, in spite of the fact that several of its critical contributions, ideas and research objectives are quite relevant for world literary studies. Mufti and Spivak are two (partial) exceptions. Most notably, Mufti, as we will see, locates anthropology within the intellectual history of world literature, as well as drawing important parallelisms between Auerbach's "Philology and *Weltliteratur*" and Claude Lévy-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (see Mufti 2016, 208-210). Spivak, on the other hand, seems to employ anthropology mostly as a negative model of various forms of "bad" comparativism, for instance in her attack of the "unexamined, dull anthropologism of cultural

relativism" that implies "cultural equivalence or full translatability" (Spivak 2009, 613). Her engagement with anthropology is equally tangential in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, focused on the figure of the native informant – a term she explicitly borrow from ethnography, but that she quickly disengages from anthropological discourse or practice (Spivak 1999, 6).

However the convergences between these two fields of study are remarkable. Anthropology is a discipline that has historically been constructed around two opposite poles: "the particularizing and the generalizing" (Brettell 2009, 650). More specifically: general anthropological speculation, which, in its more extreme versions, is nothing less than an attempt to make universal statements on humankind; and ethnographic fieldwork, which, on the other hand, tends to focus on local knowledge and forces comparisons within narrower parameters. The interplay between anthropological theorizing and ethnographic fieldwork generates the crucial "intellectual dilemma" of the discipline, as Richard Handler puts it: "the relationship between human diversity (understood in terms of historical, social, and/or cultural particularity) and human unity (we are all members of the same species)" (Handler 2009, 628). This is essentially what also world literature, *mutatis mutandis*, is struggling with. The shared premise of the field is to offer more unified perspectives to literary studies – but how is this perspective supposed to be constructed in relation to local, regional, national traditions? Both fields aim to produce greater syntheses of local cultural realities, but both must dedicate theoretical resources to, in Nirvana Tanoukhi's words, "the problem of crossing considerable divides without yielding to the fallacy of decisive leaps" (Tanoukhi 2008, 599). In both cases, the concerns are at the same time epistemological and political.

World literature and anthropology, therefore, share a core set of concerns, and the debates in both fields might productively cross-fertilize each other, especially because these similar concerns exist for precise historical reasons. As academic disciplines and epistemological projects, both world literature and anthropology may be reconnected to the same theoretical, historical and material point of origins, namely various forms of colonial expansion and their intellectual and ideological correlates. World literature, according to Mufti, has been historically engendered by an Orientalist/colonial ordering of people in well-defined national cultures (and their respective literatures). But if philological Orientalism was focused on the mapping of various "advanced" or "civilized" societies, anthropology, which emerged later as an offshoot of the same theoretical impulse (the mapping of diversity to reach unity), was supposed to focus on "primitive" cultures in a "disciplinary division of labour" (Mufti

2016, 58). Anthropology, throughout its history, developed this connection with colonialism in a number of ways – initially, in its armchair phase, by relying on ethnographic sources that were embedded, to various degrees, in colonial contexts and power structures: explorers, colonial administrators, travel writers, missionaries.

The adoption of ethnography as anthropology's standard methodology, at the beginning of the 20th century, established the anthropologist as a fieldworker-theorist and allowed researchers to collect data that, in their intentions, was scientific and unbiased. Bronislaw Malinowski, in his methodological introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific,* is arguably the most authoritative voice in this sense, forcefully arguing for the effectiveness of participant-observation – which was meant to allow the fieldworker to balance immersion in a foreign culture with scientific detachment. Unlike non-professional ethnographers such as missionaries and colonial administrators, anthropologists-ethnographers were meant to be unaffected by agendas such as colonial and imperialist ones.

In practice, not only did anthropologists retain colonial epistemological modes in their very methods and theories, but they remained in an extremely ambivalent position in terms of their political allegiances. As Kathleen Gough argues, anthropologists, since the beginning, "had obligations, first to the peoples [they] studied, second, to [their] colleagues and [their] science, and third, to the powers who employed [them] in universities or who funded [their] research" (Gough 1968, 17). The third order of obligations, along with the fact that their field of expertise, during the 20th century, shifted from "primitive" to colonial peoples (Kuper 1996, 113), led anthropology to be developed essentially in colonial contexts in collaboration with colonial powers – or, in the American case, in close collaboration with the U.S. imperial policies. The ways in which the relationship was developed varied greatly depending on the individuals involved and the specific historical contexts. For instance, British anthropologists systematically attempted to advertise anthropology, even in its academic version, as a source of useful knowledge for colonial administration (Kuper 1996, 95), but theirs were, sometimes, more tactical than heartfelt commitments (D. Mills 2008, 90). On the other hand, especially in the case of applied anthropology, there were numerous cases in which anthropologists did actively contribute to imperialist policies, most famously during the 1960s in the context of the Cold War, when it was revealed that several anthropologists were directly supporting counterinsurgency programmes in Latin America and South-East Asia (Patterson 2001, 124–27).

Anthropologists, in recent decades, have become very much aware of these problems. As a consequence, attempts to decolonize the discipline, or to turn it into something more radical, critical or self-reflective, both politically and epistemologically, have been going on, in various forms, since the 1960s. The spectre of colonial/imperial/neocolonial connivance, however, still haunts the discipline, a prime example being the recent attempts to recruit anthropologists in a massive counterinsurgency programme on the part of the U.S. Army for their war efforts in the Middle East (see Price 2009). Anthropology's problematic relationship with colonial and neocolonial forms of power should not fall on deaf ears in the context of world literature, which is similarly a field that, while only recently institutionalized, is prone to discuss and face similar issues, from a political, disciplinary and epistemological point of view. A discipline that, for better or for worse, must fend off its reputation of being the "handmaiden of colonialism" has arguably a lot to teach to whoever wants to work within a field of studies that is often accused of silently supporting neoliberal views of globalization.

Faced with similar epistemological, political and methodological problems, anthropology and world literature may look at each other for ways and modes – better ways, better modes – of creating unity out of diversity and, at the same time, of preserving diversity within unifying paradigms. My own attempt to integrate world literature and anthropology is based on a specific concept, the anthropological imagination, whose mapping allows me to connect a variety of historical and geographical contexts and literary traditions. Before I define the anthropological imagination and discuss my methodology, however, I want to explore more extensively the way in which the debates on anthropological theory can be productively juxtaposed with the current discussion on world literature, as well as discussing the relationship between anthropology and literature more generally. These two topics will be the focus of the next two sections. Both sections will also be the occasion to highlight two central moments in anthropological theory that will consistently echo throughout my work.

1.2.2. Juxtaposing Debates: the Comparative Method

As an example of how theories and debates in world literary studies and anthropology can be productively compared to highlight problems and strategies within both fields, let me juxtapose a classical shift in the history of anthropology – the passage from armchair anthropology/evolutionism to

the first phase of anthropology as a fieldwork science – with a contemporary world literary debate. The focus of both is the comparative method, which, quite conveniently, is a central theoretical concern in both fields of studies.

When modern academic anthropology emerged in the second part of the 19th century, it was conceived as maximally comparative endeavour, which aimed at reconstructing the history of humankind throughout its evolutionary stages. It initially fashioned itself as "a general science of man, [aiming at] discovering social laws in the long evolution of humans toward higher standards of rationality" (Marcus and Fischer 1999, 7). The context in which this science developed was imperial expansion, a period of increased contact with cultural others that had given, even in the previous decades, much to ponder to Western intellectuals. The cultural others that early anthropology was concerned with included, in the British context, the various colonial subjects of the Empire; and in the context of the United States, Native Americans – two fairly different cases, one "external" and one "internal" to the West, but similarly characterized by a colonial relationship with a metropolitan core.

The canonical figure of this phase of the discipline is British anthropologist Edward Tylor. In his seminal text *Primitive Culture* (1871), particularly well-known for its anthropological definition of culture[1], Tylor argued that "mankind [is] homogeneous in nature, though placed in different grades of civilization" (Tylor 2010, 7), suggesting a unitary model of cultural evolution shared by all humankind that locates every human culture within a single developmental ladder. Within this model, cultures at a similar "evolutionary stage" can be compared: "the ancient Swiss lake-dweller may be set beside the mediaeval Aztec, and the Ojibwa of North America beside the Zulu of South Africa" (Tylor 2010, 6). Tylor also argued that culture does not evolve simultaneously in all its aspects, resulting in the presence of "survivals". These are relics from previous stages of cultural evolution, "derived from an earlier state, in which the proper home and meaning of these things are to be found" (Tylor 2010, 64). Both survivals and the idea of a single developmental ladder imply that "primitive cultures" are also quite literally a mirror of the past, since they are located in an evolutionary phase that civilized cultures have already outgrown. In the United States, Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877) conceived progress in fairly similar terms, with humanity advancing identically (but not simultaneously) from a savage to a civilized stage.

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1   "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 2010, 1)

Tylor's and Morgan's anthropology was based on the idea of the genetic and psychic unity of humankind, differently from previous forms of theoretical speculation centred on polygenic models, often with distinctively racist implications. Monogenesis, the shared origin of humankind, has been, since then, a fundamental assumption of modern anthropology (Barnard 2002, 38) and its victory can arguably be considered a watershed moment in the history of the discipline as we know it today, possibly its actual founding moment. Yet stating equivalence in one respect did not imply the absence of hierarchies. On the contrary: the so-called unilineal evolutionism shared by Tylor and Morgan did explicitly set a specific model of civilization (the West) as the point of arrival of cultural evolution. This has several problematic implications, most crucially that evolutionist anthropology, by predicating the inevitable overcoming of backward stages of cultural evolution, directly fed imperialist and colonialist ideologies, providing moral and scientific backup for the extermination of native institutions – if not of natives themselves (Stocking 1987, 273). This in spite of the more or less genuine interest for the well-being of the "primitive" on the part of the anthropologists themselves. Morgan, in this sense, perfectly embodies this paradox: working for decades as a lawyer on behalf of Native Americans, and as a vocal opposer of their plight, he nevertheless formalized a theory of progress that could be – and was – exploited to support their marginalization (Patterson 2001, 31–33).

Evolutionist anthropology – with the partial exception of Morgan, who did a certain amount of fieldwork – was mostly "armchair" theorizing, synthesizing materials deriving from questionnaires and informants, or, as it was most often the case, from second-hand accounts of various travellers (Stocking 1987, 79). Those accounts came from a variety of sources: explorers, naturalists, missionaries and colonial officers – all categories of "non-professional" ethnographers that later generations of anthropologist-ethnographers would dismiss and use as negative examples to construct their professional identity but that were, most crucially, all involved in the broader process of colonial expansion in some way or another. The data of evolutionist ethnography, therefore, was embedded within the colonial system and a number of specific agendas, in spite of being detached from actual fieldwork.

One of the first major responses to the political and epistemological limits of evolutionist anthropology was carried out precisely through the appropriation, by professional anthropology, of ethnographic fieldwork. In the United States, the manifesto of this new phase is undoubtedly "The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology" (1896) by Franz Boas. Boas sharply

criticized the grand synthesis of evolutionist anthropology, arguing that their use of the comparative method was fundamentally flawed. Boas tried to envision a comparative method that was, simultaneously, less ambitious, but more epistemologically solid. Boas argued that "comparisons should be restricted to those phenomena which have been proven to be effects of the same cause" (Boas 1896, 904). Instead of any "grand system of the evolution of society" (Boas 1896, 905), which can be sustained only by groundless speculations, Boas thought that much better insights on the origins of customs could be obtained through "a detailed study of customs in their bearings to the total culture of the tribe practising them, and in connection with an investigation of their geographical distribution among neighbouring tribes" (Boas 1896, 905).

Boas, therefore, does not rules out comparison *per se*, but subordinates it to local knowledge: "the comparative method can only hope to reach the grand results for which it is striving only when it bases its investigation on the historical results of researches which are devoted to laying clear the complex relations of each individual culture" (Boas 1896, 908). The key to this new approach is precisely ethnographic fieldwork, providing first-hand experience and data, carried out in the language of native populations, and focusing on the perspective of the natives. This is the reason why Boas is considered the father of professional ethnography in the United States. He plays a similar role to Bronislaw Malinowski for the British anthropology, although Malinowski, perhaps even more than Boas, is considered today the chief theorist of the ethnographic method.

Boas and his pupils are also considered the initiators of classical cultural relativism, promoting the idea that judgements on a culture should employ the values and cognitive paradigms of that very culture. This theoretical shift was also embraced due to political reasons. Boas, a life-long opposer of racism and xenophobia in American society, used cultural relativism to oppose the innate ethnocentrism of evolutionary paradigms (Barnard 2002, 137). The epistemological critique of evolutionist methods, at least in theory, goes hand in hand with a political critique: rejecting the superimposing of universalizing models means also to reject any claim to political dominance based on such models. It is worth noting that, at a later stage, cultural relativism, due to the neutrality in which it forced the anthropologist, was attacked because it disabled the possibility of political and ethical judgment – something I variously explore in the following two chapters.

The clash between evolutionist anthropology (a maximally comparative endeavour based on second-hand accounts) and Boasian anthropology (with its focus on local knowledge and the

irreducibility of individual cultures) is a foremost example of a theoretical shift in anthropology that turns out to be very insightful for a scholar of world literature. Anthropological debates like this can be used to illuminate debates on world literature, precisely because their chief concerns and terms of discussion tend to be very similar. For instance, this debate shares curious similarities to the one focused around distant reading. Indeed, armchair anthropology may be considered a form of distant reading – albeit a very undisciplined one, taking much freedom in establishing conclusions and connections. The project of evolutionist anthropology was based on maintaining distance from its data, which is exactly Moretti's core idea, distance being for him a condition for knowledge. "The more ambitious the project, the greater must the distance be" (Moretti 2000, 57) – and indeed few intellectual enterprises are *less* ambitious than a general science of man. If we see ethnography as close reading, evolutionist anthropologists were definitely doing, instead, "a patchwork of other people's research, without a single direct textual reading" (Moretti 2000, 57). It may not be a chance that Moretti, to demonstrate his methodology in "Conjectures", ends up talking of "*a law of literary evolution*" (Moretti 2000, 58, emphasis in the original) – echoing a positivist scientific language.

Compared to 19th century evolutionists, Moretti is much more aware that a method focusing on "general" knowledge comes with a reduction of our appreciation of diversity, and wisely points out that one of the limits of his methodology is the inability to capture the nuances of "local voice" (Moretti 2000, 66). But some of the criticism that has befallen the "Conjectures" does nevertheless echo the concerns of Boasian anthropology. For instance, when Francesca Orsini – one of Moretti's earliest respondents – argues that one should be wary of passively applying Moretti's method to the context of the Indian Subcontinent (her area of expertise), she is taking up a plea for local knowledge (including *linguistic* expertise) against the temptation of an uprooted "general" knowledge that makes too hasty generalisations (see Orsini 2004). Similarly to Boasian anthropology, Orsini is not hostile to comparison in itself. In a recent essay she promotes what she calls, after Karima Laachir (Laachir 2015), an "entangled comparative reading" of Urdu, Hindi and English village novels. However her comparativism is cautious, maintaining that the influences between these traditions are indeed best seen as a working hypothesis (Orsini 2017, 62), and is carried out within geographical and linguistic criteria of proximity, differently from Moretti's global reach.

My point is not that these two debates, separated by about a century as well as from disciplinary differences, overlap perfectly, but that they are mutually illuminating. The world literary debates is

made up of a variety of different attempts to combine the particularizing and the generalizing. Anthropology and ethnography do the same. I have lingered on the contrast between evolutionist and Boasian anthropology because, however dated both perspectives may be today, it illustrates quite well two general approaches to culture that can still be used as blueprint to frame contemporary comparative strategies. Anthropology has historically provided us, and continues to provide us, with several modes to establish cross-cultural comparisons that can be used as benchmark for comparative projects in world literary studies. This implies, for both fields, a constant experimentation with a variety of comparative methodologies that possess different epistemologies and can be attached to different politics.

1.2.3. Blurring Boundaries: from the Textual Turn in Anthropology to the Present Day

If, on a theoretical level, the connections between world literature and anthropology have not been extensively explored, the same cannot be said for the relationship between anthropology and literature in general. As Alberto Sobrero argues, anthropology has always been profoundly intertwined with literature – they are bound by what he calls, after Clifford Geertz (2003), a strange romance, where mutual passion is intertwined with rejection and betrayal (Sobrero 2010, 35). Both anthropology and literature deal with the paradoxical business of "narrating the other", and, in this respect, they periodically resort to each other to compensate for their own limitations (Sobrero 2010, 31). Creative writers are sometimes inspired by anthropological studies – a primary example being Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, whose influence on a variety of literary authors can hardly be overestimated. In turn, anthropologists often look at literature with great interest – sometimes considering writers as insightful informants or even as anthropologists in their own right (see Craith and Kockel 2014, 690–91). Both writers and anthropologists have frequently written in each other's modes and genres, or have mixed creative and scientific writing in generic hybrids like Lévy-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*.

On the other hand, professional anthropology, in its classical Malinowskian form, historically defined itself *against* literature and other "non-scientific" ethnographic accounts, emerging precisely from the attempt to create more disciplined, more authoritative and accurate narratives of the other through theory, method and purity of scientific aim. Conversely, literature, and especially fiction, has

no obligation to reality, even when it adopts a mimetic form – which is, depending on the perspective, both a representational advantage and a shortcoming. In Didier Fassin's words, "while fiction could never claim to simply reproduce the real, the argument that it is faithful to reality gives ethnography a form of authority that has important ethical and political consequences" (Fassin 2014, 53). In short: in spite of many mutual compenetrations and possible cross-fertilizations between ethnographic and creative writing, there are also valid arguments to keep them apart and maintain their specificities.

This complex set of entanglements between anthropology and literature has been at the core of a rich discussion starting from the early 1970s, as part of a more general discussion on the epistemology of social sciences. This discussion largely corresponds to the postmodern, language-oriented phase of critical, reflexive anthropology, after the earlier, more distinctively anti-colonial critique (see Asad 1973). In the same years Hayden White controversially claimed that the historiographic text could, in many ways, be treated as a literary artefact (White 1978), Clifford Geertz's interpretative anthropology started to "blur the boundaries" between literature and anthropology. Geertz claims that the analysis of culture is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning" (Geertz 2000b, 5) He established a number of assumptions – ethnographic data as constructed by the ethnographer (Geertz 2000b, 9), writing as the main activity of the ethnographer (Geertz 2000b, 19), anthropological writings as "fictions", also in the sense that ethnographic knowledge is inherently contestable (Geertz 2000b, 29), culture "as an ensemble of texts" (Geertz 2000a, 452) – that drastically reduced the distance between the epistemological status of literature and anthropology. A later book, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologists as Author*, further reinforces this idea by foregrounding how the style of a given anthropologist is ultimately crucial to convince the readers of the reliability of his or her statements – it is an integral part of the construction of ethnographic authority (Geertz 1988, 4). In other words, ethnographic authority – traditionally intended as being able to convince your readers that you have "been there" in the fieldwork and gained precious insight as a consequence – is, ultimately, a rhetorical achievement.

The major watershed in the field was undoubtedly *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, a 1986 collection of essays edited by James Clifford and George Marcus. This collection, as the title suggests, focuses on ethnographic writing, stressing its inevitably biased nature in spite of its claims to scientific neutrality, its institutional and historical location, its historical dependence on colonial circumstances, as well as on the multiple forces at work in the production of an ethnographic

text (including the long-silenced voice of native informants). As a consequence, Clifford famously argues in the introduction that "ethnographic truths are […] inherently partial – committed and incomplete" (Clifford 2009, 7), which does not mean that everything goes, but rather that ethnographers must be fully aware of their representational limits: "acute political and epistemological self-consciousness need not lead to ethnographic self-absorption, or to the conclusion that is impossible to know anything certain about other people" (Clifford 2009, 7). Clifford is stressing here the importance of reflexivity, arguably a lasting and crucial contribution to the ethnographic method from this phase, in spite of the recurring criticisms that it *does* lead to self-absorption and ultimately to a betrayal of the anthropologist vocation – studying others (see Davies 2008).

Elsewhere, Clifford also writes extensively on the various forms of ethnographic authority that emerged throughout the 20th century, stressing how the original realist and "monologic" mode of ethnographic authority has been contrasted, in more recent times, with interpretative, dialogic and polyphonic forms (Clifford 1988, 53). His use of a terminology explicitly derives from Bakhtin's theories of narrative further helped to equate the narrative modes of ethnography with those of fiction – an operation similar to Geertz's *Works and Lives*. An interesting point is that Clifford states that none of these forms of ethnographic authority is pure or obsolete, and that there is room for invention in each paradigm (Clifford 1988, 53), begging the question of how, rhetorically, contrasting approaches to ethnographic authority may coexist in a single discourse, in a single language.

Postmodern anthropology – especially the *Writing Culture* phase – has been variously criticized for its "depoliticizing, dematerializing, unwittingly conservative tendencies" – as well as for "its reduction of ethnography to a solipsistic literary practice" (Comaroff 2010, 525). As I pointed out, anthropologists like Clifford are at least *aware* of the risks connected to an excessive focus on self-reflexivity. On the other hand, such focus on textuality and language, if it does not rule out an engagement with historicity and even politics (in a way, *Writing Culture* is precisely about retrieving/revealing a political dimension of ethnographic writing through its contextualization), runs the risk of experiencing politics and historicity exclusively in a discursive dimension. If these *are* shortcomings, this attention to a textual dimension and to an epistemology that allows a comparison between literary and anthropological knowledge have at the very least opened up a field of interdisciplinary inquiry. All these interventions – by stressing the importance of hermeneutics, partial truths, ambiguity, writing strategies and literary techniques for ethnography – have established a

significant interest for exploring, from a theoretical point of view, the literature-anthropology nexus. This explains the substantial number of works on the topic that have been produced in the last three decades, showcasing a variety of approaches and research interests. For instance. there are several collections of essays that deal with this topic, such as Dennis and Aycock (1989), Benson (1993), De Angelis (2002) and Cohen (2015). Throughout the years, several journals dedicated special numbers to this topic – a recent example being a 2014 issue of *Ethnologie française* that was precisely about the conjunction between ethnology and the literary. Another platform on which the discussion is carried out is the journal *Anthropology and Humanism,* which frequently tackles topics in which the two perspectives are conjoined.

From the literary side of the divide, another field of studies that was born from the encounter between anthropology and literature is New Historicism: its chief figure, Stephen Greenblatt, explicitly declares his filiation from Geertz, defining his research as "a […] cultural or anthropological criticism – if by 'anthropological' here we think of interpretative studies of culture" (Greenblatt 2005, 6). Greenblatt, whose methodology is specular to that of postmodern anthropology – he incorporates an anthropological dimension within a strictly textualist field of studies – conceives a work of art as neither separated from culture nor as a direct, mimetic representation of reality, but rather as "the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society" (Greenblatt 1989, 12). Greenblatt's and the New Historicists' practice is therefore rooted in the kind of blurring of boundaries between literary hermeneutics and anthropological readings of culture that have been enabled by the interpretative/textual turn in anthropology, as well as participating in a number of postmodern assumptions about the nature of critical practice and the historical positioning of subjects (see Veeser 1994, 2) that echo the broader intellectual endeavour of the *Writing Culture* moment.

It is worth noting that the relationship between anthropology and postcolonial criticism/theory, another field dominated by literature scholars that may seem, at first glance, an ideal interdisciplinary partner, has been much more tormented, and remains surprisingly problematic to this day. Graham Huggan argues how anthropology and postcolonial criticism/theory have historically constructed each others as straw men – accusing each other of carrying out reductive forms of thinking and deeply flawed representations of cultural/colonial others. Postcolonial scholars tend to highlight how "the disciplinary apparatus of anthropology has effectively rewarded its practitioners for manufacturing

imperialist representations of the non-European other", but simultaneously silence "the history of self-criticism that arguably defines the entire discipline" (Huggan 2008, 8). In return, anthropologists seems to focus on specific "scapegoat figures" to carry out a general onslaught on postcolonial criticism or to conflate "the by no means readily compatible views of postcolonial critics and theorists on complex issues of cross-cultural representation and exchange" (Huggan 2008, 8). This is an aspect that might explain why world literary studies, emerging, in part, from a tradition of postcolonial studies, seems unwilling to engage with anthropology. In spite of these disagreements and reciprocal accusations, postcolonial studies and anthropology share a number of theoretical preoccupations, an aspect that my work – heavily drawing from both – tries to demonstrate.

At any rate, the legacy of the discussion around the interconnections between literature and ethnography/anthropology, carried out from the 1980s onwards, represents an extremely useful toolkit to tackle texts with an anthropological approach, even if the focus shifts to *world* literature. I therefore work under the assumption that anthropological and literary knowledge are epistemologically similar; that both are amenable to interpretation; that ethnographic writing constantly employs rhetorical strategies and is receptive to stylistic analysis; that ethnographic authority is, to a significant extent, a stylistic achievement and can adopt various narrative modes; that, on the other hand, literary writing can contain profound ethnographic insights; that writing (ethnographic or otherwise) is an activity that is always historically located, and is never politically neutral, especially if it deals with the representation of others. That said, this shift in focus towards world literature highlights a different configuration of challenges and problems, both from an epistemological and a political point of view, calling for different methodological solutions.

1.2.4. The Anthropological Imagination and the Ethnographic Encounter

My work relies both on various of theoretical cross-fertilizations between anthropology and world literature, and on the extensive critical reflection on the relationship between between anthropology and literature in general. The theoretical and methodological core of my proposal, however, works on slightly different lines. I try to employ anthropology and ethnography not *only* in terms of theory, but as a foundation for ordering metaphors that we can use to construct a connective tissue between

seemingly distant literary works. I suggest here two concepts that constitute the starting point of my project of world literature: the anthropological imagination and the ethnographic encounter. Mirroring to an extent the relationship between theory and fieldwork, the anthropological imagination and the ethnographic encounter are mutually dependent and mutually constitutive.

The anthropological imagination, as I define it, is made up of the various constellations of epistemic operations that different individuals or groups rely on whenever they are called at making sense of a cultural other. I take the term "epistemic operation" from John Comaroff's definition of anthropology as a praxis, "a mode of producing knowledge based on a few closely interrelated epistemic operations", in which "epistemic" means that those operations "entail an orientation to the nature of knowledge itself, its philosophical underpinnings and its notions of truth, fact, value" (Comaroff 2010, 530). The anthropological imagination is precisely the result of an anthropological praxis. But whereas Comaroff's definition is normative – aimed at pinpointing *the* form of praxis he deems more valuable to produce good anthropological knowledge – I am interested in creating a *typology* of the forms of the anthropological imagination. Hence I explore different anthropological praxes that register different forms of the anthropological imagination based on different epistemic operations. It follows that my definition of anthropological praxis is necessarily broader that Comaroff's, encompassing all attempts to create knowledge or to frame epistemologically or imaginatively a cultural other.

The various epistemic operations are activated in the context of a concrete encounter with cultural otherness: the ethnographic encounter between an "ethnographer-figure" and a "native", in which the anthropological praxis is concretely enacted. In a sense, all cross-cultural encounters are potentially ethnographic, but I suggest that the term "ethnographic encounter" may be used when we wish to look specifically at how a given encounter contributes to shape a specific anthropological imagination. The "ethnographer-figure" is, in a broad metaphorical sense, the person whose anthropological imagination is being scrutinized. Of course, in the context of each encounter, each "ethnographer-figure" can potentially become a "native" – the person on whom the anthropological imagination is enacted – by simply reversing the perspective, although the shift may not always be possible if, for instance, the native's perspective has been silenced in one way or another.

How does the anthropological imagination work, especially in connection with the ethnographic encounter? In taking up a cognate concept, that of ethnographic imagination, Paul Willis offers a useful

starting point: he claims that "ethnography needs a theoretical imagination which it will not find, 'there', descriptively on the field"; at the same time, that "the theoretical imaginings of the social sciences are always best shaped in close tension with observational data" (Willis 2000, viii). The anthropological imagination, as I see it, is based on a similar interplay between a mental faculty and a field: it is a faculty that we activate whenever we face a cultural other. In turn, this faculty is shaped by our engagement with the other and functions as the starting point for future engagements. This circular mechanism – the theoretical schemes are modified on the field and in turn prepare us for encounters to come – is, roughly speaking, the same that is suggested by a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory refers to a methodology in social research that creates analytical categories starting from empirical data – a theory that emerges out of the field instead of being superimposed on it (see Tarozzi 2008).

It is important to note that for Willis the ethnographic imagination is a methodology that orientates his fieldwork, and therefore he describes it as a specialized, even professionalized use of the imagination. The idea of imagination I am interested in, instead, is *always* involved within *any* description of a cultural other, both as an initial framework that helps us navigate an (ethnographic) encounter and as emerging framework that results from that interaction. Moreover, I prefer the term "anthropological" over "ethnographic" imagination because it allows me to include all these instances of imagining the other that are not inherently ethnographic – for instance whenever one constructs his or her image of the other exclusively through reading and not through contact or experience. We might argue, however, that the forms of anthropological imagination that do not rely on fieldwork rely instead on "distant" forms of ethnographic encounter (as it might be argued for 19th century evolutionist anthropology). My point is not to blur any distinction between these very different sources of the anthropological imagination, but to stress that no idea on cultural others really develops in a vacuum, and ultimately goes back to a concrete encounter, which people may refer to even without sharing a direct experience of it.

It might also be useful to distinguish the anthropological imagination from the sociological imagination. This highly popular concept was initially conceived by C. Wright Mills in his 1959 book *The Sociological Imagination*. It is an inescapable benchmark if one wants to use "imagination" as a concept in the social sciences – Willis himself cites it as an influence to develop his idea of the ethnographic imagination (Willis 2000, 3). In Mills' classical formulation, the sociological imagination

indicates a "quality of mind" (C. W. Mills 2000, 4) that works as a bridge between between private "troubles" and public "issues" – or, in other words, between the individual life and its personal viewpoint, and the broader historical and social phenomena that invest society as a whole. Mills' sociological imagination – his suggested methodology for modern sociology – "enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals" (C. W. Mills 2000, 5). Similarly to Mills, I am also interested in the back and forth between two dimensions that are different in scope and location: the moment of the encounter and the mental generalization that both precedes and follows it. However, in my use of the term, the imagination *is* one of the two poles of this process, not a connecting mental faculty. As such, embedded as it is in the variety of ethnographic encounters, it is not a singular faculty but it is inevitably plural: in theory, there are as many anthropological imaginations as there are forms of ethnographic encounters in which different forms of epistemic operations are enacted.

The plurality of both these categories is also connected with the fact that neither, in any form, is politically or epistemologically neutral. In the case of ethnographic encounters, this is true both for encounters with manifest "practical objectives" – those carried out in the context of colonial administration, espionage or counterinsurgency, just to make a few examples – and for encounters that are supposedly "detached", "scientific" and "unbiased". Any ethnographic encounter always needs what Clifford calls, in reference to ethnographic writing, the "specification of discourses [...]: who speaks? who writes? when and where? with or to whom? under what institutional and historical constraints?" (Clifford 2009, 13). This is no mere need for contextualization, but has profound political implications: historicising a discourse, after all, means to reveal its political and cultural biases and agendas, stripping it of any supposed objectivity. It follows that, since the anthropological imagination can always be seen as the product of an ethnographic encounter ("distant" or based on actual experience), the anthropological imagination is not a universal but profoundly historical category. It depends on the positioning of the individual that is activating it. Different forms of the anthropological imagination are at ease with specific modes of ethnographic encounter and at loss with others; each of them, whenever it is put in writing, relies on a different form of ethnographic authority.

It should be clear, at this point, that "anthropological" and "ethnographic" do not point exclusively at academic anthropology. Instead, they refer also to various forms of applied anthropology, as well as practices of cultural encounter and theorizing that are incidentally ethnographic or

anthropological, without any interest in disciplinary norms or ethics. In doing that, I take up the suggestion by Pels and Salemink that a history of anthropology that only deals with academic, "pure" anthropology is tragically incomplete and idealizing (Pels and Salemink 2000). Instead, adequate attention should be given to all forms of "applied" and "practical" anthropologies, both before and after the professionalization of the discipline and its assimilation of the ethnographic method. We can take canonical participant-observant ethnography (or at least, an ethnography that consciously aims at those standards) as one of many possibilities of encountering and understanding a cultural other. Other distinctive configurations that are nevertheless involved in an "anthropological" understanding of the other through "ethnographic" encounters are, for instance, journalism, travel writing, activism, missionary work, military studies of an "enemy" in the context of war or counterinsurgency, espionage. For all these categories, "theory" and "field" mean different things. If fieldwork, in the traditional academic notion, implies a certain degree of political detachment that is quite the opposite of, for instance, the required stance of activism as a partisan and totalizing choice, it follows that, for activism, the "field" will inevitably blur with life.

None of these various "ethnographic" practices is dominated by a single epistemology – meaning that none of them enforces a single set of epistemic operations – exactly as academic anthropology itself. Nor is its political content pre-determined by its epistemology. For instance, a colonial imagining of the other – as Kipling shows with great clarity – may rely on authoritarian implications and racism while incorporating – alternatively or simultaneously – a certain degree of dialogism, egalitarianism and self-critical attitudes. This is particularly true in the case of literary texts, which are often, philosophically, ideologically, and epistemologically out of joint with respect to coeval theoretical paradigms or ideologies. For instance, it is particularly easy to find anticipations of critical ethnography in 19th century authors, or seemingly archaic conceptions of civilization and progress in contemporary texts. In spite of this variability, it is also necessary to resist the temptation of lingering too much on the irreducible specificity of each encounter and form of the imagination. While each encounter *is* different, working with typologies, however flexible, is the inevitable prerequisite for a comparative approach to various literary traditions that employs both the ethnographic encounter and the anthropological imagination.

This is, in fact, the way I would like to conjoin anthropology and world literature: a mapping – a typology – of different forms of the anthropological imagination in a variety of contexts and historical

periods, carried out through the vantage points of different ethnographic encounters and constructed with the help of anthropological theory. My focus is on the ways the anthropological imagination is registered in fictional and non-fictional literary works by a number of authors from various South Asian and European contexts: Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Carlo Levi, Mahasweta Devi, Amitav Ghosh, and Frank Westerman. All these authors engage in forms of writing that can be broadly defined as ethnographic, often relying on the trope of the ethnographic encounter as building block of their narratives. The aim is to work diachronically as well as synchronically, establishing comparisons across time and space.

The anthropological imagination, as I conceive it, can of course be employed even if one does not deal with artistic or creative forms. As Peter Collins argues, "the concept of creativity is sometimes taken as a synonym of imagination, a sleight of hand that more often than not reduces the latter to an unnecessarily narrow aestheticising account of imagination" (Collins 2015, 103). This is clearly the kind of bias behind a definition of "the anthropological imagination" as "the conjunction of anthropology and literature" (Fass Emery 1996, 1). On the other hand, literature *does* have certain advantages in registering the anthropological imagination. Since each form of the anthropological imagination is a fuzzy, chimeric and idiosyncratic entity, with no compelling need to be consistent, often made up of contrasting attitudes and blatant contradictions, it is best captured through a medium that, in a Bakhtinian spirit, accounts for and foregrounds the overlapping of perspectives that can be incorporated within a given category of the anthropological imagination. Literary works are such a medium[2].

The ways in which literature can engage with contradiction are, of course, many, but I think that particular attention should be given to a narratological and stylistic perspective. A way in which literary texts allow the internal contradictions of a given worldview to emerge is precisely in the unresolved ambiguities of language and narrative structure. What is, for instance, the form of the anthropological imagination of a third-person narrator in relation to the anthropological imagination of the characters he or she describes? If they diverge, how do they diverge? How is the contrast of their different imaginative worlds orchestrated, and to what aim? Can a given literary language contain, at the same time, different forms of the anthropological imagination, relying alternatively on different forms ethnographic authority? Moreover, as a last point that is directly connected with a narratological

2   For a different, more sceptical take on the theoretical utility of the concept of the imagination in anthropology, cf. Stankiewicz (2016).

perspective, it is crucial to consider that, differently from real-life ethnographic encounters (but not, of course, their textual registrations), literary texts always imply the presence of a reader, which features as a silent participant in the ethnographic encounter. At the very least, the presence of an *implied* reader, narratologically speaking, is certainly a relevant factor in the shaping of the anthropological imagination in a text. But is the reader "actively" involved in the shaping of the anthropological imagination? Yes, in some cases: an example that I discuss in the last part of this work is how specifically self-reflective ethnographer-figures, who constantly question the implications of the very epistemic operations that they find themselves using, might decide to leave the final verdict to the reader.

1.2.5. Methodological Aspects

My approach uses the anthropological imagination and the ethnographic encounter as two interconnected phenomena to bring together different literary histories and geographies. My project takes from WReC's *Combined and Uneven Development* the idea that a productive way in which it is possible to work within a world literary perspective is to bring to the foreground a unifying phenomenon of general relevance, which may be expressed both by narratives that establish themselves as transnational and global, but also by works whose focus is distinctively local. Similarly, I take from WReC the idea that the *registration* of such phenomenon may be the key, for a work, to reveal itself as world literature. If WReC takes combined and uneven development as this unifying phenomenon and the world-system as the fundamental horizon expressed by this literature, I propose here that this methodological operation may yield similar results with other categories, in this case the registration of ethnographic encounters and the forms of the anthropological imagination that emerge and inform them. As Beecroft suggests, changing the "controlling metaphor" of world literature enables new descriptive possibilities that allow for previously untouched connections between literary histories and geographies. A literature of the ethnographic encounter and a literature of the anthropological imagination, if systematically approached on a comparative basis, may connect a plethora of seemingly disparate writers that offer us various, mutually illuminating engagements with (cultural) otherness in different historical and political circumstances.

The geographical scope of my project is indeed vast, as the writers I have chosen, whose origin might be in one specific area, write systematically about "other" places and "other" people. A literature of the ethnographic encounter, not unlike travel writing, is always born in more than one place, and like Walkowitz's born-translated literature, complicates geography and forces engagements that do not entirely depend on national origins. Kipling and Stevenson, for instance, are uneasily located at the very least between India and Britain, between Scotland and Samoa. Levi and Devi, while remaining mostly within the borders of their own nation-states, Italy and India, reveal such discontinuities, inequalities and gaps between their urban locations of origins and their rural "fields" of choice that their cultural geography is by no means less complex than those spanning broader imperial networks. Ghosh and Westerman, consummate "glocal" travellers, sustain connections between Egypt, Bengal, Cameroon, South Africa and various European and South American locations.

That said, I have also tried to keep this geographic diversity at bay by relying on a more cohesive scheme in which Europe and India – the broad cultural areas from which these writers emerge – are constantly juxtaposed. But which Europe and which India? A Europe and an India that manifest a wide range of core-periphery relations in their own internal dynamics. A particularly useful detail of Wallerstein's formulation of the world-system is that the idea of core-periphery represents "a relational concept, not a pair of terms that are reified, that is, have separate essential meanings" (Wallerstein 2004, 17). This has a number of implications: first, core, periphery and semi-periphery are not stable, but they are prone to change over time, as a consequence of mutated economical conditions that result in new hegemonic configurations. Second, the presence of this tripartite structure exists both on a macroscopic and a microscopic level. In *The Hungry Tide* it is metropolitan Kolkata, first and foremost, that weaves colonial relationships with the neighbouring Sundarbans. Levi's Lucan peasants and Mahasweta's adivasis, depicted as embedded in a network of power relationships and oppression that starts from the local rural elite and arrives to the peak of political power in their respective states, are perhaps the most articulated representations in this work of how a nation-state that is part of a wider world-system and occupies a certain position – central, peripheral, or semi-peripheral – is most likely to replicate these same relations within its own borders. By systematically juxtaposing experiences from two geographical areas that are, as a rule, monolithically represented as a core and a periphery respectively, my project aims to complicate various geographies of power at a macroscopic and microscopic level.

Alongside a synchronic, geographically expanded perspective, I also try to work diachronically. I am interested in exploring the various forms of ethnographic encounter and anthropological imagination in various historical circumstances, looking at both their departures and continuities from preceding modes of encounter and imagination. This is particularly relevant if the specific historical and political context of the individual encounters can be connected to processes like capitalist and imperial expansion, which can be observed in their *longue durée* when literary works from different historical periods are compared. As an example of continuity, confronting Kipling's and Devi's anthropological imagination allow us to see how postcolonial state, in many respects, inherits both the politics and the epistemology of its colonial predecessor. The "civilizing" power of District Commissioner Orde in Kipling's "The Head of the District" functions according to the same imaginative schemes of the brutal counterinsurgency specialist Senanayak in Devi's "Draupadi", and consistently there are remarkable similarities in the way they stage their encounters with cultural others. Similar political, historical and economical circumstances may determine the return to similar forms of ethnographic encounters and anthropological imagination – and in turn, the re-occurrence of encounters and forms of the imagination alerts us that similar historical circumstances may possibly be unfolding once again. A study that develops a diachronic awareness, alongside a horizontal, synchronic one, allows us to include, in Stephen Shapiro's words "an exploration of analogous similarities across time" (Shapiro 2016, 246).

The chronological boundaries of my work (from 1885 to 2016) refer to Kipling's "The Phantom 'Rickshaw" and Westerman's *Stikvallei*. The rationale behind this choice is that these boundaries allow me to cover a number of historical passages that provide unique perspectives on how cultural others are imagined: imperial expansion in the context of both "frontier regions" and more consolidated colonial areas (Stevenson and Kipling); the rise of totalitarian states in Europe and the aftermath of their defeat (Levi); decolonisation and the nation-building of the postcolonial states (Mahasweta); and the present-day, neoliberal, fully global phase of world history (Ghosh and Westerman). These chronological boundaries allow me to make frequent comparisons with the development and shifts of anthropological theory, whose beginnings – in the late 1870s – virtually coincide with the starting point of my analysis. I elaborate more extensively on this point in the next chapter.

As a last point, I want to stress the advantages of grounding our point of entry in world literature – the anthropological imagination – in ethnographic encounters. By circumscribing a discussion on

imaginative forms within a concrete, material dimension, the encounter is a category that forces abstractions into concrete human relationships. As a plus, it is very suited to describe narrative sequences – and, therefore, for the analysis of literary texts. A recent article, discussing precisely of "ethnographies of encounter", defines encounters as "engagements across difference: a chance meeting, a sensory exchange, an extended confrontation, a passionate tryst" (Faier and Rofel 2014, 363). By focusing on this seemingly microscopic, but profoundly concrete perspective, instances like these show "how culture making occurs through everyday encounters among members of two or more groups with different cultural backgrounds and unequally positioned stakes in their relationships" and, as a consequence, "[bring] attention to the interactive and unequal dynamics of power that shape culture making across relationships of difference" (Faier and Rofel 2014, 363). My approach, by taking ethnographic encounters as my *Ansatzpunkt* to discuss the anthropological imagination and world literature, is animated by a similar intent.

2. The Colonial Anthropological Imagination: Governance, Exoticism and Conflicted Desires in Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling

2.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) and Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), more specifically with some works from Stevenson's Pacific phase (1888-1894), and from Kipling's Indian-themed writings from 1887 onwards. As regards Stevenson, I address the ethnographic travelogue *In the South Seas* (1889-1891), the fairy tale "The Bottle Imp" (1891) and the novella "The Beach of Falesá" (1892). As for Kipling, I examine some of the *Letters of Marque*, journalistic pieces written between 1887 and 1888, a number of short stories that epitomize pivotal moments of his career ("The Phantom Rickshaw", 1885, "The Head of the District"*,* 1890, and "Kaa's Hunting" from *The Jungle Books,* 1894-1895), as well as his novel *Kim* (1901). Connecting these two bodies of writings allows me to compare the strategies that these authors use to map two significant hubs of the *fin de siècle* imperial enterprise. The Pacific Islands and India were both layered colonial tapestries, in which formal and informal varieties of colonialism variously interwove with local cultures and social organizations, to which Stevenson and Kipling reacted in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

The Pacific Islands, in the decades before Stevenson's arrival, had already been penetrated by a variety of European forces. Prominent categories include various missionary organizations, who had been settling there since the end of the 18th century and had successfully established Christianity in the Pacific (Colley 2004, 12), as well as countless independent traders and adventurers. Moreover, the region had been radically transformed by phenomena such as the exodus of the natives from villages to major ports, the depopulation connected to indentured labour and the development of plantation economy, the transformation of the labour market with the arrival of (and growing dependence on) capitalist economy, and the increasing number of mixed-race children (Keown 2007, 39). Stevenson travelled mostly in Polynesia – one of the three broad "enduring geographical-cum-ethnological [divisions]" of the Pacific Islands created by the Europeans, the other being Melanesia and Micronesia (Thomas 2004, 297). Throughout his journeys, he witnessed how these developments continued to unfold in the years of his permanence there. Moreover, he experienced first-hand the arrival of more

structured forms of colonial penetration, which had begun in the 1880s, when companies backed up by various Western nations – France, Britain, Germany and the United States – had started an actual "scramble for the Pacific Islands" (Phillips 2007, 64).

The India Kipling wrote about, conversely, was already a decisively more "formal" and structured colonial world. Kipling experienced India and wrote about it in a phase in which the British imperial system reached its apogee, following the re-structuring and regimentation of imperial spaces and governance in the wake of the 1857 revolt (Meatcalf and Meatcalf 2001, 123) – a reorganization in which ethnography, as I discuss later, played an important role. Kipling's world was focused on entrenching its systems of official governance (and worried about their downfall) rather than transitioning from informal to formal systems of colonialism, while simultaneously having to confront a growing native public opinion. That does not mean that a frontier dimension was not important for late British colonialism in India, and in particular the idea of an Indian border to be ruled with more "informal" strategies due to its wild nature is an essential part of Kipling's imagination.

Stevenson and Kipling provide a heterogeneous and multifaceted response – with different degrees of internal conflict – to these two colonial societies, from an epistemological, aesthetic and political viewpoint. I do not read Stevenson and Kipling as colonial/imperial writers in the exclusive sense of adhering to colonial or imperial ideologies (especially tempting in the case of Kipling), nor exclusively through the lenses of a postcolonial sensitivity that is only interested in the politically progressive aspects of their work (particularly for Stevenson). Instead, I read them as writers that variously participate to a colonial world and to the imperial networks shaped and influenced also (but not exclusively) by colonial ideologies and their corresponding material cultures. This allows me to juxtapose Stevenson's and Kipling's different strategies and epistemological resources for framing imaginatively colonial/cultural others, and examine the way their anthropological imagination is connected with their attitudes towards colonialism and empire. It is worth noting that, while often relying on supposedly "scientific" forms of knowledge like positivist ethnography and anthropology, their anthropological imagination is shaped by categories and forms of knowledge that are profoundly intertwined with political or even administrative imperatives (often because they were created in a context of colonial governance).

To map Stevenson's and Kipling's anthropological imagination it is crucial to qualify their different relationship towards their respective "fields" – the different meaning of Polynesia and India in

their biographies. For Stevenson Polynesia became, retrospectively, a final step in a rather complex existential and artistic journey. After an early phase in which he was mostly appreciated as an essayist, this scion of an Edinburgh family of engineers had risen to literary stardom with works like *Treasure Island* (1883) and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). He had connected his reputation with popular sub-genres – children's literature, Gothic fiction – and generally speaking with the broad category of romance. When he later undertook his second second trip to America, in 1887, he arrived in the new world as a successful romancer and popular writer. It was thanks to this success that the publisher S. S. McClure proposed him to conduct a trip to the Pacific Islands, starting in 1888, in which Stevenson was supposed to write a number of travel letters that McLure would syndicate to newspapers and magazines.

The passage to the Pacific world, however, turned out to be one of the defining experiences in Stevenson's (literary) life. It drastically changed the way he approached both fiction and non-fiction, in what Richard Ambrosini calls the "most dramatic" of the several boundary-crossings of his career (Ambrosini 2006, 33). Stevenson eventually settled in Samoa in 1890, and remained there until his death in 1894. His six years in the Pacific offer a stark contrast with his received reputation as an uncommitted romancer (and hence, in the context of British colonialism, as a tacit supporter of imperialism), which to an extent endures to this day[3]. The Pacific writings are the work of a realist writer and an active supporter of the native populations in their opposition to imperial misrule, with strong interests in local cultures and history, and engaged in the political life of the region. This corpus of works is quite varied, even according to Stevenson's standards, and consists of a novel, *The Wrecker* (1892), a novella, "The Ebb-Tide" (1894), a travelogue/ethnography, *In the South Seas* (published posthumously in 1896), a historical monograph and anti-colonial pamphlet, *A Footnote to History* (1892), a number of poems and ballads inspired by local folklore, some journalism, and, finally, a volume of short stories, *Island Nights' Entertainments* (1893), which includes "The Beach of Falesá", "The Bottle Imp" and "The Isle of Voices".

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3   As Clotilde De Stasio points out, Stevenson was brushed aside both by traditionalist and modernist critics in the decades after his death, a disregard that culminated in F.R. Leavis's harsh dismissal of Stevenson in his influential 1948 study *The Great Tradition* (De Stasio 1991, 141–43). Consequently, in spite of his strong presence in the popular imagination and among international readerships, he suffered from a considerable critical neglect and was considered, with a few exceptions, a charming but minor literary figure until the end of the 20th century, when new critical interest for Stevenson and the different sides of his production started emerging.

For Kipling, instead, India was neither a final, epiphanic destination nor, indeed, a novel one. Kipling was born in Bombay in 1865 and spent the first six years of his life in India. After moving to England to continue his education, he remained there for ten years. He then went back to India, where he remained from 1882 to 1889. There he worked as a journalist in Lahore and then, from 1887, in Allahabad. He then left India in 1889 to work in England and in the United States, having already become, like Stevenson before him, a literary celebrity. A significant part of his important work about India – including the *Jungle Books* and *Kim* – was not, therefore, written in India, and indeed it was in the years after he left the Subcontinent that he fully developed his imperial-ideologue persona. India, however, had been a fundamental place of formation for Kipling: it was there where he had first elaborated – empirically, ethnographically, as it were – a number of ideas and impression on colonialism, empire, cross-cultural relations and governance that crucially informed the forms of the anthropological imagination that are found in his texts and that he constantly relied upon in the rest of his long career. It comes as no surprise that, up until *Kim*, he repeatedly returned to India as a source of materials for his writing, as well as for his cultural and political thinking.

Stevenson's Polynesian experience and Kipling's Indian experience were, therefore, profoundly different in many crucial ways. For Stevenson, Polynesia was a shocking discovery, a crucial turning point that overturned his experience as a writer and gave his final writings a new stylistic direction and a distinctively subversive edge, often in opposition to what he had previously done (or seemed to be doing). For Kipling India was a return, a rediscovery of a world he had already known in his childhood, and then a starting point for a long career that would lead him to become an unrepentant – but complicated – imperial ideologue. Epistemologically and politically, Stevenson and Kipling present us with seemingly opposite premises and outcomes. And yet crucial aspects of their experiences, writing processes and imaginative enterprises resonate powerfully with each other. First and foremost, both of them were cast in the role of cultural mediators: as popular writers with multiple readerships around various core and peripheral areas of the late 19th century world-system, they narrated historical and material specificities of Polynesia and India in a complex negotiation with the expectations of their readerships, as well as their own political creeds, agendas, and personal attitudes towards the colonial world.

Both are entangled in the complicated business of representing the colonial world for a variety of Western/imperial readerships that may be utterly unfamiliar with the contexts they describe. The

ethnographic nature of their work is foregrounded not only because they both adopt styles and tropes taken from various anthropological and ethnographic traditions – albeit in dramatically different ways – but also because they both strive to construct a form of ethnographic authority in terms of representing faithfully and reliably the colonial world under the pressure of these audiences. Their physical presence and familiarity with the locales they write about is a crucial part of this process, and the idea of "being there" and hence being a reliable, objective source is pivotal for both authors. But representing "faithfully" the colonial world may clash with the audience's expectations, which in turn entangles both Stevenson and Kipling in the problem of exoticism. As I discuss more extensively later, exoticism, as a strategy, implies meeting the expectations of a readership that craves for new and different worlds but wants them exactly as they imagine them beforehand. This clashes, in Stevenson's and Kipling's case, with the positivist epistemology and ethnographic approach that both writers embrace (albeit not always consistently). I am interested in the way Stevenson and Kipling differently negotiated this conundrum – also according their own political prerogatives – and to the different degree of success that their choices met. The fact that both were successful "romancers" and popular writers, and therefore constrained by specific generic modes and expectations, plays a significant part in this negotiation.

Taken together, Stevenson and Kipling both help to establish *and* immediately complicate the notion of the colonial anthropological imagination. This form of the imagination is made up of epistemic operations that, variously combined, can result into a number of opposing stances and concepts like egalitarianism, anti-colonial positions, obsession for control, empathy, embracing of rigid racial typologies or performative notions of identity. Two forms of the colonial anthropological imagination can be profoundly different on specific aspects: for instance, as I explore in a number of instances within Stevenson's and Kipling's texts, their approach to gender is radically divergent.

This chapter, differently from the next ones, is strictly located within the Anglosphere. However, its linguistic and "national" homogeneity belies its heterogeneous nature. Juxtaposing Stevenson and Kipling allows us to compare two fundamentally different perspectives on the colonial world. Stevenson, in spite of his "semi-peripheral" Scottish origins, may well be taken as an expression of metropolitan British culture, from which he moves away in the last phase of his career as he becomes more and more involved with the colonial world. Kipling is an Anglo-Indian subject, who, in spite of gradually moving *towards* a more central position, is for a significant part of his career more similar to

a "native informer" than to a metropolitan intellectual, and is arguably granted his position in the metropolitan cultural scene *because* of his first-hand experience of the colonial world.

Moreover, juxtaposing Stevenson and Kipling enables us to compare the forms that colonialism took in Polynesia and the forms it took in India. In particular, Stevenson and Kipling allow us to see how formal and informal colonialism differently interacted in these two areas of the late-19th century world-system. Both reveal that this distinction is actually a continuum, with adventurous and official projects often flowing into and relying on each other. Overall, this chapter offers a diversified understanding of the colonial experience (from the admittedly circumscribed perspective of two white "British" men), trying to go beyond simplified and standardized notions of colonial ethnographic encounters from a political, epistemological and cultural point of view. In particular, neither writer simply registers an exclusive, uncomplicated reliance on colonial anthropological paradigms – or, conversely, a clear-cut rejection of these paradigms – but rather offer us complex imaginative configurations in which the contradictions of ethnographic encounters in the colonial context powerfully emerge and are, with various degrees of awareness, critically addressed.

As a last note, I have to specify why I chose the late 1880s as my starting point to explore the interconnections between the anthropological imagination, ethnographic encounters and world literature. I think the 1880s make for a good starting point because of the convergence of two historical and cultural factors. By this time, anthropology and ethnography started gaining more credit within the European academia and the colonial administration, providing some basis for a self-understanding of creative writers as "ethnographic" or "anthropological". This certainly is echoed in Stevenson's interest for Victorian armchair anthropology and his scientific ambitions for *In the South Seas;* or in Kipling's interest for colonial ethnographic typologies, in the knowledgeable persona he adopts as a journalist and in the central role he gives to ethnology in *Kim* (no matter if his representation of ethnographic enterprises in that novel is rather fanciful). Moreover, the (late) Victorian period, represented, at least from an anglophone perspective, the phase in which "the idea of a properly 'worlded' English literature, often expressed in terms of imperial bonds and civilizational achievements, gathered steady force over a huge geographical expanse of the earth" (Mukherjee 2011, 1). Focusing on Stevenson and Kipling, therefore, allow us to foreground the emerging connection between an anthropological awareness that is widespread in the late Victorian/*fin de siècle* mindset, a geographically expanded idea of literature, and a colonial and imperial ideology that serves as its background. It is a phase of literary

history in which the political and epistemological potential of the ethnographic encounter and the forms of the anthropological imagination depending on it invite a comparative approach, and hence offer an interesting entry point for world literary studies.

2.2. Robert Louis Stevenson

2.2.1. A Scottish "Romancer" in Polynesia

When Stevenson arrived in the Pacific Islands – commonly referred to, in his time, as "the South Seas" – he had specific expectations about the region as well as previously acquired mental schemes that framed his understanding of their inhabitants. Some of the sources of knowledge that informed his encounter with the Polynesians were exquisitely anthropological and academic. Stevenson was indeed interested in Victorian anthropology – alongside other natural sciences – and his readings included Herbert Spencer and E. B. Tylor. He was, more broadly, interested in Victorian evolutionism and Darwinism (Reid 2006, 3–5). All these different voices – not necessarily in agreement – make for a strong theoretical background for his imaginative understanding of the Polynesians, as well as being important models for a writer that had "scientific" ambitions for his Pacific work.

The Pacific was also a place he had previously engaged with through fantasy and literary texts. A crucial influence – which he explicitly acknowledges – is Hermann Melville. Melville is, for Stevenson, "the first and the greatest" of the writers "who have touched the South Seas with any genius" (Stevenson 1998, 23). It is true that Melville's *Typee* (1846), a heavily fictionalized account of the writer's month-long stay in the Marquesan island of Nukuhiva in 1842, indulges both in the myth of the noble savage and in an exotic representation of native romance, both of which Stevenson largely rejects. Its hidden complexities, however, anticipate in many ways Stevenson's own layered (and ultimately more refined) treatment of the Pacific. From a formal point of view, Melville's text integrates adventure, autobiography, philosophical speculation and ethnographic interest (Bryant 1996, xi), providing a precedent for Stevenson's experimentation with generic hybrids as a strategy to effectively represent the Polynesian reality. *Typee* also intimates a more complex epistemology of the

colonial ethnographic encounter: when the protagonist Tommo admits that he "saw everything, but could comprehend nothing" (Melville 1996, 177) of the rituals and ceremonies he is witnessing to, he foregrounds a lack ethnographic insight that implicitly calls for a more attentive stay on the field – a call that Stevenson is willing to respond to. As regards cultural politics, when Tommo attacks the missionary activity in the Pacific, he anticipates Stevenson's far from indulgent vision of the cultural onslaught on Pacific cultures. *Typee* may be taken, in the broadest possible sense that includes both filiation and rejection, as a point of departure.

Apart from Stevenson's previous readings, both anthropological and literary, understanding the kind of anthropological imagination he employs in the Pacific requires to take into account his Scottish origins. The aspects of Stevenson's writing and thinking that go back to Scottish culture are numerous, ranging from an interest in morality and ethics that is Calvinist at heart – without necessarily sharing the *content* of Calvinist morals and ethics – to a predilection for Scotland as a setting of a variety of novels and short stories (see Daiches 1981). Moreover, some of his major works, like *Kidnapped* and *The Master of Ballantrae* (both set in the aftermath of the 1745 Jacobite uprising), actively reflect on the internal conflicts of Scottish identity. It is precisely an attention for the "losers" of modern Scottish history, like the Jacobites and the Highlanders, that is particularly relevant for his experiences in Polynesia. Stevenson, thinking back at how the autonomy and culture of the Highlands was gradually dismantled as as part of the political, economical, military and cultural clash with England, is able to look at Pacific cultures in the framework of a "Highland comparison" that enables a fundamentally sympathetic gaze. In this sense, Stevenson's Scottishness in the Pacific writings functions in a highly specific way, similar to how Jewishness works in Carlo Levi: both frame the writer within a "minor" (if not subaltern) culture within a hegemonic national mainstream (in Stevenson's case: a British cultural identity) in the context of ethnographic encounters, which in turn variously shapes their understanding of cultural others. The crucial difference is that while Levi, as I argue in the following chapter, almost never addresses Jewishness in his work, the role of Scottishness in Stevenson's ethnography of the Pacific is explicitly embraced and foregrounded since the beginning of In *The South Seas*, and consistently framed within a (critical) evolutionist framework.

Scottishness, however, is also a way to address the ambiguities of Stevenson's positioning as a traveller-writer-ethnographer in the Pacific. While Stevenson reads the connection between Highlands and Polynesian culture in term of solidarity and shared victimhood, it should not be forgotten that the

"colonial" status of Scotland (more broadly conceived) is far more ambiguous. In Michael Gardiner's words:

the Scottish contribution to empire was often disproportionately large, from the Ulster Plantation through Hong Kong trading to the defence of the African colonies. It could be argued, indeed, that on an epistemological level, the Scottish contribution was the essence of empire: the practical and spatial attitude to the observation and the organisation of the world, the ideal of franchised universalism, the culture of the work ethic, and the necessity of free markets to a nationless state. (Gardiner 2011, 3)

Scotland, while experiencing an uneven and at times distinctively colonial relationship with the imperial centre (the Highland and Jacobite cases are perhaps the most relevant instances), was nevertheless involved in empire-building both materially and epistemologically. This detail may be helpful to frame Stevenson's attitudes towards colonial others in the context of ethnographic encounters. His solidarity with the Polynesian must coexist with the fact that he nevertheless moves across the Pacific through specifically colonial networks, which establish an inherently uneven power balance between him and the natives he encounters. That said, such forms of unevenness are not hidden, but explicitly registered in his fiction, if not in his non-fictional writings.

Lastly, it is crucial to consider that the Stevenson arrived in Polynesia as a popular writer and, in particular, as a writer of romances. Specifically, Stevenson was arguably one of the most refined theorists of romance, having written several crucial contributions that helped redefining this wide-spanning, heterogeneous literary category. In particular, in "A Gossip on Romance" (1882) Stevenson defines romance as an a-moral narrative of the body, as it were, highlighting its subject matter in these terms:

There is a vast deal in life and letters both which is not immoral, but simply a-moral; which either does not regard the human will at all, or deals with it in obvious and healthy relations; where the interest turns, not upon what a man shall choose to do, but on how he manages to do it; not on the passionate slips and hesitations of the conscience, but on the problems of the body and of the practical intelligence, in clean, open-air adventure, the shock of arms or the diplomacy of life. (Stevenson 2017a, 128)

Stevenson elevates the romance's focus on circumstance, practicality and physicality as artistically valid and intellectually compelling. At the same time, this thematic focus is meant to circumscribe the romance within a space of fantasy and evasion, free from explicit moral reflection and the weight of psychological and moral development. Such limited focus is based on the implication that art, as Stevenson argues in "A Humble Remonstrance" (1884), is unable to represent the full complexity of human existence, and therefore must, through its various sub-genres, concentrate on exploring highly specific dimensions of reality and evoke specific emotions in its audience. It follows that writing a romance, at least according to Stevenson's conception in the early 1880s, is quite the opposite of a holistic/ethnographic representation of reality. This is what Stevenson means when he says that art should *not* aim at "[competing] with life" (Stevenson 2017b, 143) – a phrase found in Henry James' "The Art of Fiction", to which "A Humble Remonstrance" is a direct response.

Politically, this kind of aesthetics was shared by works that tended to be fairly conservative, especially in an imperial context: the "a-moral" imperial romance, as a rule, ideologically supported real imperial conquest. It often featured "a racialized contrast between its British heroes and the savage population inevitably surrounding them, foregrounding violent action […], at the same time as representing the penetration of an unknown, exotic, and dangerous colonial terrain" (Steer 2015, 345). As a romancer exploring the South Seas, Stevenson was expected to orientate his imagination in this direction. In this sense it easy to understand how Stevenson's passage to realist/ethnographic aesthetics and anti-colonial sympathies during the Pacific period represented a radical shift both in artistic and political terms. This shifts begins with *In the South Seas*, to which now I turn.

2.2.2. From Romance to Ethnography: *In the South Seas*

In The South Seas, a travelogue based on Stevenson's exploration of various areas Polynesia, is the starting point for any ethnographic or anthropological approach to Stevenson's Pacific writings. Although the book was published only posthumously in 1896, the materials that were later collected in the book were initially meant to be the "letters" that Stevenson was supposed to write for S. S. McLure. In a sense, therefore, this book is the first planned South Seas work, and indeed the initial reason

Stevenson travelled to the Pacific region. The book covers the Marquesas, the Paumotus and the Gilberts, with a particular focus, in the last section, on the island of Apemama and his redoubtable king Tembinok. Stevenson, however, moved away from the "letter" format, ending up writing prose pieces that are actually generic hybrids, in which travelogue, ethnography, natural sciences, political history and even linguistics merge into a wide-spanning, chaotically holistic work of non-fiction.

This was hardly what McLure expected or wanted, and also his readers, including his wife Fanny and his mentor Sydney Colvin, were generally disappointed by the outcome of Stevenson's wanderings. In 1889 Fanny famously wrote Colvin:

> Louis has the most enchanting material that any one ever had in the whole world for this book, and I am afraid that he is going to spoil it all. He has taken into his Scotch Stevenson head, that a stern duty lies before him, and that his book must be a sort of scientific and impersonal thing [...] leaving out all he knows of the people themselves. And I believe there is no one living thing who has got so near them, or who understands them as he does. (Letters 6, 303–4)

Fanny's letter stresses Stevenson's capacity for a sympathetic understanding of the natives that will be at the core of his most effective Pacific work, like "The Beach of Falesá". But her perplexities on the Stevenson's scientific ambitions are also quite telling. Her concerns in this sense are exemplary of the anxieties of Stevenson's literary advisors and of his general readership about the latest developments of his writing. The widespread expectation was that Stevenson's life in the Pacific would result in uncomplicated imperial romances, full of exoticism. When Stevenson started to send back not only gritty, realistic tales (as "The Beach of Falesá" or "The Ebb-Tide"), but also a considerable number of scientific, political or historical works of non-fiction, often patently sympathetic towards the local populations, the audiences were left craving for a supposedly more authentic "Stevensonian" voice (see Jolly 2009, 157). In a sense, however, Stevenson was returning to a sociological mode of travel writing he had experimented with before – when he had written, between 1879 and 1880, the *The Amateur Emigrant,* a travelogue that recorded his a transatlantic journey on a steerage ship to get to the United States. It is certainly not a chance that also *The Amateur Emigrant* was unappreciated by his friends and family (his father in particular, who actually paid for the book *not* to come out) and was published, like *In the South Seas*, only after Stevenson's death.

In the South Seas, at any rate, epitomizes the wide opening up of horizons, of intellectual interests and even formal possibilities that the Pacific unfolded to Stevenson, although, at the time, he did not perceive the book as a joyful formal experiment, but was seriously conflicted about the structure and the form the book should take (Rennie 1998, xxvi). It also discloses a new "engaged" approach to the reality around him – a desire to penetrate and understand that reality, foreshadowing an intention to *act* within that reality. In her seminal book *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Pacific* (2009), Roslyn Jolly argues how Stevenson's keen interest in anthropology, law and history were variously used to intervene intellectually and politically in the Pacific world, while at the same time changing Stevenson's own approach to literature:

> This diversification of Stevenson's activities as an author entailed a significant revision of the theory of literature he had developed through the 1870s and the 1880s. Then he had championed a romantic, non-realistic, and largely anti-utilitarian view of writing as play, the aim of which was to give pleasure [...] but never to "compete with life" […]. Now, however, in his attempts to represent the contemporary Pacific world accurately in his fiction and non-fiction, and to intervene in that world through his writing, Stevenson was competing with life. (Jolly 2009, 25–26)

Competing with life (James's phrase) ultimately meant, stylistically, to experiment with different forms of realism. A general category that we can conveniently use to classify Stevenson's various modes of realist writing – and that is certainly valid for *In the South Seas* – is that of *ethnographic* realism, meaning a form of realistic description based on fieldwork that is chiefly concerned with the accurate representation of cultural specificities.

All these changes are variously anticipated in the first paragraphs of *In the South Seas,* which can be taken as a good example of the narrative voice and persona that Stevenson adopts within this book. Stevenson briefly explains the reasons that led him to start travelling in the Pacific and then settling in Samoa in 1890, adding that "if more days are granted me, they shall be passed where I have found life most pleasant and man most interesting; the axes of my black boys are already clearing the foundation of my future house; and I must learn to address readers from the uttermost parts of the sea" (Stevenson 1998, 5). This sentence signals a shift in creative allegiance – the life and men of the South Seas are inherently more pleasant and interesting, hence worth imaginative engagement. At the same time, it

foregrounds a certain overlapping between Stevenson's expedition and colonial structures – he is a white man who relies on native labour and imperial networks. Lastly, it stresses the fact that Stevenson has to change his authorial persona by "learning" a different way of addressing his readers. "[Addressing] readers from the uttermost parts of the sea", means taking up the role of the man on the spot – an ethnographer on the field. The distance that Stevenson establishes between himself and his readers becomes not only geographical but also epistemological – it changes qualitatively the kind of knowledge Stevenson is trying to pass on.

Stevenson commits himself to a realistic description of Polynesian life. He further justifies his choice of the South Seas by arguing that

> no part of the world exerts the same attractive power upon the visitor, and the task before me is to communicate to fireside travellers some sense of its seduction, and to describe the life, at sea and ashore, of many hundred thousand persons, some of our own blood and language, all our contemporaries, and yet as remote in thought and habit as Rob Roy or Barbarossa, the Apostles and the Caesars (Stevenson 1998, 5–6).

If indeed these words also gestures towards the romantic traveller, they also defamiliarize that position by juxtaposing it with an ethnographic and scientific attitude. While Stevenson may evoke the fireside story in the first part of the sentence, he then shifts the focus on the more scientifically-minded idea of describing the life of actual people, ending with a note that already anticipates an (evolutionist) anthropological background. The task of representing the Pacific befits, to use a phrase he employs shortly thereafter, both "the scientific and the sentimental tourist" (Stevenson 1998, 6). The sentimental tourist is the romancer, the traditional travel writer. The scientific tourist is the ethnographer, the realist writer.

Indeed it would be incorrect to argue that sentimental, "romantic" elements (with specific reference to Stevenson's theory of romance) are completely erased from *In the South Seas*. It would be similarly incorrect to argue that "The Beach of Falesá" does not also explore "the problems of the body and of the practical intelligence", or that "The Bottle Imp" does not rely on the fantastic tropes of a fairy tale. In the particular context of *In the South Seas* the romantic often signals the few instances in which exoticist modes of framing cultural others manage to find their way in Stevenson's narrative. Bur

such instances must co-exist – and to a large extent be replaced – by a tension towards the scientific, the mundane, the everyday. Many of Kipling's texts, interestingly, struggle with a very similar set of tensions and engage in a similar process of disenchantment of a supposedly exotic world – with political outcomes, however, that are often antithetical to Stevenson's.

Stevenson's "scientificity" is grounded in an anthropological-evolutionist approach to culture, which, however, does not entirely follow the evolutionist orthodoxy. The first two chapters of the book help clarifying this point. After the introducing paragraphs, Stevenson describes his first landing on a South Sea island in the Marquesas. It is his "arrival scene", a trope that Mary-Louise Pratt has famously foregrounded as a connecting point between travel writing and classical anthropology, and that typically sets the scene for the ideological background of a text (Pratt 2011). Consistently, Stevenson's arrival scene is functional to establish his transition from the sentimental to the scientific traveller. After an exhilarated description of the landscape and seascape at dawn, Stevenson gets to meet his first Islanders, as his cabin is "filled from end to end with Marquesans (Stevenson 1998, 9). The first contact is marked – in a Melvillesque moment – by the impossibility of communication. Stevenson is reduced to silence and utterly frustrated:

> A kind of despair came over me, to sit there helpless under all these staring orbs, and be thus blocked in a corner of my cabin by this speechless crowd: and a kind of rage to think they were beyond the reach of articulate communication, like furred animals, or folk born deaf, or dwellers of some alien planet (Stevenson 1998, 9).

Three aspects of the way Stevenson frames this first ethnographic encounter are worth noting. The first one is the desire towards communication that characterizes the exchange, at least from Stevenson's side. The second one is the realization of a reciprocity of gazes between him and the Polynesians – Stevenson is looked at, he does not simply looks upon – a point that I discuss more extensively later. The last aspect is the rejection of easy metaphors that normalize the ethnographer's inability to understand: although Stevenson seems to be doing exactly that when he compares the natives to "furred animals, or folk born deaf, or dwellers of some alien planet", he is quick to add that such impression comes from having "journeyed forth out of that comfortable zone of kindred languages, where the curse of Babel is so easily remedied", which is why "my new fellow-creatures sat before me dumb like

images" (Stevenson 1998, 9). It is the traveller that is found at fault, not the native. The deficiency is not only framed in terms of linguistic skills but also of cultural knowledge. And this is why the traveller must resort to a new methodology to bridge this gap, which Stevenson is quick to introduce.

Such methodology follows, to an extent, the schemes of Victorian evolutionism, which I have already discussed in the previous chapter with special reference to Tylor – the unilineal evolution of culture, with the implication that primitive cultures are a mirror of the past of the advanced ones, and the fundamental comparability of different cultures on a universal scale. This framework runs the risk of establishing inaccurate and inopportune comparisons between unrelated cultures, as well as of fostering cultural hierarchies based on a denial of coevalness (Fabian, 2002) between the ethnographer and the natives. Stevenson, however, takes evolutionist epistemological paradigms and twists them to a more radical end. As a strategy to establish a cross-cultural dialogue with the natives and to make sense of his surroundings, he employs what he calls the "Highland comparison" (Stevenson 1998, 14), juxtaposing the cultural predicament of the Marquesan Kanaka ("man" in Hawaiian language – it is the local term for Pacific islander) with that of the Scottish Highlander. The kind of political and cultural dismantling that Marquesans are experiencing at the hands of the French colonists echoes the fate of the Highlanders throughout the 18th and 19th century, with specific reference to the Highlands Clearances:

> It was perhaps yet more important [for Stevenson to engage with the Marquesans] that I had enjoyed in my youth some knowledge of our Scots folk of the Highlands and the Islands. Not much beyond a century has passed since these were in the same convulsive and transitionary state as the Marquesans of to-day. In both cases an alien authority enforced, the clans disarmed, the chiefs deposed, new customs introduced, and chiefly that fashion of regarding money as the means and object of existence: the commercial age, in each, succeeding at a bound to an age of war abroad and patriarchal communism at home. In one the cherished practice of tattooing, in the other a cherished costume, proscribed. In each a main luxury cut off: beef, driven under cloud of night from Lowland pastures, denied to the meat-loving Highlander; long-pig [human flesh], pirated from the next village, to the man-eating Kanaka. (Stevenson 1998, 12)

If the comparison may seem a standard evolutionist-comparative operation, it is worth noting that tapping into Scottish history and culture to understand the Marquesans imaginatively acquires a

different meaning on Stevenson's part, namely to frame traumatic cultural change in a framework of solidarity. Stevenson's chief aim is sympathy, which he acquires not only by finding echoes of a traumatic experiences of conquest in a history that he can claim as his own, but also by indulging in his own "barbaric" past and sharing it with the natives:

> These points of similarity between a South Sea people and some of my own folk at home ran much in my head in the islands; and not only inclined me to view my fresh acquaintances with favour, but continually modified my judgement. […] When I desired any details of a savage custom, or of superstitious belief, I cast back in the story of my fathers, and fished for what I wanted with some trait of equal barbarism: [...] the black bull's head of Stirling procured me the legend of Rahero; and what I knew of the Cluny Macphersons, or the Appin Stewarts, enabled me to learn, and helped me to understand, about the Tevas of Tahiti. The native was no longer ashamed, his sense of kinship grew warmer, and his lips were opened. It is this sense of kinship that the traveller must rouse and share. (Stevenson 1998, 13)

What Stevenson attempts here is a multi-cultural dialogue based on the sense of kinship enabled by a sharing of "comparable" cultural items. Whether this operation is epistemologically and historically problematic, it is meant as a humbling act of self-exposure that is supposed to level the playing field.

The sense of kinship is further reinforced by further reflections on the issues of death and depopulation. Stressing the fact that the Marquesas are majorly affected by this phenomenon, Stevenson argues that depopulation in the Pacific is proportional to the extent of European cultural, economical and political influence. In doing so, he echoes the popular "fatal impact" theories, widespread between the latter 19th and 20th century. Such theories argued that Polynesian cultures (and the Polynesian themselves) were dying out as a result of a contact with the Europeans; and although these theories effectively registered the fact that the spreading of new diseases brought by Europeans had actually decimated the Islanders' population, they became another ideological tool that Western colonialism, infused with social Darwinism, used to justify its expansion at the expense of "biologically weaker" races (Keown 2007, 40-41). Stevenson was familiar with such an interpretation, having read not only the progressive and serene anthropology of Tylor but also the more aggressive writings of Spencer, the inventor of social Darwinism. Yet his interest for Darwin complicates this perspective. As Julia Reid argues, Stevenson found in Darwin a sense of evolution which was much more random,

haphazard and painful, opposing both a Spenserian sense of necessity based on the "survival of the fittest" and the benign and progressive view of cultural evolution in Tylor (Reid 2006, 143-147).

In this sense the Highland comparison and Stevenson's theories on depopulation do not necessarily imply the inevitability, let alone necessity, of the demise of Polynesian cultures according to a scheme of unilineal evolutionism and the "survival of the fittest", but rather forge a form of anti-imperialist solidarity across time. This last point, in particular, seems valid especially if we consider that Stevenson expressed his theories on depopulation and the dangers of European influences having in mind the political situation of Hawaii, about to be forcibly annexed to the United States (see Ratnapalan 2012). More generally, a Darwinian perspective allows Stevenson to disentangle his view of the "fatal impact" from a sense of cultural superiority and historical necessity that was inherently connected to a *social* Darwinist perspective. It is quite telling that, at the end of an encounter with a Marquesan girl, who laments the demise of her people, Stevenson should immediately think of death as a shared fate: "in a perspective of centuries, I saw their case as ours, death coming in like a tide, and the day already numbered when there should be no more Beretani [Britons], and no more of any race whatever, and (what oddly touched me) no more literary works and no more readers" (Stevenson 1998, 23). This sudden inclusion of the self in the other's extinction is no mere apocalyptic, universal foreshadowing of a downfall of civilization, but, grounded in the *historical* experience of the Highland comparison, an awareness of the frailty of cultures, of the arbitrariness of their extinction at the hands of stronger parties – irrespective of their inherent "worth".

The reason why Stevenson manages to steer away, for the most part, from the hierarchical implications of an evolutionist paradigm is perhaps that *In The South Seas* ultimately mixes evolutionism with cultural relativism, "[hovering] on the edge of new anthropological relativism" (Reid 2006, 148). Two passages, in particular, show this tendency. One is Stevenson's discussion about *tapus* (commonly spelled "taboos"). A *tapu*, in the Polynesian context from which the word originates, indicates a forbidden area, food, or object. Imposing a *tapu* was, traditionally, a prerogative of Polynesian chiefs. Stevenson makes an argument for the fundamental rationality of *tapus*, normally perceived as arbitrary and irrational by the Westerners. While he admits that many *tapus*, intermingling the field of law with that of morality, are "absurd enough", he nevertheless argues that *tapus* are not, as a rule, "a meaningless or wanton prohibition" (Stevenson 1998, 39). Instead, they are "the instruments of wise and needful restrictions" (Stevenson 1998, 41). Moreover, Stevenson argues that "the

Marquesans […] adheres to the old idea of the local circumscription of beliefs and duties" (Stevenson 1998, 42) – in the sense that they do not find surprising that a white person is not bound by the rules of *tapu* and can break them without incurring in magical punishment. Stevenson implicitly praises this system as inherently more tolerant when compared with Westerners' tendency of attacking superstition in other cultures, while simultaneously naturalizing *their own* beliefs and superstitions as rational and expecting other people to respect them: "All the world must respect out *tapus*, or we gnash our teeth" (Stevenson 1998, 42).

Cannibalism – a cultural practice widespread in the Marquesas, and systematically opposed by the Europeans – is the other anthropological theme on which Stevenson tests his cultural relativism. As Paola Della Valle argues, Stevenson's position on the subject – and arguably his whole relativistic stance – are greatly indebted to Michel de Montaigne's essay on cannibalism (Della Valle 2013, 51–57). Montaigne had reminded his readers, in 1580, that "each man calls barbarism whatever it is not his own practice" (Montaigne 1958, 152). In his essay, he describes extensively the cannibal practices of the Tupinambá natives of Brazil, which are enacted upon their enemies as an act of supreme vengeance but, at the same time, work according to somewhat civil procedures – a humane treatment of the prisoners before they are killed and the mercy of a swift death. Montaigne does not justify the practice, but questions the validity of absolute standards of barbarism and civilization when supposedly civilized people like the Portuguese invaders are perfectly able to far greater cruelties:

> I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit by bit; in having him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine [...], than in roasting and eating him after he is dead. (Montaigne 1958, 155)

Stevenson echoes these words when he argues, thinking of the Polynesian cannibals, that "rightly speaking, to eat a man's flesh after he is dead is far less hateful than oppress him while he lives" (Stevenson 1998, 70).

It is perhaps the initial paragraph of the chapter that provides the most original insights, with Stevenson inverting the mainstream viewpoint and scrutinizing the accepted practices of meat-eating in

the West from the perspective of other culinary cultures or set of ethical principles. It is impossible to miss the intertextual interference from Shylock's monologue from *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare (another reader of Montaigne), which is also a reflection, after all, on the inclusion or exclusion of practices and beings from the boundaries of humanity (with a specific focus on unorthodox handlings of human flesh). Stevenson argues:

> Nothing more strongly arouses our disgust than cannibalism, nothing so surely unmortars a society; nothing, we might plausibly argue, will so harden and degrade the minds of those that practise it. And yet we ourselves make much the same appearance in the eyes of the Buddhist and the vegetarian. We consume the carcasses of creatures of like appetites, passions, and organs with ourselves; we feed on babes, though not our own; and the slaughter-house resounds daily with screams of pain and fear. We distinguish, indeed; but the unwillingness of many nations to eat the dog, an animal with whom we live on terms of the next intimacy, shows how precariously the distinction is grounded. (Stevenson 1998, 68)

The paragraph is not only interesting philosophically, but also stylistically. Like heated up steel that is suddenly quenched in water, Stevenson's prose takes on a passionate and outraged vocabulary to suddenly shift to a detached and self-reflective stance that is able to calmly observe the situation from the outside. The paragraph, in this sense, epitomizes Stevenson's attempt to move from the sentimental to the scientific.

At the same time, the chapter as a whole shows that also this position – like our ethical distinctions about meat-eating – is precariously grounded. When Stevenson finishes his examination of cannibalism – which he justifies from a biological point of view by stressing that the islands in which it was traditionally practised lacked steady sources of meat – the stylistic process is reversed and Stevenson reactivates the vocabulary of civilized outrage:

> It is right to look at both sides of the question: but I am far from making the apology of this worse than bestial vice. The higher Polynesian races, such as the Tahitians, Hawaiians, and Samoans, had one and all outgrown, and some of them had in part forgot, the practice before Cook or Bougainville had shown a top-sail in their waters. It lingered only in some low islands where life was difficult, and among inveterate savages like the New-Zealanders and the Marquesans. (Stevenson 1998, 71)

Stevenson's language – reverting, with no relativist inflection whatsoever, to a lexicon that establishes a neat distinction between civilization and savagery – seems to be stylistically overcompensating for his relativist and "scientific" reflections. While this may be justified by the desire to reassure his readers that his morals are still firm (and comes with an appreciation of various "degrees of civilization" within the Pacific region), this sudden shift is indicative of a fault line in Stevenson's anthropological imagination, indicating an unresolved tension within Stevenson's approach to Polynesian culture, which goes back to a distinctively evolutionist way of framing and classifying cultural others.

What unifies Stevenson's evolutionist and a relativist tendencies is a tension towards positivistic scientificity, stylistically expressed in his ethnographic realism. After all, within academic anthropology, the anti-evolutionist critique carried out by earlier cultural relativists like Boas or Malinowski was mostly focused on methodology – promoting a different way to reach knowledge – rather than epistemology – questioning the status of anthropological knowledge. The post-evolutionist anthropology maintained the ambition, within the new framework of the ethnographic method, of reaching a true objectivity that was not biased by ideological implications. That is the reason why Malinowski stresses that:

> only such sources are of unquestionable scientific value, in which we can clearly draw the line between, on the one hand, the results of direct observation and of native statements and interpretations, and on the other, the inferences of the author, based on common sense and psychological insight. (Malinowski 1922, 3)

It is a methodological statement that, while acknowledging the existence of inferences and biases, clings to the possibility of effectively separating them from pure ethnographic data in the final stages of the work. This ambition towards scientificity, objectivity and neutrality was exactly was came under attack by several generations of anthropologists in the late 20th century, when it was variously argued that the anthropologist's neutrality conveniently historically masked the colonial context from which their work originated (Asad 1973); that it displaces the personal and social conditionings that affect all

forms of anthropological writing, which can only reach partial truths (Clifford 2009); and that it prevents a genuine political engagement with the native communities (Scheper-Hughes 1995).

Is Stevenson's tension towards "scientificity" effectively hiding the extent to which his position in the ethnographic encounters he stages is variously biased and involved in a colonial structure of power? A short digression on Stevenson's actual politics in the Pacific Islands may help clarifying this point. Stevenson maintained, as a rule, a rather critical stance towards colonial reality around him, especially of the structures of colonial governance he encountered in Samoa, as shown in *A Footnote to History*, where he denounced the corruption and malpractices of the colonial ruling class – especially German – and defended politically the cause of the Samoan chief, Maatafa, that opposed the government in charge. However, throughout his journeys, Stevenson nevertheless travelled within a context of colonial privilege and was not a *systematic* opponent of colonialism. Overall, as Ann Colley sums up, while Stevenson was in many ways opposed to the abuses of colonialism, in others he did value the presence of imperial institutions (Colley 2004, 6). In particular, discussing Stevenson's position in Samoa, Colley shows how easy dichotomies between imperialist and anti-imperialist are sometimes difficult to maintain in Stevenson's case:

> When one starts to look closely at the life of someone, not himself a colonizer, but living in a territory that is the process of being colonized by his own country, one is bound to have complicated responses that disqualify the clichés of hindsight […]. […] In a certain popular sense, Stevenson did conform to what is thought of as imperialism. Particularly in his first years in Samoa, he did subscribe to the principle that if a non-Western colony were to succeed, it required a strong and informed foreign leadership […]. Yet even such generalization is misleading, for Stevenson also increasingly came to endorse Samoan rule, Samoan culture, and Samoan ownership of the land. (Colley 2004, 137)

Stevenson is, admittedly, a far cry from an imperialist ideologue like Kipling, who represents a somewhat complementary paradox: Kipling, as a norm, sees imperial authority and firm top-down governance as the only possibility against the descent of the colonies into chaos and barbarism, and, *within* this perspective, allows the presence of spaces of kinship, solidarity and respect. Conversely, Stevenson's outspoken and ever-growing support for native rule must not allow us to forget, when we explore his literary and ethnographic corpus, that he was also, to a different degree, embedded within

the practices of colonialism, which end up affecting his imaginative understanding of the natives and his proclaimed stance as an objective observer.

How does that translates in terms of a literary ethnography like *In the South Seas*? Looking at one particular passage of *In the South Seas* allows these contradictions to emerge. While Stevenson is in the island of Butirari, in the Gilberts, a crisis ensues: the king of the island, convinced by some white traders, has risen a tapu on liquor, with the result that most of the population has spent the previous ten days in drunkenness. Stevenson and his group start worrying that the situation might get dangerous and precipitate into a riot of some kind. Stevenson is particularly concerned because "a really considerable number of whites have perished in the Gilberts, chiefly through their own misconduct, and the natives have displayed in at least one instance a disposition to conceal an accident under a butchery, and leave nothing but dumb bones" (Stevenson 1998, 176). Nods at cannibalism aside, Stevenson is adamant that the blame is ultimately to be put on the whites. But his language and imaginary at some point undertake – like in the chapter on cannibalism – a certain shift:

> Our talk that morning must have closely reproduced the talk in English garrisons before the Sepoy mutiny; the sturdy doubt that any mischief was in prospect, the sure belief that (should any come) there was nothing left but to go down fighting, the half-amused, half-anxious attitude of mind in which we were awaiting fresh developments. (Stevenson 1998, 177)

Minor episodes of violence effectively do occur – but it is fascinating how Stevenson suddenly tries to evoke a very Kiplingesque sense of urgency, duty, heroism and excitement in the context of a prospective "insurgency", which is (half-jokingly, but up to what point?) compared to the 1857 rebellion. Indeed the whole episode represents another tonal and lexical shift towards a more traditionally colonial perspective, focused on the maintenance of order and the crucial issue of governance – albeit on a very small scale, differently from the rather apocalyptic scenarios depicted by Kipling in a story like "The Head of the District", which I discuss later.

A particularly interesting passage is represented by Stevenson's decision to go to talk, after a few days, with the only merchant in Butirari that is still selling alcohol to the natives, in order to convince him to stop selling and end the danger of a riot. In the dialogue that ensues, Stevenson uncharacteristically plays the role of the manly, confident, brave civilizer, very mindful of his pride,

ready to use violence if necessary, and selflessly heroic. In this role, he brings to his senses a less savvy European who is unaware of the actual danger of the situation:

> "But there's no danger, the natives are all quiet. You're just afraid of your life."
> I do not like to be called a coward, even by implication; and here I lost my temper and propounded an untimely ultimatum. "You had better put it plain," I cried. "Do you mean to refuse me what I ask?"
> "I don't want either to refuse it or grant it," he replied.
> "You'll find you have to do the one thing or the other, and right now!" […]
> Again he changed ground. "If the natives get any drink, it isn't safe to stop them," he objected.
> "I'll be answerable for the bar," I said. "We are three men and four revolvers; we'll come at a word, and hold the place against the village."
> "You don't know what you're talking about; it's too dangerous!" he cried.
> "Look here," said I, "I don't mind much about losing that life you talk so much of; but I mean to lose it the way I want to, and that is, putting a stop to all this beastliness." (Stevenson 1998, 186–87)

Normally, Stevenson's Pacific writings discuss this aggressive colonial masculinity in complex frameworks that leave the door open for deconstruction (as in "The Beach of Falesá"), or replace it with more meditative stances. The uniqueness of this episode – where we are seemingly supposed to take Stevenson's heroism at face value – presents itself as an overcompensation or a highly deliberate pose. Alternatively, it may suggest that the ethnographer-figure in this book is ready, at times, to respond to the fantasy of the heroic colonizers, to the myth of the frontier, to the expectations of traditional romance and its traditional way of understanding cultural others in terms of a barbaric threat to order.

As a further example of how the forms of the anthropological imagination that we find in Stevenson's works can blend diverging affiliations and tendencies, we can look at another passage of the Butirari episode. Stevenson remembers a brutal brawl between two native women, carried out during the day under the influence of liquor:

One ugly picture haunted me of the two women, the naked and the clad, locked in that hostile embrace. The harm done was probably not much, yet I could have looked on death and massacre with less revolt. The return to these primeval weapons, the vision of man's beastliness, of his ferality, shocked in me a deeper sense than that with which we count the cost of battles. There are elements in our state and history which it is a pleasure to forget, which it is perhaps the better wisdom not to dwell on. Crime, pestilence, and death are in the day's work; the imagination readily accepts them. It instinctively rejects, on the contrary, whatever shall call up the image of our race upon its lowest terms, as the partner of beasts, beastly itself, dwelling pell-mell and hugger-mugger, hairy man with hairy woman, in the caves of old. And yet to be just to barbarous islanders we must not forget the slums and dens of our cities; I must not forget that I have passed dinnerward through Soho, and seen that which cured me of my dinner. (Stevenson 1998, 180)

The passage is sustained by three, interconnected epistemic operations: depicting the two native women as a paragon of bestiality; acknowledging, with Conradian horror, that the same possibility for degeneration is indeed present within civilized human beings; and taking the London slums, in a comparative move, as an example of "heart of darkness" within the Western civilization. Each epistemic operation is not necessarily at ease with the others: the first one relies on an exoticist imagery that is in line with traditional colonial thinking, and possibly invites colonial intervention; the second one, instead, is animated by cultural relativism and somehow undercuts the first position; the last one establishes a "scientific", evolutionist comparison between islanders and slum-dwellers whose politics are even less clear: is Stevenson blaming the urban poor for their degenerate state or is he instead blaming the urban middle classes for the poor's predicament, just as he is ready, after all, to admit that it is the white men's fault if the natives are descend into violence? Is the comparison meant to grant a point to the natives or to the urban poor, or to signal the difference between himself and both groups by the grace of class and culture? Overall, the passage is dominated by an ambivalent "slippage between race and class" (Phillips 2005, 41) that, as Lawrence Phillips argues, Stevenson had already practised extensively in *The Amateur Emigrant*.

Stevenson's treatment of the combined issue of gaze, agency and intersubjectivity provides further material for debate. Stevenson's scientific, "positivist" stance may indeed support the argument that his anthropological knowledge is, in Aníbal Quijano's words, "the product of a subject-object relation" (Quijano 2007, 172). With this Quijano means a form of knowledge that emerges (or is

believed to emerge) under the assumption that it is possible to produce knowledge as isolated, rational individuals that apply themselves to the study of a fundamentally inert "object". In other words, the subject is the bearer of rationality and produces knowledge through observation, the object is passively studied. The subject has agency in the creation of knowledge, the object does not. Quijano sees the subject-object relation as typical of a colonial paradigm; but, I would say, it is more generally the product of a positivist framework. What a subject-object relation erases is intersubjectivity, which is, according to Quijano, a fundamental characteristic of knowledge: "Knowledge [...] is an intersubjective relation for the purpose of something, not a relation between an isolated subjectivity, and that something" (Quijano 2007, 172). This critique echoes the attacks on the putative objectivity of classical anthropological research that I have previously addressed – the fact that it displaces its context of production and hence the inequalities at its core. Indeed Quijano himself remarks how "the formation and the development of certain disciplines, such as Ethnology and Anthropology, have always shown that kind of 'subject-object' relations between the 'Western' culture and the rest" (Quijano 2007, 173).

An authoritarian colonial anthropological imagination would assume that knowledge is produced within an ethnographic encounter devoid of intersubjectivity. Literary anthropologies, however, often show that this is not the case even when their authors adhere, in theory, to a subject-object paradigm. In the case of *In the South Seas*, we are provided with an interesting ambiguity: Stevenson's stance as a "scientific tourist", armed with a confident methodology, may support the idea of a subject-object relation, of detached control over a passive ethnographic material; but, at the same time, he often constructs his ethnographic encounters in a way that undermines the epistemological autonomy of the "subject" and/or foregrounds a form of intersubjectivity. An example of the latter is the fact that his knowledge of Polynesian folklore is unlocked by an exchange – his own disclosure of Scottish legends.

Similarly, Stevenson's treatment of gaze, while not fully abandoning a privileged viewpoint of the ethnographer-figure as "subject", foregrounds how this position is precarious and focuses our attention on the idea of reciprocity. I have already pointed out how Stevenson is aware, in his first encounter with the Marquesans, of the "staring orbs" of the people around him. Variations of those staring orbs appear throughout the book, for instance when Stevenson and his family are guests of the King of Apemama, Tembinok. The last part of the book is indeed an in-depth study of this incredible figure – the only native ruler in the Gilberts that was capable of keeping in check the European commercial incursions. But, as Stevenson gathers the impressions for his portrait, he realizes that he

too is being observed: "we found ourselves the subject of a constant study. As we sat at meals, [Tembinok] took us in series and fixed upon each, for near a minute at a time, the same hard and thoughtful stare" (Stevenson 1998, 217). The king is an ethnographer-figure himself and Stevenson cannot avoid his scrutiny. Acknowledging this reciprocity means to start dismantling a subject-object relation.

Lastly, a passage in particular shows how the two epistemic models – subject-object, intersubjective – clash and coexist in the book. At some point, Stevenson, his wife Fanny and his cook are ashore on a Marquesan island:

> Except for the *Casco* lying outside, and a crane or two, and the ever-busy wind and sea, the face of the world was of a prehistoric emptiness; life appeared to stand stock- still, and the sense of isolation was profound and refreshing. On a sudden, the trade-wind, coming in a gust over the isthmus, struck and scattered the fans of the palms above the den; and, behold! In two of the tops there sat a native, motionless as an idol and watching us, you would have said, without a wink. The next moment the tree closed, and the glimpse was gone. This discovery of human presences latent overhead in a place where we had supposed ourselves alone, the immobility of our tree-top spies, and the thought that perhaps at all hours we were similarly supervised, struck us with a chill. (Stevenson 1998, 19–20)

The sudden appearance of the native within the "prehistoric emptiness" forces us to question, in Charne Lavery's words, the "imperial discourse of empty or external space" (Lavery 2017, 34). It contests an epistemological framework that sees Polynesia as an object (located in the past) to be discovered by rational Western observation. It shatters the illusion of control. While Stevenson does struggle to maintain that control within *In the South Seas* – enforcing a fairly traditional form of ethnographic authority – he also disseminates hints that his control might not actually be as firm as he pretends to be in other parts of the narrative.

We are now in a position to provide a more precise definition of the colonial anthropological imagination which Stevenson's texts and Kipling's explore. Typical features of the colonial anthropological imagination are: a positivist concern with typologies, understood as the basis of objective knowledge; a preoccupation for governance and control, which is often based on typologies; and a tension towards a separation between subject and object within an ethnographic encounter,

connected with a concern for objectivity. Stevenson engages in all these categories, but his reflection never results in an unproblematic or simultaneous acceptance of typologies, objectivity, (colonial) governance or subject-object relations. Kipling does basically the same, but in an overall configuration that ultimately results in radically different political and epistemological outcomes, and with the important caveat that there *are* several occasions, in his case, in which he *is* actually using these categories unproblematically (his "authoritarian" fiction).

It is crucial to remember that, while I have argued how a claim to scientificity and objectivity, as ethnographic stance, runs the risk of masking ideological positions of privilege, as well as hiding an intersubjective dimension within the production of knowledge, the idea of scientificity has an important redeeming quality – even if filtered through a positivist framework. In Stevenson's case, *pace* postmodern anthropology, scientificity can be taken as a regulatory idea rather than as an accomplishment. Looking at it this way, it is the catalyst for the epistemological possibility of a representation rooted in ethnographic realism that, most crucially, defies exoticist discourse. Stevenson's dismantling of exoticism through ethnographic realism is a crucial part of his work in the Pacific, which I think can be effectively discussed with reference to one of his fictional Pacific texts, "The Bottle Imp".

2.2.3. "The Bottle Imp": Translation, Exoticism and Colonial Allegory

"The Bottle Imp" allows us to discuss the relationship between Stevenson's anthropological imagination and exoticism in connection with his role as author in the late-Victorian world-system. This short story allows us to productively employ Rebecca Walkowitz's concept of "born-translated" literature, as Stevenson conceives the story, from the start, as a text to be received as a translation and addressed simultaneously at multiple readerships. Its "born-translated" status integrates very well with an anti-exoticist tension, predicated on the use of ethnographic realism within a fantastic narrative; a deliberate concern for contextualization; and the registration of the very conditions of production and circulation of the story itself[4].

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4   A previous version of this section (2.2.3) was published as "A Born-Translated fairy Tale: Transcultural Readership and Anti-Exoticism in Robert Louis Stevenson's 'The Bottle Imp' " in *Altre Modernità* (De Capitani 2018).

"The Bottle Imp" is a technically fairy tale. The plot revolves around a magic bottle, containing a fiendish creature – the titular imp – with the power to fulfil every wish his or her owner should make. There is a drawback, though: whoever dies with the bottle in his or her possession will burn in hell forever. Moreover, the owner cannot get rid of the bottle unless it is sold at loss. The tale's protagonist, Keawe, a Hawaiian sailor that is visiting San Francisco, is tricked into buying the bottle by its previous owner, a wealthy – but fatally ill – American. Determined to make the most of the situation, Keawe uses the bottle to become the master of a beautiful mansion in his homeland and then sells the accursed object to his friend Lopaka immediately afterwards. Later on, Keawe meets the love of his life, a clever and kind girl named Kokua. He proposes to her; she accepts; and the two are about to get married. At this point, however, Keawe finds out that he has caught leprosy. He therefore decides to track down the bottle's current owner in Honolulu, so that he can use its power to be clean again. He succeeds, only to discover that the price of the bottle has dropped to two cents. This means that Keawe can only buy the bottle for one cent and will not be able to sell it again.

Risking hellfire for his beloved, Keawe buys the bottle anyway, so he can be cured from leprosy and marry Kokua. However, as soon as Kokua finds out about his sacrifice, she elaborates a plan to save Keawe: they will go to Tahiti, in French territory, where there is a coin, the centime, which is less valuable than an American cent. In this way, the couple will be able to arrange another sale. Nevertheless, in spite of their efforts, Keawe and Kokua are unable to sell the bottle, so they end up buying it from each other through the help of intermediaries. But the last of these intermediaries, a vile white boatswain, surprisingly refuses to sell the bottle back to Keawe – he believes that he will go to hell anyway, so he decides to keep the bottle for himself and enjoy its power while he still can. Keawe and Kokua, therefore, are serendipitously saved.

The first interesting aspect of "The Bottle Imp" is its genesis. Stevenson called it the central piece of a collection of *Märchen* he was planning to write (Letters 7, 461). The fact that he used the German word for fairy tale (*Märchen*) is a nod to the story's origins, which are to be found in German folklore. According to Carlo Ginzburg, the story goes back to two motifs of the German tradition: the magic bottle that can only be sold at a lower price; and the figure of the *Galgenmännlein*, a little creature born of the sperm of a hanged man, who lives in bottles and possesses wish-granting powers. Over the course of different versions, the tale also incorporated the quest for a less valuable coin in other lands. Ultimately, it reached England (Ginzburg 2000, 71).

When it first appeared in the Sunday New York Herald – between February and March 1891 – "The Bottle Imp" was accompanied by an authorial note:

> Any student of that very unliterary product, the English drama of the early part of the century, will here recognize the name and the root idea of a piece once rendered popular by the redoubtable O. Smith. The root idea is there and identical, and yet I hope I have made it a new thing. And the fact that the tale has been *designed and written for a Polynesian audience* may lend it some extraneous interest nearer home. (Stevenson 1996b, 72).

The drama in question has been identified as *The Bottle Imp* by Richard Brinsley Peake, a melodrama first performed in Covent Garden in 1828, featuring the actor Richard John "Obi" Smith as the imp – the O. Smith of Stevenson's note. It is from this source that Stevenson decided to recreate the tale with a Polynesian audience in mind – and in fact there is no evidence that he had direct contact with any other version of the story (Swearingen 1980, 146). Most crucially, Stevenson enlisted the help of a missionary, Arthur E. Claxton, to produce a Samoan translation of the tale. Claxton eventually published the translated version as "O Le Fagu Aitu" in the magazine *O Le Sulu Samoa* (*The Samoan Torch*), from May to December 1891. This, interestingly enough, was the first instance of a printed text in Samoan.

The fact that the story was translated into Samoan may shed some light on the exact meaning of Stevenson's note, which turns out to be quite ambiguous as regards the dynamics of the tale's composition. What we know is that it was "designed and written for a Polynesian audience" and that the translation was published almost immediately afterwards. As Roger Swearingen argues, this leaves us with two possibilities: Stevenson may have "[written] the story in the manner of Polynesian tales, and with a Polynesian setting, without having any particular 'Polynesian audience" in mind – or foreseeing any need of translation" (Swearingen 1980: 146), only to embrace the prospect of a translation at a later point. Alternatively, the tale "was conceived from the outset as a story for translation" (Swearingen 1980: 145), with the Polynesian audience being, from the start, a Samoan readership. The wording of Stevenson's note seems to suggest that the second hypothesis is not too far-fetched, although one may wonder why he decided to write a story set so prominently in Hawaii if he was thinking of a Samoan audience. "Polynesian audience", besides, is a very vague term, which does

not allow us to discuss in detail the exact characteristics of Stevenson's intended audience. It does work, however, as an effective counterpoint to the Western audience that the tale nevertheless anticipates. In fact, the note explicitly acknowledges the existence of Western readers (namely, readers "nearer home"). The tale is hence conceived for at least two audiences, which are expected to experience the tale in different ways.

The audience of "The Bottle Imp" is meant to be multiple and transcultural; and there is a possibility that the tale was conceived with a translation in mind – as it were, that is was conceived as a translation. Both facts beg a number of questions: what are the political implications of thinking the "Bottle Imp" as a translation? What formal characteristics and narrative strategies within "The Bottle Imp" were determined by the unusual circumstances of its genesis? How is a Western audience supposed to approach the "The Bottle Imp", considering that its "ownership" of the tale is disputed or at the very least complicated by the presence of a "Polynesian audience"? What does this tell us about Stevenson's anthropological imagination?

It is useful, at this point, to go back to Rebecca Walkowitz's category of the "born-translated", which we introduced in the first chapter – a term that describes works that "do not simply appear in translation", but instead "have been written for translation from the start" (Walkowitz 2015, 3), "highlight the effects of circulation on production" and "block readers from being 'native readers', [...] [by addressing] multiple audiences at the same time" (Walkowitz 2015, 6). The idea of the "born-translated" seems to me a useful descriptive tool that allows us to tackle those works whose production and form are intertwined, from the start, with translation and circulation, and that are able to employ this condition to provide specific political and cultural insights. This is, I argue, the case of "The Bottle Imp". Although Walkowitz is talking of contemporary novels, I believe several of her insights are by no means less relevant for a *fin-de-siècle* writer that was perfectly aware of having to juggle between a multiplicity of different audiences (European, American, Polynesian) and, in this particular case, languages. Admittedly, compared to the contemporary examples of born-translated works that Walkowitz provides, Stevenson's "The Bottle Imp" seems to sport a very limited (at least initially) circuit of transcultural circulation. However, this tale embraces, on a smaller scale, the core issues, strategies and concerns implied by Walkowitz's category.

In "The Bottle Imp", *both* audiences are estranged from their role of native readers, but this estrangement works in crucially different ways for the Western and Polynesian audience. The Western

audience, in particular, is forced to encounter a Polynesian story in a non-domesticated form. This is not achieved by substituting the original German folklore with a distinctively Polynesian one. What really puts the Western reader to the test is that Polynesian history, lore, geography and sociality, even within a fairy-tale frame, are evoked with precision, detail and realism, and, most importantly, with the assumption that the reader has already some familiarity with them. Robert Hillier, in a discussion of Stevenson's "folkloric" Polynesian fiction, notes that in "The Isle of Voices", the other Polynesian *Märchen*, "the extensive use of Polynesian setting and language forces careful and repeated reading – hardly what readers seek in a fairy tale" (Hillier 1987, 40). However, this comment seems to me perfectly valid also for "The Bottle Imp", which is not much more accommodating as far as the setting, the range of geographical references and the language are concerned. This does not necessarily imply that a Westerner is automatically unfamiliar with these aspects – especially considering the gradual absorption of the Hawaiian Kingdom in the American sphere of influence in the late 19th century, culminating in the annexation by the United States in 1898; nor that a Polynesian (especially a non-Hawaiian) is automatically familiar with them. Nevertheless, the text is rooted in a non-exotic Polynesian local knowledge, and tries to employ a non-Western perspective that resists assimilation.

As a case in point, let's take the story's first paragraph:

There was a man of the Island of Hawaii, whom I shall call Keawe; for the truth is, he still lives, and his name must be kept secret; but the place of his birth was not far from Honaunau, where the bones of Keawe the Great lie hidden in a cave. This man was poor, brave, and active; he could read and write like a schoolmaster; he was a first-rate mariner besides, sailed for some time in the island steamers, and steered a whaleboat on the Hamakua coast. (Stevenson 1996b, 73)

Right in the first passage of "the Bottle Imp" Stevenson already takes for granted some aspects of local knowledge. One is the history and the legends connected to the bay of Honaunau. This bay was the site of a royal mausoleum, Hale-o-Keawe, named after a legendary king, Keawe, whose bones, after the destruction of the mausoleum, were allegedly sheltered in a hidden cave. The other is connected to the geography of the Island of Hawaii. Stevenson mentions the Hamakua cost, located in the north-western part of the island, which was known for its huge surf – a detail that the reader is supposed to know in order to appreciate the extent of Keawe's skills as a sailor. The readers who lack this knowledge are not

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excluded from the narrative, but have an intimation that behind the text there is a world of cultural interactions and a complex lore that they cannot fully grasp.

Locations and people are systematically taken from reality (often with references to places, houses and events that Stevenson visited or experienced). For instance, in Honolulu, right after he has recovered the bottle, Keawe listens to a concert by Henry Berger, a Prussian musician that was summoned to Hawaii to direct the Royal Hawaiian Band and became an important figure on the local musical scene:

> There, among happy faces, [Keawe] walked to and fro, and heard the tunes go up and down, and saw Berger beat the measure, and all the while he heard the flames crackle, and saw the red fire burning in the bottomless pit. Of a sudden the band played *Hiki-ao-ao*; that was a song that he had sung with Kokua, and at the strain courage returned to him. (Stevenson 1996b, 90)

Notice how Stevenson manages to interweave extremely local, realistic details – Berger's presence, the song – with the supernatural aspect of the tale – the fire of damnation – in a way that smoothly advances the fairy-tale plot while establishing a believable setting. It is not a fully-fledged portrait of the society of Honolulu, but it is more than a mere taste of local colour. It is the construction of a basic – but convincing – sense of place.

The "extreme circumstantiality" (Jolly 1996, xxviii) of the setting, constantly feeding the reader with glimpses of the Polynesian social, cultural and economic world, is the main strategy though which ethnographic realism works in the tale. Another good example is the description of the Keawe's fellow-travellers during his journey on the *Hall* – an inter-island steamer that takes Keawe to Honolulu, on which Stevenson himself had travelled:

> Then the *Hall* came, and the whaleboat carried him on board. The after-part of the ship was full of Haoles who had been to visit the volcano, as their custom is; and the midst was crowded with Kanakas, and the forepart with wild bulls from Hilo and horses from Kaü; but Keawe sat apart from all in his sorrow, and watched for the house of Kiano [Kokua's father]. (Stevenson 1996b, 87)

In a few lines Stevenson sketches a believable social microcosm connected to the steamer – we discover that the ship functions as means of transportation for whites (Haoles), Polynesian natives

(Kanakas), and for cattle coming from different parts of the island – provided, of course, that we know what Kanakas and Haoles are in the first place. This is not a generic descriptive passage, it implies a certain knowledge of the economic and human traffic of the Pacific Islands. Notice that it is the Haoles' presence that needs to be justified, as if it is the curiosity of a Polynesian audience that deserve more attention, rather than the possible puzzlement of the average Western reader. In the same vein, the geography of the tale, set between the Hawaiian Islands, San Francisco and Tahiti, is remarkably accurate and specific – arguably more than any of Stevenson's Pacific fictions – and the movements of the characters within this geography reflect convincingly the regional and international networks of the Pacific Ocean.

"The Bottle Imp", therefore, develops a supernatural story out of a realistic setting. A few specifications on realism, however, are in order. If we compare "The Bottle Imp", with, for instance, "The Beach of Falesá", the longer piece that was published together with "The Bottle Imp" and "The Island of Voices" in *Island Nights' Entertainments*, it is clear that is not possible to talk of exactly the same kind of realism. Roslyn Jolly considers "The Beach of Falesá" inherently realistic for two main reasons: the believable rendition of physical sensations, and its successful "representation of the manners of various social groups in an outpost of empire at the end of the nineteenth century" (Jolly 1996: xxvii). Instead, "The Bottle Imp" relies mostly on an accurate topography and on *glimpses* of a believable social reality, which are able to stand out within a supernatural narrative. It is understandable, in this sense, that Stevenson was particularly annoyed by the grouping together of "The Beach of Falesá" and "The Bottle Imp" in a single volume (Letters 7: 350). However, he later admitted that both works possessed what he called "a queer realism" for "the manners are exact" (Letters 7, 436). Being able to connect the two stories through the category of "queer realism" is crucial – not to conflate their stylistic specificities, but to frame the formal characteristics of "The Bottle Imp" within the context of a general shift, in Stevenson's production, from (different kinds of) romance to (various forms of) realist/ethnographic aesthetics, which in turn are meant to reject an exoticist paradigm of representation.

In *The Post-Colonial Exotic* (2001), Graham Huggan argues that the exotic is not, as it is generally perceived, "an inherent quality to be found 'in' certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places" (Huggan 2001, 13), but is rather a mode of perception and consumption. As a mode of perception, exoticism "renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and [...]

effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery" (Huggan 2001: 13). As a mode of consumption, on the other hand, exoticism works through the "trafficking of culturally 'othered' artefacts in the world's economic, not cultural, centres" (Huggan 2001: 15). Both modes are characterized by what Huggan calls, after Appadurai (Appadurai 1986, 28), the aesthetics of decontextualisation: whether exoticist discourse aims to create a representation of the other that is easily understandable, or to transform otherness into a marketable commodity, it is crucial to estrange its object from its original context. This is necessary to reduce to a minimum the knowledge that is deemed essential to understand – and possess – an artefact, a person, a culture. Exoticism can be interpreted as a function of an epistemologically naive colonial anthropological imagination, whose extensive use of normalizing typologies is functional to frame cultural others in a manageable framework that ensures epistemic domination over them. It is worth noting that an exoticist anthropological imagination is not always openly demeaning towards the cultural other, but it is always reductive, reassuring and exploitative: the bloodthirsty cannibal and the "noble savage" are both exoticist categories.

Stevenson's use of realist aesthetics in "The Bottle Imp" and in the rest of his Pacific writing, on the contrary, aims to provide context, producing local specificity and sense of place that oppose a simplified perception of otherness and its easy consumption. In "The Bottle Imp" the denial of exoticism works especially well because it relies on the characteristics of the text as a born-translated fairy tale: arguably the easiest tactic for a Western reader to remain a "native reader" of a text, if that text is dealing with non-Western content, is to rely on exoticist paradigms to normalize its understanding of the setting. By estranging its readers through its nonchalant sketching of a Polynesian world, the tale prevents them from becoming "native readers" of the text; consequently, it stops them from claiming the tale together with the world represented in it. Stevenson does not simply provide a context for its fairy tale: it describes the context with the assumption that the target reader is not (necessarily) Western. This is also connected with the presence of native protagonists, who move within the world of "The Bottle Imp" with absolute familiarity. If the readers lack their coordinates, they are prevented from classifying and domesticating the cultural items within the tale by means of an exoticist paradigm. The only choice is to surrender simultaneously to the foreignness *and* to the normalcy of the setting, discarding the option of an exoticist anthropological imagination.

To understand the terms of the issue, it is very useful to discuss an exchange between Stevenson and Sidney Colvin. In 1894, Frustrated by the excessive focus on native life that he found in Stevenson's letters, Colvin wrote Stevenson:

> [Do] any of our white affairs [interest you at all]? I could remark in passing that for three letters or more you have not uttered a single word about anything but your beloved blacks — or chocolates — confound them; beloved no doubt to you; to us detested, as shutting out your thoughts […] from the main currents of human affairs, and oh much less interesting than any […] of our own hereditary associations, loves and latitudes. (quoted in Gray 2004, 159)

Stevenson – the writer who had indeed left the "hereditary associations, loves and latitudes" to address his readers "from the uttermost parts of the sea" – replied:

> Dear Colvin, please remember that my life passes among my "blacks or chocolates". If I were to do as you purpose, […] it would cut you entirely off my life. You must try to exercise a trifle of imagination, and put yourself, perhaps with an effort, into some sort of sympathy with these people, or how am I to write to you? (Letters 8, 281-2)

Colvin's assumption is exoticist at heart: the Polynesian are an exotic prop in Stevenson's existence – utterly different but also perfectly easy to understand and dismiss as inconsequential – and by focusing on them Stevenson is fundamentally hiding from view under a colourful scenery. But Stevenson's realist imagination sees them as entirely normal, part of the surroundings in which he is himself embedded, and hence finds perfectly natural to talk extensively about them, as they require ethnographic precision to be accurately imagined and understood. Colvin has to strive to see the normalcy of the Polynesians even if they are outwardly "different" to his idea of the everyday. "The Bottle Imp", similarly, asks the (Western) readers to "put [themselves], perhaps with an effort, into some sort of sympathy with these people", in order to see its protagonists, its locations and cultures as real and meaningful, and not as exotic background.

Up until now I have stressed the ways in which the text resists an easy appropriation from a Western readership. But does the estrangement work the other way? Walkowitz's point is that no reader

should be granted the status of "native reader" in relation to a born-translated work. Is this the case in "The Bottle Imp"? Is also a Polynesian reader prevented from claiming that status?

Referencing again the discussion on world literature can help to clarify this point. If we follow Moretti in his insight that world literary system is simultaneously one and unequal, and if a born-translated text estranges *all* its perspective audiences in the same way, it runs the risk of embracing a depoliticized groundlessness, which easily goes to the advantage of the stronger party within the system. Admittedly, Walkowitz is not unaware of the problem and tries to protect the category of the born-translated from this possibility: as she argues in reference to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, her idea of the transnational "also remains local in an important sense", and "global disarticulation – belonging to nowhere – is not the only alternative to national simultaneity" (Walkowitz 2015: 28). Stevenson, back in 1891, provides a possible alternative to global disarticulation, national simultaneity and uncritical cosmopolitanism, as he promotes decentering but also takes into consideration the need to redress inequalities within the world literary system. Since his Western audience is the one with more political and epistemological clout, frequently expressed through the imposition of an exoticist gaze, Stevenson is primarily focused on disarming a mode of reading that empowers that readership at the expenses of a Polynesian one. Therefore the estrangement of the Western reader is indeed the predominant strategy that the tale operates.

Still, a form of estrangement is at work also for the Polynesian audience to whom "The Bottle Imp" is dedicated. This appears in the echoes of the European folkloric material that dominates atmosphere of some passages of the fairy tale. For instance, although the story, as Stevenson fashions it, is in no way a variation on a Faust narrative, some of the most effective passages of "The Bottle Imp" should certainly remind a Western reader of the most famous versions of the German legend. When, towards the end of the story, Kokua has the bottle in her possession, she surrenders to absolute desperation:

> All roads were now the same to her, and led equally to hell. Sometimes she walked, and sometimes ran; sometimes she screamed out loud in the night, and sometimes lay by the wayside in the dust and wept. All that she had heard of hell came back to her; she saw the flames blaze, and she smelt the smoke, and her flesh withered on the coals. (Stevenson 1996b, 96)

In its deployment of this narrative trope – a character contemplating the perspective of certain damnation – the passage could be read as a different rendering of, for instance, the last scene of Marlowe's *Faustus*, where the protagonist, as the hour of his damnation approaches, tries to ease his terror by franticly fantasizing about the ways in which he could miraculously avoid his fate. Bodily movements and reactions replace elaborate Elizabethan rhetoric (the passage becomes an instance of narrative of the body, as it were), but both passages convey utter hopelessness and, most importantly, a sense of violent restlessness. Faustian echoes, in short, may allow the Western reader to feel (quaintly) at home. This is, admittedly, a significant concession. But it is definitely not enough to reclaim the story exclusively within a European tradition, and certainly does not reinforce an exoticist strategy of appropriation. The Polynesian readers may accept it, even claim it as their own, but they must also acknowledge its foreign origin.

If anything, therefore, the European material registers the dialogic environment in which Stevenson was able to conceive the story – again, we are reminded of the key passage of *In the South Seas* about the establishment of a communication points with the Marquesans through the sharing of Scottish folklore. Telling the story of the bottle imp in Polynesia is an integral part of this narrative exchange. Being born-translated is, for "The Bottle Imp", not a way to disengage from a variety of contexts, but to critically engage with them. Indeed, Stevenson's interest in writing for Polynesians while living in the Pacific region (and not merely about them) stands in contrast with Kipling's own relationship with the natives that are often present in his tales. As we discuss more extensively in the next section of the chapter, Kipling's audience, while in India, was distinctively Anglo-Indian, and he would have been horrified at the thought that the Indians he represented in his stories may actually read his work (Trivedi 2011, 196). Stevenson cultivates the opposite trend: a desire for communication, in line with his actual interest and later engagement with Samoan society and politics. This is entirely at odds with Kipling's stance, which does not contemplate the possibility of a native response to his writings. In other words: while both Kipling and Stevenson have native protagonists, the fact that Stevenson's native protagonists are conceived, in this case, *for* a native audience, is another way in which Stevenson replaces – far more successfully than Kipling – the subject-object dimension of the colonial anthropological imagination with an intersubjective exchange.

If the sharing of legends represents a constructive, creative form of trade between representatives of different cultures, it should be noted that Stevenson does not allow us to forget that such process is

part of a broader series of exchanges, carried out in the context of the commercial and military penetration of Western colonialism in the Pacific Islands. "The Bottle Imp" registers the very ambivalence of transcultural exchanges within a context of colonial expansion. It does that precisely through the device of the magic bottle, which not only is inherently connected to various aspects of the world of trade and business – to the point that, for Kevin McLaughlin, the bottle intervenes in a specifically Victorian discourse on finance, credit and speculation (McLaughlin 1996) – but also, more generally, embodies the complementary economical and cultural forces at work within a colonial context. Entering the cycle of exchanges connected to the magic bottle enables the characters to shape their lives into new directions, but it also engenders sorrow and misery. The most blatant demonstration of this mechanism is that the imp is able to cause harm even when he dispenses gifts – the most prominent example is the fact that Keawe inherits the land and money to build his house only because an uncle and a cousin suddenly die. But the *whole* system is ultimately a losing game, or, as Keawe puts it as soon as he gets hold of the bottle, "a losing bargain" (Stevenson 1996b, 76). This is a fairly accurate assessment of the overall effect of colonial penetration, at least from the perspective of the native populations as a whole, if not from that of specific individuals.

In this sense, "The Bottle Imp" may work as an allegory of colonial encounters, with the passage of the bottle from one hand to another standing for the unfolding of uneven and ambivalent social and economic relations in the colonial Pacific. Most notably, it is a white man that first brings the bottle to Keawe and it is a white man that takes it back at the end of the tale. Therefore, the commerce between Haoles and Kanakas – a transcultural as well as commercial transaction – is the essential frame in which the story is enclosed. It is not a chance that the kind of material wealth that the characters wish for is distinctively colonial: Keawe, inspired by what he sees in San Francisco, asks the imp for a house that looks almost exactly like the mansion of the American who sold him the bottle – the handbook definition of mimicry. His friend Lopaka, in a similar vein, uses the bottle to get himself a schooner.

The fact that Keawe is Hawaiian and the original owner of the bottle is American might not be a coincidence, considering that Stevenson, a personal friend of Kalakaua, the last King of Hawaii, was well aware of how the United States, about to enter in a new phase of imperialism, had their eyes set on the Hawaii (see Ratnapalan 2012). There are good reasons, in other words, to see the bottle and the whites that deal with it as an insidious colonial presence. At the same time, the encounter between Westerners and Polynesians is also the reason why the story – a German legend re-written by a

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Scotsman in Samoa – exists in the first place. Consistently with the reflexive nature of the born-translated text as conceived by Walkowitz, this fairy tale finds a way to record the system of transactions, exchanges, production and circulation that enables its existence. It foregrounds its dependence on certain material and historical conditions, highlighting, at the same time, their fault lines and inherent contradictions.

As a concluding remark, it should be noted that "The Bottle Imp" diverges from a traditional fairy tale in another crucial respect: its realistic and nuanced treatment of marriage dynamics. Kokua and Keawe are compelling characters for their selfless love for each other. But it is equally fascinating to observe how their love is not idealized or absolute: their relationship is repeatedly endangered precisely because they cannot bear the pressure they face as a couple and as individuals, which leads them to estrange themselves from each other, or, even worse, to be needlessly cold or cruel. The strain that the bottle puts on their marriage may have a supernatural origins, but the results are believable enough, investigating how the suffering of a loved one, or one's own suffering, can threaten to radically alter the way the two individuals treat one another – even when they still genuinely love each other. This insightful look at domesticity also features in the next and final South Seas text that I address, and similarly helps defying generic conventions.

2.2.4. Confessions of a Conflicted Racist: "The Beach of Falesá"

If "The Bottle Imp", with its native protagonists, captures Stevenson's anti-exoticist imagination of cultural others, his longer South Seas pieces, conversely, are more focused on dissecting the various categories of white characters in the Pacific. Such interest is perhaps best captured by the opening of the 1894 novella "The Ebb-Tide":

> Throughout the island world of the Pacific, scattered men of many European races and from almost every grade of society carry activity and disseminate disease. Some prosper, some vegetate. Some have mounted the steps of thrones and owned islands and navies. Others again must marry for a livelihood; [...] And there are still others, less pliable, less capable, less fortunate, perhaps less base, who continue, even in these isles of plenty, to lack bread. (Stevenson 1996c, 124)

The three protagonists of the tale belong to the latter category. They are all, in spite of their class and national differences, beachcombers, a word Stevenson takes from Melville (Lavery 2017, 33) that indicates a heterogeneous category of (European) adventurers who try to make ends meet at the margins of island society. At the opposite end of the spectrum the story presents us with Attwater, the tyrannical overlord of a small island, who has practically enslaved the native population to establish a pearl-fishing enterprise. Attwater is in many ways a predecessor of Conrad's Kurtz (see Dryden 2011), and combines, like Conrad's character, absolute brutality with refinement, charm and culture, stitched together with religious fanaticism and delusions of grandeur. "The Ebb-Tide", with its parade of diverse white characters, digs in the personality and motivations of these figures to question the romanticism of imperial adventure and dress down any pretension of civilizing mission. And yet "The Ebb-Tide", focused as it is on the relationship between white characters, do not really feature any ethnographic encounter that can be examined in terms of anthropological imagination. The native characters are barely present and feature exclusively as victims of the Westerners' deviousness and violence. Another novella, "The Beach of Falesá", combines the interest for studying the variety of white characters that emerges in the opening paragraph of "The Ebb-Tide" with an exploration of their ethnographic encounter with the Polynesian natives.

"Falesá" is a first-person narrative. The narrator and protagonist is John Wiltshire, a British trader working for an unnamed European company that is sent to the (fictive) island of Falesá to start a business. Wiltshire initially rejoices at the perspective, as he is "sick for white neighbours" (Stevenson 1996a, 4). He is welcomed by Case, another resident trader of uncertain nationality – Wiltshire only points out that "no man knew his country, beyond he was of English speech" (Stevenson 1996a, 5). Case, after gaining Wiltshire's trust with his wit and engaging manners, offers Wiltshire to get him a "wife". With that he means a Polynesian lover, to be enticed with a prospect of a false marriage. Wiltshire agrees, and Case quickly finds a suitable girl, Uma, who is soon "wed" to Wiltshire through an outrageous marriage contract: "This is to certify that Uma, daughter of Fa'avao of Falesá island of ——, is illegally married to Mr. John Wiltshire for one night, and Mr. John Wiltshire is at liberty to send her to hell next morning" (Stevenson 1996a, 11). While Wiltshire does not back off, he is ashamed by the deception, and, after he is left alone with Uma, grows genuinely fond of the girl.

Yet the next day Wiltshire finds himself entirely isolated. Nobody comes near his house, nobody buys his wares. Wondering whether he has been tabooed by the natives, Wiltshire is tempted to ask Uma for explanations, but ultimately decides to go to Case instead. The trader promises that he will parley with the island chiefs on Wiltshire's behalf, as Wiltshire does not know the local language. The consultation, however, leads to nothing. It is only at this point that Uma, realizing that Wiltshire has absolutely no clue of what is going on, informs him that the taboo belongs to her, and he was involved in the ban as soon as they got married. Uma was told by Case that Wiltshire knew of her condition and did not care, and it is now clear that Case had planned to set up Wiltshire with Uma in order to get rid of a business rival. Wiltshire could, at this point, leave Uma to get his business back on track, but, driven by what he now explicitly calls love, he decides instead to look for the help of a missionary, Mr. Tarleton, and to marry Uma with a legal ceremony.

From a variety of sources Wiltshire starts collecting information about his rival. Uma tells him that also her predicament is Case's doing: taking advantage of the fact that Uma and her mother came from another island, Case had been spreading rumours that Uma is taboo in order to isolate her and having a chance to obtain her favours. Tarleton also confirms a number of stories about Case's habit of killing off or scaring away any potential rival. Most importantly, Wiltshire finds out that Case maintains a position of influence on the island through his reputation for sorcery and devil-work: a native reveals to Wiltshire that Case is notoriously in league with a major evil spirit, Tiapolo, and has a shrine in the middle of the forest where he supposedly worships Tiapolo. Those who have been there with Case have witnessed terrifying feats of magic. Wiltshire, at this point, decides to investigate and discovers the shrine in the depths of the woods. Case's tricks are revealed: using aeolian harps and luminous painting, he has led the natives to believe that the place is haunted and he has dark sorcery at his command. Wiltshire is now determined to destroy the shrine and expose Case's frauds, so he returns into the woods during the night. As he prepares to blow up the shrine, he is caught up by Uma, who has overcome her fear of the *aitus* (evil spirits) to warm Wiltshire that Case is coming to kill him. What follows is a final confrontation between the two men, in which Wiltshire manages to kill his rival.

The ending reveals that now Wiltshire and Uma, still happily married after many years, have left Falesá and have several children, with Wiltshire leaving behind his dreams of returning to England. Yet Wiltshire is not entirely at peace with his new life, and the story ends with a comment that reveals Wiltshire's disturbing complexity of feelings, especially about his daughters: "But what bothers me is

the girls. They're only half−castes, of course; I know that as well as you do, and there's nobody who thinks less of half−castes than I do; but they're mine, and about all I've got. I can't reconcile my mind to their taking up with Kanakas, and I'd like to know where I'm to find the whites?" (Stevenson 1996a, 71).

"The Beach of Falesá", as I mentioned discussing "The Bottle Imp", carries out a realist aesthetics mainly through an exact and vivid rendering of physical sensations and an accurate representation of island society. Both points deserve some explanation. The first aspect is particularly interesting because it echoes, in many way, Stevenson's "classic" phase of romance writing. As Stevenson argues in "A Gossip on Romance", romance is meant to be focused, among other things, on "the problems of the body and of the practical intelligence". One of the aspects of this narrative of the body in which Stevenson is particularly accomplished – and to an extent represents an early "realist" feature of his writing – is precisely the representation of the physicality of adventure. *Kidnapped* (1886), for instance, one of his most celebrated romances, employed, as defining stylistic trait, a "hyperreal mimesis of bodily sensation" (Duncan 2014, xxi). One of the best-known passages of the book, in which the protagonist David Balfour and the Jacobite outlaw Alan Breck hide from the government troops on the top of an overexposed, scorching rock in the middle of the Highlands, may serve as an adequate example:

> You are to remember that we lay on the bare top of a rock, like scones upon a girdle; the sun beat upon us cruelly; the rock grew so heated, a man could scarce endure the touch of it; and the little patch of earth and fern, which kept cooler, was only large enough for one at a time. We took turn about to lie on the naked rock, which was indeed like the position of that saint that was martyred on a gridiron; and it ran in my mind how strange it was, that in the same climate and at only a few days' distance, I should have suffered so cruelly, first from cold upon my island and now from heat upon this rock. (Stevenson 2014, 125)

The description of the protagonists' physical distress, enhanced by well-chosen, concrete similes, crystallizes into a highly engaging narrative focused on the problems of the body. And indeed the "Beach of Falesá" maintains the same ability to represent intense, believable physical suffering, for instance when Wiltshire is shot by Case during their final confrontation and has to crawl about with a broken leg: "I scarcely knew where I was hurt, or whether I was hurt or not, but turned right over on

my face to crawl after my weapon. Unless you have tried to get about with a smashed leg you don't know what pain is, and I let out a howl like a bullock's" (Stevenson 1996a, 66).

Yet the attention towards the body and physicality seeps into more intimate scenes between Wiltshire and Uma as well. For instance, in one of the pivotal passages of the novel, when Wiltshire confesses to Uma that he does not want to lose her, and that he will remain at her side in spite of the taboo, it is particularly striking how Stevenson manages to intertwine psychological development with the immediacy of concrete gestures and physical sensations:

> She threw her arms about me, sprang close up, and pressed her face to mine in the island way of kissing, so that I was all wetted with her tears, and my heart went out to her wholly. I never had anything so near me as this little brown bit of a girl. Many things went together, and all helped to turn my head. She was pretty enough to eat; it seemed she was my only friend in that queer place; I was ashamed that I had spoken rough to her: and she was a woman, and my wife, and a kind of a baby besides that I was sorry for; and the salt of her tears was in my mouth.(Stevenson 1996a, 29)

The narrative of the body – the sudden embrace, the physical proximity, the touching faces, the tears in the mouth – is extended to the sphere of domesticity and mingles with psychological exploration, in what ultimately becomes a combination of techniques and themes from different genres: romance and domestic novel. The latter has arguably the upper hand, as Roslyn Jolly suggests: "while the story is a generic hybrid, its deepest and most consistent affiliations are with the feminine realm of domestic fiction" (Jolly 1999, 463). Jolly's argument is that a Pacific domesticity, juxtaposed with an adventurous ending, works as a revision, within the text, of traditional imperial romance, which is arguably one of the recurring aspects of Stevenson's Pacific writings: adventure loses its element of carefree evasion, not (only) because it is messy, morally bankrupt and physically excruciating, like in "The Ebb-Tide", but also because it is yoked to domesticity. There are several scenes that describe Uma's and Wiltshire life together, in which their personalities cheerfully clash in a believable representation of marriage dynamics.

Yet domesticity is integrated within a broader ethnographic portrait of island society. "Falesá" is particularly attentive towards depicting not only a variety of island types, but also their mutual relations. There are, first of all, the Europeans, coming from a variety of national contexts and roughly divided in traders, missionaries and beachcombers. The traders – like Case and Wiltshire – are

constantly trying to establish their influence within native society, with their goods, force, deceit and diplomacy. Case's negotiations with the chiefs of the island, as well as his relentless machinations, are illustrative of the pervasive nature of the traders' presence in island communities. Traders are, in this sense, in conflict with the missionaries, both for their diverging aims and their different approach to the natives, as Wiltshire reminds us: "I didn't like the lot, no trader does; they look down upon us, and make no concealment; and, besides, they're partly Kanakaised, and suck up with natives instead of with other white men like themselves" (Stevenson 1996a, 34). Indeed one of the crucial nodes in the plot is Wiltshire's ability to overcome his suspicions and ally with Tarleton – among others – to defeat Case. That said, Case and Wiltshire also differ because, while the former is an independent trader, the latter works for a trading company, and represents, in this sense, the arrival of more "formal" dimensions of colonialism.

But also the missionaries are a mixed lot. Although we are presented with the impeccable and well-mannered Tarleton, the story also offers us the example of a French missionary, Galuchet, who strikes Wiltshire as "so dirty you could have written with him on a piece of paper" (Stevenson 1996a, 17). Both the trader and the missionary can indeed precipitate in the more elastic and disreputable category of the beachcomber, and indeed Galuchet's dirtiness is matched, on the secular side, by Capitan Randall, the titular owner of the local trading post that Case has usurped. Randall, who quite aptly oversees the false marriage ceremony, represents the apotheosis of European-beachcomber dissolution. He is described as he is "squatting on the floor native fashion, fat and pale, naked to the waist, grey as a badger, and his eyes set with drink. His body was covered with grey hair and crawled over by flies; one was in the corner of his eye he never heeded; and the mosquitoes hummed about the man like bees" (Stevenson 1996, 8).

The fact that Randall is squatting "native-fashion" may lead to the impression that his degeneration is connected to his "going native". However, as Philip Lawrence argues, the story

> shows us not the threat of degeneration, but a degeneration that is already internalised by the European characters […]. Unlike *Heart of Darkness*, where it is the exposure to the so-called "primitive psyche" and the primal bush that reawakens Kurtz's "savage" subconscious, Stevenson's vision suggests that it is the Westerners themselves who contaminate local cultures, peoples and politics, encouraging greed, competition, drunkenness, violence and deceit. (Phillips 2007, 75)

Consistently, almost all the natives in the story are considerably more dignified than the whites – including Wiltshire. Leaving temporarily Uma aside, it is striking how the chiefs of the island, even if observed through Wiltshire's suspicious and biased eyes, are fundamentally civilized and respectable individuals:

> Five chiefs were there; four mighty stately men, the fifth old and puckered. They sat on mats in their white kilts and jackets; they had fans in their hands, like fine ladies; and two of the younger ones wore Catholic medals, which gave me matter of reflection. [...] I was just a hair put out by the excitement of the commons, but the quiet civil appearance of the chiefs reassured me […]. (Stevenson 1996a, 23)

The native chiefs are honourable and dignified; yet they are not mere "noble savages", naive, primitive and unable to speak with the Westerners in their own terms. In this sense it is crucial to remember Wiltshire's encounter with Maea, a chief that approaches him right after Wiltshire returns from his first trip into the woods. Maea lets Wiltshire know that he would also like to see Case overthrown, and having this kind of backup is crucial to convince Wiltshire to carry on with his plan – he understand that blowing up the shrine and exposing Case's tricks might actually be a valuable move to gain support on the island. Quite crucially, through Maea, Stevenson inserts a *native* player in the match against Case that shows a considerable degree of individual agency and strategical thinking. Wiltshire is not a solitary white saviour that defeats Case out of sheer will and bravery: he needs the active support of various parts of island society in order to defeat his rival – including the natives.

What Stevenson represents is a profoundly contaminated society, dominated by an informal but pervasive form of colonialism. The narrative does not represent a utopian or idyllic situation of interracial and intercultural harmony, but rather foregrounds the relentless power struggles as well as the profoundly aggressive and multifarious ways in which the Europeans (both traders and missionaries) infiltrate the native social tapestry. The novella is, in this sense, a snapshot of the Pacific Islands world during the *fin-de-siècle* imperialism. The fact that the island of Falesá is an invention only helps establishing its emblematic status: it is "the original island, a metonymy of the South Seas, a symbol of all Polynesian islands" (Largeaud-Ortéga 2009, 124). Stevenson's story, moreover, is

specifically ethnographic because it does not only register societal networks, tensions and struggles on a general level, but is particularly sensitive to the cultural specificities of these struggles.

Stevenson boasted, in a letter to Sidney Colvin, that his tale encompassed an immense amount of details about the South Seas, claiming that "you will know more about the South Seas after you have read my little tale, than if you had read a library" (Letters 7, 161). Sylvie Largeaud-Ortéga takes this as an indication that the story is to be read specifically as an *anthropological* library (Largeaud-Ortéga 2009, 118). Indeed, she demonstrates how Stevenson is accurate in the representation of Polynesian cultural specificities, even if they are hidden within the fast-paced unfolding of the plot. For instance, while the Western reader rightfully perceives the marriage scene as the representation of an outrageous scam, a "native" reading of the scene shows how Uma and her mother, believing the marriage to be genuine, carry out the proper rituals of a Polynesian marriage, captured with ethnographic precision (Largeaud-Ortéga 2009, 122–28). The irony is that Wiltshire *is* rightfully married to Uma according to the Polynesian custom, even through he does not realizes it.

In this sense, "Falesá" is a variation of the strategy of estrangement of the Western readership that we have explored in "The Bottle Imp": the story implies a certain degree of local knowledge, and hence does not discloses itself fully to the reader that approaches it with the intention of carrying out an act of exoticist appropriation. But actually *all* the strategies of realism that I have described contribute to dismantle the possibility of exoticism: the integration of romance with physicality and domesticity, which grounds it in the concrete relationship between individuals in the Pacific; the exploration of the layered dimension of island society; and the ethnographic precision reserved to the Polynesian characters, practices and folklore. Establishing a realist setting is particularly important to create a narrative space for the ethnographic encounter between Wiltshire and Uma. This encounter allows the text to stage and dissect a profoundly conflicted colonial anthropological imagination, showcasing how Wiltshire's imaginative understanding of Uma, the natives, his children are gradually changed by his encounter and interaction with his wife. There are three fundamental aspects that needs to be considered in examining this encounter: one, Wiltshire – our ethnographer-figure, whose anthropological imagination is under scrutiny – is the *unreliable* narrator of the story; two, Uma is conceived as the ideal foil of Wiltshire's delusions; three, their encounter is mediated in a disturbing way by Case.

Let us start with Wiltshire. Wiltshire's arc in the story may seem, at first, a fairly straightforward one. He starts off as a fundamentally racist, entitled and seemingly unscrupulous character, and ends up as a responsible father and caring husband in an interracial marriage. But his personal growth, interestingly enough, does not stop him from falling back into the racial anxieties and rigid typologies that, in theory, he should have left behind and overcome by virtue of his experience. Indeed he has, up to a point: the beauty of Wiltshire as a character and as a narrator is that "the insight and the blindness coexist side-by-side" (Jolly 1999, 481).

When we first meet him, Wiltshire explicitly desires the company of whites, becoming, in this way, an easy prey for Case's machinations. His sense of racial and epistemological superiority is what drives him for the first part of the tale – and brings him into trouble. It is in particular the moment in which he discovers the taboo that his sense of racial pride emerges. He decides not to talk with Uma about the taboo (at first) because "it's a bad idea to set natives up with any notion of consulting them" (Stevenson 1996a, 21) – a clear indication that he wants to maintain an autonomous status as knowing subject that does not mingle with his "object". In doing so, he delays the only conversation that could actually solve the mystery, as it eventually happens. Later, during the consultation with the chiefs, he is adamant about his rightful place on the island, asking Case to translate the following speech to the island chiefs:

> You tell them who I am. I'm a white man, and a British subject, and no end of a big chief at
> home; and I've come here to do them good, and bring them civilisation; and no sooner have I
> got my trade sorted out than they go and taboo me, and no one dare come near my place! [...]
> if they think they're going to come any of their native ideas over me, they'll find themselves
> mistaken. And tell them plain that I demand the reason of this treatment as a white man and a
> British subject. (Stevenson 1996a, 23–24)

Wiltshire's speech focuses on the need of establishing control on the part of the ethnographer-figure, framing the natives as lacking agency or not being entitled to it. Moreover, it constructs the natives through dichotomous cultural typologies, which engender a sense of cultural hierarchy. Of course this passage, presented in direct speech, may be attributed to the "old" Wiltshire. But it is baffling how Wiltshire-the-narrator, who should know perfectly well that most of what he says here is going to be

irrelevant to escape his predicament, and perhaps should have revised at least some of his notions about the European-Polynesian relations, should comment his words in this way:

> That was my speech. I know how to deal with Kanakas: give them plain sense and fair dealing, and I'll do them that much justice – they knuckle under every time. They haven't any real government or any real law, that's what you've got to knock into their heads; and even if they had, it would be a good joke if it was to apply to a white man. It would be a strange thing if we came all this way and couldn't do what we pleased. The mere idea has always put my monkey up, and I rapped my speech out pretty big. (Stevenson 1996a, 24)

All of this is fundamentally wrong, not (only) from an ethical, ethnographic or ideological point of view, but also according to Wiltshire-as-narrator's own experience: the unfolding of the story clearly demonstrates that he had not idea how to deal with Kanakas, at least back then, that they definitely are much more lawful than the rogue traders that arrive on their islands, and that the fact that those traders cannot be contained by laws or customs is *exactly* the root of all problems. Still, the narrator seems to be unaware of these incongruences, endorsing the epistemological stance and perspective of his former, less experienced self.

Wiltshire as a narrator is clearly narrating the story with the benefit of hindsight: for instance, the first time he describes Case he clearly foreshadows both his deceptions and his death. Yet such foreshadowing or hindsight are rarely present when he articulates, throughout the story, his imaginative understanding of the natives. It seems that Wiltshire is failing to make the connection between his ideas and his experiences, retrospectively trying to justify his notions, if not his decisions. Fortunately, his actions – and arguably his instincts – are ultimately more morally sound than his ideas. Moreover, there are moments in which Wiltshire seems to be genuinely capable, if not of self-reflection, of gesturing towards the contradictions of his anthropological imagination, which makes his character more complex and sympathetic.

The first significant moment of self-awareness is when he first starts falling in love with Uma. Wiltshire registers his conflicted feelings for the girl, being torn between seeing her as a primitive in an evolutionist and hierarchical sense (hence as an erotic and exotic object to be possessed) and as an actual person (both worthy and in need of emotional investment and respect). The former entails a

subject-object relationship – including an actual sexual objectification – while the latter explores an intersubjective exchange between equals. When they are alone for the first time, strolling towards their new home, Wiltshire comments: "I felt for all the world as though she were some girl at home in the Old Country, and, forgetting myself for the minute, took her hand to walk with" (Stevenson 1996a, 12). Engaging in "romance" with Uma as he would do with an English girl necessarily means to "forget himself", because Wiltshire is adamant that he knows what the place of a native woman should be. He assures his audience that he is "one of those most opposed to any nonsense about native women"; that he is "ashamed to be so much moved about a native" and that he had "made [his] vow [he] would never let on to weakness with a native" (Stevenson 1996a, 12-13). But he also admits that he cannot help falling for Uma, both physically and emotionally. Stevenson is particularly artful, in describing Wiltshire's attraction, to gradually discard the exoticist fetishisation of the native woman and replace it, as Wiltshire's narration goes on, with an appreciation of Uma's finer qualities:

> [She] looked so quaint and pretty as she ran away and then awaited me, and the thing was done so like a child or a kind dog, that the best I could do was just to follow her whenever she went on, to listen for the fall of her bare feet, and to watch in the dusk for the shining of her body. And there was another thought came in my head. She played kitten with me now when we were alone; but in the house she had carried it the way a countess might, so proud and humble. And what with her dress – for all there was so little of it, and that native enough – what with her fine tapa and fine scents, and her red flowers and seeds, that were quite as bright as jewels, only larger – it came over me she was a kind of countess really, dressed to hear great singers at a concert, and no even mate for a poor trader like myself. (Stevenson 1996a, 12)

While the description does not conceal the eroticism of the situation and Wiltshire's physical attraction towards Uma, the focus is quickly turned towards a deeper form of attraction, which foreshadows the strong bond between Uma and Wiltshire in the rest of the tale. Moreover it is significant that Wiltshire notes that Uma can decide to play a given role, she is not bound to a fixed or essential nature: her identity is implied to be performative – a concept that sits uneasily with colonial typifications, as I explore more extensively in my reading of *Kim*.

Another moment in which Wiltshire, more or less unwittingly, questions himself and his way of framing cultural others is when he first travels through the woods. Wiltshire was previously lectured at

length by Uma about the different dangerous *aitus* that can be found in the wilderness, to which Wiltshire responded with a metaphorical shrug. And yet, when he is actually crossing the woods, his reaction is more complex and less reassuring:

> But the queerness of the place it's more difficult to tell of, unless to one who has been alone in the high bush himself. The brightest kind of a day it is always dim down there. A man can see to the end of nothing; which−ever way he looks the wood shuts up, one bough folding with another like the fingers of your hand; and whenever he listens he hears always something new – men talking, children laughing, the strokes of an axe a far way ahead of him, and sometimes a sort of a quick, stealthy scurry near at hand that makes him jump and look to his weapons. It's all very well for him to tell himself that he's alone, bar trees and birds; he can't make out to believe it; whichever way he turns the whole place seems to be alive and looking on. Don't think it was Uma's yarns that put me out; I don't value native talk a fourpenny−piece; it's a thing that's natural in the bush, and that's the end of it. (Stevenson 1996a, 51)

Wiltshire's reaction to "the queerness of the place" is interesting. He wants to reassure his reader that he does not value "native talk" and Uma's tales had no effect on him. Epistemologically, this move goes again in the direction of establishing reassuring dichotomies between rational, civilized human beings and superstitious primitives. His justification, however, sounds quite hollow and self-defeating after his powerful description of the eeriness of the woods, and indeed Wiltshire admits, in later passages, that he *is* indeed convinced that the creatures Uma described are about to attack him. But even if we accept that imagining spirits and demons "[is] a thing that's natural in the bush", then paradoxically it is the very distinction between the epistemological structures of the Polynesian Kanaka and the British trader that falls apart. Either way, Wiltshire effectively reveals his own vulnerabilities towards the spirits of the place. The ending of the tale, it is worth noting, does not support the existence of supernatural forces – Case is exposed as a cheap trickster – but Wiltshire's subjective experience nevertheless creates some cracks in the self-contained structure of colonial rationality, hence in the possibility of relying on essentializing ethnographic typologies.

Wiltshire's contradictory statements culminate in the final paragraph, which is, in many way, a rhetorical masterpieces of conflicting feelings:

My public−house? Not a bit of it, nor ever likely. I'm stuck here, I fancy. I don't like to leave the kids, you see: and – there's no use talking – they're better here than what they would be in a white man's country, though Ben took the eldest up to Auckland, where he's being schooled with the best. But what bothers me is the girls. They're only half−castes, of course; I know that as well as you do, and there's nobody thinks less of half−castes than I do; but they're mine, and about all I've got. I can't reconcile my mind to their taking up with Kanakas, and I'd like to know where I'm to find the whites? (Stevenson 1996a, 71)

The almost schizophrenic nature of the ending epitomizes Wiltshire's conflicted colonial anthropological imagination, not only thematically – stressing Wiltshire's mixed emotions – but also rhetorically. The last two sentences, in particular, are very powerful because they shift with violence between Wiltshire's crude outbursts of racial denigration and genuine expressions of paternal love. His daughters are imagined, simultaneously, as primitive "half-castes" *and* as valuable human beings. At the same time, it is interesting to note that in the end Wiltshire seems to reveal the fact that his tale is being told to an actual living audience – when he says "My public−house?", he is likely answering to a question from a hypothetical audience. This may explain, in part, Wiltshire's seeming lack of retrospective self-awareness and his constant need to articulate his low opinion of the natives, especially if we imagine that this audience is possibly composed by fellow white males that he is trying to impress. Wiltshire is perhaps more in control of his narrative than we might think: perhaps he is deliberately trying to capture the favour of his audience by adopting a narrative voice that assumes, at times, a reassuring colonialist mindset. If that is the case, also "The Beach of Falesá" might be read as yet another meta-reflection on the relationship between the colonial storyteller and his readership.

Yet the stability of Wiltshire's perspective is not simply undercut by his own contradictions; that is arguably the *pars destruens* of Stevenson's operation. The *pars construens* is represented by his relationship with Uma, who represents an extremely beneficial counterpoint to Wiltshire's reliance on rigid typologies and his obsession with maintaining his ethnographic authority. We have already discussed how Stevenson manages to avoid her fetishisation as an exotic sexual object at the beginning of the tale. As the story proceeds, Uma emerges as a powerful character with a defined and assertive personality. She is pragmatical and witty, sardonic but supportive, funny but dignified. The moment in which she discovers Case's deception is a good example of Stevenson's subtle treatment of Uma. She

first exclaims "Damn Ese!" – Ese being Case's name among the natives – to which Wiltshire comments:

> You might think it funny to hear this Kanaka girl come out with a big swear. No such thing. There was no swearing in her – no, nor anger; she was beyond anger, and meant the word simple and serious. She stood there straight as she said it. I cannot justly say that I ever saw a woman look like that before or after, and it struck me mum. (Stevenson 1996a, 28)

There is considerable force in Uma's composed and serious attitude, which baffles Wiltshire and suggests a complex and unique intellectual life. The fact that Wiltshire genuinely admits that he has never seen a woman looking like that indirectly makes the point that Uma, arguably the most complex and flashed-out of Stevenson's native characters, defies typification. On top of that, the fact that she ultimately rushes into the woods to warn Wiltshire in spite of her ancestral fear of the *aitus* is significant: not only she claims a significant degree of agency for herself – she effectively saves Wiltshire with an act of incredible bravery – but she demonstrates that she too, like Wiltshire, is able to "forget herself" and act independently of the received norms of her culture. *Kim*, from a more convoluted ideological standpoint, also explores this tension between typification, traditional beliefs and individual agency as regards native characters.

Stevenson depicts Uma's and Wiltshire's chemistry as a couple with significant gusto, but at the same time their interactions are always conceived to undermine Wiltshire's epistemological dominance of the events. For instance, while Stevenson might seemingly display some of Uma's "native notions" for laughs, he is always careful to provide her views with some particularly acute form of insight. A passage in particular illustrates this process very well. Uma, worried about Wiltshire's confrontation with Case's patron spirit, Tiapolo, and considering the benefits of Wiltshire's alliance with Maea, asks about Queen Victoria:

> "Victoreea, he big chief?"
> "You bet!" said I.
> "He like you too much?" she asked again.
> I told her, with a grin, I believed the old lady was rather partial to me.

"All right," said she. "Victoreea he big chief, like you too much. No can help you here in Falesá; no can do – too far off. Maea he small chief – stop here. Suppose he like you – make you all right. All−e−same God and Tiapolo. God he big chief – got too much work. Tiapolo he small chief – he like too much make – see, work very hard."

"I'll have to hand you over to Mr. Tarleton," said I. "Your theology's out of its bearings, Uma. (Stevenson 1996a, 48)

While Wiltshire may dismiss Uma's ramblings about God, Tiapolo, Maea and Victoria as confused native theology, she pins down quite effectively the strategy that Wiltshire should (and does) use to escape his predicament: not relying on his status as a British subject, but weaving a local networks of alliances.

As a last point, it is worth noting that Stevenson, as he is dealing with the topic of interracial marriage, may have been thinking of Shakespeare's *Othello* when he wrote the story. That he had *Othello* in his mind while he was in the Pacific is confirmed by a passage of *In the South Seas*: he reports the story of a Scotsman in the Marquesas that accepted to be tattooed from head to foot according to the local traditions in order to win the heart of a native woman, who, unfortunately, "could never behold him from that day except with laughter" (Stevenson 1998, 50). Stevenson, most tellingly, comments that "of him it might be said, if ever of any, that he had loved not wisely, but too well" (Stevenson 1998, 50) – a direct quotation from the Shakespearean play. Admittedly, *Othello* and "Falesá" differ in several ways – most crucially in the different race/gender configuration of the two protagonists – but the juxtaposition may nevertheless provide some interesting results if we observe, rather than the protagonists, the villains of both tales.

If Wiltshire is not exactly Othello and Uma is not exactly Desdemona, Case clearly plays Iago, in the sense that the strategy of both characters is to prey on the insecurities and prejudices about gender and race of their enemies as a way to control and destroy them. When he introduces Uma to Wiltshire, he tries to reassure his suspicions on the marriage scam by hinting that she is a prostitute, implicitly trying to orientate their relationship towards an exploitative dynamic: " 'I guess it's all right,' said Case. 'I guess you can have her. I'll make it square with the old lady. You can have your pick of the lot for a plug of tobacco,' he added, sneering" (Stevenson 1996a, 7). When Wiltshire asks him to intercede with the chiefs, he is quick to fan the flames of Wiltshire's racial pride to misdirect his suspicions: "

'Understand me, Wiltshire; I don't count this your quarrel,' he went on, with a great deal of resolution, 'I count it all of our quarrel, I count it the White Man's Quarrel, and I'll stand to it through thick and thin, and there's my hand on it.' " (Stevenson 1996a, 22). In other words: Case is, like Iago, trying to warp Wiltshire's (anthropological) imagination in a way that would ultimately isolate him and lead him to self-destruction, to poison his mind by intensifying gender and racial assumptions that are already in Wiltshire's mindset (although Case's use racial categories differs significantly from Iago's, due to different role race has in Wiltshire's and Othello's life). Case fails, but the tale, especially with the ending, warns us that Wiltshire did run the risk of being defeated by his demons, because he is not free from them even after the entire experience is over.

Ultimately, the constant tension between the racial notions Wiltshire cannot let go and his ability to act against his beliefs is what makes him an effective example of Stevenson's approach to register the colonial anthropological imagination: a collection of interlocked epistemological manoeuvres aimed at making sense of the colonial other that can be activated simultaneously or at turns, resulting in different configurations. Wiltshire's love for Uma neither erases nor overcomes his previous worldview but is integrated with it in surprising, disquieting and unpredictable ways. Stevenson's writings are certainly valuable because of their early anti-colonial sensitivity, echoed by his actual political investment in anti-colonial resistance in the Pacific world, but it is the heterogeneous nature of the anthropological imagination that emerges from his ethnographer-persona as well as his characters that makes his vision of the colonial world uniquely valuable. His texts are capable of registering how the varying reliance on typologies, the tension towards control and the (precarious) establishment of a subject-object relationship between ethnographer and native result in unpredictable modes of framing the colonial other. Kipling, in many ways located on the opposite end of the political spectrum, approaches the imaginative framing of cultural others in a similar way.

2.3. Rudyard Kipling

2.3.1. Indian intimacies of an Anglo-Punjabi

In a famous poem first appeared, in an abridged version, as the heading of chapter 7 of *Kim*, Kipling famously offers a definition of himself as "two-sided man":

> Something I owe to the soil that grew –
> More to the life that fed –
> But most to Allah Who gave me two
> Separate sides to my head.
>
> I would go without shirts or shoes,
> Friend, tobacco or bread,
> Sooner than for an instant lose
> Either side of my head. (Kipling 2009, 139)

The poem can be read as Kipling's endorsement of a dual cultural heritage which he stresses as indispensable for his very being. The poem is a good starting point to underline how Kipling's position within Indian culture differs from Stevenson's position towards Polynesia. Differently from Stevenson's *elective* relationship with the Pacific Islands, Kipling's relationship with India is a hereditary one. Hence his position as ethnographer-figure, with respect to Indian culture, is distinctively more ambivalent: Kipling's status as an Anglo-Indian shares *some* traits with the native informer, while simultaneously granting him a position of ethnographic authority that colonial ethnography would typically deny to a native. This comes with a price: the two sides of Kipling's head are, after all, "separate" – a peculiar expression that implies a difficulty of communication, a lack of integration. As a result, the sense of hybridity that often appears in Kipling is just as often confronted with a belief in the solidity of cultural divisions, and the pressure of unambiguous affiliations. This tension arguably permeates much of Kipling's fiction and is a distinctive mode of the ethnographic encounters he stages.

That said, Kipling's Anglo-Indian identity should also be understood in a more specific regional framework, in the sense that the defining moment for his imaginative understanding of India was his initial stay in Punjab. Kipling worked as a journalist for the *Civil and Military Gazette*, a Lahore-based newspaper, from 1882 to 1887, before moving to Allahabad, where he worked at the *Pioneer* from 1887 to until his return to Britain in 1889. His first (adult) encounter with India, therefore, was carried

out through the lenses of a Punjabi Anglo-Indian community, with whom he fundamentally identified from a cultural and ideological viewpoint. Indeed, his "Anglo-Punjabiness" crucially influences Kipling's overall approach to the colonial other.

Punjab – a region characterized, in its western frontier areas, by a vast borderland inhabited by nomadic tribes – had traditionally been the stronghold of a more conservative Anglo-Indian community, hostile to more liberal approaches to colonial governance. More specifically, Punjab had traditionally championed the so-called "non-regulation" style of government, particularly during the early phase of British rule of Punjab at the hands of John Lawrence, from 1849 onwards. The pillars of Lawrence's "style" included the employment of an abridged version of the English law in order to allow a high degree of personal initiative to individual administrators and eliminate bureaucratic technicalities, as well as a distinctive preference for a pragmatical-military mentality that favoured quick, uncompromising and often violent solutions (St John 2000, 63–64). In short: it was an authoritarian and personalistic style of governance, suited, in Lawrence's view, to the harsh conditions of frontier rule. This was in stark contrast with a centralized "regulation" system of governance, based on the universal application of legal principles, and more accepting of an increased participation of educated Indians to administrative duties. The "Punjabi style", instead, "[valued] direct experience and influence more highly than elaborate theorizing and protocol" (St John 2000, 69), and was fundamentally sceptical of the native capacity for self-rule. The fact that, from the 1860s onwards, this style of governance was gradually replaced by regulation models, with bitter disappointment of the local Anglo-Indian community, further enhanced its ideological allure in conservative circles.

Kipling fundamentally adheres to this ideological horizon, which provides him with a precise sense of his Anglo-Indian identity and a specific epistemological and emotional structure to engage the natives. Interestingly, endorsing and embracing a "Punjabi" conception of Indian reality and governance results in the adoption – at least in theory – of an epistemological framework based on direct experience and aimed at appreciating cultural specificities. Kipling's hostility to liberal policies in India and throughout the empire might therefore be connected to an "ethnographic" concern for cultural specificity, albeit rooted in conservativism: liberal policies, for Kipling, "undermined India's unique particulars", because "they assumed the emergence of a world where once radically different countries became equivocal and interchangeable, where utilitarian government might be applied as well in Jamaica as in Punjab" (Bubb 2013, 398). In this sense, Kipling's stance is profoundly ethnographic,

at least in its intentions, taking fieldwork, direct experience and personal knowledge as a source of pride and legitimacy. It is worth noting that Kipling's fiction, while supportive of an ethnographic, experiential approach as the best way to know cultural others, and certainly concerned with constructing an ethnographic authority in this sense, is not always based on intensive fieldwork or direct experience: for instance, Kipling never adventured beyond Lahore towards Afghanistan (Bayly 2016, 265), meaning that he never explored the frontier that is so important for his ethnographical, typological and ideological ordering of the Anglo-Indian world. This combinations of a relatively "distant" modes of knowing and the importance attached to experience are frequent in Kipling, anticipating a whole set of discrepancies and contradictions in the patterns of his anthropological imagination.

The implications of Kipling's support of an ethnographic authority based on direct experience are varied. His admiration for a Punjabi style form of governance is directly connected to his fascination for (and frequent justification of) violence, but foregrounding an experiential element paves the way for the representation of instances of intersubjective ethnographic encounters, in which Europeans and Indians meet on a more even ground. That said, as John McBratney argues, the nature of Kipling's bursts of egalitarianism has a distinctively masonic character: Kipling – a Freemason for most of his life – creates his most intersubjective and dialogic ethnographic encounters as "masonic-like spaces of magical fraternity" (McBratney 2011, 26). The masonic dimension has several important corollaries: it implies an intimate, narrowly-circumscribed relationship between a few individuals, which makes it ideal to be addressed within concrete ethnographic encounters; but also implies a temporary *suspension*, rather than an erasure, of subject-object, authoritarian and uneven relationships, suggesting that there are different times and different modes in which the colonial other can be encountered. Moreover, it reveals the fundamentally male focus of Kipling's egalitarianism, consistently with his overall treatment of gender. For Kipling, manliness (often expressed in the access to various forms of violence) is a defining characteristics of his "positive" colonial heroes and natives. His position is in line with the mainstream colonial/"romantic" tradition, as well as with widespread "gendered" typologies of colonial ethnography that he heavily relies on. It is at odds, on the other hand, with Stevenson's more nuanced and critical approach to masculinity (and gender in general).

In this sense, it is also important to note that Kipling's anthropological imagination is not immune from influences and paradigms that (at times) marginalize his focus on experience. Kipling's systematic

use of racial and ethnic typologies, for instance, shares several premises, from an epistemological point of view, with the ethnographic enterprises and anthropological theorizing that were carried out on a grand scale by anthropologists-administrators at the service of the Raj. The general use of ethnography as an instrument of colonial governance, best exemplified in the rising importance of the decennial Census of India, prompted Nicholas Dirk to suggest that the late 19th century British India may be characterized as an ethnographic state. Dirks' idea is that after the Great Rebellion of 1857, the British, believing that such an event had its origins in a lack of cultural awareness on their part, grew increasingly interested in collecting anthropological knowledge on India, until anthropology became the crucial form of knowledge that the colonial state employed to determine its policies. In Dirks' words, "the ethnographic state was driven by the belief that India could be ruled using anthropological knowledge to understand and control its subjects, and to represent and legitimate its own mission" (Dirks 2001, 44). This attempt at ethnographic mapping, moreover, effectively created caste, religion and the tribe as a modern categories.

Dirks' hypothesis is not uncontested. C. J. Fuller, for instance, argues that British policies could sometimes be blatantly inconsistent with their anthropological findings, taking the 1905 Partition of Bengal as major example (Fuller 2016). Zak Leonard, moreover, points out that borderland ethnography – like that carried out in Punjab – was more ideologically, theoretically and methodologically heterogeneous than an "ethnographic state" model may suggest: "the monolithic ethnographic state does not adequately account for the development of socio-cultural ethnography on the frontier, where the priorities of individual colonial agents were not always in accordance with the fiscal and military aims of the central government" and "socio-cultural ethnography was thereby comprised of a host of inputs" (Leonard 2016, 195–96). That said, also Leonard concedes that "colonial anthropological knowledge, especially about caste, commonly shaped the thoughts and actions of the men who ran the Raj" (Fuller 2016, 256). Kipling, in a way, echoes these contradictions. His hostility towards the central Indian government and his focus on direct experience prevents an unproblematic association of Kipling's writing with the epistemological project of a centralized ethnographic state. But his writings also do engage with the broad racial typologies that are the pillars of the ethnographic state as conceived by Dirks, in particular the categories of martiality, effeminacy and criminality.

Kipling therefore oscillates quite erratically (but not inexplicably) between various configurations of colonial anthropological imagination. Considering his status as imperial ideologue, it is sometimes

quite difficult to disentangle Kipling's epistemological modes of framing cultural others with broader political categories. This is why, in Kipling's case, it is useful to have in mind a more general distinction between "authoritarian" and "complex" fiction that works both on an epistemological and on a political level. I take this distinction from David Sergeant's *Kipling's Art of Fiction* (2013). Sergeant calls "authoritarian" that part of Kipling's production that responds primarily to his imperial political beliefs, usually characterized by a high degree of punitive violence, ideological rigidity and simple formal structures; such texts are opposed by "complex" works, which "scramble the ground on which they reside" (Sergeant 2013, 5) and are more inclined towards empathy and formal sophistication. Translated in the theoretical terms of my work, we can talk of an authoritarian and a complex colonial anthropological imagination which alternate in Kipling's work. The former makes sense of a cultural other by relying unquestioningly on epistemic operations such as the employment of rigid (often racial) typologies and the establishment of a subject-object relationships that reject an intersubjective encounter. The latter complicates or questions one or more of these epistemic operations.

2.3.2. (Un)knowable India and Gothic Aesthetics: "The Phantom 'Rickshaw" and *Letters of Marque*

Many of Kipling's early tales and journalistic pieces, written while he was still working in India, are explicitly concerned with defining the possibilities of colonial knowledge, featuring a number of Anglo-Indian ethnographer-figures that variously use their local knowledge to try to navigate local reality. Already foregrounding a deep epistemological concern, Kipling's early tales provide a good starting point for discussing the various modes of his anthropological imagination throughout his career. Some of his early tales argue unapologetically for the possibility of deciphering the colonial world, often resulting in a hierarchical relationship between ethnographer-figure and native. Emblematic, in this sense, are the deeds of a recurring character introduced in the short-story collection *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888): the police officer Strickland, "feared and respected by the natives" (Kipling 2011, 23), with his uncanny knowledge of native customs and his ability to effortlessly masquerade as one. With every apparition Strickland contributes to order the colonial word and make it

understandable. Another recurring mode of writing employed in Kipling's early texts – the Gothic – is more varied in its political and epistemological outcomes, and hence an ideal starting point to foreground the great variability of the patterns of the colonial anthropological imagination to be found in Kipling's work. In this first section I explore two texts that variously employ a Gothic aesthetics: "The Phantom 'Rickshaw" and *The Letters of Marques.*

In the 1885 short story "The Phantom 'Rickshaw", a young civil servant, Pansay, after a brief an affair with a married woman, Mrs. Wessington, quickly grows tired of her and harshly ends their relationship. The woman, however, continues to love him. After some time, Pansay spitefully tells Mrs. Wessington that he is engaged to another woman, Miss Mannering. Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Wessington dies. Months later, as Pansay is happily strolling through Simla, the hill station that functions as "summer capital" of the Raj, he is confronted by an apparition of Mrs. Wessington on her rickshaw, pulled by four Indian *jhampanies* (rickshaw-bearers), as Pansay had last seen her. From that day onwards, the dead lady and her spectral servants relentlessly follow him. The apparition gradually erodes his peace of mind, in spite of the repeated attempt of a doctor, Heatherlegh, to cure him from his "delusions". After a while, Pansay starts to consider himself and Mrs. Wessington as "the only realities in a world of shadows" (Kipling 1987, 44). In the last passages of the tale, Pansay, utterly consumed by his existence between the living and the dead, announces that the hour of his death is rapidly approaching, admitting that his actions are indeed to blame for Mrs. Wessington's death, and that he deserves his punishment.

While the bulk of the tale is made up of Pansay's narrative, "The Phantom 'Rickshaw" features a short introduction, narrated by an unnamed friend of the protagonist, that creates an intriguing bridge between Pansay's death and a broader reflection on the possibility of colonial knowledge and governance. The story opens with the retrospectively outrageous statement that:

One of the few advantages that India has over England is a great Knowability. After five years' service a man is directly or indirectly acquainted with the two or three hundred Civilians in his Province, all the Messes of ten or twelve Regiments and Batteries, and some fifteen hundred other people of the non-official caste. In ten years his knowledge should be doubled, and at the end of twenty he knows, or knows something about, every Englishman in the Empire, and may travel anywhere and everywhere without paying hotel-bills. (Kipling 1987, 26)

The opening establishes the idea of a tightly-knit network of Anglo-Indians, which provides a closed horizon of knowability, as well as a seemingly generous support network. Dr. Heatherlegh, who is introduced shortly afterwards, is a representative part of this network, spending a considerable amount of time attending privately to his fellow Anglo-Indians. Among his patients there used to be Pansay, whom Heatherlegh believes to have died of overwork, laughing at the idea, suggested by the narrator, that "there was a crack in Pansay's head and a little bit of the Dark World came through and pressed him to death" (Kipling 1987, 27). This "irrational" hypothesis anticipates the supernatural outcome of the tale, setting it against the doctor's rationalizing explanation. *Both* explanations, however, are somehow reassuring, failing to threaten the pattern of knowability and material solidarity that is established at the opening of the tale. Both the doctor's and the narrator's explanations put the blame on Pansay – who has either worked too much or was somehow constitutionally vulnerable to the infiltration of the "Dark World". Yet Pansay's narrative, much more threateningly, shows that the cracks may be not only in his head, but also the result of the imaginative patterns in which colonial life is conceived. It shows that the structure of knowability foregrounded by the first narrator may be inherently flawed.

The fundamental subversive element of the Gothic epistemology proposed by the tale is to be found in Pansay's reaction to the apparition of the phantom rickshaw. Pansay's crisis involves, first and foremost, his professional status: "Here was I, Theobald Jack Pansay, a well-educated Bengal Civilian in the year of grace, 1885, presumably sane, certainly healthy, driven in terror from my sweetheart's side by the apparition of a woman who had been dead and buried eight months ago." (Kipling 1987, 34). Well-educated members of the Indian Civil Service, apparently, do not believe in ghosts, otherwise the pattern of "great Knowability" connected to India would be utterly eroded. Most importantly, at this stage, Pansay dismisses the idea that the apparition could be a ghost due to the presence of the rickshaw and the four *jhampanies*: " 'After all,' I argued, 'the presence of the 'rickshaw is in itself enough to prove the existence of a spectral illusion. One may see ghosts of men and women, but surely never of coolies and carriages. The whole thing is absurd. Fancy the ghost of a hillman!' " (Kipling 1987, 35). Even if ghosts do exist, Indians certainly do not turn into them after death: this privilege seems to be reserves to (Western) "men and women". However, Pansay overhears a conversation that confirms that all four of Mrs. Wessington's *jhampanies* simultaneously died of cholera. Faced with this fact, Pansay

has to admit that also Indian coolies can turn into spectral apparitions. It is only after this realization that Pansay starts actively conversing with the dead, hesitantly replying to Mrs. Wessington's calls and slowly descending into the realm of ghostly exchanges that leads him to believe that reality is nothing but "a world of shadows".

In the end, as Pansay is contemplating the inevitability of his demise, he wonders about his prospect for the afterlife:

> Shall I die in my bed decently and as an English gentleman should die; or, in one last walk on the Mall, will my soul be wrenched from me to take its place forever and ever by the side of that ghastly phantasm? Shall I return to my old lost allegiance in the next world, or shall I meet Agnes loathing her and bound to her side through all eternity? Shall we two hover over the scene of our lives till the end of Time? (Kipling 1987, 48)

It is significant that, after doubting the existence of "the ghost of a hillman" and being proved wrong, Paley should consistently start wondering about his own *post-mortem* fate. If, after all, coolies can be ghosts, very little remains of the ontological certainties about Anglo-Indians themselves. Although Pansay's reflections are mostly focused on his relationship with Agnes Wessington, the fact that the major epistemological collapse in the short story involves the discovery of *native* ghosts allows us to revise the first narrator's initial paragraph in two ways. The pretence of knowability is erased, shattered by the presence of the supernatural and a pervasive epistemological uncertainty. But, more importantly, this epistemological uncertainty now engulfs both Indians and Anglo-Indians. The supernatural here contributes to destabilize colonial frameworks of knowledge, in the same way as the "queerness" of the forest in Stevenson's "The Beach of Falesá" unsettles Wiltshire's sense of an essential difference between the ways Polynesian and Westerners perceive reality.

Retrospectively, the story's foregrounding of the ghostly coolies seems to expose a major fallacy of the opening paragraph: India may be easily knowable, but only as long as we remain in the circumscribed space of Anglo-Indian community. In practice the first paragraph's sketching of an Anglo-Indian community is also the attempt to stage an illusion of control, an illusion of knowability, based on the erasure of native presence within the epistemological horizon of Anglo-Indians and their separation from the natives. This operation is an extreme form of subject-object relationship, trying to

construct the natives as mere object, separated from the ethnographer-subject, and reduced to a manageable, inconsequencial non-presence. In this case the process is so radical that Indians seem to appear, initially, as mere workforce, lacking even an afterlife. All these processes are a staple of the colonial anthropological imagination of the most authoritarian kind, which however collapses when the tale reveals, as Pablo Mukherjee argues, that all the characters are connected through a "chain of death that links Indians and Europeans alike" (Mukherjee 2013, 23). The sharing of the horizon of death, as I explore more extensively in Carlo Levi's *Christ*, contains the potential to forge powerful links of solidarity and in this sense opposes the search for control and isolation that colonialist ethnographer-figures may be tempted by.

It is significant that the result of this attempt at isolation, based on the physical, epistemological, spiritual partitioning of the native from the Anglo-Indian, and aimed to maintain a reassuring and protected horizon of knowability, also results in a small, smothering and narrow society – Simla. It is the Simla society – its gossipers and busybodies – that morbidly observes Pansay's downfall and clearly hasten his fall through its maddening, panoptical scrutiny (which is in itself a form of poetic justice: Pansay's rejection of Agnes in favour of a better match is also connected to his acute awareness of the necessity of rising his status within this narrow society). The enclosed community – initially represented as a generous network of support – reveal itself to be far more threatening and less of a shelter than it initially seems. Simla, the circumscribed seat of a narrow Anglo-Indian community, whose status as a "knowable community" (Williams 1973, 165) allows other characters (like Strickland) to achieve a full epistemic control of their surroundings, is here the smothering correlate of fundamentally flawed epistemological patterns, which are exposed by the Gothic elements of the tale.

If "The Phantom 'Rickshaw" stages these illusions and then proceeds to shatter them, it is worth noting that Kipling is capable of the very opposite strategy, summoning the threat of a native, Gothic menace that a typological, ordering epistemological framework can counteract. An interesting example, taken from a later phase of Kipling's production in India, are his *Letters of Marque*, journalistic sketches of the various Natives States of Rajputana – states that formally maintained their independence but unofficially recognized British Rule. Written between 1887 and 1888 for the Allahabad-based *The Pioneer*, the *Letters* represent a phase of Kipling's Indian writing in which he was much more aware and supportive of the political ideology of the conservative Anglo-Punjabi community – differently from the phase in which he wrote "The Phantom 'Rickshaw – and, according

to David Sergeant, manifest an unease for having to write for a new community of readers that may not necessarily share his ideological assumptions (Sergeant 2016, 29). This results in "brilliantly controlled contradictions draped like veils over the granite certainties of its particular Anglo-Indian position" (Sergeant 2009, 40).

Kipling attempts a playful but firm construction of his ethnographic authority since the very first *Letter*. To do so, he assumes the voice and the persona of "the Englishman", which activates the complexities of Kipling's position as an Anglo-Indian – as both an insider and outsider in the Indian context. As Mary Condé argues, "Kipling presents himself as a very particular kind of Englishman, one who lives and works in India, and who is […] crucially, one of a small elite, an elite obsessed with gossip and rumour"; simultaneously, through this label, he "[accentuates] his isolation and vulnerability, since he is travelling in India among Indians" (Condé 2004, 233). From this curious in-between position he announces to his reader that "it is good for every man to see some little of the great Indian Empire and the strange folk who move about it" (Kipling 1899, 3), proceeding to describe the joys of travelling "under no more exacting master than personal inclination" (Kipling 1899, 3). This allows Kipling to evoke, from the very first line, the figure of the Globe-trotter: "The first result of such freedom is extreme bewilderment, and the second reduces the freed to a state of mind which, for his sins, must be the normal portion of the Globe-Trotter – the man who 'does' kingdoms in days and writes books upon them in weeks" (Kipling 1899, 3-4). The Globe-trotter is, for Kipling, the superficial proto-tourist. Kipling self-mockingly adopts the pose of the Globe-trotter in the very first pages of the Letters, claiming that he is travelling in a similar state of mind, but the parallelism is extremely fleeting and quickly gives way to a fully-fledged polemic against this figure. The Globe-trotter is the straw man against which the (Anglo-Indian) Englishman – the insider/outsider in India – establishes his own authority.

The description of a Young Man from Manchester that he meets on a train embodies the archetypical Globe-trotter:

A Young Man from Manchester was travelling to Bombay in order – how the words hurt! – to be home by Christmas. He had come through America, New Zealand, and Australia, and finding that he had ten days to spare at Bombay, conceived the modest idea of "doing India." "I don't say that I've done it all; but you may say that I've seen a good deal." Then he explained that he had been

"much pleased" at Agra, "much pleased" at Delhi and, last profanation, "very much pleased" at the Taj. Indeed he seemed to be going through life just then "much pleased" at everything. With rare and sparkling originality he remarked that India was a "big place," and that there were many things to buy. Verily, this Young Man must have been a delight to the Delhi boxwallahs. He had purchased shawls and embroidery "to the tune of" a certain number of rupees duly set forth, and he had purchased jewellery to another tune. These were gifts for friends at home, and he considered them "very Eastern" (Kipling 1899, 7-8).

Kipling takes a certain malevolent pleasure in pointing out to the man that he has been swindled – a detail that confirms the utter inability of the Globe-trotter to understand anything, driven as he is by his superficial idea of "doing" countries. By mocking the Young Man from Manchester, Kipling constructs, by comparison, his self-portrait as an ethnographer-figure. Whereas the Globe-trotter is only able to mutter platitudes, Kipling, by implication, will be able to provide the reader with profound insights. Whereas the Globe-trotter is generically pleased with everything, Kipling will provide his reader with a variety of meditated reactions – ranging from delight to disgust. Most importantly, whereas the Globe-trotter deals with exoticist notions, Kipling, by implication, is attuned to the cultural specificities of India and claims an "ethnographic", anti-exoticist stance. In this sense, Kipling's narrative persona in the *Letters* resembles the voice Stevenson adopted for *In the South Seas*, proposing himself as a "scientific" rather than a "sentimental" tourist.

Differently from the infamous Globe-trotter, fascinated by an "Oriental" charm, the Englishman, instead, is engaged in a process of disenchanting India for readers with no experience of the Subcontinent, turning it into a world that can be realistically and ethnographically understood and in which it is possible to act in accordance with local specificities. It is crucial to understand that Kipling is making a connection between a form of benevolent exoticism and liberal politics – the ever-pleased Globe-trotters are, in this sense, "those who come to India and try to impose their ignorantly liberal ideas upon the country" (Sergeant 2016, 29). This contrasts with the authoritarian, Punjabi-style pragmatism, which is, allegedly, anti-exoticist and ethnographic, based on fieldwork and experience. Arguing for the ethnographic accuracy of conservative Anglo-Indian worldviews is, of course, questionable, and their ambition to be a "demystification of India" can easily mask their nature as "an alternative, self- justifying mythography" (Morey 2018, 110).

But the crucial point, if we want to establish a comparison with "The Phantom 'Rickshaw", is

that the Englishman is not consistent in his rejection of exoticism as an imaginative mode. If he systematically dismantles the notion of a "pleasing" Orient, he much more liberal in his occasional use of a "monstrous" form of exoticism, whose Gothic aesthetics acquire a distinctively authoritarian significance when framed by the confident and rational narrative voice of the *Letters*. An excellent example is his description of the Gau-Mukh, a small spring located in the Rajput city of Chitor. The spring, accessed through a stair whose stones has been "worn and polished by the terrible naked feet" (Kipling 1899, 113), "[gurgles] and [chokes] like a man in his death-throe" (Kipling 1899, 115). As the Englishman descends, he has the impression that the place is both unfathomably ancient and dangerous:

> It seemed as though the descent had led the Englishman, firstly, two thousand years away from his own century, and secondly, into a trap, and that he would fall off the polished stones into the stinking tank, or that the Gau-Mukh would continue to pour water placidly until the tank rose up and swamped him, or that some of the stone slabs would fall forward and crush him flat. (Kipling 1899, 114)

The Gau-Mukh, which the Englishman escapes by treading, once again, on the slimy staircase which reminds him of "the soft, oiled skin of a Hindu" (Kipling 1899, 115), evokes "not exactly a feeling of danger or pain, but of great evil" (Kipling 1899, 116). The Gau-Mukh becomes a symbol for the barbarous history of the city – we are reminded that the spring is connected to a secret room where the Rajput Queen Pudmini killed herself to escape the enemies at her gate. The horror of the place, most crucially, is projected on the Indian natives themselves through the disturbing parallelism between the slippery stepping stones and the "oiled" Hindu skin. This seemingly unimportant detail is crucial to convert the description of the Gothic space of the spring into an anthropological use of the imagination. The overall effect of the description is the reification of a Gothic horror that becomes functional for the imaginative construction of a cultural other. Such cultural other requires containment by ordering forces, such as the ethnographic gaze of the Englishman, which emerges, even from the nightmarish horror of the spring, as a voice of reason.

The representation of a native uncanny presence, in short, calls for colonial intervention and serves a fundamentally authoritarian objective, reinforcing rather than questioning the necessity of

clear-cut typologies to order and administer a potentially threatening reality. In Gustavo Generani's words, the element of terror contained in some of Kipling's Gothic stories serves "as both a warning to protect the imperial status quo, and as a validation of its excesses" (Generani 2001, 30). This non-fictional sequence in the *Letters* follows the same principle. This passage is, ultimately, in sharp contrast with the apparition of the ghosts of the *jhampanies* in "The Phantom 'Rickshaw", which shatters the ordering paradigms of Pansay's anthropological imagination and forces him to reconsider the natives as equals from an ethical and an epistemological point of view – at least in death. Here the Gothic horror of the spring reinforces colonial-ethnographic categories of civilisation and barbarism.

2.3.3. Counterinsurgency and the Law: "The Head of The District" and "Kaa's Hunting"

The previous section foregrounds how Kipling can, depending on the circumstances, embrace or question the epistemic operations that characterize the colonial anthropological imagination, as well as adopting different modes of ethnographic authority. The Gothic aesthetics, in this sense, shows itself to be a fairly flexible tool, functional to different patterns of the anthropological imagination. In this section, instead, I want to focus on counterinsurgency, a recurring political and epistemological framework in Kipling's work. Setting a tale in a context of counterinsurgency pushes Kipling's expressions of the anthropological imagination, as a rule, towards their most authoritarian extremes; but Kipling is also able, at times, to use counterinsurgency in a more complex way, exposing the fault lines of the authoritarian system that he himself sets in place. To explore this ambivalence, I turn now to the short story "The Head of the District" (1891), published in *Life's Handicap* (1891) and to "Kaa's Hunting" (1893), one of the Mowgli stories of Kipling's first *Jungle Book* (1894). Both stories were written after Kipling's departure from India, a fact that is particularly important at least for "The Head of the District".

Before examining the two texts, a few words on counterinsurgency and its impact on the anthropological imagination, especially at a textual level, are in order. A 2006 manual of the U.S. Army defines insurgency as "an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict"; and counterinsurgency as all "military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency"

(quoted in Wax 2010, 153). In this sense, counterinsurgency goes beyond simple military actions and does not necessarily involve brutality of any sort, although it commonly incorporates some form of coercive or violent element. Either way, counterinsurgency is a particularly interesting context for the colonial anthropological imagination. As I am arguing in this chapter, the colonial anthropological imagination has a few distinctive features – a concern with typologies, a preoccupation for governance and control, and a tendency towards a subject-object relations – which can manifest in a variety of combinations and with different degrees of authoritarian force. In this sense, counterinsurgency can be understood as a catalyst that tends to turn a given configuration of colonial anthropological imagination into an authoritarian version of itself.

First of all, counterinsurgency simultaneously intensifies the reliance on typological classification and makes it prone to sweeping generalisations. The reason can be both practical and economical: as Jeffrey Bennet argues, in a context of counterinsurgency warfare, "identifying and protecting innocents is much more time and resource intensive than labelling large segments of the population 'hostile' and utilizing violence indiscriminately to either destroy or pacify those segments" (Bennett 2010, 312). Moreover, since the objective of counterinsurgency is to destroy or pacify the enemies, the ultimate objective is to have absolute control over them, which limits the possible detours of the (colonial) anthropological imagination towards intersubjectivity, let alone empathy. In the words of Montgomery McFate, an anthropologist that worked, in the early 2000s, to involve anthropologists and social scientists in the U.S. Army counterinsurgency programs in the Middle East, counterinsurgency involves a "fundamental contradiction between "knowing" your enemy in order to develop an effective strategy, and de-humanizing him in order to kill efficiently" (quoted in Price 2009). *Both* aspects, however, not only de-humanization, have a fundamentally destructive aim: knowing the enemy, as she argues in another passage, equally "leads to a refinement of how *best to kill* the enemy" (quoted in Price 2009, emphasis mine). The choice, in terms of anthropological imagination, is between framing the cultural other/enemy with an allegedly accurate ethnographic knowledge or within a simplified, dehumanizing scheme. The aim of both epistemic operations is fundamentally the same.

At a textual level, a counterinsurgent imagination develops a hyper-connoted vocabulary which constructs, even in supposedly neutral text, a highly charged vision of political strife, supporting a certain idea of state power and authority. In this sense Ranajit Guha's concept of "the prose of counterinsurgency" is highly relevant. Guha's findings are based on the study of peasant and tribal

insurgencies in 19th century India through different kinds of colonial documents. In particular, by examining the language employed by colonial sources at the outbreak of two rebellions, Guha notes how the systematic use of phrases such as "defying the authority of the State", "disturbing the public tranquillity", as well as defining the peasants as "insurgents" or "fanatic", creates a counterinsurgent discourse in which the enemy's motivations are irreducibly read within a highly coercive conception of how state should interact with its subjects, which is hence naturalized. While specific colonial documents – especially if written in a seemingly detached tone and some time after the events – have sometimes gained the reputation of being impartial, Guha argues that all texts that use the prose of counterinsurgency cannot possibly be "the record of observations uncontaminated by bias, judgement and opinion" and, "on the contrary, they speak of a total complicity" (R. Guha 1988, 59). "The Head of the District" is a clear example of prose of counterinsurgency, and, quite characteristically, traps its readers within a counterinsurgent imaginative worldview that they cannot escape.

At the beginning of the story, the District Commissioner of a remote frontier district in Northwestern India, Yardley-Orde, dies of fever, much wept by his second-in-command, Tallantire, and by the Khusru Kheyl, the local Pathan tribe, which Orde has pacified through his stern but just rule. However, animated by foolish liberal principles, the central government appoints a westernized Bengali, Grish Chunder De, as new District Commissioner – a choice that both the British at the frontier and their tribal subjects regard as utter madness: it is unthinkable for the mere mockery of a true sahib to rule over the wild Pathans, who, besides, have nothing but contempt for the Bengali and will never accept him as their leader. And this is precisely what happens: a fanatical religious leader, the Blind Mullah, immediately seizes the chance to incite his clansmen to revolt. As soon as trouble begins, Grish Chunder De runs away in fear, while Tallantire loses no time and quickly quells the rebellion. Simultaneously, his loyal Pathan ally, Khoda Dad Khan, by publicly accusing the Mullah of having instigated a futile revolt against the might of the British, manages to have him killed, and takes charge of the tribe. The story ends with Khan pleading his loyalty to Tallantire, which he proves by delivering two decapitated heads: the Blind Mullah's, and De's brother's, who was mistaken for the aspiring District Commissioner and executed. No one seems overly concerned for the latter's death.

"The Head of the District" was published in 1890, when Kipling had just left India to move to London. It was one of the first pieces he wrote for a metropolitan readership, which he deemed "ignorant and apathetic about its imperial responsibilities" (Sergeant 2009a, 146) and hence in dire

need of clear, unambiguous lectures about India and Anglo-Indian life by an insider of that community like himself. The story can therefore be taken as an essential, highly typified (and simplified) illustration of Kipling's Anglo-Indian *Weltanschauung*, especially his vision of the Afghan-Punjabi border where the story is set. It is an example of the anthropological imagination at its authoritarian zenith, both in its unsubtle reliance on specific epistemic operations and in its political implications, unfolding, unsurprisingly, in the context of an extremely schematic and simple plot focused on counterinsurgency. "The Head of the District" represents the Northwestern frontier as a dangerous place that can only be ruled through iron will and local knowledge – especially pragmatical, blunt and effective ethnographic classifications. To articulate this vision, the story employs a few clearly recognizable typological categories to an almost pedantic degree. David Sergeant regards this short story, alongside several narratives of this period, as mainly concerned with the construction, definition and validation of "a typological cast of imperial characters", with the creation of an "Anglo-Indian world" that, compared to previous short stories, is "far more schematic and hierarchic, more clearly to reflect an idealized conservative perception of it" (Sergeant 2013, 65). The story manages to encapsulate, in a compressed narrative space and using only three native characters, several major categories and foundational dichotomies of colonial ethnography (effeminate vs. martial; martial vs. criminal; loyal vs. disloyal).

Grish Chunder De, first of all, is the prototypical Bengali Babu. This type originates from the quite heterogeneous social group of the Bengali bhadraloks that I discuss extensively in the next two chapters, as both Mahasweta Devi and Amitav Ghosh emerge from this milieu. However, in this story and in Kipling's fiction more generally, the Bengali Babu is essentially a caricature that mocks the results of providing the "effeminate" Bengali race with an English education: an over-intellectual, coward, outwardly westernized and ultimately incompetent half-man that utterly lacks in manliness and physical prowess. The narrator makes some effort to showcase how the Western education of the Babu cannot change his nature. The Babu may annoy Tallantire by "[talking] hastily and much […] after the manner of those who are "more English than the English" of Oxford and "home", with much curious book-knowledge of bump-suppers, cricket-matches, hunting-runs" (Kipling 1964, 112). However, as soon as the rebellion starts, he reminds everyone that he has not yet taken charge of the district, and, most crucially, that his words are "not [anymore] in the tones of the 'more English' " (Kipling 1964, 114). Western education is only a veneer of mimicry that utterly shatters in time of crisis. If Macaulay's

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1935 Minute on Indian Education – a significant step in the creation of a Bengali anglicized elite – famously argued for the strategic benefits of relying on "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay 2006, 375), Grish Chunder De's role in story is to prove how clamorously ineffective such a hybrid seems to be in terms of administrative duties.

The Bengali Babu is a very specific "regional" character that, however, may also stand for the broader category of Indians from a variety of backgrounds and groups that the British considered unfit for military service. In colonial classifications, the effeminate Babu/Hindu is contrasted with the so-called martial races – specific groups that were considered loyal, fierce, honourable and trustworthy, to the extent that, as ethnographic classifications became more established, the Indian Army started to rely more and more on these communities for recruitment. Consistently with this scheme, De is contrasted with Khoda Dad Khan, the ideal native ally: unfailingly loyal, fierce, manly, but utterly respectful of the "natural" hierarchical-ethnographic chain that puts the British at the top, to the extent that he is totally dedicated to his British leaders and happy to be ruled by them, just as he deems unacceptable that a "black Bengali dog" (Kipling 1964, 109) should be anywhere near a position of power.

The Blind Mullah covers a number of ethnographically classified threats. He is, first of all, a fanatical, disloyal Muslim subject – a figure that generated considerable concern in the post-1857 British India. In a way, the presence of two Muslims characters – loyal and disloyal – effectively showcases the ambivalent feelings that emerged towards the status of Muslims after the Rebellion (see Meatcalf and Meatcalf 2001, 106). On a more regional note, Kipling may also be registering two competing visions of the Afghan tribes, framed, in different descriptions, either as virile martial society, or as fundamentally dominated by a corrupted priesthood (Leonard 2016, 182). Lastly, as an unredeemable troublemaker, the Mullah echoes another successful ethnographic category, that of the criminal tribes. In colonial ethnography, this term worked as an umbrella term for the groups that the British considered dangerous, potentially disloyal, or naturally keen on criminal activity. Two Criminal Tribes Act, in 1871 and 1911, officially sanctioned this form of classification.

Most importantly, Kipling does not merely rely on these types as models to create his characters, but as narrative devices. The very unfolding of the plot demands that these characters act precisely as they are supposed to do according to this form of colonial anthropological knowledge. There is a perfect overlapping between what characters are supposed to be, how other character describe them and

what they actually do. "The Head of the District", in this sense, could be defined as a "census-fantasy". Not because it has the extensive, all-inclusive ambition of the pan-Indian Censuses, but because it describes a world that can – indeed it must – be comfortably divided into ethnographic categories, which can be used to reliably predict the behaviour of individuals. It creates a (conveniently self-contained) world that has already been mapped ethnographically, divided in reliable ethnographic types, and is therefore understandable, precisely in the way the various Censuses of India wanted, but never satisfyingly managed to do.

The story foregrounds a form of the anthropological imagination regarding the natives, entirely based on establishing unfailing typological classifications, that overlaps almost perfectly with that of the Anglo-Indian characters – Orde and Tallantire. They are, in many ways, the ethnographer-figures of the story, and their epistemological vantage point (shared also, in part, by Khan, the loyal native) is fundamentally the same as that of the third-person narrator, who voices the same concerns, opinions and categories of the two Anglo-Indian characters. However, Orde and Tallantire are not outside the typological cast of characters that the story establishes. Indeed they are a crucial part of it, playing the key role, in this ideological and ethnographic universe, of the Anglo-Indian frontier administrator and officer. Opposed to other Western figures who are detached from the urgency of frontier rule, such as the central government administrators (or the decadent Londoners that may read the tale), this kind of administrator is competent, grounded in local reality, self-sacrificing and brave. Orde and Tallantire are depicted as heroically dedicating themselves to the service of the empire, unfailingly protecting the same ungrateful people that may question their methods from the unending threat of barbarism.

Orde and Tallantire are, in this sense, the product of an inherently authoritarian imagination. As part of his list of defining features of what he calls Ur-fascism – the abstract model that contains all the possible traits of totalitarian ideologies – Umberto Eco describes two authoritarian tendencies that are particularly relevant for the conservative colonial ideology of this story. One is the fact that, within authoritarian regimes, enemies are "by a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, [...] at the same time too strong and too weak." (Eco 1995) This echoes how, in the story, the reader is constantly reminded that only a constant, vigilant rule of the frontier administrators can keep the barbarous hordes at bay; but, at the same time, there is no real possibility that the barbarians might actually endanger the empire as a whole. Orde's death speech to the Pathans is significant in this sense, managing to convey a sense of looming threat that is also simultaneously and paradoxically deflated:

"Men, I'm dying," said Orde quickly, in the vernacular; "and soon there will be no more Orde Sahib to twist your tails and prevent you from raiding cattle.[…] But you must be good men, when I am not here. Such of you as live in our borders must pay your taxes quietly as before. I have spoken of the villages to be gently treated this year. Such of you as live in the hills must refrain from cattle-lifting, and burn no more thatch, and turn a deaf ear to the voice of the priests, who, not knowing the strength of the Government, would lead you into foolish wars, wherein you will surely die and your crops be eaten by strangers [...]". (Kipling 1964, 102)

It is not only the doomed nature of rebellion that downplays the sense of threat, but also, retrospectively, the fact that Orde correctly predicts the unfolding of the events, showing a complete understanding of the "object" under his ethnographic gaze.

This speech, moreover, is also an example of prose of counterinsurgency. Each reference to either the Anglo-Indian administrators or the natives is charged with connotations that remind the reader of a precise idea of the state and a precise idea of what it means to rebel against it: the former embodies absolute (and invincible) order; the latter uncivilized chaos – epitomized here by cattle-stealing – that is as threatening as destined to fail. Also the narrator participates in this strategy, while at the same time trying to maintain a facade of neutrality. He often seemingly limits himself to reporting the perspective of groups or collectives: for instance, the worst and most vitriolic insults directed at the Babu are woven into the narrative by adopting the perspective of the native inhabitants of the border. But the narrator's own words are clearly biased: when he first introduces the Khusru Kheyl, the narrator is quick to specify that they are "the frontier clan that [Orde] had won over to the paths of a moderate righteousness" (Kipling 1964, 99–100), an expression that already contains the worldview of the brave Anglo-Indian frontier administrator, barely (but relentlessly) keeping the tribal hordes in check.

Another authoritarian feature foregrounded by Eco is the idea that action, "being beautiful in itself, [...] must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection", and, by implication, that "thinking is a form of emasculation" (Eco 1995). This is, coincidentally, the fundamental basis on which Tallantire's heroism and manliness are constructed: all his actions and decisions are taken quickly, without an afterthought. Quickness of action is therefore profoundly gendered, and since gender, through the categories of martiality and effeminacy, is crucial to construct the ethnographic types on which the story is based, quickness of action becomes another macroscopic mark of

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distinction between the various characters. Consistently, it is denied to the intellectual and "effeminate" Bengali, who cannot take a single responsible decision, let alone quickly. Interestingly, the fact that Tallantire eschews reflection is not a liability because it is rooted in experience. Tallantire is always described as quick-minded and knowledgable at the same time. For instance, when he rushes to take charge of a garrison to quell the rebellion, the narrator specifies that "knowing his district blindfold, he wasted no time hunting for short cuts" (Kipling 1964, 115). The same is true for Orde, who, after all, speaks "quickly, in the vernacular" – a choice of words that implies his ability to perform difficult tasks with celerity and efficiency. Unthinking action is justified by field knowledge, and its rough methods are validated by its results.

The story clearly bestows ethnographic authority to those who are familiar and endorse both the knowledge that comes from colonial typologies and the fieldwork experience of the frontier. The moments in which this authority is bestowed are clearly marked – for instance, when Tallantire complains that his remonstrances about the De's appointment have been dismissed: "[I] have been told that I am exhibiting 'culpable and puerile prejudice.' By Jove, if the Khusru Kheyl don't exhibit something worse than that I don't know the Border!" (Kipling 1964, 6). Differently from the government, whose knowledge is depicted as profoundly abstract and detached from the field, Tallantire knows perfectly well that, as the narrator explains, "what looks so feasible in Calcutta, so right in Bombay, so unassailable in Madras, is misunderstood by the North and entirely changes its complexion on the banks of the Indus" (Kipling 1964, 110). The story wants us to let us know unambiguously that Tallantire has an intimate, practical experience of the border, hence he should rule the district. Crucially, the whole narrative tension of the story does not lay in whether the revolt might succeed (we are repeatedly told that the revolt cannot possibly defeat the might of the British) but in the epistemological conflict between those who know how things work (Tallantire, Orde, Khoda Dad Khan) and those who do not (the government, De, the Mullah). Tallantire's victory is primarily an epistemic triumph: he proves an ethnographic point, the correctness of his typological imaginative paradigms.

The counterinsurgent context not only makes the typologies increasingly more important to surely guide action, but also creates a disjuncture between the imagination and sympathy. Quite consistently, sympathy is a concept that, within the story, is framed as liberal nonsense. When De is first introduced, the narrator, mocking the benevolent tone of the government, comments that the man

"had wisely and, above all, sympathetically ruled a crowded district in South-Eastern Bengal" (Kipling 1964, 104) – and in the rest of the paragraph the word sympathy is used twice in a similar ironic fashion. Clearly "sympathetic rule", which for Kipling is a mixture of clientelism and idleness, is not the way in which Orde successfully managed to win the tribes to "moderate righteousness". Within an imagining of the other that must be institutionally devoid of sympathy, a rebellion is an administrative nuisance, mechanically triggered by objective factors, and as such it must be mechanically repressed without an afterthought – consistently with an imagining of a cultural others as ethnographic "objects" that (should) have no agency. It is remarkable how a crucial passage, the repression of the revolt itself, is described in an extremely concise way, as if the unstoppable force of the British Army should be entirely taken for granted and counterinsurgent violence accepted as a fact of nature. The counterinsurgent force seems to overrun the rebels in a matter of seconds:

> The Mullah had promised an easy victory and unlimited plunder; but behold, armed troopers of the Queen had risen out of the very earth, cutting, slashing, and riding down under the stars, so that no man knew where to turn, and all feared that they had brought an army about their ears, and ran back to the hills. (Kipling 1964, 116–17)

This is how a functioning state should work: as it is argued by one of Tallantire's men, "it is better to have a sharp short outbreak than five years of impotent administration inside the Border. It costs less" (Kipling 1964, 120) – an example of counterinsurgent mentality if there is one. Brutality is naturalized and deemed objectively necessary because it is (within the self-contained world of the short story) demonstrated to be cost-effective and rational.

If sympathy is ruled out, the story nevertheless indulges in alternative forms of emotional bonds between Anglo-Indians and natives. However, it validates exclusively those bonds who can exist in accordance to the view of governance of an authoritarian anthropological imagination, which argues for the essential validity of certain ethnographic classifications and uses them to establish political and cultural hierarchies. More precisely, the story depicts an example of the trans-racial and trans-cultural brotherhood of "strong men" that Kipling most famously immortalizes in his *The Ballad of East and West.* The ballad – also set on the north-western border – tells the tale of how an Afghan horse-thief and a British officer, in spite of being enemies, develop a bond of respect and friendship by admiring each

other's bravery and chivalry. The opening verse is perhaps one of Kipling's best-known passages:

> Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
> Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment seat;
> But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
> When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth! (Kipling 1897, 61)

The first two lines of the poem are often quoted in isolation, which obviously leads to a very simplified notion of Kipling's conception of "East" and "West" as irreducibly different and unable to reach a meeting point. All changes if the third and fourth lines are taken into consideration, indicating a way in which the differences between "East" and "West" can be temporarily suspended, in one of Kipling's typical attempts to look for (circumscribed) spaces of egalitarianism.

The ideological underpinnings of idealizing the bonds of the "strong men" are, in themselves, problematic, rooting egalitarianism and exchange in a violent and virile sense of masculinity and bravado. However, in "The Head of the District", differently from the ballad, this sense of brotherhood, even if it crosses racial barriers, is also paradoxically connected with a sense of hierarchy. Indeed, Khoda Dad Khan does remember with pleasure the moments of conviviality spent with his Anglo-Indian overlords, but a close reading of his memories clearly reveal a fundamental unevenness in their relationship:

> In Yardley-Orde's consulship his visit concluded with a sumptuous dinner and perhaps forbidden liquors; certainly with some wonderful tales and great good-fellowship. Then Khoda Dad Khan would swagger back to his hold, vowing that Orde Sahib was one prince and Tallantire Sahib another, and that whosoever went a-raiding into British territory would be flayed alive. (Kipling 1964, 108)

Pleasing a tribal leader with food, "forbidden liquors" and adventurous tales seems a cheap price for the absolute control over the life of the Khusru Kheyl. But it is in the finale, when Khoda Dad Khan returns to confirm his loyalty to Tallantire, that the sense of respect between the "strong men" is entirely stripped of any egalitarian pretence, in spite of the fact that Khoda Dad Khan has been

instrumental in quenching the flames of rebellion by overthrowing the Mullah. Tallantire dismisses Khan with these words:

> "[…] Get hence to the hills – go, and wait there starving, till it shall please the Government to call thy people out for punishment – children and fools that ye be! Count your dead, and be still. Best assured that the Government will send you a MAN!"
>
> "Ay," returned Khoda Dad Khan, "for we also be men."
>
> As he looked Tallantire between the eyes, he added, "And by God, Sahib, may thou be that man!"
>
> (Kipling 1964, 122)

The finale uneasily tries to suggest a sense of mutual virile admiration, which is undermined by Tallantire's (powerfully gendered) need to impose his authoritarian rule – and Khan's remissive, almost masochistically pleased, acceptance of this relationship.

Kipling returns several times to counterinsurgency in his career (possibly the best-known example is the 1889 story "On the City Wall"), and many of his counterinsurgency stories share this distinctively authoritarian bent. I argue that also "Kaa's Hunting", the second tale of Kipling's first *Jungle Book*, can be read as a counterinsurgency story. However, a comparison with "The Head of the District" allows us to appreciate some changes in the pattern of representation of counterinsurgency in this story. Rather than being inherently authoritarian, "Kaa's Hunting" explores a more conflictual relationship between counterinsurgency and the colonial anthropological imagination.

It should be noted that the whole *Jungle Book* – especially the Mowgli stories – powerfully endorses the typological aspect of the colonial anthropological imagination. Kipling's Jungle is rigorously divided into different species, each with their specific characteristics, each granted with some degree of autonomous legislation, but all supposed to obey to a shared Law. It is not far-fetched to see in this a representation of the Indian caste-system or Indian society at large, although the fact that actual Indian men and women do exist in the universe of the *Jungle Book* – and are explicitly distinguished from white people – prevents a univocal, transparent correspondence between animals and castes. More generally, it can be argued that animals do not represent specific ethnic types, but rather possible positions that the natives can adopt in the colonial context. As "The Head of the District" shows, however, those positions ultimately *imply* a form of ethnographic classification. The

mental scheme that produces ethnographic categories in "The Head of the District", therefore, is unequivocally active also in the *Jungle Book*. As Jopi Nyman argues:

> The animals of *The Jungle Book* can be divided [...] into two main categories, the good and the bad […]. This division reflects not only gendered and national categorizations but also related moral judgements, naturalized as virtues. Whereas trustworthy wolves […], the rational brown bear and the reliable mongoose obey naturalized hierarchies and social contracts, the native snakes and degenerate monkeys seek pleasure and self-gratification in denying the authority of colonial rule (Nyman 2003, 41)

Nyman further argues that the Law of the jungle is to be seen as a punitive colonial law (Nyman 2003, 41), which consistently forbids the killing of Man, lest the entire jungle be invaded by "white men on elephants, with guns, and hundreds of brown men with gong and rocket and torches" (Kipling 1996, 3). In this sense, for instance, it is easy to identify the behaviour of one of the main villains of the saga, the tiger Shere Khan, as the emblematic criminal native, not unlike the Blind Mullah. Shere Khan's *blind* and murdering hatred of men explicitly violates the Law of the Jungle, threatening the whole community with dire repercussions. The threat of Shere Khan is characteristically contained in the third story of the cycle: the tiger is killed off by Mowgli, who has him trampled under a stampede of buffaloes.

Mowgli himself – the man's cub raised by a pack of wolves – is a complex figure that articulates the ambivalences of Kipling's sense of "brotherhood". Mowgli's arc has him growing more and more authoritarian as the saga expands: he starts off as an adopted, but fully accepted child of the Jungle, only to be exiled by his own pack, instigated by Shere Khan's wily words. Mowgli, after killing the tiger, eventually returns to the Jungle, but this time as a master. In later Mowgli stories, his sense of brotherhood towards the Jungle-folk is frequently juxtaposed with his firm dominance of the Jungle. The ambiguity is perfectly encapsulated by a moment in which Mowgli and Bagheera the black panther – one of his mentors – have an argument, and the end of which Mowgli forces the panther into submission by talking in the human language and through the force of his human stare – only to regress to the language of brotherhood immediately after:

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"Strike, then!" said Mowgli, in the dialect of the village, NOT the talk of the Jungle, and the human words brought Bagheera to a full stop, flung back on haunches that quivered under him, his head just at the level of Mowgli's. Once more Mowgli stared, as he had stared at the rebellious cubs, full into the beryl-green eyes till the red glare behind their green went out like the light of a lighthouse shut off twenty miles across the sea; till the eyes dropped, and the big head with them – dropped lower and lower, and the red rasp of a tongue grated on Mowgli's instep.

"Brother – Brother – Brother!" the boy whispered, stroking steadily and lightly from the neck along the heaving back. "Be still, be still! It is the fault of the night, and no fault of thine." (Kipling 1996, 198)

The ambiguity continues in the later stories, to the point that, in "Red Dog", one of the last tales of the saga, it is stated that "all the Jungle was his friend, and just a little afraid of him" (Kipling 1996, 278) – and expression that closely recalls the combination of fear and admiration that the natives have for Strickland, another authoritarian figure.

How does "Kaa's Hunting" fare within this overall arc, and which possibilities are opened up by considering it a counterinsurgency narrative? The story opens with Mowgli being instructed in the Law of the Jungle by Baloo the brown bear. Trouble arises when Mowgli is kidnapped by the Bandar-log, the Monkey-People, a lawless and irrational folk despised by all the other animals, forcing Baloo and Bagheera to come to Mowgli's rescue. The bear and the panther are unable to face to hordes of the Bandar-log by themselves, and ask for the help of the mysterious Kaa, the rock python, who is particularly feared by the monkeys. What follows is a terrible battle in which Baloo and Bagheera are almost overrun by the monkeys, only to be rescued by Kaa. And yet, as soon as the monkeys are retreating, the python begins "the Dance of the Hunger of Kaa", which hypnotizes not only the Bandar-log, forcing them to do Kaa's bidding, but also Baloo and Bagheera. Spellbound by Kaa's dance, the bear and the panther are saved only by Mowgli's intervention, enabling both of them to escape the gruesome fate that awaits the mesmerized monkeys: to serve as meal for the hungry python.

"Kaa's Hunting" shares with the whole Mowgli saga – and the *Jungle Books* in general – a fundamentally typological imagination, most notably in its singling out a specific fragment of the Jungle population as a source of chaos and disorder. But, differently from the rest of the Mowgli stories, "Kaa's Hunting" is surprisingly unconcerned with the world *outside* the Jungle. The distant presence of the human world, in the rest of the saga, inevitably intimates Mowgli's ascent as Master of

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the Jungle, because he acquires this identity precisely through his exposure to this other reality the he can claim as his own. This story, instead, is set in that felicitous window in which Mowgli is a simple citizen of the Jungle. If Mowgli's arc within the story stresses his gradual learning of a diversified typology, this form of the imagination does not seem to create hierarchies. The Law that he studies under Baloo's tutelage in this story, instead of showing his punitive side, works primarily in terms of mutual support, respect and cooperation:

> So Baloo, the Teacher of the Law, taught him the Wood and Water Laws: how to tell a rotten branch from a sound one; how to speak politely to the wild bees when he came upon a hive of them fifty feet above ground; what to say to Mang the Bat when he disturbed him in the branches at midday; and how to warn the water-snakes in the pools before he splashed down among them. None of the Jungle People like being disturbed, and all are very ready to fly at an intruder. Then, too, Mowgli was taught the Strangers' Hunting Call, which must be repeated aloud till it is answered, whenever one of the Jungle-People hunts outside his own grounds. It means, translated, "Give me leave to hunt here because I am hungry." And the answer is, "Hunt then for food, but not for pleasure." (Kipling 1996, 22–23)

The reason for Mowgli's extensive training is that, as Baloo argues, "A man's cub is a man's cub, and he must learn *all* the Law of the Jungle" (Kipling 1996, 23 emphasis in the original). If read with a colonial allegory in mind, the sentence is quite suspicious, suggesting that Mowgli, as a man, can transcend his "nature" and acquire (cultural) mastery over different sphere of native knowledge, differently from the other animals that are limited to their own narrow knowledge of the Law. Yet, in the circumscribed horizon of "Kaa's Hunting", such vaster pool of knowledge is not framed as a premise of colonial mastery, but rather a necessity connected to Mowgli's status as an adoptive child of the Jungle. Foregrounding the importance of the *Strangers*' Hunting Call stresses that Mowgli must learn to respect his adoptive environment, instead of controlling it.

Nowhere in "Kaa's Hunting" is Mowgli boasting his diversified dominance on the animals. Instead, he employs his knowledge of the various Hunting Calls to ask for help and protection, as an equal, in two different occasions – first when he asks the Kite to warn Baloo and Bagheera as he is being carried away by the monkeys; and then when he is tossed by the Bandar-log into the hole of a broken dome infested by snakes and he has to plead the creatures not to attack him. Kaa, in a clear

anticipation of Kim's title of "Friend of all the World", half-jokingly but appropriately comments that "he has friends everywhere, this manling" (Kipling 1996, 42). Mowgli has also to humbly promise his services to Kaa in exchange for his help: "When thou art empty come to me and see if I speak the truth. I have some skill in these [he held out his hands], and if ever thou art in a trap, I may pay the debt which I owe to thee, to Bagheera, and to Baloo, here. Good hunting to ye all, my masters" (Kipling 1996, 43).

Mowgli's use of the expression "his masters" reminds us that, in the story, his role is primarily that of Baloo's (and to an extent Bagheera's) pupil. The relationship between the bear and the man's cub is indeed the emotional core of the story, and epitomizes another recurring form of trans-racial relationship in Kipling's work: that between disciple and (native) teacher – the other significant example being the bond between Kim and the lama. It is worth noting that this kind of relationship is predicated on love and on the exchange of knowledge, as Baloo explains Kaa when he is pleading for his help: "He is such a man-cub as never was, [...] the best and wisest and boldest of man-cubs – my own pupil, who shall make the name of Baloo famous through all the jungles; and besides, I – we – love him, Kaa" (Kipling 1996, 33). This kind of encounter provides, therefore, an alternative model to suspend cultural and racial barriers that is not the overly masculine (and often hierarchical) bond between the "strong men".

It is peculiar that, within one of the stories that most strongly represents the Jungle as a shared spaced of cooperation and exchange, conflict should be generated through the introduction of adversaries – the Bandar-log – that are utterly excluded, for their unruly nature, from the conviviality and "civilization" of the Jungle, as Baloo's description clearly shows:

They have no law. They are outcasts. They have no speech of their own, but use the stolen words which they overhear when they listen, and peep, and wait up above in the branches. Their way is not our way. They are without leaders. They have no remembrance. They boast and chatter and pretend that they are a great people about to do great affairs in the jungle, but the falling of a nut turns their minds to laughter and all is forgotten. We of the jungle have no dealings with them. We do not drink where the monkeys drink; we do not go where the monkeys go; we do not hunt where they hunt; we do not die where they die. (Kipling 1996, 26)

The strategy of representation at work with the Bandar-log follows the typological patterns of the

colonial anthropological imagination. If we read the Bandar-log as "the binary opposite of the colonial self which Kipling appears to construct in some of his animals", hence a "maddening, or already maddened form of identify that threatens the stability of colonial rule" (Nyman 2003, 44), it is fairly easy to reframe the whole story within the familiar and authoritarian paradigm of counterinsurgency – especially considering that the monkey are (consistently with the punitive aspect of the Law) ultimately exterminated by Kaa's intervention. The monkeys are an element of chaos – ethnographically defined – that the narrative ultimately (and brutally) forces into submission as a consequence of their unruly behaviour.

One way to deflect this possibility might be to focus on the fact that the story's metaphorical value cannot uniquely reduced to a colonial allegory (a defence that may works, perhaps less convincingly, for the other stories of the saga). W. W, Robson, for instance, comments in his introduction to "Kaa's Hunting" that both the Bandar-log and Kaa can be read in a variety of ways:

> It is fairly plain what the monkeys represent, though this is not a simple allegory: [...]essentially they are a standing metaphor, available for application according to the relevant experience of the reader. The symbolism of Kaa goes even deeper. What do Kaa and his coils represent? Snakiness, coldness, the physical and moral strength of power emancipated from passion; age, memory… Soon it becomes clear that the symbol is polyvalent, cannot be exhausted in a formula. (Robson 1992, xxvi–xxvii)

As a proof of the availability of the Bandar-log as a "standing metaphor", it can be reminded that Gramsci – an avid if unlikely reader of Kipling (see Carlucci 2013) – used Kipling's story to describe the petty bourgeoisie that supported the rise of Fascism in 1920s Italy (Gramsci 2007b). And as for Kaa, David Sergeant argues that the descriptive trope of the passage from a chaotic mass to an orderly stance – as it happens when the Bandar-log are mesmerized by Kaa – "is not inherently imperial", and "the contrast between the 'good' characters and the Bandar-log can just as easily be parsed as the contest between sanity and madness as it can suggest an imperial allegory" (Sergeant 2009b, 332).

However I think there is something to be gained from framing the taming of the Bandar-log precisely in the terms of the re-establishment of a colonial order, more specifically in the terms of a colonial counterinsurgency. And, somehow counter-intuitively, the result of this operation seems to be

not to restrict "Kaa's Hunting" within an authoritarian framework, but rather to stress how the story provide some critical reflection on the dynamics of counterinsurgency. Let us start with Kaa, the enforcer of this counterinsurgent action. The python is portrayed as marvellous, deadly and disturbing at the same time:

> [Baloo and Bagheera] found him stretched out on a warm ledge in the afternoon sun, admiring his beautiful new coat, for he had been in retirement for the last ten days changing his skin, and now he was very splendid – darting his big blunt-nosed head along the ground, and twisting the thirty feet of his body into fantastic knots and curves, and licking his lips as he thought of his dinner to come. […] Kaa was not a poison snake – in fact he rather despised the poison snakes as cowards – but his strength lay in his hug, and when he had once lapped his huge coils round anybody there was no more to be said. (Kipling 1996, 31)

Always speaking in half-teasing, half-threatening tones, Kaa appears genuinely alien when compared with the rest of the animals, and both Baloo and Bagheera approach him with suspicion and caution. Bagheera, in particular, reminds his friend that Kaa "is not of our tribe, being footless – and with most evil eyes" – to which the bear replies, not overly reassuringly: "He is very old and very cunning. Above all, he is always hungry" (Kipling 1996, 31). Kaa is therefore introduced as a sinister, albeit strangely seducing, all-devouring entity.

All the different threads of this complex and uncanny description are put in good use when Kaa attacks the Bandar-log:

> Then Kaa came straight, quickly, and anxious to kill. The fighting strength of a python is in the driving blow of his head backed by all the strength and weight of his body. If you can imagine a lance, or a battering ram, or a hammer weighing nearly half a ton driven by a cool, quiet mind living in the handle of it, you can roughly imagine what Kaa was like when he fought. A python four or five feet long can knock a man down if he hits him fairly in the chest, and Kaa was thirty feet long, as you know. His first stroke was delivered into the heart of the crowd round Baloo. It was sent home with shut mouth in silence, and there was no need of a second. The monkeys scattered with cries of – "Kaa! It is Kaa! Run! Run!" (Kipling 1996, 41)

There are certainly some parallels between this description and the British attack against the Khusru Kheyl: in both cases a precise, well-disciplined force of order strikes *quickly* at the heart of a force of chaos, sending the enemy in disarray with controlled brutality. This passage is certainly more layered and artful: while Tallantire's troops were simply reported to appear without notice, "[rising] out of the very earth, cutting, slashing, and riding down under the stars", in this case the description lingers on the aesthetic and psychological implications of such an onslaught: the narratives strives to create the impression of incredible violence administered with calm; of murderous intent carried out with lack of passion. Kaa becomes the idealization of colonial counterinsurgent violence – relentless, effective, detached – to which also Tallantire's counter-attack aspires. In many ways, both passages invite the reader to admire the surgical use of violence, taking pleasure in the effectiveness and economy of the attack.

Things change rapidly when Kaa begins his dance. This is the apex of his counterinsurgent operation, forcing the Bandar-log into absolute order after having bested them in battle. It is also, consistently with Kaa's persistent projection of both of beauty and menace, a dazzling spell of geometry, a miracle of self-control and discipline, which however points at something distinctively more sinister:

> He turned twice or thrice in a big circle, weaving his head from right to left. Then he began making loops and figures of eight with his body, and soft, oozy triangles that melted into squares and five-sided figures, and coiled mounds, never resting, never hurrying, and never stopping his low humming song. It grew darker and darker, till at last the dragging, shifting coils disappeared, but they could hear the rustle of the scales. (Kipling 1996, 44)

It is at this point that Kaa's true colours are revealed. His actions may bring order to the unruly Bander-log, but Kaa is revealed to ultimately serve his limitless hunger, whose potential victims include his former allies:

> Baloo and Bagheera stood still as stone, growling in their throats, their neck hair bristling, and Mowgli watched and wondered.
> "Bandar-log," said the voice of Kaa at last, "can ye stir foot or hand without my order? Speak!"
> "Without thy order we cannot stir foot or hand, O Kaa!"

"Good! Come all one pace nearer to me."

The lines of the monkeys swayed forward helplessly, and Baloo and Bagheera took one stiff step forward with them.

"Nearer!" hissed Kaa, and they all moved again. (Kipling 1996, 44)

Kaa's ruthless and cold commands grant him, in this last passage, a truly terrifying quality. There is no joy in witnessing the ghastly fate of the Bandar-log, and it could not be otherwise, since Baloo and Bagheera almost fall in the same trap. Kaa's use of violence is not surgical, controlled or moderate any more, but it is capricious and boundless: he can decide to kill as many monkeys as he desires, having them under his thrall, and he does not care for the collateral victims of his actions.

Kaa introduces in Kipling's fiction the possibility that those who control punitive mechanisms may serve a different agenda than the defence of order, and their use of violence may be neither moral nor circumscribed, even if its target is seemingly clear – ethnographically defined, as it were. Counterinsurgency, embodied by Kaa's actions, is ultimately antithetical to the egalitarian, collaborative society that Mowgli must navigate in the first part of the story. While seemingly animated by a single purpose – Mowgli's rescue – the story actually opposes, rather than trying to integrate, two patterns of the colonial "anthropological" imagination characterized by variously different degrees of reliance on violent and non-violent strategies of encounter and framing of cultural/colonial others. Kaa's counterinsurgent imagination ultimately sees the other as a resource to be administered and exploited (specifically as food). Mowgli frames the cultural other – for the time being – as a co-inhabitant that can imaginatively understood through a "scientific" typology, but that ultimately must be encountered as an equal, and perhaps befriended. Mowgli's oscillations between complex and authoritarian modes anticipate Kim, the other great boy-hero of Kipling's fiction and a key ethnographer-figure in his work – to which I turn in the final part of this chapter.

2.3.4. Love, Deception and Puzzlement: *Kim*

Kim's plot is fairly well-known: an orphan raised in Lahore after his parents' death – his father, most notably, was a disgraced soldier from an Irish regiment – Kim is a resourceful, versatile, mischievous

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and clever boy, with a particular talent for languages, disguise, intrigue and persuasion. At the beginning of the novel, Kim befriends an old lama that is on a quest to find a mystical river. The two depart together, quickly developing a fondness for each other. After reaching the Grand Trunk Road, Kim finds his father's regiment, and is forced to temporarily leave the lama's side to get a Western education. Simultaneously, he attracts the attention of Colonel Creighton, an ethnologist and spymaster that takes an interest in Kim's abilities and initiates him into the Great Game – the (fictional) espionage war between British India and Russia for the control of the frontier areas – under the tutelage of a number of mentors: the Pathan horse trader Mahbub Ali, the Bengali Hurree Babu, and the (ethnically ambiguous) jeweller Mr Lurgan.

Kim struggles to remain, at the same time, the "friend of all the world" that is able to blend into any Indian crowd, the "sahib" he is supposed to be due to his whiteness, and the lama's devoted *chela* (disciple). This predicament culminates in a mission he undertakes while he is once again wandering with the lama: Hurree Babu asks for his help to stop two Russian spies that are striking alliances with frontier kings to overthrow British India. At the end of the mission, Mahbub Ali and the lama (who has has found the river) discuss Kim's fate while the boy is sleeping, and the reader is left wondering whether Kim will continue playing the game or follow the spiritual path shown by the lama. The novel ends with the lama announcing Kim that he has found illumination, and he has returned from his enlightened state to guide him to salvation.

Kim can be compared to "The Beach of Falesá", as both works explore the attempt to establish spaces of empathy within the various epistemological patterns and configurations of the colonial anthropological imagination. The clashes between these patterns, which can steer towards either manipulation, detached epistemological/political control, or genuine intersubjective exchange, result, as in "Falesá", in emotional confusion: in "Falesá" we have Wiltshire's blatant narrative idiosyncrasies and his conflicted feelings; in *Kim* an awareness that several of the protagonist's important relationships are nevertheless incorporated in a framework of deception, exploitation and manipulation.

Kim's critical reception has often focused on the issue of the identity of the titular character – not surprisingly, considering that Kim himself, in different occasions, explicitly raises the question. The "Who is Kim?" leitmotiv is motivated by the numerous, diverging aspects of Kim's life and personality: Kim is a street urchin, a spy, a Buddhist monk, a sahib, an Indian – or perhaps none of those things. In particular, it is the perceived degree of loyalty towards the lama and towards the Great

Game that is usually pivotal in assessing the ultimate meaning of Kim's arc in the novel, and hence who Kim, ultimately, is. For instance, Edward Said's famous examination of the novel – included in *Culture and Imperialism* – explicitly reads *Kim* as a coming-of-age story whose protagonist is slowly integrated in the system of British domination over India, learning to exercise mastery over the colonial world (E. W. Said 1993, 176). For Said, the Great Game stands for the techniques of knowledge and panoptical surveillance deployed by the British to rule India, and, consistently he firmly locates Kim within the orbit of British imperialism and the Great Game: "Kipling never forgets that Kim is an irrefragable part of British India: the Great Game does go on, with Kim a part of it, no matter how many parables the lama fashions" (E. W. Said 1993, 175). Said, therefore, takes for granted that Kim becomes a spy at the service of the government at the end of the novel.

Said has a point in seeing in Kim the ideal imperial spy: certainly this is what Creighton sees in him, and it is the reason why he argues rather cynically that "the boy mustn't be wasted if he is as advertised" (Kipling 2009, 122). It is debateable whether playing the Great Game *as it is represented in the book* means to actively take a policing or surveillance role. In response to Said's argument, David Sergeant argues that:

> Kim and the other spies are perceptive and productive observers of other people, but we hardly see them involved in anything that might be termed "surveillance" in a policing sense, the close observation of a suspected person. Similarly, we see little or no evidence of "control". So the novel realizes "surveillance and control over India" only in the sense that it shows Kim and others involved in activities that – in reality, if not in the novel – would have been involved in imperial networks of control; and that would have been directed – in reality, if not in the novel – at a set of people far more numerous and popular than the novel itself makes out. (Sergeant 2013, 192)

In other words, Kim and the other spies are not effective as a representation or even as a symbol for actual colonial policing and surveillance. That does not mean that they cannot epitomize, in their actions, colonial modes of knowledge. Maybe Creighton is not an effective representation of the ethnographic state – the symbiosis of ethnography and governance – but several of the strategies of imaginative understanding carried out by Kim and the other spies are consistent with the ambition of achieving perfect knowability through extensive, reliable typological classification of the Indians.

An excellent example of this imaginative pattern is the section of the book where Kim and the

lama travel on the Grand Trunk Road – the "broad, smiling river of life", flooded with "new people and new sights at every stride – castes [Kim] knew and castes that were altogether out of his experience" (Kipling 2009, 80). This section epitomizes a trope that is used repeatedly to build the world of *Kim* in its diversity: the listing of ethnographic types – races, tribes and castes – which are presented as a primary source of knowledge on India. This plethora of little sketches is indeed lively and effective, and the narrator's gusto in describing the variety of Indian life is certainly only matched by Kim's delight in meeting new people and discovering new ways of life. But it is striking, especially for a coming-of-age story about a boy that is set on exploring a wider world, how little sense of puzzlement is to be found. Kim immediately deciphers the types he encounters, adapting his behaviour and language appropriately with great ease. Even if we are told that there are castes that Kim does not know on the Road, the potential difficulty of that lack of knowledge is elided, in that passage and elsewhere: the narrative presents a picture that is already transparent, within Kim's knowledge or ready to be understood.

Kim does not know everything at once, but he reduces to a minimum the gulf between the desire of knowing the unknown and the fulfilment of that desire. The moment in which he first meet the lama is particularly emblematic: "He stopped; for there shuffled round the corner, from the roaring Motee Bazar, such a man as Kim, who thought he knew all castes, had never seen" (Kipling 2009, 33). The scene seems to be set for an intricate mystery that Kim has to struggle to solve, but Kim then proceeds to ask a few, well-chosen questions to the lama, before deciding to accompany him. It is clear that the lama's mystery is quickly resolved for Kim, overwhelmed by the boy's curiosity and desire for knowledge. Kim, in short, faces the unknown without the slightest inhibition and is always rewarded accordingly. Knowing India seems, indeed, too easy, even for an incredibly observant character like Kim: the novel, in this sense, is another, even more extensive census-fantasy, because it is in fact an ethnological census in the making, guided by a figure that has no difficulty in carrying out the task throughout the novel.

Significantly, however, Kim is capable of these extreme feats of knowledge because he is fundamentally generous and open-minded, he is able to connect sympathetically with people, although he is not above deceiving them. These are qualities that are not lost on Creighton, when he instructs Kim about the way he has to behave with natives:

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There is a good spirit in thee. Do not let it be blunted at St Xavier's [the school where Kim is sent]. There are many boys there who despise the black men. […] Do not at any time be led to contemn the black men. I have known boys newly entered the service of the Government who feigned not to understand the talk or the customs of black men. Their pay was cut for ignorance. There is no sin so great as ignorance. Remember this. (Kipling 2009, 129)

Creighton's teachings may be easily taken, at first, as fundamentally reinforcing Kim's sympathetic attitude towards the natives. Yet the form of ethnographic encounter that Creighton and Kim have in mind presupposes radically different modes of the colonial anthropological imagination: both seek knowledge in an encounter with the native, and rely on imagining the natives through ethnographic typologies to obtain that knowledge; both despise ignorance, and are driven by a desire for complete understanding of those in front of them. Yet Creighton's interest is ultimately control, in the broadest sense: he means to make practical use of that knowledge, as befits his position as spymaster. Creighton's idea that a good player of the game should never despise the "black men" is in no way an ethical statement. After all, when Father Victor, one of the priests that discovers Kim's parentage, tells Creighton that he is a good man because he will take care of Kim, the Colonel hastily replies: "Not in the least. Don't make that mistake" (Kipling 2009, 124). We have no reason *not* to believe him.

It is indeed misleading to overlap Creighton's anthropological imagination with Kim's – as if Creighton were, in any sense, a mentor. Kim is fundamentally driven by curiosity and, ultimately, by genuine emotional attachment. It is true that Kim allows his talent and his temperament to be used by an imperial project. But his commitment to the Empire itself is dubious at best. Kim's attitude towards the empire is the same as everything else in his life: a source of discovery and newfound joy. But Kim is more interested in "the game for its own sake" (Kipling 2009, 32) than in any grand project behind the activities he engages with. Consistently he is interested in playing along with the various set of rules set before him to do his best in any given situation, but does not necessarily believe in the ideology or values behind the rules themselves. For instance, when Kim is in St Xavier, for instance, he is sharing stories with the other boys, while simultaneously trying to hide his more "oriental" side. What follows is a subtly subversive paragraph:

None the less he remembered to hold himself lowly. When tales were told of hot nights, Kim did not sweep the board with his reminiscences; for St Xavier's looks down on boys who "go native all-

together." One must never forget that one is a Sahib, and that some day, when examinations are passed, one will command natives. Kim made a note of this, for he began to understand where examinations led. (Kipling 2009, 134)

This might be taken as a paragraph in which Kim slowly starts to internalize blunt imperial ideology. Yet a closer examination reveals that Kim is actually studying the rules opportunistically, because he knows he will be required to act in a certain way in certain circumstances. The quick reference to the examinations foregrounds the fundamentally instrumental and detached way in which he learns about racial hierarchies. There is a certain degree of opportunism in Kim's behaviour, but ultimately he is interested in people, not in empires. Kim's absolute self-confidence as an "ethnographer" means that he rarely thinks he *needs* an intersubjective exchange to comprehend the person/type in front of him. However, differently from Creighton, whenever the person in front of him is sufficiently interesting, he actively *looks* for it.

Kim embodies simultaneously the sense of detached control of an authoritarian anthropological imagination and the desire for exchange that is supposedly its polar opposite. A passage that illustrate this contradiction is the sequence when Kim is sent to Mr Lurgan to perfect his skills as a spy. Lurgan's most important teachings take the form of initiating Kim to the Play of Jewels, a game that Kim plays against Lurgan's Hindu boy-servant. The Play consist in observing a set of different precious stones, memorize their number and characteristics, and then list them – with as many details as possible – once the stones have been hidden from view. Kim is initially rather clumsy at the Play, even when, at Kim's request, the objects to be studied are changed from stones to different items found in Lurgan's shop. Kim, bested each time, exclaims that "if it were men – or horses, […] I could do better. This playing with tweezers and knives and scissors is too little." (Kipling 2009, 161). The Play of Jewels is ultimately aimed at recognizing people, as proven by the fact that, in later sessions, Kim and the Hindu boy start playing not only "with veritable stones, [...] with piles of swords and daggers" but also "with photographs of natives" (Kipling 2009, 161). Yet there is a significant difference between Lurgan's and Kim's approach: Lurgan's techniques wants to teach Kim that natives are ultimately interchangeable with stones and daggers. The important thing is to hone one's capacity for observation. Kim, instead, instinctively cares very little for inanimate things, but is instead attracted by living things with a definite agency, like men or horses. The crucial difference is that men and horses can be *interacted*

with, and it is possible, eventually, to develop a bond with them.

With that in mind, it is possible to read in a new light one of *Kim*'s central passages: the moment in which Kim, recovering from the sickness that has befallen on him at the end of his final mission, starts to claim a definite grasp on the world:

> He did not want to cry – had never felt less like crying in his life – but of a sudden easy, stupid tears trickled down his nose, and with an almost audible click he felt the wheels of his being lock up anew on the world without. Things that rode meaningless on the eyeball an instant before slid into proper proportion. Roads were meant to be walked upon, houses to be lived in, cattle to be driven, fields to be tilled, and men and women to be talked to. They were all real and true – solidly planted upon the feet – perfectly comprehensible – clay of his clay, neither more nor less. (Kipling 2009, 264)

This passage has variously been interpreted in a very authoritarian sense – a culmination, as it were, of Kim's alleged ascent to Sahibdom, and a very restrictive version of it, on top of that. Jesse Taylor, for instance, argues that Kim, at the end of the book, emerges in "prosaically and bleakly imperial" world – an aesthetically diminished, utilitarian world that he cannot see with the vivid voraciousness of his earlier days, but only within "the epistemological space of the sahib" (Taylor 2009, 65). This passage is also central in Said's reading, who takes it as the moment in which Kim acquires his "newly sharpened apprehension of mastery, of 'locking up', of solidity, of moving from liminality to domination", which is "to a very great extent a function of being a Sahib in colonial India" (E. W. Said 1993, 174).

Seeing Kim's newfound clarity as a function of an authoritarian imperial mission is legitimate, and indeed that "perfectly comprehensible" is a clear sign that Kim endorses an anthropological imagination that is fully confident in its capacity of classifying and organizing reality. Kim's anthropological imagination works within a typological horizon in which things are to be known in their "proper" form and according to a specific function. Yet I believe that this passage is not exclusively a utilitarian fantasy of control over a bleak imperial world. Again, the richness of Kim's vision is to be found in the fundamental distinction between animate and inanimate objects: "Roads were meant to be walked upon, houses to be lived in, cattle to be driven, fields to be tilled, and men and women to be talked to". While roads, houses, cattle and

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fields are meant to be *used* in a proper way, Kim's deepest desire is to *talk* to men and women. *Talking* does not primarily imply an instance of domination. It is certainly a more intersubjective and interactive way of encountering a cultural other than mere observation. It does not necessarily entails a diminished aesthetic loss: if anything, Kim's pleasure and joy mature because they are more focused on a sense of intersubjective interaction.

Nevertheless, Kim's openness to the world presents another central contradiction. *Kim*, however strongly he desires real bonds of friendship, is both tempted and required to deceive his native mentors. The novel foregrounds a fundamental anxiety about the possibility of genuine relationships, and the extent they can coexist with lies and manipulation. This is inherently connected with Kim's vocation (and subsequent training) as an agent of the Great Game. It should be noted that the Great Game as depicted in the novel – a spy game carried out between Russian and British India to control central Asia – never actually existed, in spite of having inspired many works of popular history and having become an idiomatic (and still current) expression to indicate the geopolitics of central Asia (Hamm 2013, 395–96). Similarly, the spies in *Kim* are not spies in the real-life sense of the term: they are more clever trickster and manipulators than political figures involved in surveillance. The Great Game, moreover, is best understood as an allegory, whose meaning may range from a sense of masonic brotherhood to a complex reflection on the layered nature of reality that is the "epistemological equivalent" of the lama's Buddhist teachings (Vescovi, 2014, 15-16). And yet, even if the connection with actual espionage is rather weak, we also need to consider that the spy is a category that was formative for the professional identity of ethnographers: the behaviour of spies is considered unethical for a professional ethnographer, but the association between the two remains unavoidable (Pels and Salemink 2000, 26). Kipling, by stressing the double identity of the players of the Game as both ethnographers and spies, forces us to consider how the context of espionage affects the ethnographic encounters within the story.

In this sense the Game may also represent, for Kim, the danger of being unable to engage with cultural others beyond the mere realm of manipulation – the denial of an intersubjective dimension. The eighth chapter, in this sense, is significant. Kim is visiting Mahbub Ali, the Pathan horse-trader, during one of his escapades from St Xavier. Over the course of the chapter, Kim helps Mahbub to survive an attempt at his life. Yet, while containing its fair share of thrills

and action sequences, the chapter is much more important for a number of conversations the two characters have about Kim's identity and, most crucially, about their relationship. The kind of bond they establish is, in many ways, unusual. Mahbub is closely related to other Afghan characters in Kipling's work, such as those encountered in the *Ballad of East and West* and "The Head of the District". As such, he embodies the type of the Afghan nomad – oscillating dangerously between martiality and criminality. While this type, due to his violent temperament, can normally be befriended only in the context of the "brotherhood of strong men", in *Kim* his relationship with the titular character is presented in the other Kiplingesque mode of trans-racial bonding, the teacher-pupil relationship. It is worth noting that, in terms of emotional attachment, Mahbub is the other mentor that Kim loves as much as the lama (Vescovi 2014, 16), and it is not a chance that he is the one who joins the lama in the discussion on Kim's fate at the end of the novel. What is important is that the numerous declaration of love and affection between the Pathan and the boy throughout the eighth chapter, carried out in the midst of salacious banter, are articulated under the shadow of the pragmatical, opportunistic mentality and the ubiquity of deception that characterizes the Game.

Mahbub and Kim realize, at some point, that they both possess the secrets and information about each other that could potentially allow them to cause each other's downfall. This lead them to construct a space of honesty between them that transcend the deceptive nature of the Game – as Mahbub says, "All the world may tell lies save thou and I" (Kipling 2009, 140), precisely because there is no point in lying when they both have the means of harm the other. Kim replies that their shared secrets – and the possibility they both have to destroy each other – "[are] a very sure tie between them" (Kipling 2009, 140). But the "tie", a few paragraph afterwards, takes the explicit name of love. While the two characters are still playfully discussing how easily they could betray each other, Kim acknowledges that the real reason he is loyal to Mahbub is not the threat of retaliation, but love: "I thought of that [Mahbub's revenge] a little, but most I thought that I loved thee, Mahbub" (Kipling 2009, 141). A few lines later, prompting Kim to reveal new information, Mahbub once again puts this relationship of absolute trust and love into focus: "Tell me for love. Our lives in each other's hand" (Kipling 2009, 141). And yet the fear of betrayal is not easy to exorcise: after the attack at Mahbub's life is prevented, Kim reveals Mahbub that he had not disclosed one crucial piece of information about the assassins. Kim's explanation and

Mahbub's reaction are both telling:

> "[…] There is no need to tell more than is necessary at any one time. Besides, I did not then need money for sweetmeats."
>
> "Allah kerim!" said Mahbub Ali. "Wilt thou some day sell my head for a few sweetmeats if the fit takes thee?" (Kipling 2009, 151)

The Great Game, in this sense, represents a world of deception where ethnographic encounters – occasion to learn about cultural others – are fundamentally opportunistic, where communication, even among loved ones, is threatened by manipulation.

It is not a chance that the head of the Game, Creighton, does not take love into consideration. In the same chapter, Mahbub reminds Kim that Colonel Creighton spends money on Kim's behalf "for a purpose, not in any way for love of thee" (Kipling 2009, 140). If Creighton embodies the Game as a purely pragmatical function, Kim seeks human interaction *while* he plays the Game. Kim wants to have his cake and eat it too: he wants to enjoy the Game, he wants to play it proficiently, but he is not ready to disavow the importance of genuine bonds of love and friendship. This contrast culminates in his attempt to go undercover as the lama's devoted *chela* as part of the mission that he undertakes alongside Hurree Babu. Yet the lama is harmed during the mission as a result of an encounter with the two spies, an event that represents Kim's inability to maintain love and deception in a delicate balance, with no harm for the former or the latter. In other words, while Creighton and Lurgan fully embrace a subject-object, manipulative colonial anthropological imagination, Kim tries to integrate it (but not replace it) with an intersubjective dimension whose aim is not dominance. The novel, however, suggests that Kim's attempt may not succeed as easily as it might seem at first, testing the inherent limit of a colonial epistemological framework.

There is a final ambiguity regarding the role of ethnographic typologies, focused on the representation of one of the book's most mysterious characters: Hurree Babu. Hurree is, as his title clearly implies, another reiteration of the Bengali Babu type. He is a fat (hence emasculated) and verbose anglophile. He is a self-proclaimed coward. He is an enthusiast of Western culture and science and a passionate scholar of ethnology that nevertheless can't manage to have his articles published on the Asiatic Quarterly Review. Juniper Ellis points out that the rejection of his articles signifies that

Hurree, as a native, is automatically cut off from the project of ethnology as he is not allowed to explicate his own culture (Ellis 1995, 324), let alone to turn his ethnographic gaze on the British (Ellis 1995, 326). This detail is part of a general trend regarding Hurree's ability to "practice but not perfect" European forms, differently from Kim (Ellis 1995, 321). In this sense, Hurree reinforces a subject-object paradigm – in spite of his best efforts, he is framed as an object of knowledge rather than an active researcher like Creighton. Tim Christensen, moreover, argues that in *Kim* the whiteness of *successful* imperialists (opposed to those white characters who adopt static or traditional ideals of race) is performative, in the sense that "whiteness is structurally incommensurate to all other Indian identities, for it seems that only white Englishmen are capable of successfully engaging this form of enjoyment, while all ethnic others are imprisoned within their essential ethnic being" (Christensen 2018, 25). It is no surprise, in this sense, that Christensen takes Hurree Babu as a prime example that the identity of the native characters is fundamentally fixed and essential (Christensen 2018, 22).

However Hurree manages to be, at the same time, quite formidable. He arguably the most proficient player of the Great Game, able to travel swiftly and unnoticed, to appear and disappear in a way that surprises even Kim. In one instance, he is able to fool him into mistaking him for a doctor, with whom Kim, also undercover as the Lama's *chela*, engages into a debate over their respective healing methods. When Hurree reveals himself, Kim is, for once, genuinely impressed. But the greatest bravura piece that Hurree pulls off is the trick he plays on the Russian spies, managing to approach them, gaining their trust, stealing their documents with Kim's help, and then having them wander for days through the mountains, carrying on an elaborate pantomime in order to erase any trace of suspicion. In stark contrast with Grish Chunder De from "The Head of the District", Hurree Babu is treated with sympathy, but he is also, most crucially, highly competent.

More importantly, Hurree's game with the Russian spies questions the inherent reliability of ethnographic typologies. To approach the two spies, Hurree employs an undercover persona that is patently constructed as another reiteration of Bengali Babu type: he plays the part of the "oily, wet but always smiling Bengali, talking the best of English with the vilest of phrases" (Kipling 2009, 226) – a figure that is alternatively subservient and fearful, erudite and dim-witted. This persona is as laughable as De from "The Head of the District", perhaps even more, because he pretends to be disloyal: Hurree speaks "in terms of sweeping indecency of a government that had forced upon him a white's man education and neglected to supply him with a white man's salary, […][babbling] tales of oppression

and wrong till tears run down his cheeks for the miseries of his land" (Kipling 2009, 227). It is of course a cheap strategy, on Kipling's side, to dismiss actual complaints of educated Indians as absurd gibberish to be fed to gullible foreigners in order to win their trust – and to have a Bengali play this part, on top of that. The crucial point, however, is that Hurree's deceptions willingly *exploit* the perceived image that other people – including the readers – have of him. It is not a chance that one of the two spies call him the representative of "the monstrous hybridism of the East and the West" (Kipling 2009, 228) – a description that the sums up the type of the Bengali Babu, but that, quite curiously, is voiced by a foolish and arrogant spy. If Hurree does seem to fit an ethnographic type, he is also able to *perform* that construction within his own espionage activities. This open up a fundamental ontological instability about who the Babu really is.

Kim's last comment on Hurree is extremely significant to grasp the epistemological complications that Hurree introduces: "He tricked them. He lied to them like a Bengali. [...] He makes them a mock at the risk of his life – I never would have gone down to them after the pistol shots – and then he says he is a fearful man… and he is a fearful man" (Kipling 2009, 263). Kim tries to normalize the Babu's behaviour evoking another ethnographic trait – the Babu is good at tricking people because Bengali are natural liars. Moreover, he seems to close the circle by stating that the Babu is indeed fearful, as Bengali are supposed to be. But the whole picture remains out of joint, and Kim is, finally, puzzled. He cannot but notice a discrepancy between official knowledge of what a Bengali is supposed to be – supposedly endorsed by Hurree himself – and Hurree's actions. Can one be called fearful if his or her actions are repeatedly and consistently brave? If the Babu is a natural liar, and we know that he is able to simulate the very Bengali Babu type that we rely on to classify him, how can we be sure that we are not simply classifying what the native performs for us, knowing what we want to believe? Hurree, therefore, might represent the anxiety, on the colonialists' part, that the native might ultimately be able to deceive them, neutralizing the heuristic power of a colonial anthropological imagination that heavily relies on essential ethnographic categories.

2.4. Conclusion

Writing with a great degree of awareness for their multiple readerships – Western, colonial, native –

both Stevenson and Kipling have the issue of cultural understanding firmly in their mind as they experiment with a variety of genres and narrative modes to register the diverse experiences and ethnographic encounters of their Polynesian and Indian worlds. From their different starting points as an adoptive Polynesian and a "native" Anglo-Indian, both are concerned with gaining the trust of their readers and creating reliable guides into colonial cultural otherness. For both writers, at the same time, the anxiety of failing to understand the colonial world emerges in a variety of ways. I have already commented on how the colonial anthropological imagination – perhaps even more than any other form of the anthropological imagination – works as a system of variations in which several political and epistemological positions are possible. Stevenson and Kipling both occupy this shared horizon as neither of them systematically rejects *all* colonial strategies of understanding the cultural other – whether they are the reliance on typological (or evolutionist) schemes and categories or a tendency towards subject-object relations as a way to maintain a degree of control.

Comparing Stevenson and Kipling shows also that the correlation between politics, imaginative modes of framing a cultural other, and representational techniques is not stable. For instance, there is no easy correlation between a desire of acquiring a strong ethnographic authority – a function of a subject-object relation between ethnographer-figure and native – and a desire for imperial control. In the case of *In the South Seas*, for instance, the strong, confident voice Stevenson adopts, backed up by his scientific readings, serves the purpose of replacing exoticist or Orientalist visions of Polynesia, claiming a space for an alternative vision of Polynesian natives. But a similar operation is carried out by the narrator of "The Head of the District", whose ethnographic authority is similarly based on the concrete experience of the border against "abstract" liberal principles, and ends up endorsing an extremely authoritative form of the imagination. In these two examples two variations of ethnographic realism serve fairly different political purposes and result in very different aesthetical experiences.

Similarly, staging a loss of control in a colonial encounter can be done with a variety of modes and for a variety of purposes: the horrors of cannibalism and the perspective of native riots reignite in Stevenson a punitive side that might surprise some of his readers – and these are two examples, on Stevenson's side, of realism being used for a (mildly) authoritarian effect. Kipling, who can offer several, much more violent examples of such a strategy, can also represent a loss of epistemic control that manages to genuinely question the colonial grasp on reality, as well as its legitimacy. Pansay's breakdown and Kaa's hunger-dance rise many questions about the nature of colonial power, of colonial

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epistemology and ethnographic encounters, and in this case it is the use of non-realistic strategies – the Gothic and the animal allegory – that grant those passages their effectiveness.

Juxtaposing Stevenson and Kipling allows us to describe colonial ethnographic encounters and the various expressions of the colonial anthropological imagination as dominated by profoundly conflicted structure of feelings: they incorporate desires of understanding, of control, of fear and attraction. More specifically, they epitomizes the unsolvable contradiction between the desire for even and equal relationships that a colonial anthropological imagination does not necessarily exclude and the hierarchical tension that comes with the strategies of order and control of a colonial epistemology. It is not a chance that Stevenson's and Kipling's best colonial creations, like Wiltshire and Kim, are haunted by their own deceptions, which threaten their most intimate relationship with cultural others.

It is equally important to remember that Stevenson and Kipling represents two fairly different positions within the spectrum of possibilities that the colonial anthropological imagination enables. In a way, all boils down to two interrelated aspects: gender and violence. One of Stevenson's crucial achievements in his Pacific writings is questioning the masculine anxiety for control that dominates the hero of imperial romance. Although the shadow of that figure is ubiquitous in his colonial narratives, it is also very rare (the Butirari riot being the most significant exception) that the gendered characteristics of that figure – most of all, his propensity for violence – are not critically framed and exposed in their toxicity. Wiltshire, whose colonial/male arrogance almost proves to be his downfall, and whose use of violence is either pointless, or messy and inglorious, is saved through his integration within a universe of domesticity that he tries to resist by clinging to his racialized and gendered conceptions. It is precisely because he has partially let go of his hypermasculine colonizer/civilizer/conqueror persona that he allows himself to be helped by his resourceful wife and their encounter is resolved into a happy marriage. Kipling, instead, largely clings to the idea of a colonial world to be ruled with virile determination and for whom gender (conformity) is such a strong anxiety that it encompasses, arguably, even race (see Heldar 2011, 67). Consistently, he is much more prone to allow violence and a desire for control to inform the patterns of the anthropological imagination of his characters. It is perhaps not a chance that one of Kipling's most effective critical reflections of the inherent violence of colonial governance and its epistemological constraints on the imagining of the natives may come from describing the cruel dance of a hungry snake. Through the distancing lens of animal allegory, Kipling's need to showcase gender expectations is somehow relaxed.

3. The Militant Anthropological Imagination: Internal Colonialism and Strategies of Solidarity in Carlo Levi and Mahasweta Devi

3.1. Introduction

This chapter attempts a comparison between the Italian writer Carlo Levi (1902-1975) and the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi[5] (1926-2016). As regards Levi, I discuss his life-defining *Christ Stopped at Eboli* [*Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*], published in 1945, two later travelogues, *Words are Stones* [*Le Parole sono Pietre*] and *All the Honey is Finished* [*Tutto il Miele è finito*], dating 1955 and 1964 respectively, as well as a number of reportages from India, dating 1957. As for Mahasweta, I examine her short story "Draupadi" (1978), her novel *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* [*Chotti Munda Ebang Tar Tir*] (1980) and her novella "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha" ["Ṭeroḍyākaṭila pūraṇa sahāẏa o pirathā"] (1987). Differently from the previous chapter on Stevenson and Kipling – which covers less than fifteen years – this chapter spans a significant number of decades. Its task is to fill the gap between the late colonial phase explored in the previous chapter, and the unfolding of contemporary globalisation that is the crucial background of the chapter dedicated to Ghosh and Westerman. Taken together, Levi and Mahasweta cover a number of historical trajectories that work as a connecting tissue between these two phases, such as anti-fascist and anti-colonial struggles, culminating in the Liberation for Italy and in Independence for India, and the deeply problematic nation-building that followed that moment for both states. Most importantly, the historical circumstances and the perspective that both writers employ to face such historical circumstances are in many respects similar, sharing distinctive patterns of the anthropological imagination that are complemented by thematic, political and formal convergences, in spite of the chronological and geographical distance.

Both their biographies are defined by the intertwining of political activism and writing, although their initial engagement with literature originates from different trajectories. As for Carlo Levi, he became a writer almost by chance. During his early adulthood – spent in the politically charged

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5   I refer to Mahasweta Devi with her name rather than with her surname, as she is more widely known. As Jay Rajiva notes, "the surname 'Devi' ('goddess') is merely an honorific taken by many upper-caste female Hindu writers of a certain generation" and does not allow to distinguish between the different writers (Rajiva 2017, 191).

atmosphere of Turin in the 1920s – he mainly focused on his medical studies, on painting and on political activity. The latter, gravitating inevitably towards anti-fascism, was the reason he was sent, in 1932, to Lucania (present-day Basilicata), as a *confinato* – a political prisoner of the fascist regime. The *confino* (confinement) was a typical fascist practice of political repression: political opponents were sent to remote locations within the country where, cut off from their networks and surveilled by the local authorities, they were effectively neutralized. Levi was first sent to the town of Grassano and then to Aliano (called Gagliano in *Christ*, as a way to imitate the local pronunciation), a particularly remote and desolate location where he spent nine months. Before returning home, he witnessed first-hand the plight of the of South Italian peasants – among the poorest and marginalized strata of the Italian population. While he only wrote poetry and painted while in Aliano, his stay in the small Lucanian town became the material for his literary debut in 1945: *Christ stopped in Eboli*, the book he is still primarily associated with.

There were two chief reasons why Levi published his first book so late in his life: firstly, the book, written in German-occupied Florence between December 1943 and July 1944, could only go to press after the Liberation. Secondly, he had, for the first part of his life, thought of himself primarily as a painter. Indeed, *Christ* and the second book he published, the philosophical monologue *Fear of Freedom* [*Paura della Libertà*], were initially written as personal reflections in time of great distress rather than as proper editorial projects[6]. In particular, *Christ*, written as Levi was hiding in Florence, trying to avoid capture from the Nazi, was initially conceived as a Scheherazadesque act of narration to cheat death: in a well-known letter to his editor Giulio Einaudi for the second edition of the *Christ*, he calls the book – but, more precisely, the *act* of writing the book – "an active defence that made death impossible" (C. Levi 2010, xvii). Levi surfaced in the public sphere as a writer only after the astonishing (and unrepeated) international success of *Christ*, particularly in the United States (Beltrami 2016). His belated and somehow incidental choice of the writer's profession caused a certain resentment and accusations of amateurism by a number of more established writers, but also explains why his prose – differently from Devi's – is so consistent throughout the various genres he delves into: he never properly established boundaries between his creative and activist writings. After the war, Levi

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6   *Fear of Freedom* was published in 1948, but its composition dates back to 1939, during Levi's stay in France, where he had fled to escape the fascist regime. Of course Levi's stay in Lucania – and hence the "fieldwork" at the heart of *Christ*, predates *Fear of Freedom*, resulting in a very intricate chronology of Levi's early literary work.

alternated between non-fiction writing (mostly travelogues, essays and journalism), painting and even a successful political career – he was elected as a senator in 1963, a few years before his death in 1975.

Conversely, Mahasweta's vocation as a creative writer is unquestionable. In a recent interview with Madhurima Chakraborty, she tells that writing stories is "the only thing [she knoes] how to do" (Devi and Chakraborty 2014, 285). This may seem surprising from someone who is also known, at the very least, for her long history of political and social activism – and consequently for an intense activity as an investigative journalist. But it is a clear indication that Mahasweta, as the interviewer convincingly paraphrases, identifies herself chiefly as a writer of creative fiction (Devi and Chakraborty 2014, 283). This self-representation is corroborated by the fact that, differently from Levi, the gap between the level of linguistic and structural experimentation in Mahasweta's creative writing and in her activist pieces is noticeable, the latter being generally straightforward from a stylistic point of view. As a creative writer, differently from Levi, she has been extremely prolific in her (admittedly much longer) career. Born in 1926, she published her first novel – *Jhansir Rani* [*The Queen of Jhansi*]*,* a fictional reconstruction of the life of one of the central figures of the 1857 Rebellion – in 1956. She then continued writing fiction virtually up until her death in 2016. I have called her a Bengali writer to signal that she writes, effectively, in Bangla, but it is worth noting that she preferred to call herself an *Indian* writer (Arya, 1998, 187). This is a detail of considerable importance that can be connected with the importance she attaches to the national context for her writing and activism, as well as with the desire to escape local, provincial or "regional" dimensions in favour of broader networks of solidarity.

While Mahasweta lived the years of the struggle for independence, the formative experience that defined the central – or at least best-known – part of her career comes much later, as she started investigating the reality of adivasi life. The adivasis (also called tribals, using a terminology that is problematically connected to the colonial period but is commonly accepted in India) are communities and ethnic groups that are not integrated in the (Hindu) Indian mainstream society, representing a significant portion of the Indian population. The term "adivasi" means "first inhabitants" – consistently with their status as the indigenous population of the Subcontinent. Especially since the colonial period, they have been among the most oppressed groups of the Subcontinent: their culture and society have historically been rearranged and disrupted by the (post)colonial administration, while the adivasis themselves have been used as cheap labour, forced into the semi-slavery under the various oppressive labour systems and evicted from their lands (often in order to get hold of the untapped natural resources

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commonly found in their territories). In short, their position within Indian society is peripheral from a cultural, social and economic point of view. Mahasweta Devi started visiting adivasi territories in the 1960s, beginning with the Palamau area, which indeed frequently features both in her articles and in her fiction (see Devi 1997b, 1-42). In an interview with Gayatri Spivak, her best-known translator (chiefly responsible for her notoriety in the anglophone world), she describes the beginning of her engagement with the adivasis in the Palamau:

> In 1965, I started going to Palamau. Of course my mental involvement was already there. I was interested in [the adivasis], but did not know very much. Palamau is still an inaccessible district, the poorest in the state of Bihar, perhaps one of the poorest in India. […] I have covered all the district on foot. I walked miles, staying somewhere overnight, went from place to place. Thus the bonded labour system, in its naked savagery and its bloody exploitation of women, became clear to me. I started writing about Palamau. I also started getting bonded labourers organized. […] When I understood that feeling for the tribals and writing about them was not enough, I started living with them. Tried to solve the problem by seeing everything from his or her point of view. (Devi and Spivak 1995, xi–xiii)

This passage describes the moment she takes up adivasi rights activism, but it is only in 1976 that Mahasweta, having just acquired a considerable pan-Indian fame with her 1974 Naxalite novel *Hajar Churashir Maa* [*Mother of 1084*], starts focusing on the adivasis as subjects of her fiction in a systematic fashion, beginning with a novelistic rendition of the Birsa Munda rebellion against the British Raj, *Aranyer Adhikar* [*Right to the Forest*]. From that point onwards, the plight of the adivasis of India becomes one of her major themes, and certainly the one she is now universally identified with, both in India and abroad, although the scope of her narrative is actually very vast, covering realities as diverse as the Calcutta *lumpenproletariat*, the urban middle-class, and the world of the political insurgents.

Are these two careers comparable? One has its turning point in the context of a totalitarian state, the other, almost thirty years later, in the context of a postcolonial state. One involves a Jewish Italian man who stumbled into the writing profession, the other one a Hindu Indian woman who deliberately chose creative writing as her career. Levi deals with the peasants of South Italy, which at first do not seem inherently comparable with the indigenous population of the Indian Subcontinent. All these

aspects play a role in creating, for either writer, a distinctive voice, but do they enable or prevent a useful comparison between them? What may we actually *gain* from such a comparison?

As a matter of fact, the radical differences between Mahasweta and Devi in many instances converge in striking and illuminating parallelisms, especially if the comparison is established from the perspective of the ethnographic encounters they experience and represent, and of the anthropological imagination they employ. The fundamental parallelism can be evinced from Mahasweta's quotation reported above, when she stresses the importance of direct contact and the "native's point of view". Both Mahasweta's and Levi's writing emerge organically from an intensive fieldwork among an exploited, culturally marginalized group on the background of as internal colonialism. The ethnographic quality of their work lies in the necessity of grasping a radically different worldview in order to contrast this internal colonialism effectively – the necessity to *understand* a group in order to be able to support it. This is, in both cases, largely motivated by the deep cultural divide between the urban culture they both come from and the rural communities they engage with. While a cultural gap between ethnographer-figure and native is a recurring aspect of most literature with an ethnographic dimension – some kind of cultural divide is the indispensable premise for the anthropological imagination to operate – Mahasweta's and Levi's writing is distinct due to their explicit political, indeed partisan stance and the fact that they act within a context of internal colonialism to which they offer *national* solutions.

Juxtaposing these two writers is an ideal staging ground for a number of experiments with world literary, world-systemic or postcolonial perspectives. They allow us to dismantle an idea of colonialism as exclusively predicated on a dichotomous distinction between the Europe and its others, allowing us to tackle the phenomenon of *internal* colonialism in a comparative perspective – indeed, is it internal colonialism different in a European (albeit semi-peripheral) nation such as Italy and in a postcolonial nation such as India? Levi and Mahasweta document the state's attempts to manage, assimilate or integrate rural subaltern groups like the peasants and the adivasis. Both Levi's peasants and Mahasweta's adivasis, utterly marginalised from an economical, political and cultural point of view, actually represent the terrain on which the failures of the various projects of nation-building are most painfully registered – a failure that engenders (but is also caused by, in a vicious circle) internal colonialism. Italy and India, both young states whose national identity has been historically frail and contested, clumsily trying to come to terms with internal differences that also take the form of subaltern

cultures, represent ideal case studies to discuss internal colonialism and its anthropological underpinnings, as well as to explore alternative anthropologies that resist it.

The other crucial point of the comparison is that both writers are distinctively political – indeed their fieldwork is first and foremost a development of political activity and activism, and their anthropological imagination is distinctively militant and partisan. Juxtaposing two writers from different contexts that adhere to different political programmes – antifascism and Meridionalism for Levi, anticolonialism and indigenous rights for Mahasweta – allow us to track down convergences between these different political practices. Both writers put the discovery of the subaltern at the heart of a project of political renewal that aims at including peasants and adivasis within the nation, and in turn transforming the nation – linked, in itself, to authoritarian tendencies – into a more just institution.

If this chapter attempts to embrace a comparative dimension that incorporates fairly distant temporalities and geographies, such leaps may be justified by the fact that they are actually encouraged by the writers themselves. Both see the history of their country as a continuity to be studied in a framework of *longue durée*: in particular, the historical condition of the subaltern groups has remained, for both authors, largely unchanged throughout the centuries, also due to the structural continuity between different political regimes that have ruled Italy and India: Levi sees precise continuities between liberal, fascist and post-war Italy, Mahasweta between colonial and postcolonial India. Both of them encourage transcultural comparisons, and their work is deliberately internationalist – even Third-Worldist in Levi's case. In a way, Mahasweta and Levi themselves suggest that their respective histories *are* the same history: both deal with a liberation struggle, its premises and its aftermath, with the ensuing process of nation-building (predicated in developmentalist terms), and its consequences on a specific part of the population.

3.2. Carlo Levi

3.2.1. A Turinese in the South between Antifascism and Secular Jewishness

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How does Carlo Levi's cultural background impacts its anthropological understanding of the peasants during his stay in Aliano/Gagliano? Levi's profile – a doctor, painter, writer and intellectual belonging to the Turinese Jewish bourgeoisie – makes him an unlikely traveller into the "the desolate reaches of Lucania" (C. Levi 2000a, 12). On the other hand, it is precisely his scientific, artistic, cultural, and political formation that provides him with the intellectual tools to turn Gagliano, the site of his internment, into an anthropological field. Levi embodies a curious paradox: he never "goes native" at any point of his career, even when he dabbles in peasant witchcraft. He never rejects his intellectual milieu *tout court*. However, he is profoudly hostile to certain aspects of bourgeois culture, especially when they are intertwined with fascism, and his work is unequivocally animated by a radical, pervasive critique of the Western models of the state.

Levi's identity, if properly unpacked, provides a rationale for these contrasting tendencies. Levi is, first of all, a Northern Italian man, and more specifically a Turinese. He emerges, therefore, from one of the major political, economical and intellectual centres of peninsula. There is no denying that his descent into the peripheral South can be read as cultural shock, the sudden discovery of a previously unknown cultural reality that forces a radical rethinking of his political and epistemological categories. His stay in Gagliano is to be framed within the broader context of the so-called Southern Question. The term indicates the political, economical and cultural issue represented by the gap in terms of general development between the North and South of Italy, the latter being chiefly agricultural and dominated by latifundium, clientelism and feudal social relations. The Southern Question emerged simultaneously with the Italian Unification in 1861 – carried out precisely by the Turin-based Kingdom of Sardinia – and quickly became a major theme of political discussion. The development, over the years, of a strong alliance between Northern industrialists and Southern landholders, however, prevented radical solutions like land redistribution in the South – such alliance being the "monstrous agrarian block" ["mostruoso blocco agrario"] that Gramsci attacks in his famous piece on the Southern Question, suggesting that it could only be defeated through an alliance between the industrial working classes of the North and the peasants from the South (Gramsci 2007, 135)

The Southern Question generated a massive amount of political, cultural and economical reflections. A significant part of these reflections reinforced a vision of the South as primitive and barbaric. This is a development that Jane Schneider has no qualms about calling Orientalist, stressing that the way North-South differences were articulated is to be read "in relation to a wider context for

defining difference: the context set by dominant colonial and neo-colonial powers of the 19th and 20th century" (Schneider 1998, 3). After the first, general crisis of brigandage, which basically cast Southern Italy into civil war from 1861 to 1864, the Southern Question took its "radical, oppositional contours" from the 1870s to the 1890s, when "contrasts became not only essentialized, but racialized as well" (Schneider 1998, 3).

However, a number of thinkers approached the Southern Question by stressing how the South was economically marginalised and exploited within the broader national context, variously reframing the whole issue in terms of internal colonialism. Levi was exposed to these thinkers, particularly to Gramsci, and was able to discuss the Southern Question with the Turinese intellectuals, most notably with Piero Gobetti, one of the leading figures of the Turinese intellectual and political scene in the inter-war era and one of Levi's early spiritual mentors (Russo 1997, 1). Gobetti, in particular, provided Levi with a crucial occasion to rethink the Southern Question when he asked him to write an article on the conservative politician Antonio Salandra for his journal *Rivoluzione Liberale* [Liberal Revolution] (D'Orsi 1997, 11). Therefore, although it is beyond doubt that Levi was able experience the South and the peasant civilization in a significantly more insightful way only after setting foot in Gagliano, his stay was nevertheless guided by a theoretical preparation that provided him with the tools to make sense of the reality around him.

Levi's politics similarly provide him with important intellectual guidelines to read the peasant world. His peculiar form of antifascism was largely influenced by Gobetti's, who argued that fascism is nothing more than the autobiography of the nation (Gobetti 1983, 165) – a natural development of the failings of liberal Italy. Levi accepted this indication, and saw a fundamental continuity between liberal and fascist Italy. This is a fundamental premise to understand Levi's interest for the peasants. It is precisely because they are excluded from the nation, history and power – and hence from fascism – that they harbour the key for the renewal of Italy. Levi's ethnographic encounter with the peasants, therefore, is framed within a context of political activism, with Levi's gaze searching, in the derelict inhabitants of Gagliano, not only for an ethnographic curiosity, but also for allies against fascism and cultural solutions against totalitarianism. Needless to say, the fact that Levi's presence in Gagliano is a result of his antifascist activism is a crucial catalyst for this mode of interpreting the peasant world.

Another, rather disregarded aspect of Levi's cultural background is his Jewishness. The reason for this disregard is, simply enough, that Jewishness is largely invisible within his work. In this sense, Levi

is a prime example of a secular and secularized Italian-Jewish bourgeois intellectual, who hardly articulates and definitely does not foreground his Jewishness as a prominent part of his identity. However, the secular is hardly a mere lack of religious content, and rather implies a specific structure of feeling depending on how it interacts with the various historical trajectories from which it emerges. As Talal Asad argues, the secular, defined as "a concept that brings together certain behaviours, knowledges ans sensibilities in modern life", is "neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity, although it works through a series of particular oppositions" (Asad 2003, 25). Levi's secularism, therefore, takes a particular connotation within a Jewish-Italian background. Alberto Cavaglion polemically argues that, in the Italian context, there was a fundamental scarcity (and marginalization) of what he calls "modernizing Jews" [*ebrei modernizzanti*], figures that, while determined to remain within Judaism, attempted to adapt the Jewish tradition to modernity, critically analysing tradition in order to salvage those values that could organically work in the context of the new democratic state (Cavaglion 2002, 104). Italian Jews, instead, generally took one of two paths: a monolithic orthodoxy, fundamentally extraneous to internal pluralism, sanctioned by the 1930 law on Jewish communities that equated one's Jewishness with belonging to already existing communities; or a form of assimilation that ultimately avoided meaningful engagement with Jewish culture and heritage, even in a secularized form (Cavaglion 2002). This void was, in many cases, filled by political ideology, as shown for instance by the fact that a significant part of the Jewish youth of the end on the 19th century enthusiastically adhered to socialism (Cavaglion 2002). Primo Levi (who is, besides, Carlo's cousin) corroborates those observations in "Argon", the first, "autoethnographic" chapter of *The Periodic System*: reflecting on his ancestors – members of Jewish communities that settled in Piedmont – Primo Levi compares them to inert gases, arguing that they were more inclined to superficial and witty discussion than to serious intellectual engagement, faring rather badly, from an intellectual standpoint, in comparison with other communities in Europe and Italy (P. Levi 2014, 3–4). All of this explains why Carlo Levi, emerging precisely from a secular Turinese Jewish bourgeoisie, manifested very little interest in engaging intellectually with Jewishness or Jewish culture in his books.

Nevertheless, there are two important considerations regarding the importance of Jewishness in relation to Levi's experience with the peasants of Gagliano. First, Judaism as a culture, in the context of secularisation and cultural assimilation carried out between the 19th and early 20th century, was fundamentally considered backward, excessively ritualistic and inadequate to the standards of

modernity, and hence occupied both the status of a subaltern culture marginalized by a dominant one and the status of an ethnically "other" culture deserving anthropological scrutiny. There are, therefore, a number of interesting parallelisms between the categories used to mark Jewish difference from the secular/Christian mainstream and those Levi uses to signal the difference of the *peasant* civilization – most notably, the presence of a different ritualism, temporality and language. While the actual lack of engagement with Jewishness prevents us establish an explicit comparison between Jewish and peasant culture in Levi's work, the Jewish element may be taken as a latent, unarticulated benchmark that Levi uses to understand subaltern cultures, possibly a spectral interference that directs his way of thinking the peasants. If anything, the gap represented by the absence of Jewishness in Levi's understanding of subalternity helps us to foreground certain nuances in the way he articulates the relationship between the peasants and the state.

The second consideration regards the relationship between this Italian brand of Jewish secularism, rather prone on erasing its cultural specificity, the universalist thinking that emerges from it, and Levi's own sensitivity to cultural difference. Giovanni Falaschi argues that Jewishness provides Levi with the idea of the universal character of culture (Falaschi 1978) – and Levi is indeed attracted by universal anthropological models, especially in the later part of his career. It seems to me, however, that it is his *secular* Jewishness that may motivate his universalism – seeing, in other words, Levi's universalist vocation as a function of his identity as an assimilated Jew. At the same time, it would be incorrect to argue that Levi, as a secular Jew with a tendency towards universalism, is automatically and uncritically joining a line of secular, bourgeois, Enlightenment thinking that bases its identity on history as progress and on the state as an ethical entity. His secularism questions and rethinks both religion and the state – which he understands as closely intertwined anthropological phenomena. Moreover, his universalism is not deaf to cultural difference – the universalist tendencies of his thinking are not structurally unable to contain diversity, although their tendency to do so varies at different stages of his career.

A last point to be considered is Levi's role as a doctor in Gagliano. Levi graduated in medicine but soon chose to focus on his activity as a painter. The fact that Levi is asked to make use of his scientific knowledge in Gagliano is perhaps *the* enabling condition that allows Levi to establish a dialogue with the peasants. And yet, most interestingly, Levi's practice as a doctor ends up interacting, rather than clashing, with local folklore, witchcraft and supernatural beliefs – a fact that epitomizes

Levi's fundamentally integrative approach to cultural diversity. Therefore, while it is well enough, in first approximation, to take Levi as a "typical" example of a bourgeois, secular intellectual discovering a subaltern, "archaic" culture and being radically changed by the experience, Levi's position constantly needs to be complicated in a number of ways. The result of this encounter is hardly typical at all, and is, depending on the perspective, more *and* less transformative than it initially seems. Ultimately, the anthropological imagination that emerges from Levi's encounter with peasant civilisation can neither be idealised as a romantic break from his class and cultural roots nor be dismissed as inevitably "ethnocentric", inherently determined by such roots.

3.2.2. *Christ Stopped at Eboli.* Towards an Anthropology of Antifascism

Some of the ambiguities underlying Levi's encounter with the South emerge from the very first pages of *Christ Stopped at Eboli.* The book starts with what we could call, in Franco Vitelli's words, an integrated preface to the whole text, modelled after the opening of classical epic poems like the Aeneid (Vitelli 2008, 69). Consistently with this model, Levi exposes, in the first lines of his narrative, the essential themes of the book. In particular, Levi, taking up the voice and the perspective of the peasants, explains what is the nature of the civilizational divide between the urban and peasant world in Italy:

> "We're not Christians," [the peasants] say. "Christ stopped short of here, at Eboli[7]." "Christian", in their way of speaking, means "human being", and this almost proverbial phrase that I have so often heard them repeat may be no more than the expression of a hopeless feeling of inferiority. We're not Christians, we're not human beings; we're not thought of as men but simply as beasts, beasts of burden, or even less than beasts, mere creatures of the wild. (C. Levi 2000a, 11)

The peasants of Lucania, seen as little more than animals, have internalized this judgement in the form of a complex of inferiority towards the "Christians". "Christian" is an anthropological category rather than a religious one – although it is a clear sign of a profoundly secularized mindset that Levi is quick to adopt this way of articulating humanity and civilization as one of the structuring metaphors of the

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7   Eboli is a town located south of Naples, very close with the border with Lucania (present-day Basilicata).

book. At any rate, this label encompasses all the members of Italian society that, differently from the peasants, participate in the state and in power, however marginally, and hence retain their status as human beings. Levi points out that the idea is symptomatic of a more general condition that has further, far-reaching implications:

> Christ never came this far, nor did time, nor the individual soul, nor hope, nor the relation of cause to effect, nor reason nor history. Christ never came, just as the Romans never came, content to garrison the highways without penetrating the mountains and forests, nor the Greeks, who flourished beside the Gulf of Taranto: none of the pioneers of Western civilization brought here his sense of the passage of time, his deification of the State or that ceaseless activity which feeds upon itself. No one has come to this land except as an enemy, a conqueror, or a visitor devoid of understanding. The seasons pass today over the toil of the peasants, just as they did three thousand years before Christ; no message, human or divine, has reached this stubborn poverty. We speak a different language, and here our tongue is incomprehensible. (C. Levi 2000a, 12)

This passage contains, in a nutshell, Levi's theory of the Southern Question, and his view of the fundamentally colonial relationship between the peasants and the (Italian) state. The peasant world, and Lucania in particular, has not been touched by Western civilization – identified with a list of scientific, philosophical, existential, economical, existential concepts and practices that harken back to Greek and Roman antiquity and find a unifying metaphor in Christ's descending. This does not mean that there was never a contact between the two. Such contacts, however, have only resulted in the systematic draining and impoverishment of the peasant civilisation, entrenching it in its misery. The point is not that the peasants have not experienced history, but that it was always imposed on them.

While powerfully introducing Levi's thesis, the preface immediately begs a question: what is Levi's self-perception *vis-à-vis* the catastrophic clash of civilisations that he foregrounds right at the opening of his book? Is Levi suggesting that he too is (or was?) a "visitor devoid of understanding"? It seems unlikely, and no part of the book seems to suggest that Levi wants to present himself in this light. On the other hand he is still clearly – and quite rightly – identifying himself as a part of that civilisation that lives within the borders of reason and history – he speaks of "*our* tongue" when he talks about the West, unequivocally placing himself outside the "eternally patient" (C. Levi 2000a, 11) world of the peasants. His identification with "Christian" civilisation, ironically, seems to be further

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reinforced by one of the very few instances in which Judaism is explicitly nominated – the passage indeed ends by reiterating how Lucania was never touched by Christ's arrival, differently from "the underground hell of Hebrew [moralism]", visited by Christ "in order to break down its doors in time and to seal them up into eternity" (C. Levi 2000a, 12). The sentence, while perhaps providing some grounds to see Levi's view of (traditional/orthodox) Judaism as comparable to the peasant civilisation, seems mostly to argue that at least the form of assimilated Judaism he represents – sealed away from "Hebrew moralism" – *is* integral to Western culture – and hence aligning Levi with "Christian" civilisation. All in all, Levi ambiguously tries to articulate a detachment from the civilisation that he nevertheless calls his own, whose language he cannot help but employ. This is an important point to keep in mind as soon as I discuss the way in which Levi envisions the integration between peasant and "Christian" civilisation.

It is as part of his "arrival scene" that Levi meets the peasants for the first time: almost as soon as he sets foot in Gagliano, he is approached by a group of peasants that, knowing the he is a doctor, beg him to try to save a dying man. One of the peasants, an old man, even tries to kiss Levi's hand. Levi comments that his reaction is to step back and blush, wondering whether the gesture is part of the plea or is rather a feudal homage to a member of an upper class. Levi is ultimately persuaded, but soon realizes that the man is as good as dead. He makes an attempt to reanimate him, but fails, at which point he and the peasants part ways without a word, while the sun sets on Levi's first day in Gagliano. The whole passage is extremely significant for at least three reasons: it highlights Levi's status as a member of the upper classes, but also foregrounds a certain discomfort on Levi's side at being located within the local hierarchy. It is therefore important to establish Levi as an in-between figure. Levi is, moreover, singled out by the peasants as a potentially beneficial member of their community, thanks to his knowledge of the healing arts and his willingness to help. At the same time, his knowledge is immediately tested and proves itself to be lacking. The passage, therefore, dismisses any messianic undertone that may be attached to Levi's status as a doctor. At the same time, it foregrounds a shared experience of death that will become an essential starting point to construct a form of commonality with the peasants.

Immediately afterwards, Levi describes his first meeting with the *signori*, the rural elite of the village. The term deserves some considerations: while "peasants" is a close equivalent to *contadini*, the terminology Levi uses to describe the upper classes translates less smoothly. To talk of the village elite,

Levi most frequently uses the term *signori*. As a term of address, *signore* (singular) means "sir". As a term to designate a social group, however, *signori* is extremely generic. A *signore* can be a high-ranking aristocrat or a small village notable, like the ones Levi meets. Levi's choice – using a fairly generic term – is consistent with the broad dichotomy he establishes between the members of the "Christian" civilisation, who are within the logic of the state, and the peasants, who are not. The English text I am using frequently translates *signori* as "gentry", which is a reasonable solution for a group composed by rural notables. It should be noted, however, that their main occupations are chiefly bureaucratic and administrative, which explain their connection with fascist networks of power – indeed, with any administration that can guarantee their status. That said, in the final part of the book, when Levi talks of the village elites as one of the scourges of the South, he speaks of "middle-class village tyrants" (C. Levi 2000a, 239). The middle-class element is important because it allows Levi to underline that this group, differently from the peasants, cultivates a fundamentally bourgeois adoration of the state.

The first chapters of *Christ* are primarily occupied with the description of this particular group, which immediately tries to co-opt Levi in its petty feuds. They represent, initially, a sort of *cordon sanitaire* preventing Levi from interacting with the peasants. Particularly relevant in this sense is Don Luigino, the *podestà* (the fascist title for mayor). Don Luigino is a self-centred, sadistic and scheming individual, and an enthusiastic supporter of the regime, whose zeal is expressed in tormenting the political prisoners under his jurisdiction and organizing political assemblies. Don Luigino, however, uses some good manners with Levi, partly because he wants to use him in his feuds with his rivals: one of his bitterest enemies, Gibilisco, is also a doctor, and Don Luigino wants Levi to gradually ruin and replace him. The other reason for his good manners is the sheer pleasure he takes from having power on a man from an upper-class background, with whom he can safely satisfy his vanity, forcing Levi into "intellectual" conversations and showing off his "education" from a firmly established position of authority. As Levi comments:

> I realized that the professor was proud to exercise his authority for the first time over a gentleman, a painter, a doctor, a man of some culture. He too was cultivated, he hastened to assure me; he wanted to treat me well because we were of the same class. (C. Levi 2000a, 20)

Levi, by describing himself through Don Luigino's words in free indirect speech, uses the passage to actually position himself *outside* the traditional bonds of class solidarity that such description would entail. By framing the professed similarity suggested by Don Luigino as largely misguided – voiced, as it is, by a character that has just declared himself "the youngest and most Fascist mayor in the province of Matera" (C. Levi 2000a, 20) – Levi creates a strong contrast with the first encounter with the peasants, which intimated at a much more meaningful form of commonality. If Levi is, superficially, more similar in class to the *signori*, theirs is a world that Levi examines, frames as a battleground of endless feuds and obsessive hatreds, and quickly leave behind, turning his ethnographic gaze to the peasants.

Rejecting the world(view) of the *signori* is almost a preliminary condition for engaging the peasants. In the same chapter, right after their first encounter, Don Luigino warns Levi against the local population, claiming that he should not mingle with anybody. A similar advice is soon offered by Don Luigino's uncle, Don Milillo, one of the local doctors. The doctor reminds Levi that the peasants are "good people, but primitive" (C. Levi 2000a, 21), and that since he is a handsome young man he should never accept wine and coffee from a local woman, lest she could serve him a philtre or a love potion. Levi ironically comments that he foolishly disregarded these suggestions, and that during his stay he drank wine and coffee offered by the peasants every day, so he probably ingested a significant amount of these philtres. Instead of harming him, Levi speculates, they possibly managed to grant him some form of arcane insight on the local world: "perhaps in some mysterious way [the philtres] helped me to penetrate that closed world, shrouded in black veils, bloody and earthy, that other world where the peasants live and which no one can enter without a magic key" (C. Levi 2000a, 22). Foregrounding the philtre's alleged role allows Levi to state his interest for, indeed his openness to, the magic, folkloric side of Gagliano. A significant part of his ethnological exploration of Gagliano will involve precisely witches, spells, spirits, myths and popular beliefs, which are a crucial part of the peasants' imaginative world. But, more importantly, Levi's literal acceptance of the philtres signals his acceptance of the world of the peasants *tout court*. At the same time, Levi performs here the first act of the construction of his ethnographic authority, in the sense that he reassures the reader that he, by an almost mystical connection with the peasant world, is a trustworthy guide.

Levi's portraits of the *signori* are arguably more satirical than ethnographic: they privilege caricature over the mythical mode of description – charged with layers of anthropological analysis –

that he saves instead for the peasant characters (Spinazzola 1997, 95). That does not mean that Levi's portraits do not contain valuable insight on the *signori*, especially as regards *their* anthropological imagination. After his chat with Don Luigino and Dr. Milillo, Levi meets for instance Dr. Gibilisco, the other town doctor. Gibilisco's take on the medical profession is quite singular, mixing complete ignorance (not unlike his colleague Milillo) and a ferociously possessive notion of his "patients":

> I soon reached the conclusion that his ignorance was even deeper than that of old Milillo. He knew nothing at all and was talking at random. One thing he did know: the peasants existed merely in order that Gibilisco should visit them and succeed in getting money and food for his visits. […] The science of medicine was to him a privilege or *jus necationis*, a feudal right over the life and death of the peasants, and because his poor patients rebelled against this, he was devoured by a continuous and bestial rage against their tribe. […] But the peasants […] would go neither to the pharmacy nor to the doctor; they did not recognize the feudal right. And malaria, quite rightly, killed them off. (C. Levi 2000a, 23-24)

Gibilisco, who feels neither pity nor sense of duty towards the peasants, to the point he seems to rejoice in their suffering, is certainly a darker figure than the fairly harmless Milillo. Both, however, frame the peasants as sub-humans. Milillo calls them "primitive", Gibilisco thinks he can dispose of their life and their death as a feudal lord, effectively claiming a right on their bodies. It is interesting that these first descriptions of the peasants as a group are voiced by two doctors. Although the two men can hardly be called doctors at all, their views may be taken as a local declination of with more authoritative and influential pseudo-scientific discourses.

In their words it may be possible to find an echo, for instance, of the Lombrosian school of criminal anthropology. Cesare Lombroso, other than an internationally renowned criminologist, represented, alongside his pupils and collaborators, one of the dominant forces of Italian positivist anthropology. While wildly inconsistent in their definition of race and its relationship with environmental factors (Gibson 1998), Lombrosian criminal anthropologists generally rooted the social problems of the South in biological determinism, arguing that Southerners were racially predisposed to crime. Anthropometry was one of the chief tools employed to support these arguments – not unlike the colonial anthropologists active in the British Raj in the same years. The result was a general criminalisation, on racial terms, of the Southerners, but mostly of the rural poor, from which brigands

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chiefly stemmed. It comes as no surprise that Lombroso elaborated many of his ideas about race while he accompanied an anti-brigand expedition (Petraccone 2000, 154). While seemingly far apart, there is a continuity – in terms of sensibility, values and worldview – between these racial and social typologies and the crude vision of the peasants offered by Milillo and Gibilisco: both degrade the peasants at the rank of sub-humans from the vantage point of civilisation, reason and science, to which the two doctors claim to belong, in spite of their ignorance and Gibilisco's bestial ferocity. Levi's ethnography of Gagliano, therefore, is to be seen as a counter-ethnography that opposes this vast continuum of "Christian" anthropological imagining of the peasants, aiming at restoring their moral dignity and cultural specificity. This fundamental move is also what animates Mahasweta's writing on the adivasis, contrasting the de-humanizing colonial imagination of the British and the Hindu mainstream alike.

In spite of his witty remarks about drinking philtres, there is nothing mystical, ultimately, in Levi's relationship with the peasants of Gagliano. In fact, the two fundamental "keys" to open up the peasant world are rather medicine and politics, because they both provide forms of cultural exchange, recognition and solidarity with the peasants. In this sense, Levi's anthropology, based on the search for solidarity with a specific group, is inherently partisan. The term can legitimately be taken at face value, since Levi, who is writing the book during the Nazi occupation, is hence adopting what Sergio D'Amaro calls Resistance-oriented mentality [*mentalità resistenziale*] (D'Amaro 2003, 81). But Levi's anthropology is primarily partisan because it clearly position itself politically, choosing a side within the political conflict that he encounters on the field.

Levi's anthropology matches, in many ways, what Nancy Scheper-Hughes has defined as "militant anthropology", based on an ethnography that is "personally engaged and politically committed" (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 419). Scheper-Hughes, attacking the classical model of the anthropologist as cultural relativist – a politically neutral observer of the events happening on the field – argues instead for a model of the ethnographer as an activist and a witness. While observation is "a passive act which positions the anthropologist as a 'neutral' and 'objective' (i.e., uncommitted) seeing I/eye", witnessing, on the other hand, "is in the active voice, and it positions the anthropologist inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being, one who will 'take sides' and make judgements" (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 419). Being *partisan*, and not simply militant, moreover, has also further implications, as Neelam Srivastava argues: "partisans are characterized by their taking of sides, a commitment to a political cause *that does not come from a filial relationship* to their culture

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or nation but from an affiliative one, a chosen allegiance, as it were" (Srivastava 2018, 5, emphasis mine). This form of affiliative relationship – which could be described as *not* acting as a Gramscian organic intellectual, namely as a spokesperson for one's class – is necessary if the two figures involved are separated by a cultural gap, as it usually happens in an ethnographer encounter. Partisanship, defined in this way, is therefore a stance that a militant ethnographer is very likely to take – and indeed it is fair to say that Scheper-Hughes has also this aspect in mind when she talks of her "militant" anthropology, although she uses the word partisan only once in her article.

I borrow Scheper-Hughes's definition of militant (partisan) anthropology because it seems apt to describe Levi's (as well as Mahasweta's) anthropological imagination. Their whole understanding of the subaltern groups they study is written in a politically charged context, has a fairly transparent political aim, and borders, quite consistently with the biography of the two writers, with activism. The crucial point is not exclusively that Levi and Mahasweta take sides, but that they are explicit and deliberate in their political standing in support of a specific group. The explicitness of their political intent is important to distinguish between actual commitment and the biases that permeate any form of writing, anthropological or otherwise, even when the writers opt for a supposedly detached perspective. Let us consider Stevenson and Kipling. Neither of them is, ultimately, an apolitical writer. But their mode of writing is not explicitly engaged or partisan. For instance, Stevenson's *In the South Seas* is written in a primarily realist, observational and "scientific" mode – although that is, in itself, an ethical and anti-colonial strategy to avoid exoticism and challenge Eurocentrism. Kipling's "The Head of the District", which has profound political implications, forcefully arguing for a strong, authoritarian border governance, is nevertheless justified with a positivist epistemology that is framed as objective and hence politically neutral: it is a simple fact, in the story's universe, that a Bengali cannot rule the savage border tribes and only a firm (British) hand can keep them at bay.

Levi, just like Mahasweta, structures his texts in a way that makes impossible for the reader not to confront his political and ethical judgements, eliciting a political and ethical reaction from the reader. This is one of the cases in which the reader, asked to take a political stance, becomes an active participant in the ethnographic encounter. It must be stressed, however, that Levi's political stance is also fundamentally oppositional. Levi, at least in *Christ*, constructs his ethnographic self, the peasants and their respective encounter in a way that is systematically confrontational and adversarial to the

signori, to fascism and, ultimately, to the state in its traditional incarnations, asking readers to do the same.

Crucial, in this sense, is the chapter in which Levi explains the relationship between the peasants and the state. The chapter starts as a commentary on the frequent assemblies that Don Luigino, especially due to colonial war the regime is waging in Ethiopia, is particularly eager to organize. This prompts Levi to reflect on the political panorama of Gagliano and the various degrees of allegiance to Fascism of his inhabitants. Levi comments that the representatives of the local elite are all members of the Fascist Party, for the simple reason that the party stands for power in the form of the state. No peasant is a party member for the exact same reasons – they do not feel entitled to power, and, most importantly, they perceive the state as a natural calamity, an external, hostile entity that manifest itself only to force them to pay unfair taxes and recruit them for its own wars. Consistently, they treat it with the same resigned indifference reserved to a vicious storm:

> To the peasants the State is more distant than heaven and far more of a scourge, because it is always against them. Its political tags and platforms and, indeed, the whole structure of it do not matter. The peasants do not understand them because they are couched in a different language from their own, and there is no reason why they should ever care to understand them. Their only defence against the State and the propaganda of the State is resignation, the same gloomy resignation that bows their shoulders under the scourges of nature (C. Levi 2000a, 78)

The peasants, in other words, see the State as a form of destiny, yet another natural-magical force that rule over their life.

The chapter significantly ends with a few peasants, gathered in the town square by Don Luigino and forced to listen to fascist propaganda on the radio. The speech, Levi comments, comes from "a land of ease and progress, which had forgotten the existence of death and now called it up as a joke, with the frivolity of an unbeliever" (C. Levi 2000a, 80). It is clear that, in Levi's view, the greater illusion is not thinking that interconnections of arcane nature control humans life – as the peasants are, to an extent, justified in doing – but believing in the omnipotence of the state as a machine of infinite progress and wealth that can overcome death, or worse, distribute it to others at will, as it is happening in Africa.

The theme of war is taken up again in another major passage. In spite of Don Luigino's propaganda in favour of the colonial enterprise, the peasants, again, treat the war preparations with

scepticism and resignation – they know the war is an imposition from the "fellows in Rome" (C. Levi 2000a, 131). The war, like the state, is yet another natural catastrophe, and Levi claims that it is not registered as a historical event. Indeed, Levi claims that peasants are indifferent to historical memory, because history is the handmaiden of the state, their enemy. The only "historical" narrative that they hold dear is that of brigandage, which, however, is preserved in their hearts and minds in the form of a myth, rather than as a "proper" history. The actual historical implications and circumstances of brigandage does not concern them, but they simply remember it – with passion but without indulging in any rhetoric of heroism – as a desperate revolt against the state.

Post-unitary brigandage, which exploded after 1861, was in itself a very heterogeneous phenomenon. It was partially genuine social revolt from below, rooted in pre-existing social conflicts but aggravated by the new administrative configuration. It was partially the expression of the schemes of local powers that controlled or were involved in the criminal networks. Finally, it was partially supported by former army officials of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies – the main power in the South before the unification – engaged in anti-"Italian" guerrilla. It is even plausible to read it as a proper civil war, considering the amount of troops that the newly unified Kingdom of Italy sent to fight in the South, as well as the number of victims involved in the brutal repression that followed (Marmo 2016, 602–3). Regardless of the interpretation, brigandage is also a moment that legitimately reveals the presence of a very strong colonial tendency in post-unitary North-South relations, most notably in the status of disposable, second-class citizens attached to the Southern poor. The repression of brigandage took the shape of a civilising mission: a moralising enterprise through brute force, which cast the South in an explicitly subordinate role (Petraccone 2000, 62–65). The authorities focused on a criminal interpretation of brigandage, bypassing its social element (Graaf-Bartalesi 2011, 11). This, as I discussed through Kipling's "The Head of the District", is a common pattern of a counterinsurgent anthropological imagination, which is unable to see the insurgents as people, but only as a problem to be solved – a dehumanization that is helped by colonial anthropological categories (brought to to their extreme logical development), as well as by the employment of its own specific language (R. Guha 1988).

This is crucial because Levi has no real sympathy for brigandage itself – as a social revolt, he sees it as anarchic, violent and exclusively (self-)destructive; and as a civil war, he sees it as colluded with local power networks, factionalism and reactionary groups. He values, however, the collective

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memory that the peasants have of it, siding with an "insurgent" rather than "counterinsurgent" imagination. Levi claims that to narrate the story of the peasants one should conceive "a history outside the framework of time, confining itself to that which is changeless and eternal, in other words, a mythology" (C. Levi 2000a, 138). But for Levi a myth is "the expression of a particular moral world, referred to the feeling that is its condition" (C. Levi 1948, 68). As such, the mythology of brigandage turns out to be the embedded moral memento of the elementary sense of justice that the peasant civilization possesses – a latent impulse to resist to the radical dehumanization it has been subjected to. As Levi claims: "Every revolt on the part of the peasants springs out of an elementary desire for justice deep at the dark bottom of their hearts" (C. Levi 2000a, 139-140). The challenge is finding a way to transform the death-wish that Levi sees in brigandage into freedom, solidarity and meaning, and possibly political action.

It is important to note here an important divergence from Gramsci – a crucial influence for Levi in his vision of the peasant as victims of internal colonialism. It is specifically the well-known prison notebook 25, where Gramsci discusses the idea of subaltern history, that deserves comparative attention. Levi's vision of brigandage as a violent outburst that ultimately does not change the status quo of the peasants may possibly echo Gramsci's idea that "subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up", and that "only 'permanent' victory breaks their subordination" (Gramsci 1971, 55).Yet for Gramsci the history of the subaltern groups should consist precisely in tracking down, from fragmentary evidence, the gradual phases that a specific subaltern group experiences before reaching autonomy. This means considering the impact, on the subalterns' consciousness, of events that, *in themselves*, does not result in a permanent victory – for instance, a failed uprising like brigandage. On the other hand, Levi's idea of subaltern history as a mythology seems to dismiss altogether the Gramscian task of reconstructing a factual, material history of the peasants, with the obvious risk of ignoring how the peasant's oppression, however centuries-old and persistent, may change its historical configurations over time.

Most importantly, at least in this phase, Levi seems to deny any possibility that the peasant self-awareness may have been changed by – some, not necessarily all – political and historical events. Within Levi's anthropological imagination, the peasants' perception of themselves is fundamentally static and indifferent to specific material changes or events. It is only in the post-war period that Levi will recognize a chance for the peasants to change their perception of themselves, indeed their whole

worldview. This is also a major difference with Mahasweta that I address later in the chapter. While she too sometimes adopts a static vision of the adivasis, relying on a problematic notion of indigeneity, the protagonists of her fiction are generally able to assimilate historical events, most notably as part of a changing repertoire of stories and songs. This repertoire, while being made up of mythical rather than historiographical narratives, constantly "updates" the adivasis' self-awareness and identity. This is why Mahasweta thinks that exploring the history of the individual peasant and adivasi uprisings is inherently valuable, carrying out a much more "Gramscian" alternative history than Levi's "history outside the framework of time", where *any* uprising is, for the peasants, a reiteration of the same unchanging moral myth. It is also worth mentioning that the idea that different civilizations may diverge in their conception of time is relevant also for the Jews, whose sense of time and history is perceived as different from that of the secular (Christian) mainstream (see Goldberg 2016). It is intriguing that Levi is systematically using categories that would allow him to connect Jews and peasants in their difference to the "Christian" civilization – but never actually makes the connection.

Although Levi is a far cry from romanticizing the "anarchism" of the peasants and their alienness to history, the two passages on the state and on brigandage have nevertheless tremendous moral and political importance in Levi's work, especially if read in the context of Levi's philosophical essay *Fear of Freedom*. This is the text where, as Italo Calvino famously commented, Levi unfolds its general worldview and the lines of its reinterpretation of history (Calvino 2010, ix). It is a book, that, in the form of a philosophical-anthropological reflection, ultimately suggests, in an allusive but fairly transparent way, a theory of Nazism. To do so, it constructs a theory of the state, of religion, of freedom and art that is highly valuable to understand the terms of his engagement with the peasants of Gagliano.

In *Fear of Freedom*, Levi sees religion as an attempt to keep at bay the sense of "the sacred" – a paralysing, primordial state, where no individual consciousness is possible. The sacred is, however, a part of every man, and is also the principle of creativity and freedom. Levi calls religion the attempt to exorcise the sense of the sacred through a sacrifice – bringing the sacred outside of ourselves and fixing it in symbols and rituals, making it understandable. This allows individuals to exist – it is hence a partial freedom – but enslaves them to idols, the fixed forms that religion turns the sacred into. The state can be one of those idols, created to exorcise the fear of a peculiar form of the sacred – the mass,

the indistinct human matter that represents in itself the denial of relationship between individuals, while containing the potential for all relationships.

By surrendering themselves to the state-idol, human beings are granted certitude, but at the price of freedom, and are forced to perform perpetual acts of alienation – sacrifices – to keep the idol alive: sacrifices of their own individual autonomy; sacrifices of those social groups that are framed as foreigners; and the ultimate sacrifice, the collective holocaust of war. Ironically, the enslavement to the state prevents personal expression or freedom, casting individuals in a similar condition to the first, paralyzing encounter with the sacred. Peace and creativity – opposed to enslavement, war, and certitude – are only possible when human beings react to the sacred not by enslaving themselves to idols, but by finding a way to retain their individuality within a free relation with otherness, constructing real human relations. In social terms, this means that "the divinization of the state (and the servitude that results from it) will last until the end of social infancy, until each man, peering inside himself, won't find, in his own complexity, the state in its entirety, and, in his freedom, its necessity" (C. Levi 1948, 23).

With this in mind, it is possible to understand the full implications of the relationship between the peasants and the state. The *signori* – but by extension all the supporters of the fascist party – have given up to their freedom in exchange for certainties, turning the state into an idol. They maintain this idol through human sacrifices – the peasants and the targets of colonial violence being among the most prominent victims of this process. Conversely, the peasants are forced into a state of anarchy and lack of freedom, resigned to suffer destiny in its many forms, including the state. They are unable to express themselves, and are cut off from the state and history. Yet in this state of anarchy – so similar, in many respects, to idea of the sacred and the mass – Levi sees the possibility to construct real human relationships, to construct an alternative idea of the state that does not silence the individuals but allows their free and creative expression within a greater collectivity.

Levi witnesses – in Scheper-Hughes's sense – the capacity of the peasants to establish various kinds of genuine relationship of solidarity. There is, first of all, a form of solidarity connected to the shared experience of the tyranny of the state. The peasants are, in a sense, apolitical, but they harbour a natural suspicion of everything that comes from the state and an instinctive sympathy for everything that opposes it. This includes the political prisoners of the fascist regime, who naturally gain their favour:

> [The peasants] were not concerned with the views of the political prisoners who were in compulsory residence among them, or with the motives of their coming. They look at them kindly, and treated them like brothers because they too are, for some inexplicable reason, were victims of [the same] fate. (C. Levi 2000a, 78)

In the peasants' detachment from the state, Levi finds a class that is utterly immune to Fascism as an ideological phenomenon or to any form of state-worshipping, giving instead primacy to a powerful sense of brotherhood. Levi's ethnographic encounter with the peasants, therefore, is framed within a pre-political form of solidarity – pre-political in the sense that it has a rather instinctual character and is focused on elemental values like fellow-feeling in the face of oppression, irrespective of ideology. In spite of this unarticulated character, such expression of solidarity, in the context of a totalitarian state, represent the basis of a form of resistance. Levi's ethnography of the peasants contains, more or less explicitly, an anthropology of antifascism.

Another form of solidarity that Levi explores takes a distinctively anti-colonial tone. Documenting the reactions to the Ethiopian war, Levi juxtaposes the fanatical enthusiasm of the "Christians" throughout Italy to the silent scepticism of the peasants in Gagliano:

> It seemed that school children and their teachers, Fascist Scouts, Red Cross ladies, the widows and mothers of Milanese veterans, women of fashion in Florence, grocers, shopkeepers, pensioners, journalists, policemen, and government employees in Rome, in short, all those generally grouped together under the name of "Italian people", were swept off their feet by a wave of glory and enthusiasm. […] The peasants were quieter, sadder, and more dour than usual. They had no faith in a promised land which had first to be taken away from those to whom it belonged; instinct told them that this was wrong and could only bring ill luck. (C. Levi 2000a, 131)

Levi registers, in one stroke, the fervour of the state idolatry, and the elementary desire for justice that leads the peasants to the conclusion that it is wrong to rob people of their land. The peasants, therefore, hold the seeds for a revolution that is not so much political – although Levi believes, as I discuss later, that they *must* be involved into a political project – but rather moral. They harbour a respect for justice and humanity that represents the spiritual basis of both antifascism and anticolonialism. What arguably

lies behind this spiritual disposition is the peasants' knowledge of death. The fact that the peasants are sent to war at the service of the State is evoked, at some point, with words that reflect precisely a sort of bleak cosmopolitanism based on death: forced to obey to the commands of the other, stronger civilization, the peasants "must march out to die for it, today in Abyssinia, as yesterday on the Isonzo and the Piave and for centuries past *in every corner of the globe*, behind one bright flag or another" (C. Levi 2000a, 134, emphasis mine). It is precisely the "humbling contact with death" (Ward 1996, 164) that Levi must learn throughout his stay in Gagliano, but particularly through his medical practice.

Practising medicine among the peasants is not simply an occupation: it is a transformative exercise that allow Levi to learn a new ethos from the peasants, a new-founded awareness of death. Therefore his medicine is no miraculous gift from modernity, although the peasants are quick to notice how Levi's methods are much more effective than those of the incompetent local doctors. It is the medium for an exchange of knowledge – technical and existential – between Levi and the peasants. It becomes, moreover, the single act of political resistance Levi can undertake during his stay: at some point, possibly due to the intervention of Dr. Gibilisco, Levi is forbidden from the authorities to attend to his patients. Levi's choice to disregard the prohibition, however, charges his practice with tangible political significance, turning it into the major catalyst of Levi's process of transformation and learning.

Indeed, one of the book's central epiphanies comes precisely when, almost in a reprise of the first encounter with the peasants, Levi has to travel to a nearby village to attend to a severely ill patient, a gesture that has been authorized by Don Luigino only unofficially, belatedly and grudgingly. The man is, once again, beyond salvation, but differently from the first time, when the sudden arrival of death had left Levi bewildered, this time he is able to transform a sense of shared pain in a sense of belonging and peace:

Death was in the house: I loved these peasants, I felt their sorrow and the humiliation of my impotence. Why then such a great peace was falling on me? I felt like I was detached from anything, from anywhere, a far cry from any determination, lost outside time, in an infinite elsewhere. I felt veiled, hidden like a sprout under the bark of the tree: I listened to the night and felt like I was, all of a sudden, in the very heart of the world. An immense happiness, never felt before, was in me, and filled me completely, along with the flowing sense of an infinite plenitude. (C. Levi 2000a, 214)

Levi's happiness in the face of death may be read as an inappropriate, even aestheticizing reaction towards the situation he is experiencing. Yet peace and happiness are arguably connected to the impression that, albeit in a limited fashion, within the narrow area of his medical practice, Levi can talk a language of life and death that the peasants also share, differently from the hollow propaganda of the state. Speaking this language allows him, as an individual, to be of service to a community. It transforms his medical practice into an act that is, from a cultural point of view, organically integrated in the life of the peasants. This moment of happiness is to be counted among what Levi, in *Fear of Freedom,* defines as "one of the few living moments", generated by the instances in which "the two opposite processes of differentiation and undifferentiation find a mediating point" (C. Levi 1948, 19) – when an isolated self finds a communication point with the mass, without losing himself or herself in the process. Practising medicine in Gagliano allows Levi to do that – it is a service that does not override difference, in a romantic union with the peasants, but allows a communication point between the two. In this sense his fieldwork results in a participated, organic integration with the peasants. It is the opposite of medicine as feudal right.

However, the ban is not just the catalyst for Levi's epiphany, but also provides the occasion to explore how the peasants have the potential to express themselves politically and creatively. After the peasants hear that the man has died, and that Levi was allowed to attend to him only very late, they are outraged. Their first reaction is violence, morally justified by the sub-human treatment they receive: " 'We're dogs' they said to me, 'and in Rome they want us to die like dogs. One Christian soul took pity on us, and now they want to take him away. We'll burn the town hall and kill the mayor'" (C. Levi 2000a, 217). This rebirth of the "old spirit of the brigands" (C. Levi 2000a, 217), which Levi manages to quell, is soon replaced with an attempt to claim their rights through legal means, a petition. But as Levi warns them that is unlikely that a petition should have any effect, the peasants turn to art, setting up an improvised play. In the play a good and an evil doctor fight for the body and soul of a peasant. The evil doctor, however, has the support of the State, and the poor man is doomed:

> The two medical men, one white and one black, representing the spirits of good and evil, fought like an angel and a devil over the sick man on the stretcher, exchanging volleys of witty and bitter words. The angel seemed about to bear away the victory when suddenly an emissary from Rome, with a fierce and monstrous face, appeared on the scene and chased him away. The man in black

[...] was left master of the situation. Pulling a knife out of a bag, he began to operate. He pretended to cut through the sick man's clothing and with a rapid motion of his hand drew out of the wound a pig's bladder which was hidden there. Then he turned triumphantly toward the chorus, which was murmuring words of horror and indignation, brandished the bladder and shouted: "Here is his heart!" He pierced the heart with a big needle until blood spurted out, while the mother and the chorus began to intone a dirge, and the drama came to an end. (C. Levi 2000a, 219-220)

The play summarizes the worldview of the peasants in relation to the state, medicine and the *signori.* It is worth noting the profound biopolitical undertone of the peasant's perspective: the dehumanization of the peasants, the tyranny of the state, results into an effective control over their bodies, over their life. The state is literally after the peasants' hearts, their lack of understanding for the peasant's worldview translates not just in epistemological, but in concrete physical violence and exploitation. Moreover, the play represents a spontaneous example of peasant creativity, of peasant art – an act of freedom that opposes the idolatry of the state. The play allows Levi to showcase a potential for creative responses within peasant civilisation that anticipates the political awakening of the peasant movement in *Words are Stones* – and like in the Sicilian travelogue, the new solution replaces the traditional response of peasant civilisation: brigandage.

It is to unearth this core of elementary justice, awareness of death, human solidarity and potential for creativity that Levi, as a fundamental epistemological move in his ethnographic encounter with the peasants, attempts to find an integration between the peasant civilisation and his own. This emerges explicitly in the form of a political programme in one of the most famous passages of the book. In order to participate to a funeral, Levi briefly returns to Turin and discusses his experiences with a number of people. Fresh from fieldwork and profoundly changed by the experience, he is baffled at the level of abstraction of his fellow citizens' approaches to the Southern Question: none of the solutions suggested by the people he encounters, regardless of their political orientation, is connected to the real life of the peasants. Levi, in pages that will attract the outrage of a wide range of political formations, rejects all the traditional forms of state as viable solutions of the Southern Question, be they fascist, liberal or socialist, or any other form "in which the middle-class bureaucracy still survives" (C. Levi 2000a, 237) – although he is adamant that it is under fascism that the plight of the peasants has reached its absolute

peak. Levi argues that "we can bridge the abyss only when we succeed in creating a government in which the peasants feel they have some share" (C. Levi 2000a, 238).

Levi's view is connected to his peculiar form of antifascism that, after Gobetti, sees in fascism the expression of a persistent tendency in Italian society that can only be uprooted through a radical cultural, moral and political change. An essential part of this process is breaking the oppression of the middle-class notables that rule the rural towns, defeating the radical misery that afflicts the peasants and finally finding a way to organically integrate them within the state. As Levi argues, "unless there is a peasant revolution we shall never have a true Italian revolution, for the two are identical" (C. Levi 2000a, 239). The oppression of the peasants, in other words, diminishes also the oppressors from a moral and civil point of view – to the point they allow themselves to surrender to fascism – or, as he effectively puts it: "Just as long as Rome rules over Matera, Matera will be lawless and despairing, and Rome despairing and tyrannical" (C. Levi 2000a, 238). It is worth noting that this exact idea ends Mahasweta's "Pterodactyl", stressing the gigantic loss that the destruction of the adivasi culture signify *for the Indian mainstream*.

Levi suggests a specific way out: local autonomy, which in the case of the peasants would mean the formation of autonomous rural communities. Only through the political autonomy of every social body that makes up the state it is possible to reconstruct the state together with the idea of the individual at its core:

> We must rebuild the foundations of our concept of the State with the concept of the individual, which is its basis. For the juridical and abstract concept of the individual we must substitute a new concept, more expressive of reality, one that will do away with the now unbridgeable gulf between the individual and the State. The individual is not a separate unit, but a link, a meeting place of relationships of every kind. This concept of relationship, without which the individual has no life, is at the same time the basis of the State. The individual and the State coincide in theory and they must be made to coincide in practice as well, if they are to survive.
>
> This reversal of the concept of political life, which is gradually and unconsciously ripening among us, *is implicit in the peasant civilization*. (C. Levi 2000a, 240, emphasis mine)

The idea of the individual – and the state – as a nexus of relationships clearly echoes the philosophical paradigm of *Fear of Freedom*, where the only individuals that are free are those who fully embrace

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relationality without fear of losing themselves, and the only free state is the one that grants to the individuals their full autonomy. It is the peasant civilisation that embodies this idea, at least at an implicit, potential level.

It is crucial to notice that Levi's political suggestions are framed within a national context, which is particularly understandable considering the specific kind of Resistance background that surrounds the writing of *Christ*. Levi, at the time he is writing the book, was a member of the Action Party, a liberal-socialist political formation active from 1942 to 1946. Inspired ideologically, among others, by Gobetti, the Action Party, in the immediate postwar era, was one of the most uncompromising political forces in terms of opposing and refusing to accommodate any residual fascist presence in the new political panorama – which was one of the reasons for its short life. Levi and the Actionists, insisting of radically renovating postwar Italy, tended to consider the Resistance as a civil war, hence a radical point of crisis of the idea of Italy that called for a rethinking of the nation (Ward 1996, 16–22).

Yet what are the implications of this focus on the nation for Levi's anthropological understanding of the peasants? Levi's anthropological imagination, being a national one, sees the peasants as denied, but rightful, citizens of the Italian nation-state. As much as he values peasant civilisation in its own terms, and as much as he is sceptical about history as a narrative of accumulative progress, and as much as he believes, at least at this phase, that the two civilisation are fundamentally alien from each other, he also believes in solutions that revolve around the nation as a unifying element. Autonomy is not, crucially, separation from national history, but rather re-integration in it. Levi's ultimate political aim is allowing the peasants to participate to the nation-state and history in their own terms, although admittedly reaching this objective would also change the very nature of the state and accommodating non-teleological visions of history. The fact that Levi is not exclusively concerned with preserving "traditional" cultural identities as isolated, pristine entities may be corroborated by the vision he likely adopts towards Jewish identity in Italy. Perhaps he is even less confrontational in this respect than he is regarding the peasants, since he makes no effort, in his definition of the new nation, to carve a space for a cultural specificity like the Jewish one in the same way he does for the peasant civilization. The fact that he, as a Jew, is inherently secular – and most importantly *at ease* with this configuration of his identity – may explains his lack of concern for the autonomous status of this particular subaltern culture.

The importance, for Levi, of linking the peasants to a national project is connected to at least two reasons. The first reason is political pragmatism: Levi thinks that the nation is the fundamental terrain on which the rights of the peasants – indeed their autonomy – can be better protected. Timothy Brennan's definition of the nation as a manageable community may be useful here. Brennan argues that "nations are 'manageable' in both directions. They allow the state to manage the subalterns and the subalterns to petition the state, with a rhetoric of the 'popular' that appeals to a shared cultural identity" (Brennan 2001, 83). The nation-state, in this sense, while it can be a source of oppressive governance modes, can also can also be made accountable for his citizens – provided it is, at least nominally, democratic. In spite of the civilizational difference between peasants and "Christians", the best hope for the peasants, for Levi, lays in an integrated autonomy *within* a democratic Italian nation-state.

This brings us to the second point, which is more specifically anthropological. When Levi argues that the new sense of the individual and the state is *implicit* in the peasant civilization, he provides us with a fundamental key to grasp his anthropological understanding of the peasants. The peasants harbour the key to a spiritual, intellectual and moral rebirth of Italy. But their civilisation is not able to articulate these values in a coherent political and moral project that can act within the temporality of the present. It is crucial to remember the fundamentally negative view that Levi holds about brigandage as a form of social protest – this form of spontaneous insurgency is, for him, basically a violent, extreme outburst that equals to a death-wish. Peasants can only return to history – for the benefit of *all* Italy – if they are integrated within a national context.

To be fair, Levi sees this inability to act in the present – expressed in their patience and resignation – as the result of a history of domination rather and not as determined by any inherent cultural (let alone racial) trait. Yet, Levi is by no means a primitivist, he sees peasant culture as tragically *forced* into a state of anarchy, of timelessness. As he argues, the peasants must be drawn away "from their inevitable anarchy and indifference", but "the South [cannot] solve its difficulties with its own efforts alone. […] All of Italy must join in and, in order to do so, must be renewed from top to bottom" (C. Levi 2000a, 240). Levi never suggests that the peasant civilisation, in itself, is the solution. The solidarity that the peasants can offer is, after all, a "passive brotherliness" (C. Levi 2000a, 78), the creative outburst of the play is a "poetical release of their feelings" (C. Levi 2000a, 222) – both are somehow instinctual reactions, spontaneous but fleeting, because the peasants, in the historical conditions enforced on them, are not capable of persistent and fully conscious political mobilisation.

Only a peasant civilisation integrated with modernity through local autonomy can solve this conundrum.

This premise allows us to make some further considerations on Levi as an ethnographer-figure in *Christ*, particularly on how he is, I believe, a far cry from any temptation of "going native". To do so, we can turn to Levi's treatment of the the peasants' magical conception of the world. One of the crucial anthropological insights that Levi provides about the peasant subjectivity is that their vision of the world is dominated by obscure forces, saturated in divine power and multiple, seemingly contradictory meanings, and trapped in webs of reciprocal influences – a view that contrasts powerfully with the univocal meanings of reason, religion and (teleological, progressive) history:

> To the peasants everything has a double meaning. [...] People, trees, animals, even objects and words have a double life. Only reason, religion, and history have clear-cut meanings. But our feeling for life itself, for art, language, and love is complex, infinitely so. And in the peasants' world there is no room for reason, religion, and history. There is no room for religion, because to them everything participates in divinity, everything is actually, not merely symbolically, divine: […] everything is bound up in natural magic. (C. Levi 2000a, 115)

In his formulation of the peasants' worldview, Levi echoes in many ways Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's theory of prelogism. Lévy-Bruhl is, indeed, alongside Frazer, one of the main anthropological influences on Levi's writing and thought (Bronzino 1996, 48). His conception of primitive mentality – in opposition to evolutionist thought – sees it not as "a rudimentary form of our own" but instead as "normal under the conditions in which it is employed, [...] complex and developed in its own way" (Lévy-Bruhl 1923, 33). Lévy-Bruhl defines the primitive mentality as prelogical, meaning that it not (as) affected by the principle of non-contradiction – it "admits the simultaneity of data which cannot be coexistent either in time or space with us." (Lévy-Bruhl 1923, 105). The primitives, surrounded by "the presence and agency of powers which are invisible and inaccessible to the senses" (Lévy-Bruhl 1923, 60), live in a state of emotional participation with the universe, and their existence is contiguous with supernatural forces.

From Lévy-Bruhl, Levi clearly takes the idea that peasant "mentality" is to be seen as fully autonomous from a "rational" way of thinking; that it embeds the peasants' life within a world in which

natural and supernatural overlap; and that it has at its core the acceptance of a multiplicity of seemingly contradictory phenomena. As an example of this latter point, Levi mentions the cow-woman, whose mother is said to be a cow, but that nevertheless has a human mother as well. As Levi comments, "No one saw any contradiction in this dual birth, and the woman herself, whom I knew personally, lived quietly and happily, like both her mothers, for all her animal heredity" (C. Levi 2000a, 112). Levi is not dismissing this way of seeing the world, indeed it explicitly states it is fundamentally similar to the principles of multiplicity that regulate life, art, language and love – and hence profoundly valuable. But is this enough to say that he effectively *rejects* anything that has a clear-cut meaning – be it reason, religion of history? I would be more inclined to see that Levi would rather opt for an integration of the infinite multiplicity of meaning precisely with a worldview that *is* capable of clear-cut meanings. In other words, Levi is not unreservedly praising prelogism, but rather believes that it may be usefully integrated precisely with categories such as reason and history.

This attempt at integration involves a complex process of mediation whose success varies considerably from encounter to encounter. When he is confronted with the magical remedies that the peasant traditionally adopt, for instance, Levi sees no harm in respecting them and think they possess a significant psychological value for the peasants. The peasants, besides, facilitate this integration by actively supporting and valuing "Christian" medicine (if done properly). This is, therefore, an example of a fairly successful integration. In several instances, Levi is considerably less enthusiastic of his immersion in this prelogical world of magic forces. In a brief passage, for instance, Levi, after being taught at length of the presence of natural magic by his witch-servant Giulia, reacts with utter exasperation:

> The days went by with the most dismal monotony, in this deathlike existence, where there was neither time, nor love, nor liberty. One living presence would have been more real to me than the company of infinite numbers of bodiless spirits, constantly staring at me and following me about: the continual magic of animals and things weighed upon me with a funereal enchantment, but the only way to be free of them was to possess a magic even stronger. (C. Levi 2000a, 153)

The peasants' world is embedded in a network of influences, ranging from the smallest spirit to the distant and threatening presence of the state. There is no freedom, therefore, in this world, no act of creation that can definitely break free from this cycle of influences.

In order to explore the limits of Levi's anthropological imagination, Giulia the witch is an important point of reference, for she represents both one of the most powerful and insightful portraits of *Christ* and the protagonist of one of the most problematic passages of book. Giulia can be considered, in many ways, Levi's privileged informer in Gagliano. As a witch – an expert in sorcery and local folklore – she teaches to Levi everything she knows about popular magic, to the point that, when the ban strikes and Levi can no longer work as a doctor officially, she suggests that Levi should work as a sorcerer instead. Giulia is one of the most fully flashed-out and memorable characters of the book, and represent Levi's most concrete link with peasant culture. Her portrait, fully embracing the mythical mode of anthropological representation that Levi uses for peasant figures, merges animal features and a sense of the archaic into a powerful anthropological profile:

> Giulia was a tall and shapely woman with a waist as slender as that of an amphora between her well-developed chest and hips. In her youth she must have had a solemn and barbaric beauty. Her face was wrinkled with age and yellowed by malaria, but there were traces of former charm in its sharp, straight lines, like those of a classical temple which has lost the marbles that adorned it but kept its shape and proportions. A small head, in the shape of a lengthened oval, covered with a veil, rose above her impressively large and erect body. Her forehead was straight and high, half hidden by a lock of smooth black hair; her almond-shaped, opaque, black eyes had whites with blue and brown veins In them like those of dogs. Her nose was thin and long, slightly hooked; her wide mouth with thin, pale lips, somewhat turned down at the corners in bitterness, opened when she laughed, over powerful, sparkling, wolflike teeth. Her face as a whole had a strongly archaic character, not classical in the Greek or Roman sense, but stemming from an antiquity more mysterious and more cruel which had sprung always from the same ground, and which was unrelated to man, but linked with the soil and its everlasting animal deities. There were mingled in it cold sensuality, hidden irony, natural cruelty, impenetrable ill humor and an immense passive power, all these bound together in a stern, intelligent and malicious expression. In billowing veils and a wide, short skirt, firmly planted on legs as long and sturdy as the trunks of trees, her large

body moved slowly and with harmony and balance, bearing proudly and erectly on its monumental and maternal base the small, black head of a serpent. (C. Levi 2000a, 104-105)

Giulia literally embodies peasant civilisation as Levi sees it – especially in her timelessness, her archaic nature and alien character. Her description is typical in Levi's use of an animal vocabulary, which is, in itself, somehow problematic. As Roberto Derobertis argues, Levi systematically "[uses] metaphors, analogies, and similes related to the semantic field of animals" (Derobertis 2012, 162), especially in relation to women and children. This is ironic, considering that in the very first pages of *Christ* Levi laments, through the voice of the peasants, that they are being regarded "not as men but simply as beasts, beasts of burden, or even less than beasts, mere creatures of the wild". There is no doubt that Levi uses these animal images independently of any connotation of value, but the fact that Levi relies on the semantic field of animality as a shorthand for cultural difference may indicate that, while he may have managed to establish a relationship of solidarity with the peasants, his language has not. It is ultimately accommodating, in this respect, towards an urban perspective that would find such animal connotations and juxtapositions consistent with its expectations.

One passage, moreover, is crucial if our aim is to pinpoint Levi's limits in reaching out towards the peasants. At one point, Levi decides do a portrait of Giulia. The witch is in all respects a loyal and obedient servant, to the extent that she makes it clear that she is ready to have sex with Levi should he ever desire it. However, she stubbornly refuses to sit for a portrait. The reason for Giulia's unwillingness is connected to her belief that, as Levi puts it:

> A portrait subtracts something to the person who is being portrayed, an image: and, due to this subtraction, the painter acquire absolute power on the person who has sat for him. This in the unwitting reason why many people are repelled by the idea of being photographed. [Giulia], who lived in in the world of magic, was afraid of my painting [...] due to the influence and power I could have exercise on her by extracting an image from her. (C. Levi 2000a, 150-151)

This is consistent with the idea that the peasants interpret everything in terms of reciprocal influences and magical relations of power and dominance. Levi, well-aware of this, opts for a drastic solution. The passage that follows is remarkably disturbing, especially coming from the usually benevolent voice of Levi:

I understood that, to win this fear of magical nature, I should employ a magic that was stronger than fear; and this had to be a direct and superior power, namely violence. I threatened, therefore, to beat her and made as if to do so; in fact I actually started, without too much difficulty, as her arms were no stronger than mine. As soon as she saw my raised hand and felt the first blow, Giulia's face filled with joy and she smiled beatifically, showing the full array of her wolf-like teeth. Just as I had imagined, she knew no greater happiness than that of being dominated by an absolute power. (C. Levi 2000a, 151)

The passage is not only disturbing because Levi basically admits to have beaten her servant to force her to sit for a portrait, but because of the suspicious overlapping between Levi's theory of peasant passivity and the course of action he enforces. The quick confirmation of his theory, precisely when Levi needs it to justify his actions, suggests that his interpretation is, at least in this passage, culpably biased. If Levi is actually offering a genuine insight into Giulia's mind, he is at the very least guilty of abusing of its ethnographic knowledge to a very selfish end. Indeed, what is problematic is not only the use of violence itself, but the fact the fact that Levi's aim is ultimately to force Giulia to do something she is intimately opposed to. Yet it seems that in this case, with his painting at stake, Levi is willing to treat Giulia's beliefs as mere "superstition" that can – and perhaps should – be dismissed, circumvented or, even better, exploited to reach a higher end. This is a profoundly colonial mechanism, based on an acquaintance with local knowledge that is then manipulated for practical ends. It is ultimately, as Levi himself admits, an act of sheer dominance. Are we supposed to understand, from this passage, that the peasants' desire of being dominated extends also to the influence of the state, which is, after all, an absolute power in their view?

It is also particularly interesting that Levi is willing to compromise on the ethos that normally guides his encounter with the peasants in an instance involving a literal act of objectification. The gendered aspect of the passage moreover, cannot be overlooked. The fact that the passage is preceded by Levi's refusal of Giulia's advances necessarily leads to an interpretation in that direction. It is indeed puzzling that Levi's rejection of Giulia's sexual offer – which is, according to the narrative, made in a fairly spontaneous way – should be immediately juxtaposed by a moment of coercion and violence, both physical and epistemic. Levi seems to judge both episodes strictly within the cultural perspective of his own moral code – it is obviously wrong to make use of a superior social standing to

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elicit sexual favours; at the same time, there is nothing wrong with making a painting. Both positions happily dismiss Giulia's perspective.

This passage is perhaps the clearest indication that, while Levi can only propose a project of political and spiritual integration by displacing and downplaying class, gender and cultural differences, they remain as a latent background in his narrative. The stylistic tool of this displacement is what I call, from the perspective of ethnographic authority, monologic subjectivism. Gigliola De Donato rightfully stresses how Levi manages to combine a documentary impulse that grounds his tale in neorealist referentiality with a high degree of subjectivity: Levi's peasant portraits, with their capacity to attach multiple layers of symbolical meanings to the various characters, are an example of this stylistic solution (De Donato 2003, 44–45). I believe this style is a double-edged sword. It allows Levi to represent an organic, holistic portrait of a radically different cultural world that is accessible because it is mediated by Levi's subjectivity. This is, moreover, an effective mode to write a work of militant anthropology that is profoundly concerned with the establishment of a political thesis. On the other hand, it is a fundamentally monological mode of ethnographic authority that creates a fairly self-enclosed, self-referential world, that offers little possibilities beside its overarching horizon of interpretation.

3.2.3. *Words are Stones* and *All the Honey is Finished*: Peasant Political Consciousness and Coexistence of the Times

In the following sections I want to explore three moments of Levi's production following the publication of *Christ stopped at Eboli* – the travelogues *Words are Stones* (1955) and *All the Honey is Finished* (1964), as well as Levi's collection of reportages on India (1957). These three pieces of travel writing allows us to observe how Levi's anthropological imagination emerged organically from his first book but also evolved in significantly different directions. Evolution is perhaps a misleading term, in the sense that Levi's work is, in many ways, remarkably cohesive from a stylistic and philosophical perspective. Levi writes almost exclusively non-fictional autobiographical travel writing in which he adopts the persona of a traveller-witness, to the point that Sergio Pautasso, commenting the overall cohesion in Levi's writing, even suggest that Levi could be considered the author of a single book

whose connecting tissue is the structural disposition to travel (Pautasso 1997, 181). The exception is *The Watch* [*l'orologio*], which is technically a novel since its protagonist and the plot are fictional. However, almost every character is based on a real person, and the protagonist maintains the essential characteristics of the Carlo Levi-persona that is the autobiographical, non-fictional narrator and protagonists of all Levi's work. This cohesiveness is a significant divergence from Mahasweta, whose journalism and essays are clearly distinguishable, stylistically, formally and in terms of creative effort, from her fiction. Moreover, the philosophical core of Levi's work remains unvaried throughout his career – the insights from *Cristo* and *Fear of Freedom* remain fundamentally valid even for later works. That said, Levi adapts his fundamental categories within new historical situations, such as the shift from the fascist to the democratic state.

Levi is profoundly critical of how the Italian political scenario was configured after the Liberation and the end of the Resistance, in the sense that he believed that the revolutionary energies of the Resistance had been wasted away or suppressed in favour of a re-establishment of pre-fascist order – a position best documented in *The Watch*, where the fall of the government of Actionist leader Ferruccio Parri heralds the triumph of the authoritarian-bourgeois-liberal tendencies within the Italian political panorama. Nevertheless, after the fall of fascism, Levi sees a chance for the peasants to emerge, with an autonomous gesture, from their immobility, to crystallize their protests into political struggle and to transform their instinctual sense of brotherhood and justice into conscious political awareness – a chance of self-expression, in other words, that is not merely fleeting and precarious but durable and meaningful. The new national context is significant, and its relevance to Levi's theories can perhaps be best explained through the 1950 essay "The Watch and the Peasant" ["l'orologio e il contadino"], in which he elaborates on how and why peasant and urban civilisation should find a way to integrate each other.

In this essay, Levi argues that the peasant civilisation is, due to its inherent precariousness, forced to constantly invent meaning, create myths and name things, but is also, ultimately, silent – its achievement are never stable and constantly return into an amorphous confusion (a clear reference to the sacred of *Fear of Freedom*; but also, more concretely, to brigandage and the satirical play in *Cristo*, which ultimately do not affect the status quo in any way). It is hence a world that lack self-expression, mute – subaltern in a Spivakian sense. The peasants cannot emerge from this cycle of creation and chaos, they "don't look look over their own horizon because they lack the awareness of another world"

(C. Levi 1975, 60) – a lack of awareness, it should be noted, that Levi always sees as historically imposed. This other world is the urban universe of active progress, history and reason, whose ability to earn durable achievements would provide the peasants with a similar capacity to hold on to their creative and political conquests – and that world, in turn, needs the peasant world to avoid becoming hollow and devoid of poetic content. My point is that the post-war democratic Italy, in Levi's view, while not exactly "a meeting place of relationships" that allows the free expression of individual autonomies, it is at least a context that allow the peasant civilisation to gain awareness and claim the capacity of self-expression from the urban civilisation.

Interestingly, in the context of democratic Italy Levi shifts from a strictly ethnographic mode, in which the cultural, prelogical specificity of the peasant world is starkly opposed to the world of the Christians, to more universalizing anthropological modes in which all human beings can and should participate to a plurality of existential conditions and belong to different times. It is the crucial concept of co-presence/coexistence of the times [*compresenza dei tempi*]. This fairly ambivalent concept can be interpreted in at least two ways. One the one hand, Levi uses it to refer to the presence and persistence of the past, of history, of all time in contemporary gestures, acts, speech, concrete objects and memories. It is, in short, a sort of historical memory, either mental or embedded in materiality, that preserves (or should preserve) all things alive that happened in the past. This phenomenon, for Levi, emerges at an individual as well as collective level, and each individual and community can experience it in various degrees. In this historical sense, the coexistence of the times can also be a cultural specificity: Italy, for instance, is a country where this phenomenon is particularly prominent, according to a 1955 article named "History is present" ["La storia è presente"]. In this text Levi argues how, in Italy, "nothing that ever had a meaning [is] dead in our history – instead, that very history lays unrolled and open in front of us, in each fact and in each person" (C. Levi 2000c, 38).

There is also a more universal sense of the coexistence of the times, which establishes it as the fundamental category of Levi's anthropology and anthropological imagination – almost an element of human nature. The phrase can also refer to the capacity to integrate different sensibilities, different experiences of human condition, which may be connected with different historical periods but are also, arguably, universal, synchronic possibilities of human experience – like the complementary conditions of (material, existential) precariousness and stability. This is one of the greatest ambiguities of Levi's thought, of his anthropological imagination and of his language, especially after *Christ*: they all seem

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to be employing a fundamentally allochronic mode, meaning, in Johannes Fabian's sense (Fabian 2002), that they imply an essential denial of coevalness, casting the peasant in an undifferentiated past – conceiving different material and existential conditions as a different temporalities is practically a handbook definition of allochrony. And yet, at the same time, Levi's anthropology is profoundly *coeval*, because the peasant's "past" is (and should be) alive, meaningful and relevant – it is, in other words, contemporary. This in an ambiguity that, in part, also Mahasweta experiences.

In Levi's view, any individual is asked to participate to a multiplicity of coexisting times. As he explains in a passage of *All the Honey is finished* (which I briefly comment later in this section), the coexistence of times is, for Levi, almost a synonym for a full sense of humanity:

> How reality is multifarious! And how, in everything, in each of us, different and remote times coexist! And the more a person is alive, real, complex, the more this simultaneity of different conditions and situations, like geological strata, this eternity of history and prehistory, is present in this person […]. (C. Levi 2003)

This of course connects with Levi's idea of finding a mode of integration between peasant and "Christian" civilisation – two different "times" – that preserves each of them while enabling both to be affected and transformed by the other. It possible to argue, moreover, that this more inclusive sense of temporality may also invest Levi's vision of Jewishness: if traditional Judaism is, after all (and not unproblematically), also perceived as belonging to a different temporality, the coexistence of the times should promote a recuperation of that temporality as well, together with its cultural specificities. Whatever the scope of the idea of the coexistence of the times, the explicit, newfound centrality of the concept results in Levi's post-war writing being an anthropology of cultural change, focused on men and women caught in a process of transformation, in an attempt to embrace the "coexistence of the times". How can the peasants become protagonists of history while maintaining the core values their world?

It should be noted that Levi's optimism towards a possible emergence of the peasants within national history is not rooted in an abstract faith in democracy, but quite consistently emerges from the observation of the peasants themselves. It is a wave of political mobilisation coming directly from peasant cooperatives – the peasant movement – that keeps Levi's hopes high. The peasant movement,

in the 1940s and in the 1950s, was incredibly active, leading, most notably, to a significant number of occupations of the lands. The response to such mobilisation was quite violent, resulting in a wave of repression from the state and the agrarian elites, helped by criminal organizations like the mafia or bands of brigands (Barbagallo 2013, 119–20). Levi, nevertheless, registers this historical moment as the political and historical awakening of the peasant civilisation.

A crucial catalyst for Levi's changed anthropological imagining of the peasants in the post-war era is certainly his encounter with Rocco Scotellaro. Scotellaro was a poet, writer, activist and social scientist born in Tricarico – a village in Lucania, not far from Aliano, where he was also mayor for a few years. Scotellaro is the handbook definition of the Gramscian organic intellectual: born from a peasant family, he articulates politically and intellectually the world of the class from which he emerges. He faced the predicament of the peasants through his political activity, and the same time all his writings are centred around the peasant world. His poetry, as well as two unfinished works – his autobiography *L'uva puttanella* and the his sociological essay *Contadini del sud* – are extensive explorations of the peasant world of Southern Italy, not unlike *Christ*. Levi, who had befriended Scotellaro in 1946 (De Luca and Levi 2016, 667), saw in Scotellaro the model of the peasant leader, combining an internal knowledge of the peasant world and an acute "modern" political awareness. Scotellaro's political activity – abruptly interrupted by false accusations that lead him to a short but harsh experience of imprisonment – was also an example of the brutal opposition to peasant politics by reactionary forces that maintained their hold of the South in spite of the fall of fascism (Tranfaglia 2000, XVI).

Scotellaro embodies the peasant movement for Levi, and it is not a chance that one of the most important elaborations of the peasant civilisation after *Christ* is to be found in the preface he wrote for Scotellaro's autobiography, *L'uva puttanella*, published posthumously in 1955 after Scotellaro's early death in 1953. In the preface, Levi responds to the widespread criticism, also coming from the left-wing political world, that he, Scotellaro and many others (such as the economist Manlio Rossi-Doria and the ethnologist Ernesto De Martino) had idealised the peasant world, overestimating its potential and disregarding the industrial working classes – a criticism most famously voiced by the critic and communist politician Mario Alicata (see Sacco 1996, 199–203). In the preface, instead, Levi points out that in Scotellaro's work (and in his own) there is no romanticization of the peasant world – its deficiencies and misery are represented as obstacles to be overcome. The peasant civilisation is not, for

either of them, a "mental idol" (C. Levi 2012, 7) – the choice of words is of course significant in Levi's lexicon – but a starting point towards a different future.

In this framework, Rocco is a natural peasant leader, because, in spite of being profoundly rooted in peasant reality, he is also able to break the traditional passivity and immobility of the peasant world – to claim for himself that capacity of expression that is historically denied to the peasants. With words that, once again, echo *Fear of Freedom*, Scotellaro is defined as a person that the peasants "[felt] [as] one of them, and yet different for his ability of self-expression that is at the same time similarity and complete differentiation" (C. Levi 2012, 5). Scotellaro is precisely one of those mediating points between self and other that Levi identifies, in different fields of human action, as the only living moments in existence. People like Scotellaro, and the peasant movement as a whole, allow the peasant civilisation to gain the self-confidence that ideally would allow the peasant world to return to history through its owns means. If history is imposed on them, once again, the cycle of enslavement would not be broken and the peasants, forced to suffer history and not to act in it, would simply remain in their despairing immobility.

Scotellaro is a looming presence in the Sicilian travelogue *Words are Stones* [*Le parole sono pietre*], dated 1955 – not only because, as Levi tells in the preface, Scotellaro was a travelling companion for a trip in Calabria that was initially planned as an integral part of the book (C. Levi 1955, 22–26), but because his political, poetical and existential model is arguably the basis of the peasant portraits that populate the narrative. Three crucial passages represent Levi's newfound faith in the peasants as autonomous subjects and protagonists of their own modern history: the description of a strike among the miners of Lercara; the portrait of the assassinated peasant leader Salvatore Carnevale; and the portrait of Carnevale's mother Francesca Serio.

The strike in Lercara, carried out by the workers of the local sulphur mines after the death of their young co-worker Michele Felice, is the first instance in which Levi finally describes, in a literary text, the peasant civilisation as awakening to history and political consciousness:

There was the strike: the first in living memory; everybody's life was involved in it. I had come to visit, out of curiosity, an old sulphur mine, in one of the countless villages where peasant immobility is to be found; instead I found myself in a living centre, with change and movement in

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full swing, where all feelings are new, the actions are passionate, the desires are tense and violent,

and something that didn't exist before is born in the hearts of men. (C. Levi 1955, 71)

Interestingly, in the context of the strike, it is *signor* N., the owner of the sulphur mine, that is a relic of the past – his management of the sulphur mine, carried out with archaic and dangerous methods, forcing the peasants in misery, represents the anachronistic survival of a feudal universe that lives in absolute immobility. The new political awakening, instead, is based on the encounter between history and the best of the peasant civilisation. Levi explains that, after the death of Michele Felice, "the ancient sense of justice was touched, the centuries-old despair found, in that fact, a visible symbol, and thus the strike began" (C. Levi 1955, 73). It is crucial that justice and despair among the miners crystallize into a strike, and not in brigandage – the traditional cultural response to injustice in the peasant world – especially because brigandage, in the book, takes an even more sinister outlook than in *Christ*, featuring essentially as an ally of the mafia and state repression.

Indeed, a recurring theme of *Words are Stones* is the way in which peasant civilisation is able to find alternative political responses to misery and injustice. In this sense, the portrait of the peasant leader Salvatore Carnevale is significant. Carnevale, a young peasant activist in the small village of Sciara, killed off by the mafia allied with the local landlords, he echoes in many ways the description of Scotellaro. He is, like Scotellaro, a "true peasant leader" (C. Levi 1955, 162), able to articulate political struggle and cultural change in a way that is organic to the peasant world. Simultaneously, he breaks off, uncompromisingly, with the old structure of power that forces the peasants in immobility and misery: "He had a clear mind, and understood that the you can't make deals, that the peasants had to rely on their own forces, that the peasant, to live, had to to break off with the old feudal structure, cannot go for half-measures, can't accept the slightest compromise" (C. Levi 1955, 162). Carnevale's unwillingness to compromise with the mafia is precisely what leads him to a violent death, and provides the character with an epic dimension and a tragic heroism that is nowhere to be found in the anthropological portraits, riddled with mythical language, of *Christ*. Carnevale embodies the passage from the brigand to the political activist: when Levi describes a photograph of the young man, he notices that his eyes look like those of Giuliano – a fearsome brigand cooperating with the mafia and responsible for a major slaughter of peasant protesters in 1947 – but "with a sort of righteousness, of

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modest pride in his straight gaze, like that of someone that wants to build his own destiny" (C. Levi 1955, 186).

Yet it is certainly the portrait of Francesca Serio, Salvatore Carnevale's mother, that most powerfully articulates the new political consciousness of the peasants. Francesca Serio is a woman who has recently lost a son. She is supposed to adopt the role of a traditional mourning mother. The funeral wail, in Ernesto De Martino's definition, is a ritual action that moves within a mythical horizon, re-establishing a number of traditional values that grief threatens to compromise (De Martino 2000, 55). Instead of adopting this traditional and "conservative" role, Francesca reacts to the death of her son by transforming herself radically into a political being with a distinctive voice. Her transformation is announced by a strong symbolical and political act: she speaks up – she denounces the death of her son, breaking the silence that traditionally surrounds mafia crimes. Her act ensures the survival of the peasant movement in Sciara. After that, she lives on as a secular avatar of justice. Francesca Serio is a far cry from the women in *Cristo* – like Giulia. There are neither mythical nor animal connotations in her portrait. Levi abandons the physicality of his previous female characters in order to depict a person whose entire existence boils down to her speech – her life is circumscribed entirely within a narrative of justice: "she talks, she narrates, she reasons, she discusses, makes accusations, quick and precise, alternating between dialect and Italian, extended narratives and the logic of interpretation, and she is entirely in that continuous, endless discourse, all of her" (C. Levi 1955, 170).

What Francesca Serio tells is a stream of precise and violent accusations directed towards the mafia and the authorities. She is a being of speech and voice, in sharp contrast with the imposed silence on peasant civilisation. Her articulacy is the core of her anthropological and political self-transformation from traditional wailing mother to political spokesperson of the peasants: "Thus this woman made herself, in a single day: her tears are not tears anymore, but words, and the words are stones" (C. Levi 1955, 170). Whereas the funeral wail runs parallel with the self-destructive rebellion of the brigand, the words-stones are the correlative of political action: Francesca, like her son, is used by Levi to signal the possibility, within the peasant civilisation, of a passage from an anarchic response to injustice to a political one. *Words are Stones*, in spite of depicting a peasant movement that is variously under siege, is remarkably forward-looking and optimistic precisely for this insistence on expression and awareness. It embodies the coexistence of the times in its most politically-oriented sense, the ability to act politically *within* the cultural horizon of the peasant world.

All the Honey is Finished [*Tutto il miele è finito*], Levi's other major post-war Italian travelogue, written in 1964 and documenting two trips in Sardinia, takes a more sombre view of the integration between peasant and urban civilisation. It is not a chance that the peasant movement, in full swing in the 1940s and 1950s, has by this time largely died out, and the Southern Question is now addressed in terms of industrialisation. This is deeply problematic for Levi, who sees in this phase, again, the risk that the peasant civilisation is once again reduced to silence and denied autonomy, this time by being engulfed and erased within the industrialisation process (C. Levi 2000b). It makes sense then that *All the Honey is Finished*, in stark contrast with *Words are Stones*, rather takes a more melancholic and existential view of cultural change.

Levi's structural principle is, once again, the coexistence of the times. Indeed, in the travelogue on Sardinia, Levi's insistence on this concept is much more deeply pronounced than in any of his other books. Perhaps the several layers of Sardinian history, where the ruins of the ancient Nuragic civilisation coexist with pastoralist communities, peasants and the industrial working-class towns, naturally lead Levi to insist more and more on the idea of uneven temporalities. Yet there is, in the book, a remarkable divergence between the exhilarating sense of the coexistence of the times as a harmonious historical memory that enriches the individual and the collectivity, and an experience of multiple temporalities and ways of being human that clash in political and social struggle. Gigliola De Donato stresses how the book epitomizes the retreat from the hope of a spontaneous peasant revolution, as well as the negative side of any top-down solution to impose cultural change (De Donato 1997, 140).

Yet Levi's description of cultural change in *All the Honey is Finished* is arguably his most subtle discussion of this theme. It implicates not much a disavowal of the enthusiastic revolutionary mode, the sudden clean break with the past that he describes in *Words are Stones*, but rather a complementary reflection on another mode in which people experience a shift in their inner and social world. The central episode in this sense is set in the town of Orgosolo, where Levi witnesses how the resurgence of a traditional dynamics of blood feuds that are part of Sardinian culture (*desamistade*) results in a violent attempt of the state – yet again described with the characteristics of a "visitor devoid of understanding", a colonial power – to quell the phenomenon with all means necessary. Levi visits the town two times. The first time, the colonial dynamic is played out in fully dichotomous terms, opposing a traditional society with a modern and colonial one. The second time, during his second trip, Levi introduces a new element: the painful, tentative efforts of human beings that, out of their own

volition, slowly detach themselves from parts of their culture that no longer feel vital or relevant to embrace different possibilities. In this way, as Francesca Congiu argues, Orgosolo moves "from a purely colonial space (placed in direct opposition to the central Italian state) to a more contested one" (Congiu 2012, 169). The rural hinterland of Sardinia, expression of a conflictual coexistence of the times, becomes a site of multi-layered (self-)contestation, where Levi witnesses how indeed the whole island, torn between a traditional culture and an imposed modern law, is nevertheless

> moved by new forces born from within, which are able to create new aims for life and new problems, as well as the drama that sees the ancient law becoming an uncertain presence in the people's consciousness. A certain and undisputed norm, centuries-old justice, may seem now unjust, not only at the eyes of the stranger – foreign and devoid of understanding – to his law and his rejection, but to the very soul of the country, to its collective feeling, to the will of the industrial worker, son of a pastor, and perhaps also to the heart of the fugitive, alone like a wild animal among the inaccessible rocks. (C. Levi 2003, 112)

Levi's final look at the Italian rural world, therefore, ends on a note of transgenerational cultural change that is born *from within* "traditional" societies. If anything, this last look at the peasant world redeems Levi from the accusation of seeing the peasant world as inherently timeless and unchanging – a perspective that lingered within the pages of *Christ*, even if one accepted that Levi saw this immobility as historically imposed. He now approaches the idea that traditional cultures are, in themselves, capable of cultural change – and hence inherently involved in a historical process. Mahasweta Devi, through conflicted adivasi characters caught in the middle of overwhelming and threatening processes of cultural transformation, reaches a very similar conclusion in the context of the adivasi world.

3.2.4. Passage to India: Levi's Third-Worldism and its Discontents

Levi's later production has a distinctive tendency towards more universal schemes, inserting the peasant world within a more general anthropological pattern based on the (various degrees of) coexistence of the times. Levi, consistently with the universalizing dimension, becomes, in the later

part of his career, also a frequent explorer of extra-Italian realities, writing travelogues and reportages on a variety of countries – most notably, India, China, Russia and Germany. Apart from the insistence on the coexistence of times, the connecting tissue between his Italian, European and Asian voyages is, once again, the search for a human and political solidarity. In this sense it is crucial to go back to the 1964 letter to Giulio Einaudi, where Levi, in a passage in which he juxtaposes his own biography with the recent history of the peasant world, suddenly shifts from an exclusive focus on the Italian South to a sort of *Global* South *ante litteram*: Levi says that he was lucky enough to enter adulthood "as that very world [the peasant world] came of age, in all the fraternal beings of all the Lucanies of every corner of the earth" (C. Levi 2010, xix). The sudden introduction of "all the Lucanies" of the world clearly marks the way for a more universal conception of solidarity, as well as explicitly suggesting that Levi's paradigm wants to travel and be tested abroad. Considering his focus on realities such as India and China, especially in the context of the 1950s, it is appropriate to talk, alongside Levi's universalism, of a specific Third-Worldist trend in Levi's writing. As Neelam Srivastava argues in her discussion of Third-Worldism in post-war Italian culture, the term, albeit elusive,

> has both a precise political significance and a wider, looser application as a sympathetic attitude held towards anti-imperialist struggles and revolutionary movements in what was formerly known as the Third World. Ideologically, Third-Worldism transcended Eurocentric Marxist positions to take into account the political work of anti-colonial thinkers and activists (most notably Mao, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral and Che Guevara) who influenced the art and writing of numerous Italian intellectuals. (Srivastava 2018, 201)

Levi's attempt to look beyond the panorama of Italian politics certainly fits a Third-Worldist approach, both epistemologically and chronologically.

Within this context, Levi's trip to India, carried out in 1957 and resulting in a number of short articles for the newspaper *La Stampa*, is particularly interesting. I want to focus on the way these pieces present themselves as an invitation to carry out a comparative analysis of Italian and Indian history, and hence as an ideal connection with Mahasweta's work. Levi's trip to India starts off, right from the beginning, by rejecting India as an incomprehensible other and rather suggesting a fundamental equivalence with Italy:

[India] is not another world, an exotic civilisation, extraneous and distant, it is not what it is usually called "colour" – Oriental colour – it is not a foreign country, shut off in forms, measures, rituals, in words from other roots and other history, but it is our world, our history; it's us, in our antiquity and our modernity. A gigantic mirror where, in hundreds of millions of images, we find our own image once again, India seems to unveil […] the spectacle of our own centuries-old story (C. Levi 2014, 7)

The structuring role of the coexistence of the times is clear in this text, and this is a good instance to foreground its ambiguities. Levi makes a distinctively anti-exoticist move by rejecting India as an absolute other. However, the passage also foregrounds the risk of easy equivalences that are implied in Levi's universalizing mode. As we discussed in the previous chapter, in reference to Stevenson's "The Bottle Imp", exoticism works through a normalization of the other and a reduction of the element of surprise, and hence an easy, universalizing equivalence between Italy and India may be seen as another form of exoticism – a way to reassure the reader that they do have the tools, along with the narrator, to understand the reality in front of them.

At the same time, Levi manages to create a set of equivalences that ground the comparison between Italy and India in a number of historical events. The comparison does not rest exclusively on the fact that the past – in Italy and in India – is never dead, but that the uneven temporalities of India and Italy seems to converge in specific patterns:

Here is the great pagan world, the world of the village, which we repressed and chastised in ourselves for centuries. Here are the monsters, here are the gods that we adored […]; and the peasant nature and the earth-made houses. And then, here is feudalism, the castles, the privileges and serfdom, the customs and the castes; and simultaneously the nineteenth century men dedicated to the fatherland and national liberation; and the most modern and contemporary of all, the middle-class, the proletariat, the bureaucracy, the army; and the universities, the industries, the dams, the atomic power plants. (C. Levi 2014, 8)

Levi's idea of India sees precise parallelism between the Italian *Risorgimento* and the more recent liberation struggles against fascism, and the political uprisings of India; as well as in the tension

towards industrial modernity that drives both countries in the post-war era. He sees both countries as embodying a model of multiple temporalities, in which variously ancient institutions coexist with modern developments. In this sense Levi diverges radically from two other Italian writers that have explored India more or less in the same years – Alberto Moravia and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Moravia and Pasolini wrote reportages based on a joint trip to India that ultimately embraces the representation of India as a fundamentally other, exotic landscape. They react differently to this perceived ontological otherness – Moravia with detachment, rationally trying to explain its historical origins, Pasolini with abandonment,striving towards an utter immersion – but neither is ready to find a common ground with Italy (see Zaccaro 2002, 134–35). Levi, through the conceptual framework of the compresence of the times, does, which allows him to think, once again, in terms of *political* solidarity.

In this context, Levi employs the theory of the state that had originally developed in *Christ* to describe the working of the colonial state. This is indeed the consistent development of the anti-colonial sentiment and solidarity that he tentatively explored in Gagliano, which was an important part of his anti-fascist outlook. It is New Delhi, the "invisible" capital of India, that allows him to epitomize the relationship between state and colonized people: Levi argues that the city is "nothing more than an enormous hiding place: a hiding place that conceals the invisible dominated people to the sight of the dominators; and that, on the other hand, allow the latter to remain unseen, shut off in their palaces" (C. Levi 2014, 18). Levi, pondering on the Indian and British presence in new Delhi, concludes that the two worlds are fundamentally independent and utterly different from each other, their relationship made up of "absolute incommunicability" (C. Levi 2014, 18). This attempt to hide themselves from India, Levi insists, is nothing more than an attempt by the British to repress the "old, full-blooded England – popular and Shakespearean" (C. Levi 2014, 27), and ultimately resulted in Victorian manners, morality and etiquette – all of them being attempts to suppress the Indian world as a fundamentally familiar presence. For Levi, the conclusion is nothing less that "it was India that built modern England" (C. Levi 2014, 27). This is, other than a powerful insight of the nature of colonialism itself, another important parallelism with Italy, whose modern development was also predicated on uneven relationships between North and South

The crucial node that allows the passage from Levi to Mahasweta's work is Levi's analysis of the *post*colonial state. His idea of the postcolonial state is, understandably, constructed in opposition to the colonial state: in the New Delhi passage, he comments that "the hiding place is not hidden any more,

the eyes are open, the cows stroll through the gardens" (C. Levi 2014, 21). Levi, perhaps projecting on India his idea of how the Italian state should be, thanks to the change brought about by a popular, "peasant" revolution, sees the postcolonial state as a fundamentally organic formation that emerges spontaneously from the people. His portrait of Nehru, in this sense, highly significant. Nehru is arguably Levi's model of the man of power and, to an extent, the ideal embodiment of the state. He is fully immersed in the coexistence of the times, being a modern man that understand and values antiquity. He was forged by the experiences of imprisonment and the peasant village to the extent that he is represented almost like a peasant leader, like Carnevale or Scotellaro. However he is entirely free from the complex of insecurity and fundamental despair that characterized both of them as members of the peasant world. Nehru, in short, brings the coexistence of the times within the sphere of high politics. Levi's identification with Nehru is noticeable (Zaccaro 2003, 115), an aspect that indeed reveals a speck of narcissism. Indeed, Levi's post-war role as the chronicler of the Italian world, as a meeting point of Christians and peasants, of different temporalities – which he takes upon himself after an experience of prison and village life – seem to echo Nehru's life and his work.

Crucially, Levi reports an episode in which, after being congratulated by Roberto Rossellini on the construction on the Hirakud megadam, Nehru is seemingly shocked and suddenly turns sorrowful and meditative. Levi interprets this passage as a proof of Nehru's awareness of the dangers of power – the latent possibility that he could, with all the might at his disposal, become a tyrant. Yet Levi is implicitly dismissive of the possibility: the episode is intended to celebrate Nehru's self-awareness rather than an actual dark side of his power. And yet it is difficult, today, not to think to Nehru's inaugural speech of that very dam. As Debasree De reports: "In the inaugural ceremony of the Hirakud dam project, speaking to tribal villagers who were to be displaced by this dam in 1948, he said: 'If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country' " (De 2014, 3). Similarly, in her famous essay on megadams, Arundhaty Roy provides a scathing picture of Nehruvian power in the context of another inauguration, in 1961, which foregrounds, in stark contrast with Levi's portrait, absolute distance and incommunicability:

The villagers were made to sign papers and were paid a sum of money, which they assumed was payment for their destroyed crops. When the helipad was ready, a helicopter landed on it, and out came Prime Minister Nehru. Most of the villagers couldn't see him because he was surrounded by

policemen. Nehru made a speech. Then he pressed a button and there was an explosion on the other

side of the river. After the explosion he flew away. (Roy 1999)

Both examples clash powerfully with the idea of a leader that organically embodies the will of the people, and rather provides the impression of a centralized power that plays its cards with utter disregard of the weakest strata of the population – especially that invisible part of the population, the adivasi, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, are hardly mentioned in Levi's reportage.

My point is not that Levi got either the postcolonial state or Nehru wrong, or that he should have portrayed them differently. The context of his trip, I believe, amply justifies the fundamentally positive and optimistic attitude he adopts as regards the postcolonial state. He takes India as a model for the peasant revolution that he still believes in – the reportages, written shortly after *Words are Stones*, arguably share the same enthusiasm. It is certainly admirable that Levi preferred to construct bridges of anti-colonial solidarity, to lend his trust to a newborn, postcolonial nation, rather than adopting an easy "Naipaulian" pessimism. However, Levi's brutal analysis of the state in an Italian context – his fundamental belief that there is a continuity between the liberal and fascist state; his idea that the Resistance was somehow betrayed and the state that emerged after the war was not a clean break with the eternal Italian Fascism – lends itself as a paradigm to analyse the passage between colonial and postcolonial state. If Levi does not make this step, he nevertheless suggests that the comparison between Italy and India is valuable and worth exploring. In other words: it might be useful to take seriously Levi's suggestion that India is a mirror of Italy and bring it to its extreme consequences, making the most, in a postcolonial context, of the most radical aspects of his thinking on the state and its relationship with subaltern cultures.

Such move brings us quite naturally to Mahasweta Devi. She is the Indian writer that, like Levi, focused her literary, political and anthropological imagination on a specific subaltern group within her country that was historically forced into a relationship of internal colonialism by a variety of state forms. For Mahasweta, as for Levi, all of these state forms have been "devoid of understanding", relying on a specific anthropological imagination regarding the subaltern groups that is largely complicit in their marginalisation. Specifically, Mahasweta is convinced of the fundamental continuity – albeit not equivalence – between colonial and postcolonial state *vis-à-vis* the Indian adivasi, and explores various forms of ethnographic encounter between the adivasi and the mainstream that follow

different modes – sympathetic or exploitative – of the anthropological imagination. Moreover, she also explores the internal dilemmas of cultural change that invest a colonized, marginalized community. Mahasweta does not simply test Levi's model in a different context, but indeed integrates it with a radical critique of neoliberal development, a reflection on environmental justice, and a more self-reflective take on the ethnographer-figure.

3.3. Mahasweta Devi

3.3.1. Bhadraloks, Adivasis and Naxalites

Similarly to Levi, Mahasweta comes from a cultivated middle class elite. Specifically, she stems from that particular group in Bengali society that is usually called bhadralok. The term can roughly be translated with "gentlemen", and, to an extent, does indeed share the implications of the English term. As Joya Chatterji argues, the term bhadralok carries "connotations of Hindu, frequently upper caste exclusiveness, of landed wealth, of being master (as opposed to servant), and latterly of possessing the goods of education, culture and anglicisation" (Chatterji 1994, 5). This fairly heterogeneous group rose to prominence during the colonial times, initially accumulating wealth through acquired tenure rights after the Permanent Settlement act of 1793. While they did not cultivate the land – a crucial part of their identity as "gentlemen" – their wealth *came* from the land, resulting in a far stronger attachment to the countryside than the European middle classes they are usually compared to (Chatterji 1994, 4–6). Over time, the bhadraloks invested land-based wealth in Western education, constructing their role as intermediaries of colonial power and centring their identity precisely around education (Chatterji 1994, 10). Kipling's anglicized Indians are typically bhadraloks: the "over-intellectualism" of the various Bengali Babus is usually paired with the effeminacy that colonial typologies attribute to the Bengali, and it is no surprise that Kipling despises their role as mediators of indirect rule, since he is in favour of more direct form of governance.

The bhadraloks' investment in (Western) education resulted in many of them playing a crucial part in the Bengali Renaissance, a cultural movement that, between the early 19th and the early 20th

century, aimed at combining "tradition" and "modernity" into a progressive humanism. The Renaissance resulted in a radical transformation of Indian intellectual life and literature. For instance, the Bengali novel, one of the major traditions emerging from the colonial encounter (see S. Chaudhuri 2012), was in large part a product of the social and cultural climate of the Renaissance. Figures like the Hindu reformer Ram Mohan Roy and Rabindranath Tagore himself are probably the best-known members of this cultural current. The perception of being entrusted with this heritage resulted in the bhadraloks seeing themselves "as a cultured and enlightened class […] and standard bearer of progress and modernity" (Chatterji 1994, 12). It should be noted that this was, often, a public façade that could hide a more traditional substance – an idea that can be summed up, in Rabindra Ray's words, as "the disjunction between enlightenment in public life and orthodoxy in private" (Ray 2011, 59).

The bhadralok identity and its contradictions are an important premise to understand the meaning of Mahasweta's engagement with the adivasis, because they are profoundly intertwined with a number of ideological and political positions that she specifically addresses in her fiction. As Joya Chatterji specifies:

the […] bhadralok definition of themselves as a modern, enlightened and cultured middle class […] obscured the extent to which the fabric of bhadralok pre-eminence in Bengali society was made up of a variety of strands, in which their wealth and powers as a landed elite, their position at the top of the caste hierarchy, their privileged access to urban employment and to some measure of authority under colonial rule, all were woven into an intricate pattern of dominance (Chatterji 1994, 12).

The gap between the bhadraloks' (self-)representation and their privileged, hegemonic role in Bengali society can arguably be taken as a starting point for Mahasweta's writing and activism. She represents an internal strand of opposition precisely against this "intricate pattern of dominance" – both in its historical incarnation and in its reverberations in postcolonial times.

For instance, Mahasweta offers alternatives to traditional patterns of caste and cultural hegemony. While attempting to force a syncretic space between "tradition" and "modernity", the core of the Bengali Renaissance was, as a rule, a high-Sanskritic tradition that left little space for multiculturalism. Tagore is a significant exception: he took interest, for instance, in the Santal adivasis living near his school in Santiniketan, rethinking them, within a multiculturalist ideal, as "the pathway

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between local, national and international modernities" (Rycroft 2006, 174). This is why Amit Chaudhuri, in his introduction to one of Mahasweta short stories, argues that her interest for the adivasi may be seen as a continuation of Tagore's work (A. Chaudhuri 2000, 123) – a statement that makes particular sense considering that Mahasweta did spend some time in Santiniketan as a student. But Chaudhuri also claims, quite rightly, that Mahasweta represents, first and foremost, a departure from the mainstream sensitivity of the Renaissance:

> her articulations also represent a critique of the Bengali Renaissance she was formed by; in her absorption with the non-Sanskritic universe of the tribals (…) she marks a break with the high cultural, sometimes Brahmanical impulses that informed the secular sensitivity of the Renaissance. (A. Chaudhuri 2000, 123)

This partial rejection of the Renaissance is important because it informs Mahasweta's broader political and cultural critique. In representing the systemic exploitation of the rural adivasis, she systematically attacks the self-representations of the urban elite as humane, modern, civilized and cultivated. Mahasweta exposes how the refinement of the dominant groups – as well as the splendour of the state they represent – is based on the squalor of the subaltern groups, which nevertheless are, in her view, more civilized and democratic than "the mainstream".

Mahasweta's oppositional reaction to her bhadralok background is crucial to understand the nature of her militant stance, especially when compared to Levi's own partisan position. Levi unequivocally sides with the Southern peasants in opposition to the rural elites and those parts of Italian society that support fascist dictatorship. Yet, because he is effectively outside both groups, he is able to retain a fundamental faith in his own restricted milieu – a progressive (Northern) middle-class intelligentsia. If anything, this makes his position as a militant ethnographer more serene and confident, because it still retains some ground under his feet. Mahasweta, instead, acts as a *Nestbeschmutzer* – a German term that means, literally, someone who fouls his/her own nest and indicates someone who (supposedly) denigrates his or her own country or people. I use the term, of course, not in a derogatory sense (as it is normally employed) but rather to stress how Mahasweta's militant stance stands from a radical rejection of a number of political and cultural commonplaces rooted in *her own* very specific milieu. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Mahasweta's militant

anthropological imagination is not only concerned with re-imagining the adivasis in order to systematically oppose their oppressors, but also with critically scrutinizing the ethnographer-figures that engage the adivasis, especially those that share her own social and intellectual backdrop. Both Levi and Mahasweta are sensitive to the dangers of those forms of the anthropological imagination that reinforce asymmetric relationships. But in Mahasweta this realization is arguably more painful and more conflicted, resulting in doubts and uncertainties, because she feels that there little intellectual tradition from her background that can offer her genuine, uncompromised insights on the adivasis. This makes the necessity of fieldwork perhaps even more urgent than in Levi's case, as she feels to be in dire need of alternative sources of knowledge to understand the adivasis.

The opposition to bhadralok values, moreover, takes a further political connotation within the historical phase in which Mahasweta starts writing about the adivasis, in the aftermath of the Naxalite movement. Started off as a local insurrection in the village of Naxalbari in 1967, this insurgency, initially directed against the "local oppressive landlord-police nexus" (Ganguly 2013, 59), soon sparked a number of similar insurrections throughout West Bengal and several other parts of India. The ideological origins of the revolt were largely institutional, originating in the discontent of radical communist activists for the agrarian policy of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which largely backed off from its promises of land reform and large-scale land distribution (Ganguly 2013, 59). That said, the insurrection gained a considerable amount of followers not only among communist activists and radical students, but also among peasants and adivasis. Indeed, the specificity of the Naxalite insurrection was precisely that it was able to mobilize and involve a large number of adivasis (Ganguly 2013, 61). The aim of the movement, following Maoist thinking, was to seize control of the countryside and later move to occupy urban areas, but its bulk was effectively repressed in 1972 (Shah and Jain 2017, 1165). Naxalite and Naxalite-inspired movements, however, remain active to this day, especially after 2004, when a massive Maoist insurgency, following the fusion of two large armies, brought the fight against the Indian state to an unprecedented scale (Shah and Jain 2017, 1166).

The Naxalite movement – in its historical phase, 1967-1972 – informs Mahasweta's militant stance in at least two ways. It represents, at least according to Mahasweta's reading of the movement, an uncompromising onslaught against exploitative and hegemonic forces in Indian society that translates into an act of solidarity with the rural subalterns. Indeed it can be argued that it is precisely the engagement with the adivasis and the willingness to fight for and with them, rather than a precise

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political line, that Mahasweta finds particularly important in the Naxalite insurgency. This is consistent with the fact that she generally refuses to label her political ideology in favour of welcoming, strategically, various instances of struggle that benefit the adivasis. As she explains, "it will not avail to look for any definite politics in my writing. Sensitive persons committed to the cause of the persecuted stand at the centre of my works. […] Mentally, [those people from different political affiliations] share a common ground, a fact that does not appear contradictory to me" (Devi 1990, xx).

In spite of this ideological elasticity, and her openness towards a variety of strategies and tactics, the influence of the Naxalite struggle in Mahasweta's imaginary is also registered through the frequent trope of armed insurgency. Indeed the insurgent and the rebel are recurring figures in her fiction. They can be contemporary insurgents belonging to various political creeds, like the titular characters of "Draupadi", a fearless adivasi Naxalite, and *Bashai Tudu* (1978), a charismatic and seemingly unkillable adivasi rebel with no specific political allegiance. Alternatively, they can be leaders of historical rebellions during the colonial times, like the Muslim Titu Mir, who organized the 1830-1831 Narkelberia uprising and is the protagonist of the eponymous book (2000), or the great adivasi leader Birsa Munda, portrayed in the 1975 novel *Aranyer Adhikar* [*Rights to the Forest*]. All these figures are part of a history of resistance that Mahasweta sees as an important political legacy for the contemporary adivasis.

The second reason why the Naxalite uprising is particularly poignant to frame Mahasweta's militant stance is that one of its driving forces is specifically a rejection of the urban bhadralok world, its values and its practices. In this sense the movement functions as a bridge, in Mahasweta's literary career, between the city and the countryside, between her fiction on the urban middle classes and the adivasis. The turning point is the publication, in 1974, of one of her most famous works, *Mother of 1084* [*Hajar Churashir Maa*]. This novel tells the story of Sujata, the mother of a Naxalite activist from a respectable bhadralok family in Calcutta, who investigates the circumstances surrounding the death of her son – executed by local mafias at the service of the police repression. In doing so, she simultaneously starts to connect her son's participation to the radical movement with the exploitative hypocrisy of the privileged society they both belong to, as well as questioning her own role, as a woman, mother and wife, in that very society. The book traces the origins of the Naxalite movement in the corruption of the Bengali dominant elites, emerging as an act of disavowal against that specific milieu.

It is only after this book, focused entirely on an urban setting, that Mahasweta decisively moves to the adivasi-centred fiction she is mostly known for. In fact, *Aranyer Adhikar* [*Rights to the Forest*] her first, major work of fiction focused on an adivasi revolt – the 1895 insurrection led by Birsa Munda – was first published the following year, in 1975. Therefore, if it is true that Mahasweta's "fieldwork" and activism in adivasi areas starts in the 1960s, before the Naxalbari uprising, most of her *fictional writing* on the adivasis is written in the wake of Naxalbari, hence my argument on *Mother of 1084* as a "bridge" between the two phases of her production. Together, *Mother of 1084* and *Aranyer Adhikar* epitomize the poles of Mahasweta's anthropological imagination: a profoundly sympathetic – militant – depiction of adivasi lives, plights and struggles; and a painful reflection on whether and how members of the dominant classes can effectively contribute to that struggle, starting with a rejection of their mainstream ethos.

3.3.2. The Legacy of the Colonial Anthropological Imagination: Counterinsurgency and "Draupadi"

The passage to a rural context – through the connective tissue of (Naxalite) insurgency – allows Mahasweta to juxtapose a political discourse with a distinctively anthropological one. This juxtaposition is evident in Mahasweta's short story "Draupadi" (originally published in Bangla in 1978). The story represents an ideal starting point to examine the treatment of anthropological imagination in Mahasweta's fiction, as it is entirely and explicitly structured around an ethnographic encounter, albeit of the most violent kind. Its structural transparency and its highly charged political content makes it a radical and clear example of the militant anthropological imagination that Mahasweta embraces, while offering an example of the imaginative paradigms she relentlessly opposes.

Most of Mahasweta's ethnographic encounters generally involve an adivasi character that the reader is asked to sympathize with and an ethnographer-figure that is to be critically examined. If the sympathetic adivasi characters range from epic heroes to more flawed figures, the ethnographer-figures range from individuals open to a possibility of engagement with the native to active perpetrators of violence and exploitation. The ethnographer-figure in "Draupadi" – Senanayak – belongs

unquestionably to the second category. Interestingly, Senanayak's brutality in the counterinsurgency scenario of the story is explicitly connected to his intellectual makeup, illustrating very well the exchange between the anthropological imagination – a mental construct – and ethnographic encounter – an actual event. Moreover, the short story also illustrates – due to the extreme dehumanization that derives from a counterinsurgency setting – the profoundly colonial nature of the relationship between Indian mainstream and the adivasis, articulating Mahasweta's idea of a deep continuity between colonial and postcolonial state in terms of practices of internal colonialism. Located at the extreme end of the continuum, Senanayak is the spectre that all the other ethnographer-figures of Mahasweta's fiction (especially if they claim to be sympathetic and well-intentioned) must confront. In many ways, Senanayak is the spiritual successor of Kipling's Orde and Tallantire from "The Head of the District".

"Draupadi" is divided into three sections. In the first, we are introduced to the story's antagonist: Senanayak, a "*specialist*[8] in combat and extreme-Left politics" (Devi 2014, 21). He is tasked with tracking down a couple of Santal adivasis that are collaborating with the Naxalite insurgents: Dulna and Dopdi/Draupadi Mejhen, known for leading a riot against a moneylender[9]. Senanayak manages to find and kill Dulna, leaving his body as a bait for Dopdi. At this point the perspective shifts to Dopdi herself, who works as a courier for the rebels. She realizes that she is being followed, but in the attempt to lose her pursuer she falls into an ambush set up by Senanayak and she is captured. In the third section – the actualization of the ethnographic encounter – Dopdi is brought to the military camp. Senanayak wants her to reveal the location of the insurgents' hideout and, after a first interrogation proves unsuccessful, he authorizes the soldiers to torture and rape her. The short story, however, ends with an unexpected act of defiance: Dopdi/Draupadi, mangled and brutalized, exits the tent where she has been tortured – stark naked, in a complete reversal of the Mahabharata episode revolving around her namesake – and taunts Senanayak, pushing him with her maimed breasts.

In her preface to the English edition (1997), Gayatri Spivak points out that she decided to translate this short story out of interest as much as for Senanayak as for Draupadi. The former is, in

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8   All the words in italics are in English in the original text (Spivak 2014, 16), including the two key terms to understand Senanayak imaginative world – theory and practice. Indeed the (over)use of English jargon in the short story on the part of the officers of the Indian army (something that even their own soldiers comment and mock) may perhaps be taken as a further element of continuity between colonial and postcolonial counterinsurgency. What they use is, after all, a form of prose of counterinsurgency that they inherited from the British (see R. Guha 1988).

9   Dopdi and Dulna are also minor characters of Devi's novel *Bashai Tudu* (1978), where they are companions of the titular character, the insurgent leader Bashai Tudu, and more details on their background – as well as another account of the riot described in "Draupadi" – are provided.

Spivak's view, "the closest approximation of the First World Scholar in search of the Third World" (Spivak 2014, 1). Spivak's argument for this comparison is that Senanayak embraces a disjuncture between theory and practice in relation to his sympathy towards his enemy: "in *theory*, Senanayak can identify with the enemy. But pluralist aesthetes of the First World are, willy-nilly, participants in the production of an exploitative society. Hence in *practice*, Senanayak must destroy the enemy, the menacing other" (Spivak 2014, 2). It is perhaps true, as Brinda Bose suggests, that Spivak's focus on Senanayak is slightly distorted by her interest in self-reflective exercises (Bose 2008, 72). Indeed, comparing him to a First World scholar because he is engaged in a study of subalterns from a position of privilege, as well as calling him a "pluralist aesthete" because he reads both Shakespeare and *First Blood,* might perhaps be a metaphorical overstatement that does not pay enough attention to the specificities of Senanayak's position as a counterinsurgent specialist in the context of rural India.

However, Spivak is right in stressing not only that Senanayak's arc in the story is as important as Draupadi's, but also that Senanayak's duplicity between practice and theory is an exploration of a broader epistemological problem connected to the production and use of knowledge. I prefer to read this duplicity as the endorsement of a brutal counterinsurgent anthropological imagination that, inherited from the colonial period, translates smoothly into the postcolonial one: a subject-object relation in which the ethnographer-figure and the native are utterly separated, the former has an active and the latter has a passive role – knowing and being known; killing and being killed – and the acquisition of information on the native is merely a classificatory aspect aimed at a practical scope.

The duplicity between practice and theory is presented as soon as Senanayak is introduced:

> Whatever his *practice*, in *theory* he respects the opposition. Respects them because they could be neither understood nor demolished if they were treated with the attitude "it's nothing but a bit of impertinent game-playing with guns". *In order to destroy the enemy, become one*. Thus he understood them (*theoretically*) becoming one of them (Devi 2014, 22).

This self-presentation is as convoluted as problematic: Senanayak maintains that he is, on an abstract level, sympathetic, but the inescapable administrative and repressive function of his knowledge reinforces and is determined by a mechanic, hollow and brutal way of imagining the other, not differently from the ruthless pragmatism of colonial officers in Kipling's "The Head of the District".

Within this framework, the other is an enigma to be solved, but the solution to this enigma is only aimed at a pragmatical classification that is to be exploited in the most straightforward way for military and administrative purposes: Senanayak's objective is to identify Dulna and Dopdi so that they can be apprehended. He is very efficient in doing that: through Dulna's last words – "Ma-ho" – he can identify both him and Dopdi as Santal adivasis from a specific village. This information in turn allow him to decipher a song she and Dulna "sang jubilantly in a savage tongue, incomprehensible even to the Santhals" (Devi 2014, 21), which turns out to be Mundari (Dopdi and Dulna uses it to communicate in code with their allies). Once Senanayak is able to label them, the problem is solved – he can "understand" them, or, in his words, he "becomes" the enemy. But this transformation into the enemy is not meant to provide any sympathetic insight – it is directed towards the discovery of a way to better exterminate the adivasi other. The possible grievances behind insurgent action or the individual and collective history of the insurgents are not relevant.

An interesting aspect of Senanayak's presentation is that he seemingly stands out from his more simple-minded colleagues, but Mahasweta makes sure to gradually unveil how the difference is ultimately illusory. Senanayak cultivates a significant sense of superiority derived from his ability to decipher the signs that the rebels leave, and to use their knowledge against them. The leader of the counterinsurgency operation, Capitan Arjan Singh, strictly adheres, instead, to the unsophisticated and ideologically-charged commandments of an official handbook of the Indian Army. The handbook suggests, for instance, "that the most despicable and repulsive style is guerrilla warfare with primitive weapons" and that "annihilation at sight of any and all practitioners of such warfare is the sacred duty of every soldier" (Devi 2014, 22). However these instructions seems to offer little help to the soldiers under Arjan Singh's command, who cannot capture Dopdi and Dulna because "not merely the Santhals but all tribals of the Austro-Asiatic Munda tribes appear the same to the special forces" (Devi 2014, 20).

Arjan Singh and his soldiers see the adivasi insurgents – from the moral high-ground of civilisation and their ethnocentric pride – as indistinguishable savages to be exterminated with higher forms of warfare, a vision that Senanayak deems simplistic and ineffective. When he uses Dulna's corpse as a bait, he is well aware that "this is the hunter's way, not the soldier's", but at the same time he "knows that the brutes cannot be dispatched by the approved method" (Devi 2014, 24). However, the word "brutes" – a term charged, in English, with transparent Conradian overtones – signals that, for

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all his theoretical framework and subtler techniques, Senanayak, in practice, is fundamentally similar to his colleagues. Promoting a mechanical form of cultural understanding, the specialist equally empties anthropological imagination from sympathy and ethical value: the other is simply an administrative issue conjoined with an ethnographic riddle, not a human being. The gap between ethnographer-figure and native that such form of the anthropological imagination enables is still filled with cool-headed brutality.

Before reaching its violent climax, in which the extent of this brutality is explored, Mahasweta introduces Dopdi. In this section it is clear that Mahasweta's story is, other than a political attack to counterinsurgent violence, is also a counter-anthropological project, aimed at restoring dignity to the adivasi fighter. The few pages in which Dopdi appears establish a portrait of a fierce adivasi insurgent, whose transparency of intent – but not simplicity – contrasts with Senanayak's multiple layers of self-construction that hide his fundamentally brutal nature. Mahasweta does not aim to please her reader with an edulcorated portrait: one of the first actions that Dopdi undertakes is to pick up and kill the lice in her hair, complaining that she cannot use kerosene to do that because it would attract the soldiers. Moreover, she is violent and ruthless with her enemies, but also fierce – she he is proud of her ancestry, her blood being "pure unadulterated blood of Champabhuni" (Devi 2014, 31) – as well as loyal and brave, to the point that, once she finds out that some of her allies have betrayed her and she is probably going to be captured, tortured and killed, her only concern is to make sure that her capture will not harm her comrades. In a ghastly prefiguration of her fate, Dopdi even pictures the scenario of her torture, as if to steel herself: "Dopdi knows, has learned by hearing so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture. If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue […] When they *kounter* you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound" (Devi 2014, 28-29).

"Kounter" is a crucial term in the counterinsurgent lexicon of the story. It technically means "to be killed in an encounter", but the term actually refers – as the story clearly shows – to the practice of the Indian army and police to torture and murder their prisoners and then leave them in the forest *as if* they were killed in an encounter (Shah and Jain 2017). It is a term that condenses extreme physical violence but also epistemic violence perpetrated by deception: by erasing the reality of torture and brutality and constructing the artificial scenario of an anti-guerrilla skirmish, the army maintains its moral high ground, projecting the image of "civilised" soldiers opposed to barbaric counterinsurgents.

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Within the theoretical framework that I am using, of course, this conceptual fusion of killing, deception, humiliation with the concept of the encounter provides us with an effective category to describe the uneven and ferocious exchange between Senanayak and Draupadi: the ethnographic "kounter" – where anthropological research meets murderous intent.

Within this (en)kounter, Senanayak's cool-headed ruthlessness and lack of human sympathy *in practice* are is presented in a particularly effective way, particularly in the passage preceding Dopdi's torture. In a chilling and powerful juxtaposition of the mundane and the horrifying, Senanayak authorizes torture so that he can leave and have dinner:

> Draupadi Mejhen was apprehended at 6.53 p.m. It took one hour to get her to the *camp*. Questioning took another hour exactly. No one touched her, and she was allowed to sit on a canvas camp stool. At 8.57 Senanayak's dinner hour approached, and saying, Make her. *Do the needful*, he disappeared. (Devi 2014, 35)

The "needful", of course, is gang-rape and mutilation. Mahasweta initially does not describe the rape itself, which is only alluded, immediately after the paragraph above, by referencing its unbearable length in Dopdi's consciousness – "then a billion moons pass" (Devi 2014, 35). Its consequences, however, are shown in graphic accuracy after the deed is done – this include the horrible mutilation of Dopdi's breast, "bitten raw, the nipples torn" (Devi 2014, 35). The abrupt passage, shifting from Senanayak's cold command to the violence perpetrated on Dopdi's body, epitomizes the extreme effects of the disjuncture between theory and practice, sympathy and imagination, subject and object. After a short respite, Dopdi is raped again, and this time Mahasweta, to capture the relentless and mechanic violence of the rape, portrays her as "a compelled spread-eagled still body", crushed by "active *pistons* of flesh" that "rise and fall, rise and fall over it" (Devi 2014, 36).

The entire story is devoted to the representation of a colonial mindset in postcolonial times. What Mahasweta explores is an elemental violence against an "ethnic other" that is orchestrated through a dehumanization of the enemy and, in Senanayak's case, an anthropological knowledge of the other that seems to provide an order to the sheer exercise of violence. Needless to say the violence, in this specific case, is powerfully gendered, adding a further layer to the various level of brutality that animate the counterinsurgent imagination. Mahasweta signals her desire for the collapse of this mindset

through Dopdi's final challenge to Senanayak. When Dopdi, naked, wounded and blood-spat, confronts him, she shatters the neat separation between theoretical order and violent practice. The terrifying and fierce confrontation she imposes on Senanayak – "Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid" (Devi 2014, 37) – forces the colonial anthropological imagination to stare at the savage messiness it can enact on human bodies and minds. It is a physical and epistemological closing of the gap between subject and object of anthropological research, creating a disruption in Senanayak's complacency. Colonial anthropological imagination loses its stability.

It should be noted, lastly, that, for such a short story, "Draupadi" manages to orchestrate an enormous number of perspectives, details and pieces of sociological and ethnographic information – we learn of the working of the Indian Army, its internal, strategical divergences, of rural socioeconomical relations, of insurgent (especially tribal and Naxalite) activism, of the gendered nature of counterinsurgent violence. Mahasweta can accomplish this by writing, most typically, in a prose that condenses a huge number of contextual information within a single paragraph or even line, as well as with an extremely flexible use of focalisation and free indirect speech. Neil Lazarus, in his commentary of "Pterodactyl", has called this technique "[a] ceaseless shifting of [the] representational lens" (Lazarus 2011, 156). This shifting – which arguably is present in different degrees in several of Mahasweta's works, most certainly in the three works I tackle in this chapter – allows her to move quickly from one character to the other, touching and clashing, in a Bakhtinian fashion, a multiplicity of languages, which are presented to the reader in a dense (and sometimes obscure) flux. This process involves, most crucially, not just her characters' but her narratorial voice: she embeds her character's inner thoughts in a free indirect speech that alternates between their internal perspective and a journalistic or sociological voice that provides context, technical details, political background. If "Draupadi" makes the most of this technique within the limited space of a short story, Mahasweta develops its full potential in longer works like *Chotti Munda* and "Pterodactyl".

3.3.3. A Picaresque Epic: *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*

Chotti Munda and his Arrow [*Chotti Munda Ebang Tar Tir*], published in 1980, is perhaps one of Mahasweta's most ambitious works. It narrates the life of an adivasi community through the eyes of its leader, the titular character Chotti Munda. Through Chotti, born in 1900, Devi offers a vibrant description of the Munda community and their changing way of life from the last years of the Raj up until the immediate post-Emergency period. In this long time span, Chotti and his community face the plight of bonded labour – the practice of providing free labour to rural elites, usually for generations, in order to repay an initial, often trivial debt – as well as abuses from the police and the local landlords. When "modernity" arrives, after Independence, not only is the traditional life of the Mundas changed even more radically, but they also have to face the brutality of the party politics of independent India and the robberies and killings carried out by bands of thugs at the service of political organisations – especially during the 1975-1977 Emergency period. This ultimately forces Chotti, a peerless archer that nevertheless has always safeguarded his community from violence through diplomacy, cunning and bravery, to fight for his people. The novel ends with Chotti publicly taking responsibility for the killing of two thugs that have been spreading violence and death for years under the protection of political authorities – an unthinkable act of arrogance for an adivasi – forcing a final showdown with the local authorities.

In *Chotti Munda*, historiography meets ethnography. The book is a historical novel of epic proportions, but its origins lays – like much of Mahasweta's fiction – in her fieldwork in the adivasi territories. She sees the novel, as she claims in an interview with Spivak, as a repository of experiences that registers a quickly vanishing reality, a sort of "salvage anthropology" stretched through time: "I have to document it, these things will vanish. And thus came *Chotti Munda*. In it, so many experiences, I had stored them so lovingly – Chotti is my best beloved book" (Devi and Spivak 2003, xii). On a similar note, in another interview with Arya Shachi, stressing that her work is primarily concerned with authenticity to real life, she points out that in *Chotti Munda* there is no single incident that she has not seen herself (Arya 1998, 189). This is paradoxical for a historical narrative that, for a large part, is set decades before her actual explorations of the adivasi villages. It is, however, consistent with her vision of adivasi colonial and postcolonial history as a fundamental continuity in terms of exploitation and resistance, to the extent that she feels entitled to use her experiences of adivasi life, somehow anachronistically, to "authentically" represent the past. The book, in this sense, manages to combine

two fundamental threads of Mahasweta's production as a whole: a recreation of the past and the documentation of the present (Arya 1998, 66).

Stressing continuity as a principle of adivasi experience and history is not, however, an ideological position, but rather a perspective rooted in ethnographic knowledge. In the same interview with Spivak, she stresses precisely this point, with particular reference to the adivasi revolts during the colonial period and their persistence in contemporary memory:

> When, in the 60s, I would go to Munda villages, their marketplaces or anywhere, they would talk still of Birsa's uprising and of Dhani Munda [one of Birsa's companions, who also appears in *Chotti*] who was a legendary figure. […] I used to visit that region from '63 to '75 continuously. I have seen with my own eyes what the Emergency meant, what was done. The criminalization of politics, letting the lumpen loose in the lower caste and tribal belts. Inhuman torture and oppression. I have also seen resistance. That is the time where the Naxal boys where harboured there, given shelter, allowed to escape. What Chotti Munda or my other stories and books depict is a continuous struggle. (Devi and Spivak 2003, ix)

"Continuity" means the persistence throughout the decades of a feudal nexus of agrarian relations that encourages and support the illegal eviction of the adivasis, the appropriation of their land, bonded labour and other forms of discrimination and exploitation. It also means a "continuous struggle" sustained by historical memories like past insurgencies – a different continuity that, differently from Levi's bleak vision of traditional brigandage, Mahasweta treasures and values as an important counterpoint to exploitation. Since neither side of this continuity is registered in Indian historiography, Mahasweta aims at filling precisely this historical vacuum.

It should be noted that Mahasweta's vision of adivasi history as a continuous assault on their way of living presupposes the existence of an ancestral isolation of the various "tribes" that was broken in the colonial times. It is certainly true that the colonial period represented a moment of increased exploitation through more centralized, rigid and bureaucratic re-organization of adivasi and rural life in India that set the scene for the current exploitative regime (and the modern forms of resistance to it). However, the belief in the adivasis' original state of isolation is also a colonial creation, supported by colonial anthropologists that seemed to ignore that it was precisely colonial governance that had created the "tribes" as an isolated entity – as part of the larger process of compartmentalization of

Indian society carried out by the ethnographic state that I discussed in the previous chapter. In other words, early anthropologists "failed to appreciate the *unprecedented* nature" of the isolation they were witnessing to (S. Guha 1999, 201, emphasis mine).

The pre-colonial history of the adivasis, had been, up to that point, quite different. As Prathama Banerjee puts it:

> Historically, the hill and forest peoples of India – who later became tribes – were neither stateless peoples, nor peoples outside history, nor simple, non-hierarchical, egalitarian communities. Indeed they were fully involved in kingships, in land and forest politics, in tributary relationships with other groups, in particular occupational specialisations and even in commerce and war. They were also internally variegated, hierarchised and gendered communities. (Banerjee 2016, 231)

The assumption that the adivasis were living in peaceful isolation before the arrival of modernity has had historically several ramifications, including shaping the mindset of many contemporary adivasi activists, who deploy, strategically, a discourse of indigeneity to reinforce the adivasis' claims to their political, civil and cultural rights (Shah 2010, 10–12). Also Mahasweta sometimes employs, for the same strategical reasons, a discourse of indigeneity that, problematically, refers to the pre-colonial adivasi past as one of pristine isolation in communion with nature. Interestingly, however, this does not result in Mahasweta's promoting of a conservative, isolationist, nostalgic or static conception of the adivasi identity – which is one of the possible outcomes of that position. Indeed one of the most interesting aspects of *Chotti Munda* is the way in which she articulates a layered discussion on how adivasi culture, confronted with the presence of the "mainstream" and "modernity", should actively face cultural change. Mahasweta argues, in *Chotti Munda*, that the ideal expansion of adivasi identity into modernity is towards subaltern solidarity, consistently with her militant vision. On this point she and Levi are definitely close, especially if we consider that Levi explores the importance of peasant political awakening in *Words are Stones* and the capacity of traditional cultures to transform themselves in *All the Honey is Finished*.

Mahasweta's ambitious objective, therefore, is to explore adivasi history as a continuity, but also in its epistemological specificities that distinguish it from Western historiography; and to conjoin it with a registration of adivasi culture both in its traditional specificities and its capacity of

transformation. Taking the Munda history and culture as her privileged point of observation, Mahasweta creates Chotti Munda as figure that can sustain all these different objectives. The result is that her character, having to carry the burden of a history and a culture, can only be a larger-than-life epic hero, whose life is both exemplary and paradigmatic for an entire community, consciously articulating its values and its predicament.

Since the very first words of the novel, Mahasweta establishes the mechanism through which Chotti's life is able to organically assimilate within itself the experience of the community at large, as well as representing the Munda vision of historical narrative and memory: "His name is Chotti Munda. Chotti is of course also the name of a river. There is a story behind a river giving him a name. *Stories grow around him all the time*" (Devi 2002, 1, emphasis mine). Throughout the book, all the events of Chotti's life are turned into stories, more specifically into songs. Songs are, actually, the Munda way of registering events and perpetuating historical memory. Crucially, the songs are constantly invented and modified to fit contemporary events – they are not "traditional" in the sense that they speak (exclusively) of a mythical past, although they take the shape of a mythical narrative. They are both a chronicle of recent events and a depository of past events. This, as previously anticipated, contrasts decisively with Levi's idea of a "timeless" peasant mythology, and results in a decisively more "Gramscian" (historically grounded) approach to subaltern history.

Chotti Munda becomes the catalyst for this never-ending narration. His heroic deeds are important victories in the community's history. For instance, in an early episode, Chotti is forbidden to use his bow and arrow by a police officer, lest he may inspire or lead a revolt. Later, however, Chotti saves the officer from a boar, and the officer rewards him by lifting the ban. The event, apparently mundane, is not simply registered as a fact in an individual life, but is transfigured – as a song – into a moment of genuine pride for the community, a moment of collective recognition that expands Chotti's myth and Munda history at the same time – a triumph over an unjust and arbitrary power that is rightfully chastised:

> Everyone is most pleased that the Daroga [the police officer] has lifted the ban on [Chotti's] use of the bow and arrow. This event also becomes a matter of [Chotti's] achievement and supernatural quality, little by little. All is story in Chotti Munda's life, everything becomes a tale. Story and song.

In the words of the song the boar becomes a moving mountain, and what is most thought-provoking, Chotti gets a new weapon.

> Ye picked a blade of grass
>
> Grass became spear
>
> Ye pierced t' boar
>
> He died right away
>
> And Daroga?
>
> He said, Go ye brave man
>
> Join all games,
>
> I was punished in this way
>
> Cos I banned yer play. (Devi 2002, 82)

While Mahasweta's clearly relishes in her celebration of Chotti, she grounds her epic hero in a the reality of adivasi life. Chotti's bitter commentary to this song, for instance, is to remark how his deeds can do little to change his material situation: "A blade o' grass turns inta spear, but if I don' plough Tirath Lala's field [the greedy and sly trader and moneylender] I've got nothing to eat" (Devi 2002, 82).

Perhaps even more importantly, Chotti becomes such a pivotal figure in the local community that the Munda start to incorporate his presence into narratives in which he was barely involved. He is fairly puzzled by this: "What is this? Whatever good the Mundas do, why does the credit goes to him? What sort of Munda is he? Is he the Mundas' wish-fulfilment? How?" (Devi 2002, 96). Yet Chotti's role as a receptacle of stories, unifying disparate events into a single narrative, is crucial: he enables the emplotment – to use Hayden White's terminology (see White 1978) – of the events in the Munda community, the construction of a coherent historical narrative out of their lives that would arguably have no form to express itself without his presence. The kind of plot that this historical narrative follows is that of the heroic saga, which enables the Mundas to withstand and resist the material conditions of their lives, to retain their pride and values, and to oppose an empowering tale of bravery and cunning to their despair. In this sense, indeed, Chotti *is* a "wish-fulfilment" for his community, but one his community absolutely needs.

Moreover, Chotti's life, while providing shape to Munda history, is also embedded within a larger continuity. The book begins by telling briefly story of Purti Munda, one of Chotti's ancestors, who could not live anywhere because ancient artefacts, resources or gold emerged from the ground whenever he settled, prompting other populations or the government itself to evict him and his family – a clear allegory of the adivasi condition at least since the colonial era. Yet Chotti is also, more concretely, in direct contact with the immediate past of the Munda. At a very early age, he meets Dhani Munda, a legendary rebel that was a companion of the great Birsa Munda, the leader of the 1895 insurgency against the colonial government. The young Chotti, fascinated by the mysterious and solitary man, begs him to teach him archery. The old man accepts and begins to teach him, with reluctance at first, and then, once he understand that Chotti might be worthy of carrying on his legacy, with passion and almost in a frenzy. Ultimately, Dhani bestows a gift upon Chotti: his magic arrow, which can never miss a shot. The arrow will eventually become an integral part of the Chotti legend, and allegedly the reason why he is such a peerless archer. However, Mahasweta herself explains that the arrow is not "magic in the narrow sense, but an arrow Dhani Munda wants to hand over. The arrow is a symbol for the person who will carry on that continuity. Chotti in an emblem of that" (Devi and Spivak 2003, x).

But what does it mean to carry on that continuity – Birsa's and Dhani's legacy? Dhani – a paternal figure that Chotti look up to for his entire life – sets up a crucial dilemma for Chotti that will have profound moral, political and cultural ramifications. He reminds Chotti that sometimes it is necessary to take up weapons, fight, and even kill. Chotti is not convinced:

Why must one kill people from time to time?
We killed.
Why?
We won' eat mealie, eon' obey t' terrorizin' moneylender, Diku [non-adivasis], polis, will occupy arable and settled rural land, will take back t' right to t' forest.
Did ye?
No. We got nothin'. Someone showed us t' way. We fought. Someone might show ye folks t' way.
All t' reasons remain, Chotti. If such a day comes ye too will kill. And yes, raise Dhani Munda's name and kill. I'll be at peace then.
Kill humans!

If need be. (Devi 2002, 15)

Dhani then goes to die – he decides to make a final appearance in a village, fully dressed up in his battle attire, well aware that this will provoke the merciless retaliation of the authorities. Chotti will understand the meaning of Dhani's final act only later, after one of his young pupils, Dukhia, in an act of desperation against his bond-master, takes charge of a riot and kills brutally him. Dukhia's actions – not unlike Dhani's – are seemingly pointless and suicidal – the boy is swiftly tried and hanged. Yet at this point Chotti understands that "even with the knowledge that the outcome is death, in order to remain right with oneself, the humans created by Haramdeo [the Mundas' god], having reached the 20th century, must sometimes do certain things. Dhani and Dukhia did them" (Devi 2002, 55). The idea of remaining true to oneself can be extended from the (nevertheless central) problem of violence as self-defence to the broader issue of cultural change.

Chotti is, after all, a product of Mahasweta's anthropological imagination – the result of her own ethnographic encounter with the Munda people – and in this sense he articulates her vision of adivasi culture. Through Chotti's dilemmas on how to lead his community and his choices about how to fight exploitation and violence, Mahasweta articulates a vision of the adivasis as the heirs of a cultural legacy (a tradition, a continuity), but simultaneously as contemporary modern individuals, whose possibility for a meaningful change does not lay in a submission to the self-proclaimed heralds of progress – which for the Mundas means little more than a new enslavement in mutated circumstances – but in subaltern political solidarity.

On the one hand, Chotti is a keeper of tradition, an aspect Mahasweta consistently explores through the extended metaphor of archery. Just as the arrow is the symbol of continuity – handled over by Dhani at the end of Chotti's training – one of Chotti's defining moments, which establish him as a leader of the community, is when he is asked to train the young Mundas in the ways of archery. Chotti is initially worried – an excess of enthusiasm in archery may attract the unwanted attention of the government, always wary of possible adivasi uprisings – but he is quickly won over by the sheer pleasure of transmitting his legacy to young Munda boys:

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There is an especial joy in teaching them. A new excitement. If they win at the local and regional fairs, his legacy will remain with them. If one of them is truly skilful, wins repeatedly, then perhaps the young Munda men of that time will come to him. Saying, Teach us. (Devi 2002, 63).

But Chotti's enthusiasm towards the Munda cultural legacy is constantly combined with a reflection on how Munda culture – and the Munda themselves – are inevitably exposed to change. The question is how to approach change while remaining true to oneself.

Mahasweta suggests political solidarity and consciousness as the keys to embrace change without being passively forced to experience it. It is significant that Chotti has one of his first realizations about the necessity of change within Munda culture when he talks with an aggrieved young man about the injustice that they are constantly subjected to. After listening to the man's words – remarkably on point, more than usually lucid in pointing out the responsibilities of the unjust local power structure – Chotti understands that "with the passage of time the Munda's way of thinking and talking is also changing. [The young Munda's] words are sharp, but their reason can't be denied" (Devi 2002, 84). Chotti will soon appropriate this new form of political awareness, understanding the importance of solidarity with other subaltern groups. Indeed, a crucial aspect of Chotti's leadership is his ability to intertwine the Munda's concerns for survival with that of the outcastes that live in the same village. In a conversation with Chhagan, the leader of the outcastes, he specifically connects the impracticability of traditional Munda life with the need for solidarity:

So Chhagan! Our lot's t' same as y'alls. The old days wit' real Munda villages r'gone. And all t'pahan's [the Munda priest] power, gone. He too just shows hoe to run t' feasts, how to settle neighbours' quarrels. There's one difference. Ye have caste stuff. To t' Lala, to t' Brahman, ye're low caste […]. We have no caste diff'rence. And I bring it up, cos t'village is now all mixed. Ye and us die together in the famine, drought and bonded work. Lala wants to decide. But if need be ye and us go together, I say. (Devi 2002, 101)

Even though his sadness for the loss of vibrancy of traditional culture is perceivable, Chotti wastes no time to mourn the old days of Mundas' isolated, self-contained existence. A much older Chotti will explicitly and movingly spell out the terms of this bond of solidarity, a bittersweet brotherhood of the dispossessed: "In our Chotti village untouchable-adivasi live together. In work-sweat, in joy-pain,

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we're one […]. Only adivasi-untouchable leave their own earth and set forth, and they go adrift" (Devi 2002, 242)

Solidarity in pain, joy and struggle, in other words, is a catalyst for a form of change that is valuable and fundamentally organic within a "traditional" community. This is an important point for at least two reasons. Firstly, Mahasweta – echoing Levi's idea of autonomy – separates quite clearly the idea of an organic cultural change with a generic idea of modernity and progress predicated on development as a top-down process. Indeed, she is adamant that such kind of development, as a strategy, translates in increased exploitation, and that, as an ideology, is just another fig leaf for violence and brutality. Her criticism becomes particularly sharp when she reaches the Emergency period. Commenting on the first round of elections in the area and the extreme violence through which the whole process is conducted, Mahasweta sarcastically comments: "The Chotti area graduates into modernity through the way in which the former Member was removed [he was blown up with a hand bomb], the elections were won through fraud and armed robbery, and the post-election contracts were divvied up" (Devi 2002, 189). Indeed, Mahasweta completely disentangles the idea of the postcolonial state – at least as regards the adivasi areas in this novel – with a process of democratisation. Mahasweta's idea of postcolonial India, at least from the adivasis' perspective, fits the harsh definition provided by Pablo Mukherjee: "contemporary India is postcolonial in the sense that it is the site of an intensified exploitation (and, as ever, struggle against this exploitation) by a globalized ruling class" (Mukherjee 2010, 6). The struggle Mahasweta depicts is precisely against *this form* of "development", a fundamentally new, more brutal incarnation of old strategies of exploitation.

Chotti's struggle is a continuation of the previous peasant and adivasi revolts. It is animated by the same – as Levi would say – elementary sense of justice. It is not, however, animated by the same messianic or religious zeal that drove the Birsaites or Titu Mir's followers, nor is, for most of the novel, violent at all. While Chotti's vocation – at least according to Dhani – is that of a bow-wielding hero, he sets aside that role practically for the entire narrative. If one were to find a parallel in Western literature, he is more similar to Mozart's Figaro than to classical Homeric heroes: he is a representative of a subaltern group, forced to coexist in an uneven relationship with feudal powers; he cannot openly antagonize the patently unjust behaviour of those powers, and he is forced to rely on his cunning to survive. Revolt is, of course, an option, but Chotti knows that it would probably result in the destruction of his community. Chotti's rejection of violence, however, is not simply strategic but also

based on ethical grounds, proving a crucial ethnographic point: that the moral high-ground of the Hindu mainstream in terms of civilisation is unjustified. As Mahasweta argues: "Chotti is never raising his arrow to kill anyone, he is basically a civilized polite person" (Devi and Spivak 2003, xix).

Chotti's strategic intelligence and cunning are explored not only in his ability to forge alliances, but also – and here the Figaro parallelism is perhaps particularly poignant – in his ability to trick the powerful into supporting his cause, or to neutralize their capacity for harm his people. In this sense the novel, in spite of highlighting the political and historical importance of adivasi insurgency, also focuses its attention on several everyday strategies of resistance that the Mundas adopt. Mahasweta registers, in this sense, what anthropologist James Scott calls "the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on." (Scott 1985, xvi). One of the characteristics of those everyday forms of resistance is that they are "informal, often covert, and concerned with immediate, de facto gains" (Scott 1985, 33). Yet the more pragmatical, less idealistic nature of this resistance does not make it trivial: it is quite obvious that, without those forms of everyday resistance, Chotti and his people would have been completely swept away.

One particularly interesting episode is played out during the first reign of terror of Romeo – an enforcer working for the Congress Youth League. A murderous psychopath and a Hindu supremacist, Romeo is, unsurprisingly, a major antagonist of the last part of the novel. Romeo and his thugs have their eyes set on a young girl, Basmati Oraon, but Chotti and his fellow Mundas can do little to protect her: attacking Romeo directly – using force – means to face the wrath of the political organizations he works for, while complaining with the authorities before or after the damage is done – appealing to justice – would probably lead to nothing. So Chotti has to find a way to neutralize Romeo while involving powerful witnesses that the authorities cannot easily ignore or dismiss. Chotti manages to capture Romeo and his men as soon as they have trespassed into Basmati's house, and then immediately calls Amlesh Kurana, a renowned social scientist that is temporarily living in the area, so that he can witness to the attempted assault and intercede with them with the Youth League Secretary. *Embarrassed* that the brutal behaviour of his men was exposed in front of a public figure – he would normally condone or even approve their actions – he guarantees that there will be no repercussions about the incident, promising to keep his men at bay for the time being.

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Most of Chotti's victories are bittersweet, and this one is no exception – none of the Youth League men face any consequences and they are soon ready to cause trouble again. Mahasweta makes sure that the reader is aware that only through Chotti's articulated plans, his skills as an orator and a diplomat, can the authorities be made marginally accountable for the protection of the adivasis. The book celebrates, as in an epic poem, Chotti's virtues, but simultaneously, with Brechtian bitterness and black humour, does not allow the reader to believe that anything but a continuous struggle against all odds from resourceful men and women can keep the adivasis alive. The picaresque, comedic aspect of this episode – especially in the way the underdog is able to use his cunning against those in power – has a profoundly tragical and political side to it – it exposes the sheer absurdity of a world that forces people to rely on convoluted schemes to obtain their basic human rights from the authorities. But this combination of tragic and picaresque is a central part of the novel's aesthetics, which mixes high and low forms – alternating feats of heroism and tricks played on the powerful – as it is appropriate for the profoundly surreal, unjust, topsy-turvy world that the adivasis have to live in.

And yet, in the final scene of the novel, the epic dimension is allowed to prevail, with Chotti rising to the rank of a proper epic hero. Romeo has been killed by some young adivasi while he was trying to sneak into the village to extract revenge for a previous defeat at Chotti's hand. As all the Munda and outcastes are rallied in a forced gathering (the authorities are determined to find Romeo's killer by any means necessary), Chotti stands up, appearing as an undisputed leader and a respected elder:

> Chotti rises from the judge's seat. There's winter in the air. In the coldstruck air one sees that Chotti is a seventy-eight year old man. There are a million lines on his face and body. White hair folded back near the nape and held in a brass ring. White pith in his pierced ears, short white dhoti around his waist. A bow and an arrow, his arrow, he brings it every year, by ritual law, at the time of his judging, and he takes it back. (Devi 2002, 286)

It is at this point that Chotti, in order to protect the young men that killed Romeo, takes the blame upon himself. To prove the truth of his words, he shoots his arrow – Dhani Munda's arrow – into the target – a perfect shot. Chotti fully fulfils his fate, merging with history and legend and, simultaneously, connecting them with contemporary subaltern struggle: "As he waits he mingles with all time and

becomes river, folklore, eternal. What only humans can be. Brings all adivasi struggle into the present, today in the united struggle of the adivasi and the outcaste" (Devi 2002, 287). The practical result of his unifying efforts are demonstrated in the novel concluding passage – when Chotti is about to be arrested by the S.D.O. (Sub Divisional Officer):

> Instantly a thousand adivasi raise their bow in space and cry, No! The non-adivasi raise restraining hands.
> Chotti on one side, S.D.O. on the other, and in between a thousand bows upraised in space. And a warning announced in many upraised hands. (Devi 2002, 288)

Chotti's apotheosis corresponds, in the final lines, to the full consciousness of a shared subaltern struggle – a continuation of a resistant adivasi legacy that nevertheless is grounded in the present.

It should be noted that Mahasweta's emphasis on struggle and on an adivasi political and cultural *autonomy* from the centralized machinery of the state – I use the term deliberately to establish a parallel with Levi's central political category – does not imply a rejection of the nation. Indeed, Mahasweta wants the adivasi to participate in Indian national life. She has nothing but contempt for the way in which Adivasi were largely ignored by the struggle for independence, which indeed is referred only two times in the whole book. The first time, in 1930, Chotti notices some arrested Gandhian activists on a train, and asks, half-interested, who are those people. The second time, at the time of the Quit India movement – hence during one of the last and most intense phases of the Independence struggle – it is rather the narratorial voice that explicitly spells out the fundamental gap between the adivasis and the nationalist activists:

> The August movement did not even touch the life of Chotti's community. It was as if that was the Dikus' struggle for liberation. Dikus never thought of the adivasi as Indians. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle. In war and Independence the life of Chotti and his cohorts remains unchanged. (Devi 2002, 96)

There is of course a powerful polemical thrust in a book that covers seventy-eight years of 20th century Indian history and barely mentions the independence struggle. The polemic works in two directions: one lays in the very production of a narrative that displaces the independence struggle completely,

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framing it as a fundamentally irrelevant event – from the Mundas' perspective. The other is stressing the dramatic absence of an adivasi involvement in national life, which however – similarly to the relationship between Levi's peasants and the Italian state – does not result in a complete lack of interaction, but rather in the reduction of that interaction to exploitation and subalternity. Indeed the adivasis have to suffer the machinations of the state – especially in the post-independence phase – but have no means to reach out the state. They are not Indians – although they are technically Indian citizens – in the same way as the Levi's peasants – technically Italian citizens – are clearly separated by the "Italian people". Internal colonialism, in this sense, is for both authors the pervasive establishment of second-class citizens within a nation – from an economical, cultural and political standpoint – and is connected to a fundamentally flawed process of national unification.

To further explore the origins of this marginalization, the book presents a gallery of non-adivasis, addressing a variety of positions that the authorities or members of urban, privileged groups adopt *vis-à-vis* the adivasis – different ethnographic encounters that, depending on their various political, historical and cultural configurations, prevent or enable a point of contact. Needless to say, Mahasweta loses no occasion to dress down various forms of the anthropological imagination that are complicit in the oppression of the adivasis.

The colonial phase, for instance, captures the colonial administrative worldview that we are, by now, familiar with. In one of the first chapters, Chotti and his community face a famine. They are forced to ask the help of Tirathnath, the local trader and moneylender. He would use the opportunity to make new bondslaves by granting food for free (and getting their thumbprint in exchange) but Chotti manages to obtain food as a loan – a transaction that, crucially, does not bind the adivasis to Tirathnath. The rumour that circulates among the police, however, is that Chotti has looted Tirathnath's granaries, generating a debate on whether that area of the tribal belt is actually pacified. The Mundas, in this context, are framed as an unpredictable, rebellious and dangerous population. Remembering the revolt led by Birsa Munda twenty years before, a doctor comments: "playing the tuila, dancing the group dance and then shooting arrows. A most complicated people" (Devi 2002, 43). The doctor sees the coexistence of peaceful traditions and armed struggle as puzzling and contradictory because it does not connect rebellion with social factors such as exploitation but only with the expression of pre-determined racial characteristics – a typical positivist/colonialist mindset, quite similar how the Lombrosian paradigms in Italy framed brigandage.

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Juxtaposed with the description of the actual lives of the Mundas, such way of thinking seems particularly hollow. This is how Chotti, a few pages earlier, sums up their situation: "Tirathnath says I bring people together. Yes, we're bound together. By hunger fire. I haven't roused anyone" (Devi 2002, 41). Through his essential but dignified rhetoric, Chotti shatters the ethnographic constructions that serve an abstract administrative idea of order and would have him and his people framed as inherently "troublesome" – a criminal tribe, as it were – because they protest out of hunger. This narrative technique – switching back and forth an official and subaltern voice – is sustained throughout the length of an entire novel. Devi registers a constellation of anthropological imaginings that, however different, are systematically dressed down in front of the reader and presented as inadequate through a contrapuntal confrontation with the adivasi characters.

Things become particularly interesting in the postcolonial phase. It is at this point that the most toxic and murderous form of anthropological imagination emerges, namely the one connected to Hindu fundamentalism. The position of the Hindu Right regarding the adivasis has historically been to deny the legitimacy of their identity, protesting against their status as indigenous people. Such position goes back to G. S. Ghurye, an influential sociologist with (Hindu) nationalist ideas, who argued that the tribals were simply "backward Hindus", and as such should be reintegrated into the mainstream of society (Bhukya 2008, 108). This is a line of argument that the Hindutva movements, more recently, have used to co-opt adivasi in their own project of national construction. Its implications, however, are far from benevolent: since the adivasis would obviously be at the bottom the caste hierarchy, this anthropological vision would inevitably justify an upper-caste hegemony over them. If anything, one implication is that upper-caste Hindus should take the burden of civilising the adivasis, cleansing them from their barbaric ways.

In *Chotti*, Mahasweta explores the depths of the violent Hindutva anthropological imagination chiefly through the voice of Romeo, whose project for the Chotti area epitomizes the stark brutality of Hindutva ideologies that is usually hidden under the layers of upper-caste paternalism: "Keep the untouchable and the tribal under your shoes. They live well that way. Everyone gets cheap labour. Sowing and reaping go well. And the biggest thing. The glory of the caste remain high" (Devi 2002, 207). Far from being one of Mahasweta's most subtle creations, Romeo manages nevertheless to provide the reader with a powerful mixture of casteist and economical motivations, illustrating, through

Mahasweta's capacity for writing dialogue that is dramatic but loaded with socio-cultural insight, the nexus of motivations underlying Hindutva positions..

More nuanced but equally interesting is the perspective presented by Amlesh Khurana, the prestigious scholar that is sent to study the area in the early '70s. In a surreal conversation with a local officer, Amlesh demands to visit a number of villages with precise population patterns – most of all, he wants to visit villages composed by a single caste or ethnic group. The officer replies that such villages are nowhere to be found, but he could bring him to actually existing villages. Amlesh replies spitefully that this will not do: "This is the work of surveying by scientific methodology. The government will build project on this basis for the development of area" (Devi 2002, 228). A "scientific attitude", in this case, actually stands for the tendency of forcing reality into a pre-existing theory. The contrast here works particularly well since a points Devi stresses repeatedly throughout the novel is that Chotti is able to unite adivasis and outcastes under his leadership – the reader already knows that Amlesh's theory of separate groups in separate villages is flawed. Most crucially, both the authoritarian imagining of the Mundas provided by the colonial doctor and the relatively well-meaning theory endorsed by the postcolonial scholar Amlesh share the same traits: abstractness, emphasis on classification instead of understanding, and separation between subject and object, the latter being essentially an administrative nuisance. Amlesh, however well-intentioned, becomes another spokesperson of a state that is, for the adivasis, "more distant than heaven".

The novel offers also the glimpse of a different possibility when Chotti meets a young Naxalite activist on the run. Instead of turning him to the police, he decides to help him. The episodes underlines Chotti's mercy, his respect of life in contrast with the ruthlessness that drives the counterinsurgency – fundamental human values that offer an elemental resistance against the state machinery. But Devi also frames the sequence as the seed of a new way of approaching the adivasis and, in turn, as a way to go beyond the colonial anthropological imagination *tout court*. During a short conversation, Chotti is fascinated by the boy's idealism, his desire to fight against oppression, although he knows the human cost of such a fight and the relentless opposition that it will face. More importantly, the boy seems animated by a genuine desire to understand the Mundas. The following piece of dialogue between Chotti and this most peculiar Diku [non-adivasis] is particularly interesting:

You're a great guy.

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So they say. But if I'm great why wear only ballbag, why no rice ever' evenin', why so much pain, eh?

The same story everywhere.

Diku doesn' grasp our sorrow.

We grasped. (Devi 2002, 179)

The Naxalite will then leave, not before expressing his the desire to come back again – "I learnt nothing at all. I'll come again" (Devi 2002, 180). The desire will remain unfulfilled: the boy is soon caught and brutally killed.

The episode, however, is nevertheless an occasion to propose an alternative to the subject-object relationship of colonial anthropological imagination, foregrounding intersubjectivity as a basis for imagination and hence of humanity. The Naxalite boy represents a central moral and epistemological point of reference in the book, consistently with Mahasweta's idea of what the movement, as a whole, represented for Indian history – an uncompromising rebellion against oppression and a self-sacrificing gesture of solidarity towards the downtrodden. The young Naxalite's perspective foregrounds the necessity of a willingness to listen, to include the cultural other that we are talking for within our imaginative process. Yet the passage, focused as it is on the young man's idealism and how brutally his life was exterminated, is inevitably oblivious of the epistemological pitfalls implied in a militant activism that claims to "grasp" a subaltern point of view – activists and militants, in other circumstances, are not immune from committing various forms of physical and epistemic violence towards cultural others they claims to help or to speak for. Such issues are actually the central concerns of the last text by Mahasweta that I will address in this chapter: "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha".

3.3.4. The Activist's Dilemma: "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha"

In its apparent simplicity, the encounter between Chotti and the young Naxalite epitomizes questions that, while inescapable for any writing with an anthropological sensitivity, acquire particular urgency in the contest of militant or activist writing. How can, indeed, the *sorrow* of the subaltern be grasped by an outsider? And if this must be the basis for political action, what can be done to better grasp that

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sorrow? Is politically engaged fieldwork the solution? Levi, as we mentioned, is sensitive to the issue – the state, the *signori*, and all the state-worshippers are detached from the peasant experience, and only months of ethnographic observation among the peasants seem to reveal the true nature of their plight. Somehow, however, Levi he manages to sidestep the issue of whether his own authorial voice is supposed to have already "grasped" the sorrow of the subaltern (but the answer is likely to be positive). On the other hand, for Mahasweta the question seems to remain always positively open. In this sense a novella like "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha", originally published in 1987, is paradigmatic of the underlying tensions of Mahasweta's work regarding the ethnographer-figure, tackling extensively the complexities of the ethnographic encounter between the adivasis and the non-adivasis, especially as regards the political and ethical responsibilities of the latter. Differently from "Draupadi", framed within the context of a ruthless counterinsurgency and hence providing little space for subtleties, "Pterodactyl" explores a variety of forms of engagement between the two sides – like in *Chotti*, but in a more systematic fashion.

Mahasweta has called "Pterodactyl" the "abstract of [her] entire tribal experience" (Devi and Spivak 1995, xx). The phrase can be read in at least three ways. One of them is precisely that the novella explores in painstaking detail the meaning and difficulties of the ethnographic encounter with the adivasis on the part of a metropolitan intellectuals. It is, in this sense, one of the most articulate experiments in self-reflection carried out by Mahasweta – an exploration of how it feels to meet the adivasis, to witness the collapse of one's own epistemological tools and paradigms, and to be changed by the experience. Another reading – indeed the one Mahasweta herself explicitly refers to – is that the adivasis that appear in "Pterodactyl" are conceived to register the shared experiences of all the different adivasi groups in India. Mahasweta reinforces this point by deliberately conflating customs from different groups in the descriptions of the adivasis in the novella and even inventing the central myth of the pterodactyl as the ancestral soul (Devi 1995, 196), thus further detaching the Pirtha adivasis from a specific adivasi culture. This is a strategic move to foreground a shared identity that can promote a unified adivasi struggle. Here Mahasweta acts decidedly more as an activist than as an anthropologist, being more concerned with creating a shared political platform than indulging in an accurate ethnographic description.

Indeed, Mahasweta is very explicit about this point in an interview with Spivak, stressing, at the same time, the national dimension of the adivasi problem:

> Will it be right then to say that you are not trying to keep their separate ethnicities alive…
>
> No, no, no.
>
> …but a general tribal identity as Indian.
>
> General tribal as Indian, not only that. They are Indians who belong to the rest of India. Mainstream India had better recognize that. (Devi and Spivak 1995, xvii)

Minoli Salgado stresses that this passage exposes an important difference between Mahasweta's political programme and that of her translator Spivak, whose readings/translations of Mahasweta's work try to highlight the irreducible cultural difference between the various adivasi groups and a systematic opposition to nationalist discourse (Salgado 2000, 134-135). The two interpretations are not, however, mutually exclusive. Even when Mahasweta deliberately plays around with ethnographic details – as in "Pterodactyl" – or prefers to foreground a general tribal identity, her starting point is nevertheless a fundamental descriptive realism of adivasi life (hence an ethnographic precision) – that may be *eventually* transcended for a political aim. Similarly, it may be argued that Mahasweta opposes *traditional* nationalist discourse – which marginalizes the adivasis – but she does not disown the nation as a legitimate level of political struggle, as I discussed in relation to *Chotti Munda*. However, Salgado has a point in foregrounding the priority of political solidarity in Mahasweta's work. I believe this is particularly appropriate for "Pterodactyl", whose (not unproblematic) ambition is to allow the reader to understand the essential characteristics of a global indigenous experience. The relevance of the novella, according to the author, goes, in fact, beyond the borders of India: "If read carefully, 'Pterodactyl' will communicate the agony of the tribals, of marginalized people all over the world" (Devi and Spivak 1995, xxi). Tellingly, the volume in which the English translation appears (*Imaginary Maps*) is dedicated to all the indigenous people in the world. Ultimately Mahasweta oscillates, in her career, between ethnographic precision and a pan-indigenous horizon – like Levi, who moves from a specifically Italian/antifascist phase to a universalist/Third-Worldist one. Perhaps for both authors the reason is that their search for political solidarity, which they initially carry out within a strictly ethnographic context, naturally leads them towards an internationalist perspective.

A last way in which "Pterodactyl" is an abstract of Mahasweta's tribal experience is its distinctively encyclopedic outlook, exploring various aspects of the adivasi experience with reference

to the past but also with a systematic engagement of new political, cultural and economical challenges. The novella, written in the late 1980s, a few years before the official liberalization of Indian economy, function as a link between the earlier part of Mahasweta's work – including her historical fiction – and later historical phases. Developmentalism and how it affects the adivasis (or how it doesn't) has always been a theme of Mahasweta's fiction, but here she is able to create a bridge between the Nehruvian model, which she ruthlessly dissects in its final stages, and the neoliberal one, which she anticipates. Moreover, her attention on environmental degradation, "natural" disasters and relief work on the backdrop of NGO culture firmly involve this text with issues and debates of the neoliberal era, reinforcing the novella's role as a crossroads of historical phases.

Puran Sahay, the novella's protagonist, is a reporter specialised in issues of caste and state violence. Although he certainly knows the tools of his trade, he lacks heartfelt commitment. His reportages have been praised – and validated by the hostility of political authorities – but his personal involvement for these pieces is the same he has for his articles on tourist resorts and celebrity gossip. As the narrator suggests, "the newspaper is a business to him" (Devi 1995, 97) – that of the investigative journalist seems to be only a pose he opportunistically adopts. Puran, however, is not entirely comfortable with this duplicity. Not only is he frustrated with his professional life, but he also knows that this inability to truly commit has also repercussions on his personal life. He is cold and distant in his relationship with his mother, his son, and most noticeably, with Saraswati, the woman he (presumably) loves and he would like to marry – a possibility that he constantly defer. Puran is faced with a harrowing question: "how will a person merely floating in the everyday world, who has not attempted to build a relationship with mother-son-Saraswati, be able to do justice to a subject as a journalist?" (Devi 1995, 97).

His limits are indeed put to a test when he travels to the Pirtha district, in Madhya Pradesh. Puran's friend Harisharan, a low-ranking development officer, has asked him to come and write on the living conditions of the local adivasis. Their plight is multi-faceted, but one of the most pernicious aspects of their situation is that, although people have been dying of starvation for a long time, Pirtha is not declared a "famine area", but just a "drought area". The reasons for this discrepancy between the schemes of the government and reality are both political and economical: in order to acknowledge the existence of the famine, the government would also have to admit that the technological developments implemented during the green revolution have not helped those people at all; that the causes of the

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famine are not natural but man-made; and that the relief funds earmarked for the adivasis have regularly been intercepted by local elites. Once in Pirtha, Puran investigates the plight of the adivasis, as well as the sighting of a mysterious airborne creature – the titular pterodactyl. This apparition has cast the inhabitants of Pirtha into a state of mourning – to the point that they are refusing relief and letting themselves die. They regard the apparition as a visitation of their ancestral soul, which cannot find peace under the present circumstances. A local boy, Bikhia, has engraved the creature onto the wall of a cave.

Before arriving to Pirtha, Puran has a long conversation with the S.D.O. [Sub-Divisional Officer] that is responsible for the area. The conversation touches a remarkable number of topics and is another example of Mahasweta's use of an information-loaded dialogue that sets a conversational atmosphere while constructing a fairly complex political and cultural framework for the reader. For instance, in this passage, the S.D.O. and Puran discuss the drought and the responsibilities of the government:

"If there were small dams three miles down the river, and then another mile down, the tribal area of Pirtha would be green."

"This didn't happen?"

"No. Eleven years ago there was great pomp and circumstance on Independence Day. We sent food. There was a camp, the minister came, there was an inauguration ceremony, and many reporters came."

"I didn't come."

"It began where it ended."

"It didn't go any further."

"No, no, it would have advanced if it had begun. Three SDOs have tried in turn, but the files always get lost halfway between Madhopura and Bhopal. [...] It'll never be done. Now we hear, there's lots of water in Pirtha."

"Who says?"

[…]

"Imagine someone going to see Pirtha […] at the height of the rainy season, and then such a view we would have. No way to guess there is a water problem… Journalist! Why come in the rainy season to inspect a drought area?" (Devi 1995, 100)

A few lines of dialogue manage to introduce the water crisis in Pirtha, the superficial and deceiving rituals of the state, the corruption afflicting various levels of the bureaucratic chain and the fundamental bad faith of the government, exemplified by the surreal choice of visiting a drought area during the rainy season. The conversation captures, from the insightful perspective of a "sympathetic" but ultimately powerless officer, the gap between the state and the adivasis. The state and its rituals require sacrifices, including, first and foremost, the adivasis themselves.

The lengthy conversation with the S.D.O., which delays Puran's departure considerably within the narrative economy of the novella, is also meant to create the sense of the slow, difficult journey, that necessarily precedes the actual ethnographic encounter between Puran and the adivasis. Puran has to navigate several layers of mediation before he can meet the inhabitants of Pirtha – a narrative structure that registers their distance from the resources of the state and from the gaze of the average Indian citizen. After the S.D.O., Puran meets up and with Harisharan – another link in the bureaucratic chain, albeit closer, physically and emotionally, to the adivasis. Harisharan's position is that of a fundamentally well-intentioned officer that is aware of the limits of the administrative framework but is determined to make the most of it – he wants to "use the system to *unmask* it" (Devi 1995, 112). As he explains Puran: "my need is to make a big noise in whatever way and put Pirtha on the map of Madhya Pradesh and therefore of India. I don't want heaven. Only what can be done within the administrative framework […]." (Devi 1995, 112). And yet, even before he arrives to Pirtha, Puran's mission – documenting the situation effectively, making "a big noise" and forcing India to acknowledge Pirtha's existence – stumbles into a fully-fledged crisis. This crisis involves, on Puran's side, a loss of faith in his anthropological imagination – the categories he uses to understand the adivasis – and in his ethnographic authority – his capacity to speak of/for the adivasi experience.

Differently from the narrating voice of *Christ stopped at Eboli*, whose ability to penetrate the peasant world is intimated at the early stages of the text, Puran, in spite of being an experienced fieldworker, this time starts to question his capacity for genuine insight. This crisis is largely engendered by the fact that his presence and in Pirtha is contested by the adivasis themselves. Indeed his work or Harisharan's are perceived as not significantly different from that of the Indians that have directly contributed to the destruction of adivasi culture. This emerges in particular in one passage, when Shankar, a literate adivasi that act as spokesperson of the local community and Harisharan's man of the field, starts narrating the plight of his people "as if he is singing in a saga" (Devi 1995, 119).

Shankar's saga – capturing, not unlike the Munda songs in *Chotti*, the mythical and poetic approach to history of the adivasi communities – tells of the time when the Pirtha adivasis owned their land and were free to follow their customs, until the foreigners came, casting Pirtha into poverty and cultural degradation:

> We were kings. Became subjects. Were subjects, became slaves. Owed nothing, they made us debtors. Alas, they enslaved and bounded us. Our land vanished like dust before a storm, our fields, our homes, all disappeared. […] Oh, we climb hills, and the road comes chasing us. The forest disappears, they make the four corners unclean. Oh, we had our ancestors' graves! They were ground underfoot to build roads. Houses, schools, hospitals. We wanted none of this, and anyway they didn't do it for us. (Devi 1995, 119-120)

Shankar's lament ends poignantly with a rejection of any form of relief: "You can't do anything for us. We became unclean as soon as you entered our lives. No more roads, no more relief – what will you give a people in exchange for the vanished land, home, field, burial-ground?" (Devi 1995, 120).

The passage, apart from registering a centuries-old history of expropriation and exploitation, provides a concrete political statement with respect to the modern policies of development and relief. A leitmotif of the novella is how planned development, often orchestrated in the remote seats of power with no contacts with the indigenous people and in accordance with corporate or governmental agendas, is not only blind to the adivasis' actual needs, but can also actively create material and cultural impoverishment and promote exploitation, effectively turning into underdevelopment. Mahasweta, in other words, points out how the development entailed in capitalist modernisation – whether it is promoted by state, non-governmental or corporate agents – "takes the forms also of the development of underdevelopment, of maldevelopment and dependent development" (Deckard et al. 2015, 13). The roads – a traditional symbol of progress if there even was one – epitomize those paradoxes: Shankar suggestively describes the roads as "chasing" his people, while Puran remembers how an acquaintance of his had previously explained him that the roads "have been built with the money sanctioned for tribal welfare so that the owners of bonded labour, the moneylender, the touts and the pimps, the abductors, and the bestial alcoholic young men lusting after tribal women can enter directly into tribal habitations" (Devi 1995, 109).

Top-down development, in "Pterodactyl", is ultimately a catalyst for slow violence – namely, in Rob Nixon's definition, "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across space and time, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011, 2). It is not a chance that Shankar's saga, to register the plight of the adivasis, must necessarily embrace a dimension of *longue durée,* going back to a remote past – semi-mythical but not atemporal – that is nevertheless still relevant to understand the present: only in its unfolding through years, decades and centuries can the violence inflicted on the adivasis on a cultural, environmental and economical perspective be fully appreciated. It is similarly not surprising that Mahasweta decides to focus on a famine, namely a form of catastrophe that is typically invisible and lacks a spectacular quality, which is why Harisharan wants Puran to depict the suffering of the Pirtha adivasis in the most shocking fashion he can muster. Ultimately, Puran's position as a journalist, as a potential activist, as an "ethnographer" and as a storyteller must be negotiated between Harisharan's view – doing something for the adivasis is better than doing nothing at all – and Shankar's – doing something for the adivasis is pointless and will end up making things worse.

Shankar and Harisharan are just the two most vocal figures that Puran has to listen to. The variety of perspectives and positions weighting on Puran's choices are mirrored by the heterogeneous, often polyphonic style of the novella. Some sections starts with quotations from articles of scientific literature – which Puran reads; some passages consist mainly of (sometimes fairly technical) dialogue between various characters – like the initial conversation with the S.D.O; in other passages the narrative voice takes over, providing dry accounts characterized by a significant level of socio-economical detail, only to return, almost unexpectedly, to a character's mind, and then move from one character to the other. While it is actually quite frequent for Mahasweta to use variations of this technique – what we previously called, in Lazarus' words, "volatile focalisation" – the effect in "Pterodactyl" is quite specific: Mahasweta's reader has the impression of skimming through Puran's field notes, constantly updated with new insights coming from a variety of sources and constructing his perspective throughout the novella.

A passage that highlights this process is Puran's first meeting with the Sarpanch (the state-sanctioned head of the village council). The Sarpanch, a comparatively well-off member of the community, while talking of the custom of using drums to communicate news, talks of "the tribals" before shifting to "we", and this detail prompts a number of reflections in Puran's mind:

When the tribal gets a little education, gains a little safety and moves from his class, does he go up or down? Does the lower middle class or the middle class accept him as a member? […] No, the main point is that he is not of the destitute tribal community, and not of the class which is his in the adjacent community. Is that why he has to empathize with his poor tribal community in troubled times? Why did the Sarpanch first say "tribals" and then "we"? A many-leveled problem. It is improper to pass quick judgement from a safe distance. (Devi 1995, 116)

The sense of tentativeness contrasts noticeably with Levi's polished, argumentative and confident narrative, and places Puran in a less dominant and assertive position as far as his ethnographic authority is concerned. The final sentence, moreover, clearly indicates Puran's attempt to find a proper ethical and epistemological dimension to build up his knowledge.

Puran's journey can be read as an initiation ritual that he undertakes to purify himself from his epistemological and ethical certainties – and it is not a chance that Puran's experience will actually include a ritual oil bath at the end of his stay. The phases of this extended ritual are numerous and include, at first, fairly straightforward confrontations with the harshness of adivasi life. As soon as he arrives to Pirtha, Puran sees a crowd of starving people – a particularly striking image is that of "infants [resting] their faces like ticks on the chest of their skeleton mothers" (Devi 1995, 128). At some point one of the women faints and Puran rushes to her help: "Puran puts his arms around her. A strange mixed smell attacks him: of dying of starvation bit by bit, of an unwashed body, of a rotting mouth. Puran lifts her up carefully and lays her down under a tree" (Devi 1995, 130–31). This is a brief but pivotal moment for Puran, as it triggers the beginning of a process that, starting from the sensory level described here, allows Puran to tear down his emotional and intellectual barriers.

The process Puran undertakes is not simply about giving and receiving help, about seeing, touching and reacting emotionally, but also about self-discipline and renunciation. Two gestures are crucial: the fact that Puran decides to refuse the generous meals that the Sarpanch and Harisharan have fixed for him; and that he decides to take notes instead of taking pictures. He does both out of respect for the adivasis. As for the food, he understands that "one can't come to Pirtha and return posthaste to look for good food in some government bungalow, it's immoral" (Devi 1995, 138). As for the pictures, he explains Harisharan that he is "realizing how barbaric it is to photograph skeletal men and women"

(Devi 1995, 147). Harisharan, pragmatical as always, comments unenthusiastically: "Please avoid that realization. Make an uproar about Pirtha" (Devi 1995, 147). Harisharan thinks that only an increased visibility of the Pirtha case will be able to attract sufficient interest to save the adivasis, and that Puran's scruples will only sabotage the operation as a whole.

Yet Puran's actions are not to be read as simply symbolic or self-serving, but indicate his attempt to conceive an approach to the adivasi problem that starts from the adivasis' point of view, in the hope of gaining their trust and serve their best interests. The risk of the *opposite* approach are clearly illustrated by Kausaliji, a well-connected relief worker that is operating in the Pirtha area. His approach embodies Mahasweta's deep reservations about a certain kind of NGO culture. On the one hand, he argues that the only way for the Pirtha adivasis to survive is to leave their ancestral home among the Pirtha hills and move to more fertile plains. The fact that they would abandon the environment and the sites in which their culture is embedded is of little consequence. On the other hand, he has no scruples in taking pictures of the starving men and women to gather the materials he needs for a show for fundraisers in the West. The moments in which the pictures are taken is described by Mahasweta as an act of naked, unadulterated violence against "the self-respect of the hungry" (Devi 1995, 168), which the starving and humiliated adivasis try somehow to resist:

> Now pictures are taken. The women cover their faces with the torn ends of their cloth. The men turn their faces away. The scene of an old woman holding a skeleton baby in arms taking lentil-rice in her bowl, is captured very well and when the tape recorder is held close you can catch the rattle in the old woman's throat and her mumble as well as the child's chirping wail. (Devi 1995, 169)

Kasauliji believes that he is entitled to take the adivasis' images and record their suffering voices because he has literally bought that right by providing relief.

Let alone the fact that Kasauliji's motives are far from transparent, this sense of entitlement is not only questionable *per se*, but is also a clear signal of broader ethical and epistemological problems. The forceful taking of the pictures of the starving adivasis epitomizes an asymmetrical anthropological imagination in which the native has no agency – it is an object that can only accept the decisions taken by a distant ethnographer figure/subject who supposedly knows better. In fact, the way an ethnographer-figure deal with someone else's image is a substantial test on how he or she perceive that

cultural other anthropologically. It is not a chance that I have previously argued that Levi's most controversial moment as regards his relationship with the peasants is precisely his decision to force Giulia to sit for a portrait. In spite of the different nature of the media of painting and photography, I believe the two sequences are fundamentally comparable, as both register a similar, forceful appropriation of a subalterns's image, allegedly for a greater good. Puran – a much more self-aware ethnographer-figure – understands that there is ultimately a very thin line between Kasaulji's overall approach and plain exploitation: both deprive the adivasis of any control over their destiny and contribute to the cycle of slow violence enacted on them at a material or cultural level. Both are, ultimately, different degrees of (internal) colonialism. Puran, instead, tries to establish a communication point with the adivasis and provide them with agency as regards their future – while simultaneously undertaking a personal transformation as a journalist and as a person.

The crucial moment of Puran's transformation is his encounter with Bikhia, the boy who has engraved the image of the mysterious airborne creature, and eventually with the creature itself. After some time spent in Pirtha, during a stormy night, Puran is visited by the creature, which, after consulting some scientific literature, he roughly identifies as the a pterodactyl. Or rather: a pterodactyl is what this creature reminds Puran of, although it does not actually fit perfectly any scientific description. Right from the beginning, the "pterodactyl", for Puran, is a working hypothesis that in itself contains an aporia: if the creature is really a pterodactyl, then it is supposed to be extinct; but if it is not a pterodactyl, then Puran has no clue about what the creature could possibly be. The other interpretation is the one Bikhia accepts: the pterodactyl is the soul of the ancestors of the Pirtha adivasis – an hypothesis that, however, begs the question of why the ancestral soul may have chosen Puran, an outsider, as its protector. The pterodactyl's ontological indefiniteness is consistent with one of the chief functions of the creature within the story: to shatter the hegemony of a single epistemology and rationality and expose the limits of Puran's capacity for making sense of world, of history, of cultural others.

Puran and Bikhia decide not to reveal the pterodactyl's presence to anyone else in order to protect it. The creature, in Puran's view, is the carrier of some kind of message – an "earthshaking piece of news" (Devi 1995, 142). Puran, however, cannot understand it. He makes an effort to decipher the meaning of the pterodactyl's glance and he makes several hypotheses, but can find no confirmation, as the pterodactyl is "outside [his] wisdom, reason and feelings" (Devi 1995, 156). Puran can only

speculate. The pterodactyl may be warning him against the fundamentally destructive nature of *all* history – both human and natural – whose violent side is only thinly veiled by the deceptive ideology of progress; in particular its warning may be directed against the increasing capacity for violence and death that human beings have perfected in the last decades, accelerating their own destruction:

> What does it want to tell? We are extinct by the inevitable natural geological evolution. You too are endangered. You too will become extinct in nuclear explosions, or in war, or in the aggressive advance of the strong as it obliterates the weak, which finally turns you naked, barbaric, primitive, think if you are going forward or back. (Devi 1995, 157)

This reading of the pterodactyl's message takes a specifically eco-cultural turn, almost a vision of a bio-technological dystopia in which nature is enslaved, destroyed or profoundly twisted into horrific new forms:

> Forests are extinct, and animal life is obliterated outside of zoos and protected forest sanctuaries. What will you finally grow in the soil, having murdered nature in the application of man-imposed substitutes? "Deadly DDT greens, / charnel-house vegetables, / uprooted astonished onions, radioactive potatoes / explosive bean-pods, monstrous and misshapen / spastic gourds, eggplants with mobile tails / bloodthirsty octopus creepers, animal blood-filled / tomatoes?" (Devi 1995, 157)

Exhausted this "broad" historical theory, Puran tries to turn to a narrower hypothesis – reading the pterodactyl as a spokesperson of the marginalized and offended indigenous people of the world. Is this perhaps the meaning of the message? The pterodactyl's eyes offer no answer.

> The collective being of ancient nations is crushed. Like nature, like the sustaining earth, their sustaining ancient cultures receive no honour, they remained unknown, they were only destroyed, they are being destroyed, is that what you are telling us?
> The dusky lidless eyes remains unresponsive. (Devi 1995, 157)

Puran even tries to narrow down the meaning to his immediate experience – the plights of the Pirtha people – and to an urgent, straightforward ethical injunction against the crimes committed against the Indian adivasis, but again he receives no confirmation:

> Have you come up from the past to warn us, are you telling us that this man-made poverty and famine is a crime, this widespread thirst is a crime, it is a crime to take away the forest and make the forest-dwelling people naked and endangered? Are you telling us that it is a crime to grasp in a stranglehold the voice of protest, and the arm of combat?
> The eye says nothing. (Devi 1995, 158)

Whether the pterodactyl is the carrier of a cosmic, ancestral wisdom, or whether its message is strictly connected to the oppression of the people of Pirtha – or both – Puran must admit his failure: "No point of communication. Nothing can be said or written" (Devi 1995, 158). This contrasts decisively with Bikhia's experience, who seems to find some meaning and communication in the pterodactyl's presence through their shared experience of death and extinction: "[Bikhia] has found some contact. He is a tribal, an aboriginal, you are much more ancient, more originary than his experience. Both your existences are greatly endangered" (Devi 1995, 156). Like in *Christ*, the elemental knowledge of death represents a bond that crosses cultural barriers – in this case even crossing the barrier between human and non-human. It is, moreover, a prerogative of the endangered subaltern.

The pterodactyl, within the narrative, works in at least three, interconnected ways. Firstly, it is overcharged with ambivalent meaning, embodying a number of interconnected, catastrophic historical trajectories. As David Farrier comments,

> Puran's encounter with the pterodactyl presents the reader with superimposed cataclysms; with overlaid moments of extinction […]. Not only the cultural (or even literal) death of the adivasi, the pterodactyl also marks the return of death on a truly monstrous scale (Farrier 2016).

In this sense, Puran's reflection on the pterodactyl's meaning may be a response to Shankar's saga – an attempt to rethink violence, as Shankar suggested, in its unfolding throughout time, unveiling trajectories, parallelisms and continuities of destruction that are otherwise invisible. But while Shankar's saga was the expression of a coherent historical vision born out of adivasi experience, Puran

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knows that his multiple interpretations of the pterodactyl's meaning are simply hypotheses that he constructs independently of an entity whose sorrow he does not grasp. This failure leads Puran to question in an even more radical way the depths of his knowledge, forcing him to rethink his previous experiences with the adivasis. For instance, at some point he realizes "how little he understood when he travelled in Ranchi district from one Munda village to another till he finally learned about them from S. C. Roy's book" (Devi 1995, 158). The fact that he had to encounter the tribals in a textual form in order to "know" them – through a classic ethnographic monograph – seems now to him a clear sign of how superficial his previous engagement had been. He understands the futility of his work, at least in the way he has undertaken it so far: "even after this deeply investigative analysis he knows nothing, has known nothing" (Devi 1995, 159).

The second way in which the pterodactyl works in the story, therefore, is as the final catalyst and culmination of Puran's epistemological crisis. The pterodactyl's message will be lost to Puran when the creature, in spite of Puran's and Bikhia's best efforts, eventually dies. Puran is not granted any revelation – he is left only with his hypotheses. But Puran understand that it might have been possible to understand the pterodactyl, had he been accustomed to cross the barrier that separate him, a part of the "mainstream", and the adivasis. The incommunicability between him and the pterodactyl is only an extreme reflection of the lack of communication between India and the adivasis. Hence Puran's encounter with the pterodactyl, while ending in tragedy and failing to establish a communication point, nevertheless enables some insights as regards the relationship between the two groups. As Neil Lazarus comments:

> Puran, recognising the limits of his own culturally determined understanding, is able both to assess the social costs of what this understanding has bracketed or extinguished, and also to glimpse how the centuries-old pattern of marginalisation and destruction might even now begin to be unpicked (Lazarus 2011, 159)

Puran's epiphany, therefore, focuses of the assessment of a gap between the adivasis and the mainstream, which, like in Levi's work, is not the expression of an ontological difference but historically forced on both groups by what Puran – not unproblematically – sums up as a lack of love. As he takes his leave from Harisharan, Puran argues that it was impossible to establish a

communication point with the pterodactyl – the soul of an ancient civilisation – because "to build it you must love beyond reason for a long time" (Devi 1995, 195). Puran's self-realization comes to full circle: it is precisely the lack of love – not only his, but of an entire country – that blocks understanding and makes action pointless. And yet, as Puran admits his defeat and relinquishes any ethnographic authority on Pirtha, he is allowed to contemplate the beginning of a new cycle: "Love, excruciating love, let that be the first step. Now Puran's amazed heart discovers what love for Pirtha there is in his heart, perhaps he cannot remain a distant spectator anywhere in his life" (Devi 1995, 196). The implication is, of course, that both his personal life – his relationship with Saraswati – and his journalism will change after the experience of Pirtha.

But what is, ultimately, "love"? It would be easy to mistake the novella's finale as the endorsement of a romantic fusion with the adivasis on the part of the mainstream Indian. But that would arguably translate into easy escapism that the political, cultural and economical complexity presented in the novella simply does not allow. Most importantly, "Pterodactyl" makes an extensive arguments against all one-sided forms of the imagination that are not constructed through a dialogical effort. Embracing an abstract, idealistic form of romantic love for the adivasis – which is, besides, a tradition that goes back to the colonial period – could only signify another act of violence, the adoption of a certain pattern of relationship that is indifferent to the adivasis' own subjectivity. It would mean to remain within the imaginative, ethical and epistemological framework that incorporates also Kasaulji's aggressive, top-down relief practices and more overt patterns of colonial governance. Puran – or the Indian mainstream – are not entitled to that form of love. Love, in the present circumstances, can only take the form of individual, tentative acts of trust on the side of the adivasis and mainstream India that, however, entail different duties and responsibilities due to the profoundly uneven nature of their relationship. In order to unpack this last point, let me briefly return to the pterodactyl, and in particular on the third way in which the creature function within the story – as a mirror of a specifically adivasi subjectivity.

While the pterodactyl, for Puran, works either as a reminder of his epistemological limits and as a number of interconnected hypotheses about history, violence and apocalyptic scenarios, for Bikhia the creature seems to have a more definite meaning. Epistemologically grounded in the myth of the ancestral soul, Bikhia, right from his first meeting with the creature (alongside Puran), is able to gain wisdom from it: "Bikhia has received his ancestral soul. This is why his face is now so full of a quiet

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wisdom" (Devi 1995, 143). The nature of this wisdom seems to be about the cultural choices that the adivasi community has to make in time of crisis, in particular as regard the "mainstream". Bikhia seems to read the flight of the pterodactyl – of the ancestral soul – as an example set in front of him to provide him with guidance to lead his people. The contrast between Puran and Bikhia is particularly stark during the pterodactyl's death scene. In that scene Puran is facing the failure of his ability to understand, he is "witnessing his own futility" (Devi 1995, 180). Bikhia, on the other hand, is actively learning from the myth of the incarnated ancestral soul, which is tragically coming to its conclusion under his own eyes:

> Bikhia is witnessing that their ancestors' soul embodied itself and flew one day, and now it's leaving its form and returning. If it were truly that? Would it have told all the tribals of the burial grounds in the extinct settlement, lying underneath the *bridges* and paths, the new settlements and the fields of grain, that our descendants are disappearing? Their existence is freshly endangered. To survive they must mingle with the mainstream, where their social position will be on the ground floor and their sense of ethnic being will no longer be distinct. [...] Bikhia's eye are like the still flame of a lamp, he wants to see his fill of the noble death of this noble myth (Devi 1995, 180)

Bikhia will emerge empowered from the encounter with the pterodactyl. He becomes "like an ancient chief of the community, venerated by all" (Devi 1995, 181). In this sense, Bikhia is very much like Chotti – a figure of continuity that is able to scour the past to provide his people with new cultural solutions to survive in the present. Quite significantly, he is last seen overseeing the planting of new edible roots – a clear signal that, under his leadership, his community is now determined to fight for survival.

In particular, by witnessing the ancestral soul take shelter at Puran's side, Bikhia seems to be able to conceive a way in which adivasi culture, while embracing the necessity of finding a symbiosis with the mainstream, does not surrender to its totalizing demands. This is epitomized by Bikhia's last request to Puran: to join him and the rest of his people for a ritual oil bath, but also to leave immediately afterwards. Bikhia acknowledges the necessity of the foreigners in time of crisis: "after all is said and done it is true that this outsider had to be let into what was intimately their own, in fact their own dead ancestors' soul" (Devi 1995, 182). But Bikhia is also adamant that there is a limit to this intimacy, which was indeed temporary. As Puran seems to be reading from Bikhia's glance, "You

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remain you, and I remain me, and after this heavy phase is over each will return to the orbit of his life" (Devi 1995, 182).

The first phase of love is an act of trust, which, on the adivasis' side, signifies an acceptance of the outsider in time of needs. For the mainstream Indian, instead, the act of trust translates instead into an acceptance of the adivasis' point of view even when it seemingly defies the logics of rational governance. With this in mind, Puran is finally able to write his report on Pirtha. His capacity to write the report stems from a newfound perception of the irreducible difference of his historical and cultural experience, but also from a newfound faith in the legitimacy of his way of acting culturally, which is writing: "let Puran be able to keep his faith in the pen. He is not a tribal […] How can he have faith in their faith? Puran must keep unshaken his faith in paper, pen and the printing machine. Puran has nothing else. If there is no pen there is no Puran" (Devi 1995, 186). And yet when he writes the report, he has to acknowledge that the Pirtha adivasis are legitimate in their insistence on not leaving their hills, acknowledging their right to protect their "near-extinct ethnic being" (Devi 1995, 189). Puran, in his report, tries to find a compromise between a sense of responsibility towards the adivasis and the necessity of trusting them with their destiny. His efforts mirror Mahasweta's own anthropological imagination in the context of the novella: a balancing act between a generalised political vision of the adivasis that must be imposed on a national scale to redress internal colonialism and a profoundly humble vision of militancy, which ultimately translates into an act of trust towards the adivasis. And indeed, as a political programme – appealing for the responsibility of the mainstream to incorporate the adivasis in a national discourse, but also defending the adivasis' autonomy – Mahasweta opposes internal colonialism through a formula that in many ways reminds us of Levi's original proposition in *Christ*.

3.4. Conclusion

Taking as a starting point the ethnographic discovery of a rural, subaltern group who had historically been marginalized through various phases of national history, Carlo Levi's and Mahasweta Devi's anthropological imagination takes a partisan, militant and oppositional stance in support of these groups. This allows them to critically address Italy and India – two nations whose frail, tormented,

uneven process of nation-building is particularly visible from the perspective of its victims – from a multiplicity of perspectives. They deal with the difficulties these two nations face in overcoming the authoritarian tendencies inherited by previous phases of history – both on in political and in cultural terms. These faults lead, in both cases, to the development of internal colonialism in both its material dimension – sheer exploitation and combined unevenness – and in its representational and discursive aspects – the representation of peasants and adivasis as second-class citizens, primitives, animals.

Their anthropological imagination, based on seeing national history as a continuity and subaltern presence as a continuous exclusion (and resistance), allows us to compare the dynamics of ethnographic encounters in European and the (post)colonial periphery. Such connection forces us to think together different forms of authoritarian governance – liberal, fascist, post-fascist, colonial and postcolonial – and different, persisting forms of the colonial/positivist anthropological imagination – either practised by colonial anthropologists, Italian positivist criminologists, military officers that strike against brigands or Naxalites, or more subtly inscribed in various forms of contemporary development plans. At the same time, this connection between Italy and India allow us to link together different forms of subaltern experience – various configurations of rural relationships and various modes of experiencing the (non-)presence of a distant, alien state. It allows us to compare, lastly, different forms of subaltern subjectivity within that nexus of relationships – different ways of conceiving history, especially in relation to magic and supernatural forces –- and of subaltern resistance – armed insurgency, songs, art, alternative telling of the past, political solidarity and mobilisation. The ethnographer-figure that explores these scenarios and horizons is asked, in both Levi's and Mahasweta's work, to grasp and understand the subaltern perspective in a context of twisted nation-building that would normally exclude peasants or adivasis from their rights as citizens.

In my view, it is precisely because Mahasweta is chronologically subsequent to Levi that their comparison becomes more even compelling. She can be seen as ideally carrying on a number of strategies and critical reflections belonging to Levi's work – an approach of militant anthropology and fieldwork, a theory of the state and the intellectual-writer vis-a-vis a "culturally other", internally colonized subaltern group, and, lastly, a "national" anthropological imagination which, nevertheless, values cultural autonomy – in a subsequent phase of world history, and within a different cultural world. When they do diverge in their political objectives or in their anthropological imagination,

Mahasweta and Levi offer us compelling issues to debate in an international and intercultural perspective.

The most relevant point of contention is, arguably, the one connected to the central thematic nexus of insurgency, resistance, history, nation and cultural change. Both authors value political mobilisation and the creation of relationships of political solidarity as a way to organically bring about change in a "traditional", subaltern community. However, their vision of subaltern armed insurgency diverge. Levi has no patience for the idea of brigandage as a social revolt while he is profoundly supportive of anti-fascist Resistance as a profound moment of spiritual as well as political renovation. The difference between these two moments is connected to Levi's idea of peasant history: while the Resistance is a moment of collective national renovation, brigandage is an outburst of the isolated peasant world; and since the peasants can only experience history in a timeless, mythical mode if left on their own – a mode that has a moral core but cannot organically be used as a basis for change and progress – brigandage can be, at best, a moral memento. For Mahasweta, who believes the adivasi conception of history to be able to accumulate a historical memory over time, each act of rebellion is part of a continuous resistance that the adivasis can learn from, and that organically leads both to other non-violent forms of resistance and to new armed uprisings.

How much of these differences depend on the writer's individual imagination and how much from the socio-historical context in which they write? Can it be, for instance, that the framing of the adivasis as "indigenous" people may inform Mahasweta's greater trust in their possibility of experiencing history independently *and* in a dynamic way? What are the implications and indeed the legitimacy of a struggle in the context of a liberal, totalitarian, colonial or postcolonial state? Are there different moral underpinnings? Mahasweta's and Levi's work offer different solutions, not entirely free from contradictions: while both see continuity between different forms of government, Levi, for instance, seems to wholeheartedly accept insurgency as a solution only in the context of a totalitarian state and from a national platform, while Mahasweta embraces subaltern militant action in all historical configurations – although she still believes in the necessity of integrating the adivasis on a national project. We may agree or disagree on the individual analyses, but approaching these evaluations jointly allows us to use India and Italy, as Levi would suggest, as mirrors of each other.

4. The Multidirectional Anthropological Imagination: Forgotten Lives, Environments and Epistemological Pluralism in Amitav Ghosh and Frank Westerman

4.1. Introduction

This last chapter deals with the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh (1956) and the Dutch writer Frank Westerman (1964). More specifically, I discuss Ghosh's travelogue *In an Antique Land* (1992) and his novel T*he Hungry Tide* (2004), as well as Westerman's essays/reportages *El Negro en ik* [*El Negro and Me*] (2004) and *Stikvallei* [*Choke Valley*] (2013). Both writers are known for the vast geographical and historical scope of their interests, a fact that the relatively small selection of works presented in this chapter already shows. These four books engage with a variety of historical periods as well with a number of diversified locations such as rural Egypt, the Sundarbans region of Bengal, a Catalan provincial village, and the Grassfields area of Western Cameroon. Ghosh and Westerman also have two different but equally heterodox approaches to literary genres, writing works that are not easily identifiable through traditional categories. Lastly, they actively engage with a variety of epistemological positions, such as various strands of scientific culture, poetic visions of the world, secular humanism and religious thinking.

Ghosh's and Westerman's capacity to explore different geographies, histories and discourses, as well as to mix genres and disciplines, is enabled, at least in part, by their multifaceted backgrounds, education and professional experiences. Ghosh was born in Calcutta in a bhadralok family – the same social and cultural milieu from which also Mahasweta Devi originates and that I have discussed in the previous chapter. His formation include a B.A. in history, an M.A. in sociology, and, most importantly, a Ph.D. in anthropology – which is the reason he did fieldwork in Egypt, as narrated in the pages of *In an Antique Land*. Ghosh, who had never been interested in an academic career and "always wanted to be a 'writer', whatever that means" (Stankiewicz and Ghosh 2012, 593), published his first novel *The Circle of Reason*, in 1986. From that point onwards, while teaching in various universities in India and the United States and carrying out a parallel activity as an essayist, journalist and foreign correspondent, he started writing novels in a variety of different genres and often based on significant

amount of research in different disciplines. His work can therefore boast the presence, for instance, of a Proustian *Bildungsroman*, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), a science fiction thriller, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), and several historical novels: *The Glass Palace* (2001), on the history of colonial Burma, and the recently completed *Ibis Trilogy*, a monumental saga on the first Opium War between British India and China, made up of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015).

Ghosh's fiction weaves together subaltern- and micro-history into various novelistic forms. He has explored various silenced sides of the history of South Asia, the Indian Ocean and a number of other, interconnected regions of the world. His way of doing history is, in many ways, in opposition to traditional historiography and its tendency to silence subaltern history. Similarly, many of his works are in many ways responses to abstracting and reifying tendencies of classical anthropology. *In an Antique Land* and *The Hungry Tide*, in spite of being profoundly different from a formal point of view, are probably the two instances in which Ghosh's distinctive anthropological outlook can be best explored, which is the reason they are the focus on this chapter. Ghosh's latest work, *The Great Derangement*, a long essay on climate change, shows an interest in environmental issues (already anticipated in *The Hungry Tide*) and in a variety of related philosophical, moral and epistemological questions, adding a further layer of complexity to Ghosh's work.

Westerman's background and his array of intellectual interests are also quite diverse. He was born into a devout Protestant family in the Northern Netherlands, and studied tropical agriculture at Wageningen University. As he tells in *El Negro en ik,* the aim of his studies was ultimately to do aid work in developing countries. He later decided to become a journalist, a career that emerged quite organically from his field experience as an engineer, as he had started writing reportages while doing engineering work abroad as a student. Quite consistently, he worked mostly as a foreign correspondent, most notably in the Balkans in 1992 and in Russia from 1997 to 2002, until he became a full-time writer in 2002. Westerman's books make good use of this variety of experiences, often starting off from an encounter taken from a specific phase of his personal or professional life, in order to expand it with further fieldwork and research. Differently from Ghosh, whose main works are novels – *In an Antique Land* being a notable exception – Westerman is exclusively a writer of non-fiction.

Considering his long career as a foreign reporter, it comes as no surprise that Westerman's books have a distinctively international setting. Often dealing with multiple locales at once, and following the

threads of political, intellectual or material history, Westerman creates complex tapestries made up of a variety of interweaving topics and themes like colonialism, social engineering, science, religion and storytelling. For instance, *Engineers of the Soul* (*Ingenieurs van de ziel*, 2002) explores the processes of social engineering in the Soviet Union through the interconnected viewpoints of literature and the monumental public works undertaken by the Stalinist regime; *Ararat* (2007) discusses the relationship between science and faith using Mount Ararat – in myth and history – as a starting point; *Brother Mendel's Perfect Horse* (*Dier, Bovendier*, 2010) deals with the parallel developments of "scientific" racism and animal eugenics by delving in the history of the Lipizzaner horses; and, more recently, *A Word A Word* (*Een woord een woord*, 2016) discusses the different histories of anti-terrorism campaigns in various countries and their drastically different degrees of reliance on violence and diplomacy. Westerman freely mixes his technical-scientific and journalistic expertise, his interest for narrative, and the knowledge and the repertoire coming from his religious background – which both *El Negro en ik* and *Stikvallei*, on which this chapter will focus, amply demonstrate.

I take Ghosh and Westerman as representatives of another mode of the anthropological imagination that I call "multidirectional" – a term that I borrow from Michael Rothberg's concept of "multidirectional memory" (Rothberg 2009). The multidirectional anthropological imagination consists in two epistemic operations: the tendency to see cultural others as representatives of multiple histories, which includes the possibility of seeing them as a mirror of the self; and the tendency to see them through the lenses of multiple epistemological positions and paradigms. Various cultural others, in Ghosh and Westerman, can either turn into the mirror for a broader (or simply another) history – they can mean something else that is, at first, seemingly unrelated with the context in which ethnographic encounters take place. Simultaneously, cultural others can be framed under multiple discourses at once – poetic, secular, religious, scientific – that both writers try, with different strategies and different degrees of success, to translate into a common language. The point of a multidirectional anthropological imagination is arguably that cultural others – as well as the self – can be better understood in their cultural specificity within broader perspectives that cross the concrete, narrow boundaries of a given ethnographic encounter. There is, moreover, a certain self-reflective tendency in the multidirectional anthropological imagination, certainly in Ghosh's and Westerman's work, perhaps because, in order to explicitly stage a confrontation between different epistemological paradigms, it is also important to be aware of one's own positioning.

On a theoretical level, the multidirectional and colonial anthropological imagination diverge epistemologically, because multidirectionality tends to destabilize the typological, ordering tendency of the colonial anthropological imagination; and, conversely, it shares with the militant anthropological imagination a tendency to transform the cultural others through an intellectual operation that connects them to a broader cultural history, although it does necessarily not imply a partisan stance. I use the concept of multidirectionality as an alternative to describing Ghosh's and Westerman's work – and the anthropological imagination that emerges from their work – as "global". That is not to say that (contemporary) globalization, which after all can be understood, in Anthony Giddens' definition, as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens 1990, 64), does not play a role in their narratives. Many instances of multidirectionality in their work respond to the effects of globalising processes. Moreover, globalization is central in the contemporary rekindling of interest for world literature, as I have discussed in the first chapter, and is a structuring element in much contemporary anthropology (see Appadurai, 1996; Marcus, 1995; Ribeiro, 2014). It may seem ideal, at first glance, to focus a chapter on contemporary writers with an anthropological outlook, framed in a comparative context influenced by the debate on world literature, and dealing with multiple, mutually influencing locales and histories, in terms of a "global" anthropological imagination.

However, arguing that Ghosh and Westerman explore a "global" anthropological imagination in their works may too easily suggest that they embrace ideological underpinnings such as the idea of the borderless world – namely that, in our contemporary globalised reality, people, ideas and goods can all circulate freely and without restraints. Globalisation *is* inherently a border regime, in which the capacity to overcome barriers is strictly regulated. Similarly to the way different people enjoy vastly different possibilities of movement across the globe, so do different narratives, which tends to be strongly policed when they struggle to portray people, places and histories as mutually interconnected in ways that threaten dominant discourses. In order to avoid the ideological connotations of a "global" anthropological imagination, I prefer the term multidirectional, which has also the advantage, in Rothberg's original formulation, to take a specifically oppositional stance against the attempt to isolate narratives and identities in the public sphere. That is not to say that the multidirectional anthropological imagination is necessarily a necessarily critical or radical perspective. Also multidirectionality, like all forms of the anthropological imagination, can take a number of political and epistemological

orientations, and there is definitely some potential for conservative or at least epistemologically questionable approaches within this horizon.

The "global" anthropological imagination may remain as a term to indicate an acritical adherence to the (secretly hierarchical) idea of the borderless world – and hence of cultural others as mere interchangeable travellers in supposedly free-streaming global flows. It should also be noted that in Ghosh's case the label "global" may certainly be acceptable to define the terms of his commercial success, since Ghosh is, especially after the publication of the *Ibis Trilogy*, a global bestseller. Westerman certainly enjoys a smaller circulation (the fact that he writes in a relatively minor literary language has a role in this), but his work has nevertheless been translated into a variety of languages, including, for some specific titles, non-European ones like Afrikaans or Japanese.

Ghosh's and Westerman's shared preference for research-based narrative and their multidirectional perspective represent a solid reason to compare their work. As a further incentive, their identity as an (anglophone) Indian and as a Dutch writer offer two compellingly different horizons in which to locate the origins of their multidirectionality. Provided that both variously explore different epistemologies, Ghosh is in many ways more willing to accept the coexistence of opposing perspectives that may arise in the ethnographic encounters he represents. This is connected to an anti-Enlightenment critique that informs his specific brand of humanism, which is in turn profoundly rooted in the tradition of the Bengali Renaissance. Westerman, on the other hand, ultimately clings more strongly to liberal-democratic principles contained in a matrix of European rationalism and secularism, but at the same time is particularly sensitive to colonial history and neocolonial dynamics in ethnographic encounters also as a response to a certain lack of articulation, in the Netherlands, of the Dutch connections with a (broad) colonial past.

4.2. Amitav Ghosh

4.2.1. Syncretic Humanism

While considerably younger, Ghosh belongs to the same bhadralok milieu as Mahasweta Devi, but the role of this background in forging the vision of the two writers diverges considerably. Their respective approaches to family and nationalism may help to highlight the difference. Mahasweta, in spite of her harsh criticism of Indian nationalism and Nehruvian Developmentalism in their exclusionary and exploitative aspects, still looks at the nation as a possible, indeed a *necessary* site of recognition for the adivasis. Conversely, she is vitriolic in her dismissal of the bhadralok family as a site of possible renewal – as in *Mother of 1084*. Ghosh, whose writing career was largely carried out in the aftermath of the Emergency – arguably the ultimate failure of the project of Nehruvian nationalism – sees in nationalism itself a far more dangerous site of violence than the family, even a traditional one, and sees the family as a valuable *alternative* to the nation. As he writes to Dipesh Chakrabarty:

> Two of my novels (*The Shadow Lines*, and my most recent, *The Glass Palace*) are centred on families. I know that for myself this is a way of displacing the "nation" […] In other words, I'd like to suggest that writing about families is one way of not writing about the nation (or other restrictively imagined collectivities). (Ghosh & Chakrabarty, 2002, 147)

The (bhadralok) family in *The Shadow Lines* is dysfunctional and divided, but it is Partition, and then a death in a communal riot, that truly threaten its capacity for providing meaning and shelter to its members – not any inherent flaw in their culture and values. This is also consistent with Ghosh's attraction towards smaller units and individuals, opposed to Devi's explicit concern for collectivities: in Ghosh's fiction a gathering, in most cases, intimates a threatening destruction of the self rather than an energizing fusion with a community.

Ghosh, therefore, is concerned with a significantly different set of political preoccupations and a has a fairly different relationship with the Bengali cultural heritage, which can be more serenely embraced as long as it is not restricted by narrow-minded articulations of identity such as hardcore, essentialist nationalism. Whereas Mahasweta takes an explicitly oppositional stance against the values and culture of the Bengali middle-classes, branded as hypocritical and oppressive, and turns, in a militant move, towards the adivasis, Ghosh has ultimately a less conflictual sense of filiation with the culture of the Bengali Renaissance and its 20th century legacy. He discusses extensively his influences from Bengali high culture, including Bakimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray.

This is not to say that the exploitative politics of the privileged classes is outside Ghosh's concerns – but his critique is more oblique, consistently with Ghosh's lack of a partisan stance against that *milieu*.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Ghosh's humanism – arguably one of the defining aspects of his intellectual outlook – draws much of its specificity from a dialogue with Tagore. As Carlotta Beretta argues, Tagore and Ghosh both share a tension towards a universal literature (Beretta 2015, 253) – which Tagore articulates in detail in "Visva-Sahitya", and Ghosh in his essay "The March of the Novel through History". In this dissertation on the various literary presences in this grandfather's bookcase, Ghosh elaborates a notion of literature that refuses "to be beaten into provincialism" (Ghosh 2005c, 109). In a rather overt reference to Tagore, he praises (and implicitly endorses) "a notion of universal 'literature', a form of artistic expression that embodies difference in place and culture, emotion and aspiration, but in such a way to render them communicable" (Ghosh 2005c, 108). As in Tagore, such conception of literature is rooted in both difference and translatability of experience – hence enabling a humanist conversation across cultures.

Most notably, as Beretta points out, Ghosh takes from Tagore (and from the Bengali Renaissance as a whole) a remarkably *syncretic* form of humanism. Tagore believes that "the humanity of men is a sign of their divinity", which in turn can be grasped with the power of imagination that is at the disposal of a poetic mind (Beretta 2015, 253). Ghosh adopts a more distinctively secular perspective, but in his books imagination, vision and (poetic) intuition, even if achieved through the pathway of faith, are all valued alongside a rationalizing and scientific discourse that is usually connected to secularism (Beretta 2015, 254). This openness to alternative epistemic possibilities is indeed one of the operations that allows Ghosh to recover a subaltern experience that is ignored by official historiography, in a way that is not entirely different from Mahasweta's interest for the adivasi forms of historical narration.

A consequence of this syncretic humanism – or perhaps one of its constituting elements – is that Ghosh's own position on what "the secular" and "the religious" actually are is quite complex, as he tends to re-organize the two categories in different patterns than we are usually accustomed to. Ghosh somehow anticipates the recent trend of finding new modes of integration between religious and secular perspectives that is often captured under the expression "postsecularism." As Camil Ungureanu has remarked, this term has lately become popular to indicate how "a new wave of philosophers and social theorists has, in the past decade, questioned the secularist opposition between religion vs.

modernity, faith vs. reason, and looked for a new common ground shared by atheists and faithful alike" (Ungureanu 2014, 1). Ungureanu distinguishes between rationalist and non-rationalist variants of postsecularism that nevertheless "share the conviction that religion cannot be simply dismissed as obsolete and irrelevant" (Ungureanu 2014, 2). Ghosh's conception of religion is, in a way, post-secular, in the sense that, most typically for his thinking, he tries to translate religious and secular perspectives into a shared language.

A way to understand Ghosh's perspective on religion is to look at his essay "The Fundamentalist Challenge" (1995). Here Ghosh argues that religious fundamentalism is not too different from secular movements that struggle for power and recognition, as it appears eminently interested in questions such as state power, bureaucracy, school curricula, the army, the law courts and the banks (Ghosh 2005a, 123). The discourse of religious fundamentalism shares the same concerns of groups involved, for instance, in language or ethnic conflicts, and, moreover, expresses itself in the same terms: "[all these movements] have recourse to the same language of difference – a language that is entirely profane, entirely devoid of faith or belief" (Ghosh 2005a, 125). Ghosh defines the collective ideology of these movements as supremacism – "the belief that a group cannot ensure its continuity except by exerting absolute cultural and demographic control over a particular stretch of geography" (Ghosh 2005a, 128). Ghosh ends the essay claiming that, in spite of the overwhelming tendency to conflate contemporary religion with political and social conflict, he has "swum too long in pre-postmodernist currents to accept that some part of the effort that human culture has so long invested in matters of the spirit will not, somehow, survive" (Ghosh 2005a, 137). What he means by that is that it is still possible to see religion as a source of spiritual insight, therefore available for a dialogical exchange, and not simply as a (supremacist) language that struggles to contain and control difference and carry out political agendas.

This set of ideas is further elaborated in a more recent an interview with Citra Sankaran:

I really hate this kind of fundamentalism, whether it be Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, whatever, it just revolts me. I just feel for it an absolute disgust because I think most of all it betrays any kind of spiritual content in human beings. And I do think that our inner lives, our spiritual selves are very, very important and it's very, very important to preserve that space in which spiritual life is possible. And what I hate most about this kind of fundamentalism is that it is just a pure kind of

politics which is seeking to, as it were, colonize every free space within us and that's why I feel we must resist this fundamentalism just as strongly as we resist the sorts of secular attempts to colonize all our integral spaces. (Ghosh and Sankaran 2012, 14)

Rather than siding either with a religious or a secularist view of the world, Ghosh tries to change the terms of the debate. What matters to him is to oppose any supremacist way of thinking that claims a complete control over the inner self of human beings. Supremacism is defined chiefly by its obsession with controlling people by imposing a specific model of humanity – what Francesco Remotti calls "anthropopoieutical frenzy" (Remotti 2013, 155) – and it can be either secular or religious. Resisting it, therefore, requires a critical effort from secular and religious people alike. Ghosh's attempt to address both audiences is clear from the fact that, while in the interview he talks of "spiritual life," resorting to a religious vocabulary, in other passages he expresses similar concepts in secular terms. For instance, in *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the protagonist states that if we do not try to imagine the world by ourselves, "we [will] never be free of other people's inventions" (Ghosh 2005d, 31). Ghosh stresses the importance of resisting any attempt to colonize our inner self, in order to articulate a space where a shared intellectual effort of creativity and dissent can survive. Supremacism, in this sense, includes not only religious fundamentalism, but also totalitarian ideologies, aggressive, uncompromising forms of rationalism and predatory forms of capitalism.

Anshuman Mondal talks of Ghosh's work in terms of "politics of ambivalence" (Mondal 2007, 173). He argues that his writing "is characterized by an attempt to choose both registers of modernity – humanism, secularism, syncretic nationalism, historicism – and those registers that resist or contest them – subaltern, postmodernism" (Mondal 2007, 173). Mondal's definition is, in many ways, even more poignant today, after Ghosh's publication of *The Great Derangement*, his long essay on climate change. This text, expanding several intuitions that were anticipated in *The Hungry Tide*, puts a new stress on forms of non-human agency, on non-human presences that certain rationalist traditions tend to silence. It could be said that Ghosh extends the concept of "human", if understood as a being that is provided with agency, also to non-humans. In the era of Anthropocene, when human action becomes a geological agent, Ghosh's humanism tries to move away from anthropocentrism – as a reaction to the very opposite, generalized trend of focusing imagination on the human "in exactly the period in which human activity was changing the earth's atmosphere" (Ghosh 2016, 65), thus making human beings

blind to the environmental effects of their actions. Ghosh's anthropological imagination, therefore, not only sees cultural others within ethnographic encounters populated by multiple possible epistemological systems that must somehow coexist, but also in relation to a larger context that includes animals, plants and the environment, with whom some form of dialogue must be established. This, alongside his "post-secular" concern for the "matters of the spirit", makes him far more accepting towards forms that a received form of secularism would simply label and dismiss as "irrational".

Ghosh's work is characterized by a tension between a desire of communicability, translatability and dialogue, and a sense of the irreducible specificity of individual and cultural experience. His anthropological imagination and his ethnographic encounters are fundamentally striving towards the *possibility* of dialogue and mutual exchange, but must constantly confront the presence of a number of political and cultural barriers. Ghosh's views on translation, in this sense, are emblematic of his position. In the previously quoted interview with Citra Sankaran, when asked whether he believes in "ultimate translatability of languages and cultures" (Ghosh & Sankaran, 2012, 5), Ghosh replies:

> I think all this stuff that people are always saying, "oh so much lost in translation," I think to myself, "who needs to hear that!" I mean what's the point of people saying that? [...] When I speak in English, how do I know that you are understanding what I am saying? Is it really possible for one human being to understand another human being? Obviously we interact with each other through a surface of words which is always deceptive. So what's the difference? There is always some sort of a patina which prevents, as it were, perfect communication. But that should be a given. It should be a starting point. […] If it's difficult to translate, then find a way! Language allows you infinite possibilities; you just have to try a little harder. (Ghosh and Sankaran 2012, 5–6)

This attitude can be extended to ethnographic encounters in a more general sense: there are difficulties, but it is always possible, in theory, to "try a little harder" in establishing cross-cultural communication. This attitude preserves a fundamentally humanist core that believes in the possibility of dialogue, even when the act of translation must find a shared language between human beings, animals and plants, or seemingly incompatible perspective such as secular and religious worldviews, or political pragmatism and idealism.

This does not exclude the possibility of a *breakdown* of dialogue, especially in those historical circumstances when there is no interest, from one of the two sides, to carry on a conversation, as in the

European conquest of the Indian Ocean trade (*In an Antique Land*), in the Morichjhãpi massacre (*The Hungry Tide*), in the bloodshed of the First Opium War (*Flood of Fire*) or in the approaching environmental apocalypse that the globalized ruling class plans for the Global South to pay (*The Great Derangement*). Needless to say these are all instances in which, for Ghosh, some kind of supremacist force has triumphed. But when Ghosh's ethnographic encounters do work according to a multidirectional framework, the cultural other manages to be a human being whose specific "language" can be translated and understood and, precisely because "other" cultures can be translated and understood by non-natives, a being that is capable of moving through cultures and belong to different worlds. Ghosh's multidirectionality is meant to find shared ground for dialogue thanks to shared humanity – in a context that includes also other beings entitled to a different forms of agency – but also thanks to the belief in the equivalence of different languages, discourses and viewpoints. As we will see, Westerman's own humanism and approach to a multidirectional imagination is less syncretic, less inclusive, but perhaps more intellectually lucid, more capable of articulating its own ambivalences and epistemological distortions.

As a final note, Ghosh is the only writer explored in this thesis that was academically trained as an anthropologist. However, many of his formal choices – and the way he structures the encounters within his books – are actually a polemical response to the limitations of traditional historiography and ethnography. Ghosh's research narrative opposes the tendency of traditional historiography to erase subaltern stories – hence his intellectual connection with subaltern studies and microhistory – but also the tendency of classical ethnography towards eliding the human and emotional aspect of fieldwork. In an interview with Alessandro Vescovi, Ghosh explains his relationship with anthropology:

> I liked anthropology, I thought anthropology was a very interesting subject and I learned an enormous amount from it. But it wasn't what I wanted to do. Anthropology, at least the anthropology of that time, was full of generalizations, and my mind doesn't work like that. I can't think about very abstract generalizations. I like to think about people, that's what interests me, people, characters. The plight in which individuals can find themselves. In some sense that was not what anthropology was about. (Ghosh and Vescovi 2007, 131)

A similar explanation, but definitely harsher on the discipline of anthropology as a whole, is found in an interview with Frederick Luis Aldama:

I realized very early on that anthropology was not of interest to me in the end because it was about abstractions, the way you make people into abstractions and make them into, as it were, statistical irregularities. And in the end my real interest is in the predicament of individuals. (Ghosh and Aldama 2002, 86–87)

It could be argued, without claiming that his work is antithetical to all forms of anthropology, that Ghosh is attracted towards the human specificity of the individual ethnographic encounter – where his characters, including the ethnographer-figures, can fully display their individual predicaments – rather than the generalizations that derive from combining the various individual encounters into an abstract synthesis. While not explicitly connected to the intellectual developments in academic anthropology, Ghosh's narrative solutions, aiming at recovering this dimension, actually share several concerns with the moment of postmodern critical anthropology that can be roughly identified with *Writing Culture*. Overall, Ghosh's work is a simultaneous rethinking of traditional historiography and ethnography, and the emblematic text for this process is certainly *In an Antique Land*, to which now I turn.

4.2.2. *In an Antique Land*: Culture of Compromise in the Mirror of History

In an Antique Land, written in 1992, consists of two alternating narrative threads. In the first one, Ghosh reconstructs the life of a Jewish merchant, Ben Yiju, active between Egypt and the Malabar Coast, in Southwestern India, as well as that of his Indian slave Bomma. Ghosh, by telling their story, also introduces the reader to the world of the pre-modern Indian Ocean, and, most importantly, to what he calls the "culture of accommodation and compromise" (Ghosh 1992, 228). This is how he defines the mercantile culture of the Indian Ocean trade at the time. According to Ghosh, not only did this trade network involve representatives of a variety of religious, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, providing an historical precedent for modes of cultural pluralism and trans-national mobility, but was also carried out in an essentially peaceful manner. Ghosh interprets this as having been "the product of a rare cultural choice" (Ghosh 1992, 287), which was suppressed when the Europeans arrived in the region and started to use force to gain control of the trade. The second narrative is focused on the time Ghosh

spent in two Egyptian villages – Lataifa and Nashawy – doing anthropological fieldwork among the local fellaheen (peasants) as part of his Ph.D. thesis. Ghosh sees his work in Egypt as an occasion to retrieve the pre-modern fragments of the culture of accommodation and compromise in the midst of a contemporary world dominated by identitarian divisions and supremacist ideals (echoed also in India, the other side of that pre-modern world). The culture of compromise is conceived as the possibility of coexistence of a variety of ways of being secular or religious, as well as the basis for a more flexible understanding of identities and affiliations, hence the importance of its retrieval in the present day.

The historical part of *In an Antique Land* represents an emblematic case of subaltern history. Ghosh reconstructs the life of two minor figures, almost erased (to different degrees) from history, and recovered through an unlikely archive: the Geniza of the synagogue of Ben Ezra, in Fustat, a neighbourhood of Cairo. A Geniza is the deposit where a Jewish community preserves all kinds of documents, lest God's name, routinely invoked in the most mundane transactions, should be profaned by the destruction of the documents. Plundered by various generations of Orientalists in the late 19th and early 20th century, and dispersed in a variety of Western archives, the incredible amount of materials contained in the Cairo Geniza is Ghosh's starting point. Written in Judaeo-Arabic – a dialectal variant of medieval Arabic written in Hebrew script – these documents are the symbol of a syncretic civilization that contrasts that "particular vision of the past" (Ghosh 1992, 95) in which the history of Jews and Muslims are irrevocably partitioned – a vision of the past that the dispersal and erasure of the Cairo Geniza retroactively validates.

The biographies of Ben Yiju and Bomma are an attempt to counter that vision of the past. Bomma, in the section dedicated to Ghosh's attempt to find out his exact name and the community he belonged to, is identified as part of the Tuluva community of the Malabar coast, a community whose religion, like many groups in India, "was woven from an equal mixture of local forms of worship […] and the high Sanskritic tradition", with the Tuluva "[participating] enthusiastically in the worship of both sets of deities" (Ghosh 1992, 252). This is in stark contrast with present-day Mangalore, where Ghosh witnesses Hindutva ideology launching a full onslaught on religious syncretism. On the other hand, Ghosh points out how Ben Yiju, already part of a multicultural trade world, probably ended up marrying Ashu, an Indian woman from the Nair community of the Malabar coast that he had personally freed from slavery. The fact that the marriage was somehow unusual, but probably did take place, is suggested precisely by the fact that Ashu is referenced only once in the whole corpus of Ben Yiju's

letters, "for only a marriage of that kind – with a slave girl, born outside the community of his faith – could have earned so pointed a silence on the part of [Ben Yiju's] friends" (Ghosh 1992, 230). Ben Yiju is depicted, in Ghosh's reconstruction, as crossing boundaries of faith and custom out of love.

Lastly, also the relationship between Ben Yiju and Bomma is represented as a bond that defies cultural barriers. Although Bomma is Ben Yiju's slave, Ghosh argues that their relationship was "probably more that of patron and client than master and slave, as that relationship is now understood" (Ghosh 1992, 259). Ghosh argues that the forms that slavery could take in the pre-modern world were "part of a very flexible set of hierarchies and often followed a logic completely contrary to that which modern expectations suggest" (Ghosh 1992, 260). He points out that several Hindu, Jewish, Muslim traditions within the Indian Ocean system offered examples of slavery as metaphors for quests for spiritual perfection, hence providing something ennobling like "human connections, pledges of commitments, in relationships that could just as well have been a matter of mere exchange of coinage" (Ghosh 1992, 263). For Ghosh, this conception of slavery – a set of "inarticulate counter-beliefs" – is important to argue for the existence of "a small patch of level ground" between "the matrilineally-descended Tulu and the patriarchal Jew who would otherwise seem to stand on different sides of an unbridgeable chasm" (Ghosh 1992, 263). Ben Yiju, Bomma and Ashu – and their respective relationships – end up representing the capacity to suspend differences and find common ground, consistently with the "world of accommodations" that Ghosh struggles to re-evoke (Ghosh 1992, 237).

Ghosh's historical narrative foregrounds syncretism, interconnection and shared memory in and between areas of the world and cultures that have been subsequently conceived as separate or explicitly antagonistic. His thinking struggles to recover what Michael Rothberg calls "multidirectional memory" (Rothberg 2009) – a mode of remembering events that does not simply enclose a specific history within the limited, self-referential horizon of the group that is most likely to have an identitarian bond with that history, but tries to open up recollections and connections with other parallel histories. Originally conceived as a way to make sense of the memory of the Holocaust in relation to the history of decolonisation and the civil rights movement, multidirectional memory works in a number of ways: rediscovering hidden links between various histories; enabling memories from a specific tradition to be articulated in the context and through the model of another history; and allowing a specific collective memory to be used by groups that, at first sight, have nothing to do with it.

Ghosh's narrative is replete with attempts to construct multidirectional memory: for instance, in the attempt to think together the Indian Ocean Trade and the contemporary history of the Middle East; or in his focus on similar instances of a syncretic past in India and Egypt that are subsequently replaced, in both areas, with a "partitioned" sense of history and identity. Taking my cue from Rothberg's multidirectional memory, I argue that Ghosh and Westerman work according to a multidirectional anthropological imagination. In this imaginative framework the cultural others are conceived through the mirror of seemingly unrelated stories, confronted with a variety of epistemological paradigms, and with the objective of finding a common ground between them and the ethnographer-figure. The historical narrative of *In an Antique Land* represents Ghosh's fundamental scheme for the multidirectional anthropological imagination, which is then projected onto the cultural specificity of present-day Egypt. Bomma, Ben Yiju, Ashu are only understandable in their cultural specificity in relation to a broad, wide-spanning history that connects different regions of the world: they would not make sense if they were restricted within more limited, locally circumscribed identities. Moreover, they interact with each other according to a humanist dialogical principle that allow them to find a shared language between their different traditions.

It is worth noting, as Gaurav Desai has, that Ghosh's reconstruction is marked by a number of historical distortions. Most notably, the idea of a fundamentally peaceful Indian Ocean trade is belied by the evidence of several internal rivalries between the various powers in the Indian Ocean and various historical attempts, also through the force of arms, to take control the trade networks. As Desai points out, "it may be true […] that before the arrival of the Europeans no political power in the Indian Ocean ultimately succeeded in dictating the terms of trade, but it was not for lack of trying" (Desai 2004, 136). Similarly, Desai points out that the vision of pre-modern slavery that Ghosh relies on – and, I would add, is so crucial to align Ben Yiju's relationship with both Bomma and Ashu as a free cultural choice in the name of tolerance and multiculturalism – ignores other instances of violence, of sexual and economic exploitation in the context of slavery the Indian Ocean trade (Desai 2004, 138–40). It is important to linger on these elisions in Ghosh's reconstruction because they effectively introduce an element that must be constantly taken into consideration when dealing with the multidirectional anthropological imagination: reading a cultural other with lenses that belong to another context, to another history, allows the cultural other to transcend the boundaries of a limited experience and

illuminate specific aspects of reality that would otherwise remain invisible. However, it also inherently marked by the risk of over-projection and mystification.

Nevertheless, the historiographical narrative – questionable as it may be – is an enabling framework that allows Ghosh to see present-day Egypt with different eyes. Most crucially, Ghosh's attempt to retrieve the culture of compromise, rather than a solitary quest, takes the form of a dialogical ethnography, as Ghosh's text "seeks to do away with the authoritative persona of the ethnographer, and to replace it with a dialogue between Ghosh and his native informants which continuously puts into question his narrative authority" (Srivastava 2001, 46). The retrieval of the culture of compromise, therefore, is conceived as a collective ethnographic experiment, carried out through a number of personal encounters between Ghosh and the villagers. Seen in this perspective, the ethnographic encounters of *In an Antique Land* reveal themselves as moments in which multiple, different languages try, succeed or fail to find a common ground.

It is not surprising that James Clifford – one of the editors of *Writing Culture* – was enthusiastic about *In an Antique Land* (see Stankiewicz and Ghosh 2012, 532). Ghosh's book, in many ways, represents the enactment of many theoretical insights of the phase of postmodern anthropology that Clifford represents. The ethnographic part of the text exposes the daily reality of fieldwork, including the fact that meaning, in ethnographic encounters, can only be constructed in a continuous negotiation with the informers. Ghosh, in particular, is particularly keen on showing that he is subjected to a continuous scrutiny on the part of the local inhabitants. His authority, moreover, is extremely precarious. The gap between traditional anthropology as an authoritative, hegemonic discourse and Ghosh's actual experience of fieldwork is yet another reason why he distanced himself from traditional anthropology: as he argues in an interview with Claire Chambers, "anthropology was creating a kind of hegemonic voice. It was an authoritative voice, an authoritarian voice, and all the time I was in this village I never had that sense of authority. And essentially, this was because I'm Indian" (Ghosh and Chambers 2005, 29). The quote allows us to underline that, consistently with the self-reflective attitude of the book, *In an Antique Land* is not focused on a "universal" ethnographer-figure, but on an *Indian* anthropologist, whose experience of Egypt is necessarily different from that of his Western colleagues.

One of the fields on which the dialogic experiment is played out is that of the "matters of the spirit", Ghosh's transversal category that encompasses both the secular and the religious. This becomes one of the fundamental areas in which the modern culture of compromise, in the ethnographic part of

In an Antique Land, can be retrieved. The first relevant encounter in this sense is the one with the educated and devout Ustaz Mustafa. Mustafa is the first of many characters that interrogates Ghosh on religious matters. It should be noted that, although Ghosh is often identified as a Hindu by the villagers and he himself tells Mustafa that "[he] was born a Hindu," he specifies to the reader that his position is actually more nuanced: "If I had a religious identity at all it was largely by default" (Ghosh 1992, 47). Ghosh's choice of words is significant, as he basically defines himself as secular person from a Hindu background. The cultural positioning of his secular status is of course very significant and plays a role throughout the narrative, informing his relationship with religious practices in specific ways – for instance, in his "specifically Indian" anxiety about being interrogated on religious symbols (due to his experience of communal riots). However he refrains from explicitly defining himself as secular, perhaps in line with his attempt, carried out throughout the book, to replace the dichotomy between the secular and the religious with a struggle against supremacism.

Ultimately, the encounter with Mustafa turns out to be the first attempt in the text to illustrate a present-day version of the culture of compromise. After finding Ghosh's arguments in defence of Hindu customs quite weak, Mustafa repeatedly urges him to convert to Islam. After several attempts, Mustafa asks Ghosh whether his father would be upset if he changed religion. When Ghosh answers that he might be, Mustafa ceases his efforts to convert him: "He had a son himself and it went against his deepest instincts to urge a man to turn against his father. And so, as the rival moralities of religion and kinship gradually played themselves to a standstill within him, Ustaz Mustafa and I came to an understanding" (Ghosh 1992, 52). The tone is light-hearted – the solution to the conflict is clearly a fortuitous and humorous one. However, this solution is crucial to understand the concept of compromise that Ghosh has in mind: not primarily focused on negotiating identities, but on forming a sympathetic understanding over shared values that enables a messy coexistence of different forms of life.

Ghosh does not elide the pressure involved in this kind of exchanges. This is best illustrated in the scene where he is invited to a wedding ceremony, and he is ultimately forced to remain with the elders instead of joining the celebrations. Like Mustafa, the elders start to interrogate him on religious matters – such as whether Indians are circumcised or whether they really "burn" their dead instead of burying them. This particular time Ghosh reacts to this line of inquiry by running away, unable to resist the interrogation. He explains to the reader that his anxiety is connected to a traumatic childhood

experience, the memory of an anti-Hindu riot in Dhaka. His friend Nabeel, however, runs after him, and tries to calm him by saying: "They were only asking questions, [...] just like you do; they didn't mean any harm. [...] These are just customs; it's natural that people should be curious. These are not things to be upset about" (Ghosh 1992, 204). Nabeel's comment frames the villagers' behaviour as mere curiosity, an attitude that is sometimes indiscreet, but is ultimately a premise for dialogue, urging Ghosh to withstand pressure, confrontation and fear, in order to value sympathetic attempts to reach out for him.

Withstanding this pressure is crucial to allow more fundamental forms of bonding to happen, and the narrative shows several situations in which a barrier of religious intransigence is nevertheless overcome by empathy. For instance, when Ghosh returns to Egypt after several years of absence, in 1988, he visits Jabir, a former pestering and exuberant boy that has now turned into a deeply religious young man. The encounter with Jabir is particularly significant because the tension between Ghosh's secular approach and Jabir's religious worldview is brought to the foreground. Jabir is very vocal about his Muslim identity:

> He added that it was in college that he had begun to learn the real meaning of Islam, from talking to some of his teachers and fellow-students. They had read the Quran together every day and held long discussions that lasted late into the night.
>
> "I was not involved in politics or anything," he said "and I didn't join any groups or societies. But I learnt to recognize what is wrong and what is true. I don't know how to explain these things to you: you don't understand matters like these" (Ghosh 1992, 308).

There is certainly a slight disquiet in the way Ghosh frames Jabir's statement, because he seems to deny the possibility of a dialogue between them on meaningful ethical issues – in other words, on spiritual matters. However, the episode turns out to be an emotional moment that underlays a genuine connection. Ghosh poignantly describes Jabir's dejection after he confesses that his hopes are being crushed by the difficulty of achieving independence, with the consequent social shame. The dialogue between the two proves Jabir wrong: a form of spiritual understanding is possible even between an orthodox Muslim and a secular Hindu writer – perhaps not on fine points of theology, but certainly over a shared insight on the tragedies and the ironies of life.

A character that, instead, embodies a supremacist attitude is Imam Ibrahim, the protagonist of one of the best-known passages of the book. The Imam merges religious orthodoxy and militaristic developmentalism in a single uncompromising worldview. In his quarrel with Ghosh, he accuses him of being uncivilized and barbarous because of the Hindu custom of cremating the dead. Most importantly, he voices the idea that civilization should ultimately be measured against the West, more specifically its military might. In the West, the Imam claims, they don't burn their dead, for "they're advanced, they're educated, they have science, they have guns and tanks and bombs" (Ghosh 1992, 235). Unable to restrain himself, Ghosh furiously starts boasting of the technological superiority of Indian armaments. The discussion degenerates in what Ghosh calls a squabble between "delegates from two superseded civilizations, vying with each other to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence" (Ghosh 1992, 236).

Reflecting on the event, Ghosh is ashamed to realize that he has, somehow, become a participant and a witness "to the extermination of a world of accommodations that [he] had believed to be still alive, and, in some tiny measure, still retrievable" (Ghosh 1992, 237). The expression "world of accommodations", quite iconic in itself, echoes a later passage – in the historical narrative – in which Ghosh describes the European conquest of the Indian Ocean Trade: "as always, the determination of a small, united band of soldiers triumphed easily over the rich confusions that accompany a culture of accommodation and compromise" (Ghosh 1992, 288). The argument between the Imam and Ghosh, in which only the rationale of violence prevails, prefigures, in a doubling and mirroring that is typical of *In an Antique Land*, a (past) event that still needs to emerge within the narration, eventually asking the readers to link the two sections and think one through the other.

Ghosh, however, ends the episode with an instance of culture of compromise. One of his friends, Khamees, cheers him up by assuring that he will come to visit him in India after he leaves. After a while, he adds: "but if I die there you must remember to bury me" (Ghosh 1992, 237). Christi Ann Merrill chooses this passage to argue that Ghosh deploys humour as a way to stress that cultural differences cannot be wished away, but they can function within an inclusive, constructive mode. Khamees, she argues:

is suggesting that there is indeed a possibility for understanding our differences – even if it's an approach that is partial, incomplete, fragmentary. The closest we will ever be is when we

acknowledge those differences and allow ourselves to laugh at them, and therefore at ourselves. (Merrill 2007, 122).

This partial understanding achieved through humour is another example of how the culture of compromise can work. It involves finding imperfect solutions that allow differences to coexist and more meaningful connections – friendship, solidarity, conviviality – to prosper.

Not only the Imam episode, but several of the ethnographic encounters in the Egyptian narrative acquire their full significance only in connection to historical part of the book, to the point that it can be argued, as Anshuman Mondal does, that two two narrative threads are doubles of each other (Mondal, 2003, 21). However distant they may seem, the reader is asked to see Ben Yiju's and Bomma's stories and experiences as echoing that of the fellaheen. Ultimately both sides of the narrative allow the other to be narrated with greater focus: thanks to the double-helix structure of the novel, episodes from the historical and ethnographic part are juxtaposed in a way that foregrounds how both worlds are relevant to each other. This is particularly noticeable in a number of chapters that, by explicitly connecting the events of one part of the book to the other through thematic similarities, validate a multidirectional imagining of the characters. The most significant example is certainly Nabeel, previously mentioned in relation to the marriage episode.

When Nabeel is first introduced, together with his best friend Isma'il, we immediately find out that he ultimately ends up in Iraq as a migrant. The detail surprises Ghosh – who learns this fact from Shaik Musa, another old acquaintance, during his visit in 1988 – because he had always imagined his friend would become an officer of the Agriculture Ministry, as he had been planning to do since he met him. Ghosh then narrates the story of Nabeel and his family. Born into a poor branch of an important local lineage, from a father who had accepted a "respectable" but badly paid job as a watchman, Nabeel is serious and quiet young man that "never [says] anything or [commits] himself without a good deal of prior thought" (Ghosh 1992, 148). At the same time, Nabeel is ambitious, determined to redeem his family from poverty:

"Nabeel […] hated his family's poverty, and loyal though he was to his father, he considered a watchman's job demeaning, unworthy of his lineage: He has always been treated as a poor relative by his more prosperous Badawy cousins, and he had responded by withdrawing into the defensive

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stillness of introspection. But there was a proud streak in him and […] he was determined to escape

his poverty and improve his family's condition. (Ghosh 1992, 150)

This combination of worldly determination and introspection – as well as his tragic story of emigration, discussed in a few paragraphs – frames Nabeel as a compelling double of a variety of other characters.

Nabeel, first of all, is a double of Ghosh, the ethnographer. This is explicitly foregrounded in the passage in which Ghosh is preparing tea with Isma'il and Nabeel in Ghosh's room. After "running his eyes silently around [Ghosh's] room, looking from [his] clothes, hanging on pegs, to [his] paper-strewn desk and the pots and pans stored in the tiny space that served as makeshift kitchen", he suddenly comments: "It must make you think of all the people you left at home […] when you put that kettle on the stove with just enough water for yourself" (Ghosh 1992, 152). Nabeel's insight is not lost on Ghosh, not only because it rings true, but also because of the sympathetic epistemic operation on which it is based: "It was the first time that anyone in Lataifa or Nashawy had attempted an enterprise similar to mine – to enter my imagination and look at my situation as it might appear to me" (Ghosh 1992, 152). Claire Chambers notes how this episode is also a declaration of intents for Ghosh as an anthropologist – for him, she claims, "the ethnographer's most important quality should be empathy, the ability to put him- or herself in someone else's shoes" (Chambers 2006, 13). Nabeel, through accurate observation and empathetic effort, becomes a double of Ghosh's experience, an ethnographer in his own right. This is even more relevant because, as we know, Nabeel eventually undertakes a journey of his own towards Iraq – his comment is not only an acute observation on his fiend's inner world, but also an intimation of his own future.

But, most importantly, Nabeel also becomes a double of Ben Yiju and Bomma. The chapter that introduces him ends with Ghosh asking Shaik Musa why Nabeel and Isma'il left for Iraq. The old man replies: "Why does anyone leave? […] The opportunity comes, and it has to be taken" (Ghosh 1992, 152). Ghosh, immediately afterwards, starts narrating Ben Yiju's story: "To the young Ben Yiju, journeying eastward would have appeared as the simplest and most natural means of availing himself of the most rewarding possibilities his world had to offer" (Ghosh 1992, 153). The connection is explicit: both Nabeel and Ben Yiju are framed as young men trying to take their life in their own hands – although, while Ben Yiju's career is depicted as a glorious ascent towards a world of possibilities,

Nabeel's beginnings are significantly less glamorous. Another partial parallelism is to be found in this description of Ben Yiju's personality and talents:

> His distinction of mind is evident enough in his letters, but he must have had, in addition, a certain warmth or charm, as well as the gift of inspiring loyalty – qualities whose attribution is none the more doubtful for being a matter of conjecture since their indisputable proof lies in the long friendships enshrined in his correspondence. (Ghosh 1992, 158)

Nabeel, once again, mirrors these qualities in his more humble, less privileged form. He is gifted, like, Ben Yiju, with significant intellectual qualities; he is both loyal and inspires loyalty, as his friendship with both Isma'il and Ghosh shows. The bond between him and Ghosh is strong enough that they keep corresponding regularly after Ghosh's departure. Yet, at the end of the narrative, his traces start to get lost – he seems to be receding into a phantasmal state of existence, like the historical figures that Ghosh must retrieve from the archives of history. Once he finds out that Nabeel is in Iraq, Ghosh manages to call him just once from New York, in 1988, promising to visit him in Baghdad. The promise is not kept, as Ghosh never manages to reach Baghdad on his way back to India.

When, in the epilogue, Ghosh is back to Egypt for another round of visits in 1990, a few weeks after the beginning of the Gulf War, Nabeel is not there. He is still in Iraq, and no one has any news about him. Indeed, the final pages of *In an Antique Land* are replete with ill omens about Nabeel's fate. Ghosh even thinks back to Nabeel's comment about making tea for one person only, far away from home – remarking that "it was hard to think of Nabeel alone, in a city headed for destruction" (Ghosh 1992, 353). In the final lines of *In an Antique Land*, as Ghosh is watching the news at Isma'il's house, Nabeel's fate, at least within the horizon of the narrative, is sealed into oblivion: watching a crowd of refugees trying to escape Iraq, the spectators, including Ghosh, try to find him among the crowd, but to no avail:

> There were more than a dozen of us in the room now. We were crowded around the TV set, watching carefully, minutely, looking at every *face* we could see. There was nothing to be seen except crowds: Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History. (Ghosh 1992, 353, emphasis mine)

Significantly, a few pages earlier, Ghosh had discussed the last document concerning Bomma, kept in centre for historical research in Philadelphia, symbolically finding a closure for his story. The juxtaposition is significant. Nabeel is now more akin to Bomma than to Ben Yiju, and with his disappearance he becomes something similar to how Bomma was described at the beginning of the narrative, in the prologue. Indeed, the very first paragraph of the book clearly echoes its ending: "The slave of MS H.6 first stepped upon the stage of modern history in 1942. His was a brief debut, in the obscurest of theatres, and he was scarcely out of the wings before he was gone again – more a prompter's whisper than a recognizable *face* in the cast" (Ghosh, 1992, 13, emphasis mine). Also Nabeel, at the end of the book, has no face. Even more tragically, there seems to be no redemption, as in Bomma's case, no closure to Nabeel's story. With this last, bleak equivalence, Nabeel turns out to be the cultural other that Ghosh uses as the privileged mirror for his multidirectional anthropological imagination in the text, containing in himself a number of other stories while simultaneously embodying the culturally specific experience of an Egyptian fellah: his empathy echoes Ghosh's anthropological persona; his ambition and desire for the future echo Ben Yiju's aspirations; his disappearance in the midst of the war reminds the readers of Bomma's intended fate – oblivion.

Ghosh's double-helix structure – coming into full effect in the last, brief sub-chapters of the epilogue – creates a swirling tapestry of parallelisms that forces the reader to compare individual events and situations by connecting the highly specific historical and cultural contexts in which they are located. This strategy echoes Ghosh's reflections in another passage of "The Fundamentalist Challenge". Discussing the possibilities of literature of representing violence, he claims that what fiction – and certainly also a narrative non-fictional text like *In an Antique Land* – is best equipped to provide is "a richness of detail" in describing an individual event that "creates a circumstance that is its own context and in this sense is imaginatively available far beyond the boundaries of its location" (Ghosh 2005a: 135). *In an Antique Land* is precisely conceived to explore with "richness of detail" the emotional setting of individual, local gestures that its characters carry out, but that are simultaneously able to reach out to different historical periods, different sensitivities and cultures. This epistemic operation, however, always runs the risk of stumbling into inadequate and inappropriate overlappings. For instance, is Nabeel's desire for a prosperous future even comparable, in its structure of feeling, to Ben Yiju's ambition? Ghosh's humanist imagination suggests that this is the case, and this is, again, an enabling narrative to construct a different vision of present-day Egypt as well as of the pre-modern

Indian Ocean system. Yet Ghosh is not unaware of the pitfalls contained in such form of thinking. In particular, they are addressed extensively in *The Hungry Tide*, where the risks and the potential of multidirectional anthropological imagination are one of Ghosh's fundamental concerns.

4.2.3. *The Hungry Tide*: Translated Worlds

If *In An Antique Land* mixes, in his double-helix structure, microhistory and dialogic ethnography in a work of non-fiction, *The Hungry Tide* is, instead, a research *novel*: it is clearly fictional, but it based on significant research in a variety of disciplines. At the same time its ethnographic character is also unmistakable: if we take the fairly simple definition of "ethnographic novel, from either insider or outsider," as "one that conveys significant information about the culture or cultures from which the novel originates" (Tallman 2002, 12), *The Hungry Tide* complies perfectly. It provides a holistic representation of the culture of one specific, peripheral area of Bengal, including its relationship with the local centres of metropolitan power, with its environment, its folklore, its history[10].

The novel is set in the region of the Sundarbans, at the very end of the Ganges' delta. This area of Bengal is a made up of an archipelago covered in mangrove forests, whose inhabitants survive mostly through the resources offered by the forest and the rivers, constantly threatened by tigers, crocodiles and storms. Two characters enter the so-called tide country: Piya, an American cetologist of Indian origin, and Kanai, a Kolkata-born, Delhi-based businessman that runs a company of professional translators. Piya is coming to the Sundarbans to study the fluvial dolphin *orcaella brevirostris*. Kanai is coming to read the recently discovered notebook of his late uncle Nirmal – a communist intellectual forced, in the early fifties, to seek refuge in the Sundarbans, where he has worked all his life as a schoolteacher. Kanai has been requested to do so by his aunt Nilima, Nirmal's widow and the head of the Badabon Trust, a local non-profit organisation supporting the island of Lusibari. The notebook will turn out to contain the account of Nirmal's involvement with a group of refugees that, after settling on the island of Morichjhãpi, were brutally evicted by the government in 1979, with most of them being viciously killed. The other central character of the novel is Fokir, a local fisherman whose mother, Kusum, died in the Morichjhãpi massacre. Piya, after spending a few days in Fokir's company and

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10 Some passages of this section (4.2.3) were published as part of "Exploring the Ethnographic Encounter. An Anthropological Approach to World Literature in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*" in *Il Tolomeo* (De Capitani 2016).

realizing he is acquainted with parts of the river that are crucial for the dolphins' life in the Sundarbans, decides to recruit him as a guide for her expedition. Kanai, who is attracted to Piya – in the same way as Piya and Fokir are to each other – decides to join them. The expedition, however, is struck by a terrible storm, during which Fokir dies to save Piya's life. In the end both Piya and Kanai decide to relocate themselves closer to the Sundarbans – Kanai moves to Kolkata, while Piya sets her working base in Lusibari, to collaborate with Nilima's Trust.

The novel's focalisation shifts around three main perspectives: Piya's and Kanai's – in alternating chapters – and Nirmal's, whose diary is read by Kanai. Alessandro Vescovi argues that thise repartition has a number of important functions for the novel: first of all, it allows the narrative to approach the Sundarbans though the perspectives of three "outsiders", so that the reader is provided with a form of mediation to experience the culture of the region (Vescovi 2011, 89). In this sense, the three main characters are all ethnographer-figures, cast in a number of ethnographic encounters with cultural otherness and actively engaged in an imaginative effort to make sense of their surroundings. Secondly, their limited perspective and the fact that their encounters within the Sundarbans follow the necessities of the plot, rather any pre-ordained order in which the region should be approached to have a "proper understanding" of it, allow the novel to arrange its material through an epistemological journey that mimics the randomness of reality (Vescovi 2011, 97). Various cultural details, words, stories and customs of the Sundarbans appear randomly or are mentioned casually, only to reveal their full importance and significance later in the novel, and not necessarily within the perspective of the same character. The overall effect is somehow the opposite of Kim's census-fantasy: no single character is able to grasp a complete knowledge of the Sundarbans, and they are often puzzled by what they see. All these procedures variously displace ethnographic authority, that is diffuse and not focused on a single ethnographer-figure. This is consistent with the trend Ghosh had already set within In an Antique Land.

Vescovi also points out that each main character provides a unique epistemological standpoint: scientific for Piya, linguistic for Kanai and poetic/political for Nirmal (Vescovi 2011, 93) – Nirmal, in fact, demonstrates both a political and poetic understanding of life, ending most of his journal entries with quotes from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. Quite consistently, the central metaphor of the book (as well as an important plot point, especially as regards Kanai) is translation. Translation dominates the novel in a very broad sense: not only as literal translation between languages, but as an enabling concept for a

number of equivalences, passages and transformations from and between various systems of knowledge or forms of existence..

Therefore we find equivalences and interchanges between humans and animals, between men and the environment, between animals and political systems, between different modes of knowledge and systems of belief. The point is that the book revels in forcing its protagonists beyond their epistemological comfort zone, forcing them to "translate" their languages and modes of understanding the world. So natural science and historical materialism are turned into a holistic understanding of the environment, mammal behaviour becomes poetry, mechanical translation becomes anthropology, liberal cosmopolitanism is turned into a subaltern yearning for a better life and tiger-killing becomes insurgency. Ghosh's quest for a multidirectional anthropological imagination lays precisely in investigating the possibility of these transformations. One of the assumptions of the book, which Ghosh takes from Rilke, is that we live in an inherently "translated world", where only animals, perhaps, truly feel at ease. Therefore we can only read it through different translations and interpretations – which are, in many cases, interchangeable, but that we also need to be ready to decipher.

The investigation on the idea of a translatability between different discourses and forms of knowledge was already a central feature of *In an Antique Land*. Translatability was inherently explored through two fundamentally human factors: time and culture – with a specific focus on secular and religious perspectives. In *The Hungry Tide* the area of anthropological enquiry – and hence the space in which translations can be enacted – is expanded towards non-human agents, so that the field in which the ethnographic encounter is played out is not limited to the interaction between ethnographer-figure and native *as human beings*, but between ethnographer-figure and the environment. With this word, by borrowing Pablo Mukherjee's definition, I mean "the complex (and often conflict-ridden) web, field or system […] composed of the relationships between human and non-human agents or actors that define the history of the Indian subcontinent" (Mukherjee 2010, 5) – or, for that matter, any area of the world. This definition clarifies that the environment is not outside history, nor does it overlap with an idea of "nature" that is antithetical to "culture". Indeed "the environment" is a constitutive part of human culture – and as such is a fundamental part of anthropological analysis. The anthropological imagination in *The Hungry Tide* ultimately directs towards this conception of the environment: if *In an Antique Land* argues for a dialogical anthropology in connection with

microhistory, *The Hungry Tide* asks the readers – and its ethnographer-figures – to extend this dialogue to non-human agents as well.

Each of the epistemological approaches employed by the characters to make sense of this environment, however, is more complex and internally contradictory than it initially seems. Piya's scientific outlook, for instance, seems to connect her to a traditional positivist outlook – a fact that is further reinforced by her admiration for 19th century naturalists that tried to identify the *orcaella brevirostris* – and in turn to a typological, atomizing mode of knowledge. Moreover, as she tells herself when she first start feeling attracted to Fokir, her usual approach to scientific research is to "[make] a place into a field" through "the exclusion of intimate involvement" (Ghosh 2004, 112). Although the comment seems to be focused exclusively on the sphere of personal attachments, it underlies an internalized idea of positivist detachment and objectivity. However, her scientific work also forces her to take a more holistic approach to the environment she is working in, just as she is gradually pulled towards significant human relations. When Piya, exploring the river alongside Fokir, makes a game-changing discovery about the daily movements of the dolphins – they follow the movements of the tides and "migrate" twice a day to different pools – she starts to fully understands the complexity of the watery environment of the Sundarbans, and that her study of the dolphins will require a significant amount of interdisciplinary effort:

> As she sat in the boat, thinking about these connections and interrelations, Piya had to close her eyes, so dazzling was the universe of possibilities that opened in her mind. There was so much to do, so many queries to answer, so many leads to follow: she would have to acquire a working knowledge of a whole range of subjects – hydraulics, sedimentation geology, water-chemistry, climatology […]. She had been sent to the Sundarbans for a fortnight, to do a small survey, on a shoestring budget – but to follow through on the questions now buzzing in her head would take not a week or two, but years, even decades. She had perhaps fifteen to twenty years of active field research ahead of her; she sensed that this project would consume all those years and more: it was the work of a lifetime. (Ghosh 2004, 125–26)

Initially looking at the region from a narrow field of expertise, Piya realizes that studying a single aspects of the Sundarbans necessarily requires branching out in a plethora of other subjects – due to to the extreme degree of integration between the myriads of elements within that incredibly diverse

ecosystem. This, in turn, requires the commitment of a lifetime – an argument in favour of immersive, long-duration fieldwork if there is one, with the difference that Piya's "field" gradually becomes a "place", replete with attachments.

If Piya's research project leads her towards a holistic form of knowledge, her research project – as she delineates it in the passage above – begs the question of what role does she attaches to human beings. The best way to answer that question is to look at her evolving relationship with Fokir. When she first meets him, her impulse is to romanticise him – in both senses: as her sentimental and physical attraction grows, so does her tendency to see him as a "natural man" in harmony with her environment. At the same time, the emotional attachment towards Fokir and the fact that she learns to explore the Sundarbans with him at her side allows her to see her scientific work as embedded, rather than artificially isolated, from the broader environment of the Sundarbans. When, at a certain point, she needs to map the riverbed with depth-soundings, she finds out that Fokir's fishing technique – which consists in scouring the bottom of the river with a nylon line to gather crabs – actually helps her to accomplish her task effortlessly. Her commentary is decisively charged with an erotic subtext, but she is not misguided in her intuition that her scientific work is compatible with the traditional human activity of the Sundarbans:

> That it had proven possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously – people who could not exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in one another's heads – was far more than surprising: it seemed almost miraculous. Nor was she the only one to remark on this: once, when her glance happened accidentally to cross Folkir's, she saw something in his expression that told her that he too was amazed by the seamless intertwining of their pleasures and their purposes. (Ghosh 2004, 141)

Piya sees Fokir as organically integrated in the natural ecosystem of the Sundarbans, just as she envisions her own work – through the logics of ecological conservationism – as inherently attuned with "nature". The fact that Fokir seems to be perfectly at ease around the orcaellas and know of their movements around the river only confirms this impression.

The fact that two of them cannot communicate verbally does not abate Piya's enthusiasm in the slightest, and, at the beginning of their second expedition (the one also Kanai joins), she

enthusiastically declares that "there was so much in common between us that it didn't matter" (Ghosh 2004, 268). Kanai – driven, to a considerable extent, by jealousy – is quick to point out that:

> There wasn't anything in common between you then and there isn't now. Nothing. He's a fisherman and you are a scientist. What you see as fauna he sees as food [...]. You are from different worlds, different planets. If you were about to be struck by a bolt of lighting, he'd have you no way of letting you know. (Ghosh 2004, 268)

Kanai's defence of verbal communication ties in with his own trust in the power of words and translation. It also directly contrasts with Piya's desire, expressed consistently throughout the novel, for a world where there is no need for translation (Rollason 2005, 6). Her attraction for marine biology is in part connected to her fundamental distrust of language and – *pace* Kanai – part of her attraction to Fokir is related to the fact that their relationship is constructed without words.

Kanai is quickly proved right – up to a point. What Piya is not considering is that Fokir's relationship with the environment of the Sundarbans might not necessarily be as peaceful and serene as she imagines it to be. The key episode in this case is the tiger killing scene. Around the middle of the novel, Piya, Kanai, Fokir are forced to spend a night close to a village that is subsequently attacked by a tiger. A mob gathers to kill the tiger, trapped in a cowshed. For everyone, including Kanai and the reader, who have learnt of the tense relationship between humans and tigers in the Sundarbans, the reaction of the villagers makes sense. Piya, instead, is shocked, having conflated, up to that point, her own view of nature with that of the locals – in particular with that of Fokir, who is now eagerly joining the mob. She rushes to stop them, and only the fact that Fokir carries her back to the their boat prevents the villagers from turning on her. Piya and Kanai voice a seemingly unsolvable ethical dilemma that, in turn, is offered to the reader:

> Kanai spat into the dust. "Piya, you have to understand – that animal's been preying on this village for years. It's killed two people and any number of cows and goats –".
> "This is an animal, Kanai", Piya said. "You can't take revenge on an animal". (Ghosh 2004, 293-294)

Piya sees the problem essentially as an ethical choice, disconnected from the practical implications for the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. What Piya needs is to complicate her position with what Rob Nixon

calls a "transnational ethics of place" (Nixon 2005, 239) – an attachment to a specific environment that, at the same time, is aware of those global dynamics of domination and power that an abstract preservationism might choose to ignore.

It is Kanai – who has just finished reading Nirmal's notebook and knows the details of the Morichjhãpi massacre, and is himself on a journey to question his own liberal viewpoint – that voices the connections between first-world environmentalism, the privileged classes of India and the suffering of the tide country people. He tells Piya that they are both complicit in maintaining the existence of the violent relationship between men and animals in the Sundarbans. As for Piya, she is complicit because "It was people like you [...] who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human cost"; as for him, "I'm complicit because people like me – Indians of my class, that is – have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favour with their Western patrons" (Ghosh 2004, 301) Although Piya is ferociously on the defensive in this episode, Kanai's argument ultimately strikes home. When Piya discusses again the matter of environmental preservation with Nilima at the very end of the novel, she is adamant about the fact that she does not want to "do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it" (Ghosh 2004, 397), and this is why she wants to involve the Badabon Trust in her large-scale project on the orcaella brevirostris.

However, does Piya's arc radically invalidate the kind of anthropological imagination she relies on to frame Fokir at the beginning of the novel? In other words, even if the point about her elitist ecologist notions is ultimately taken, is it true that her work as a scientist and his work as a fisherman are fundamentally different, their worldviews are incompatible, and that their experiences cannot be mutually illuminating even in their cultural specificity? After the tiger killing episode, Piya is willing to admit that she and Fokir have nothing in common. Yet the narrative finds other way to ultimately support the fact that, if their views are not the same, they are at the very least compatible – in other words, they are translatable in each other's language. Fokir, for instance, has a deep respect for the dolphins, rooted in his religious beliefs. Like many inhabitants of the tide country, he is a devotee of Bon Bibi, a forest goddess whose mythology and ethics play a pivotal role in the novel. We learn from Nirmal's journal – in which Fokir appears prominently – that he has been taught by his mother Kusum that the dolphins are Bon Bibi's messengers, gathering close to his family shrine at the island of Garjontola. The reason he can bring Piya to the pool where she can properly observe the dolphins is that he normally goes, like his mother has taught him, to honour Bon Bibi at the shrine in Garjontola.

Considering Fokir's personal connection with the dolphins, Kanai's idea that he simply sees fauna as food is largely mistaken.

If Fokir is not, as Kanai mockingly suggest, a "grass-roots ecologist" (Ghosh 2004, 297), his devotion to Bon Bibi does bind him to an inherently conservative set of ethics, also from an environmental standpoint. As Ghosh gradually reveals throughout the novel, Bon Bibi grants her protection to those who go into the forest with a pure heart, who respect the forest by refraining from defiling it (for instance, by relieving themselves or by lighting fires) and only go into the forest out of need (and not out of greed). Nor would this be the only choice available to an inhabitant of the Sundarbans. Annu Jalais – an anthropologist that Ghosh worked with for the writing of the book – stresses how specific groups in the Sundarbans can embrace more "violent" forms of worship and ethics because they base their livelihood on activities that are not traditionally approved by the Bon Bibi ethics, like poaching or prawn seed collection. These activities are, at the same time, riskier, more lucrative and more aggressive towards the environment than traditional forest work (like Fokir's fishing). Prawn seed collectors, for instance, use nets that have detrimental environmental consequences (see Jalais 2010, 115–23). Ghosh mentions the existence of these other groups in a passing comment made by Nilima – and it is interesting to notice that he does not particularly dwell on the ethical dilemmas posed by these specific groups, somehow simplifying the internal tension between the various subalterns of the Sundarbans. As Jalais points out, the environmental damage of prawn seed collection are very real, the dangers for the collectors are high and they directly feed a voracious global market. It should be noted, however, that this activity is often practised by women that can benefit from a lucrative source of income to challenge traditional rural hierarchies, and are labelled as violent and greedy by more traditional forest workers (see Jalais 2010, 32 and 124-143).

My point is that Piya's concern for ecological preservation – after a much-needed grounding in local reality – and Fokir's stance – which does not represent the spontaneous set of beliefs of a "natural man", but a set of affiliations determined both by his family affiliations and by his professional status in the Sundarbans – *are* in many ways compatible, in spite of the divergence presented the tiger episode. The novel's ending celebrates their union: even though, during the storm, Fokir dies and Piya loses most of her notes, she is ultimately able to preserve Fokir's knowledge and use it as a foundation of her new research project when she returns to the Sundarbans: her hand-held monitor – the only piece of equipment that survives the storm – has registered all the routes that Fokir has shown Piya in their

few days of work together. Fokir's religious and professional practices, intertwined with his devotion to Bon Bibi and her messengers, as well as his local knowledge, are translated and preserved into the language of (locally grounded) scientific fieldwork, in a project driven by the study of the *orcaella* and written in satellites. Ghosh, in depicting Piya's and Fokir's relationship, is envisioning a clearly positive example of "postcolonial custodianship" in the sense explored by Filippo Menozzi: "a living connection able to continue the other's legacy rather than merely one's own" (Menozzi, 2014, pos. 16). Such positive custodianship would not be possible if Piya's and Fokir's worldviews were not, to a certain extent, translatable into each other – if the idea of "Bon Bibi's messengers" and the ethics of the Sundarbans fisherman were not compatible with the scientific concept of the *orcaella brevirostris* and the ethics surrounding its scientific study.

Kanai's arc offer a parallel development, that equally forces him to cross the boundaries between epistemological paradigms, to dramatically misread at least one cultural other, to ultimately realize the complicities and shortcomings inherent in his anthropological imagination and adjust it to a more grounded – and ultimately acceptable – ethical position. Kanai, at the beginning of the story, is the representative of a global/liberal anthropological imagination: he believes in fundamentally meritocratic values, sees the people around him as equals engaged in fair competition that he is entitled to best with his talents, and, most of all, believes in social mobility and ambition as a driving force of human beings. He is serenely oblivious to his class privilege, which this meritocratic imaginative understanding of others conveniently conceals. Ghosh is very explicit in describing the disconnect between Kanai's liberal imagination and what we could call his bhadralok habitus. In Bourdieu's classical definition, habitus is a set of internalised behaviours connected with "a particular class of conditions of existence", which operates "without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them" (Bourdieu 1990, 53). Since habitus does not require the conscious obedience to a set of rules, Kanai is able to behave with an astonishing sense of self-importance and class arrogance, and simultaneously to believe he has overcome the traditional horizon of an upper-caste/class worldview through his cosmopolitan background. He does not consciously act according to a class and caste ideology, he rather rationalizes his behaviour in terms of rightful pride for his social and linguistic skills.

For instance, at the beginning of the novel, he asks "an elderly and somewhat subdued-looking person" (Ghosh 2004, 5) to switch places on the train to Canning. He thinks this is a test of his

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charisma and persuasion skills. The man complies, but actually because he is scared by Kanai's upper-class appearance. The narrative explicitly points out the role of class and power in the exchange by briefly taking the man's perspective: "this was clearly someone with a long reach, someone who might be on familiar terms with policemen, politicians and other of importance. Why court trouble?" (Ghosh 2004, 6). Similarly, when Kanai first encounters Fokir, he is barely able to breach into the wall of silence that the man constructs around himself. He later puts all the blame on the fact that Fokir is allegedly "a peculiar, sulky fellow" (Ghosh 2004, 217). He never realizes that talking to Fokir, as Piya puts it, with "the kind of tone in which someone might address a dimwitted waiter, at once jocular and hectoring" (Ghosh 2004, 210) may have played a significant role in increasing Fokir's hostility.

It is Kanai's imaginative construction of both Fokir and his wife Moyna that best illustrate the workings of his anthropological imagination and the changes it undergoes as the novel progresses. Kanai meets Moyna in the first part of the novel and is immediately struck by her determination: she is adamant about her desire of becoming a nurse and provide an education for her son Tutul, as much as she is annoyed by the fact that Fokir tends to disappear for days on the waterways, bringing Tutul with him. Kanai's admiration for Moyna is profound and genuine, even though it relies on a fundamental narcissism:

> Kanai could tell, from the sound of Moyna's voice, that her dream of becoming a nurse was no ordinary yearning. It was the product of a desire as richly and completely imagined as a novel or a poem. It recalled for him what it meant to be driven to better yourself, to lay claim to a wider world. It was as though, in listening to Moyna. He were looking back on an earlier incarnation of himself. (Ghosh 2004, 135)

Kanai's liberal-global anthropological imagination sees the cultural other as a peer (at least in theory), an individual fully provided with agency that is entitled with the same ambitions and desires of self-improvement as he is. The limits of this form of imagination is its inability to perceive alternative, meaningful possibilities for life as well as to appreciate the profound differences, in terms of privilege, between himself and a subaltern like Moyna: his ambition is *not* the same as Moyna, simply because, for instance, he never had to worry about food while he was following his drive to "better himself", nor could he have any doubts about the chances for transnational mobility that would be granted to him.

It is Piya that points out this aspect of Kanai's imaginative world to the reader, in the passage where the two of them are discussing the relationship between Fokir and Moyna. After listening to Kanai's plea for sympathy for Moyna's predicament – stuck as she is with a "backward" husband with no desire for self-improvement – she manages to see through Kanai's ideological construction (just as thoroughly as he is able to expose her romantic idealisation of Fokir):

> She understood now that for Kanai there was a certain reassurance in meeting a woman like Moyna, in such a place as Lusibari: it was as if her very existence were a validation of the choices he had made in his own life. It was important for him to believe that his values were, at bottom, egalitarian, liberal, meritocratic. It reassured him to be able to think, "What I want for myself is no different from what everybody wants, no matter of rich or poor; everyone who has any drive, any energy, wants to get on in the world – Moyna is the proof". Piya understood too that this was a looking-glass in which a man like Fokir could never be anything other than a figure glimpsed through a rear-view window, a rapidly diminishing presence, a ghost from the perpetual past that was Lusibari. (Ghosh 2004, 220)

The passage is particularly interesting – through its explicit use of the image of the mirror – because it can also be taken as a commentary of a common preoccupation in Ghosh's work, the fact that our projection of our own experience onto the other may ultimately result in a dramatic misreading of that other. In this case the limits of Kanai's imaginative operations lay in his incapacity to fully appreciate the specificities of Moyna's experience (to the extent he thinks it overlaps with his) and to see Fokir's life as inherently worth living. Consistently, he is almost invisible, precisely because he does not conform to Kanai's image of what a fully realized human being is supposed to be.

Kanai's anthropological imagination, perhaps even more distinctively than Piya's, is rooted in the metaphor and practice of translation, which is understandable, considering his professional occupation. Kanai's ease with multiple languages is the correlate of his impression of being able to understand the world transparently and complements his idea that people are the same, have the same drives and desires, and are hence readable, "translatable", as it were, into a language, a culture, an ideology, a worldview that he is familiar with. Moyna's experience is seemingly translatable into his liberal ambition; Fokir's way of living is not, hence Kanai is tempted to dismiss it as fundamentally sub-human and inarticulate. His equation between linguistic and general knowledge is clearly expressed –

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and first questioned – when Kanai asks Moyna why she married Fokir, even though she knew of his frustratingly reserved personality. Moyna's reply baffles him:

> She smiled, as if to herself. "You wouldn't understand," she said.
>
> He was nettled by the certainty in her voice. "I wouldn't understand?" he said sharply. "I know five languages; I've travelled all over the world. Why wouldn't I understand?"
>
> She let her *ãchol* drop from her head and gave him a sweet smile. "It doesn't matter how many languages you know," she said. "You're not a woman and you don't know him. You wouldn't understand." (Ghosh 2004, 156)

The full meaning of Moyna's reply remains a mystery – is she alluding to social pressures connected to her role as a woman? Or, quite simply, to her attraction to Fokir? – but the point of the episode is quite clear: there is more to the world than languages and words, a point that Moyna reiterates when, much later, she tells Kanai that words are not the way to a person's heart: "Words are just air, Kanai-babu […]. When the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river lies beneath, unseen and unheard" (Ghosh 2004, 258). Also in this sense, Kanai's journey is complementary to Piya's: while she desires a world without the need of translation, he desires a world where translation can provide perfect transparency.

All of Kanai's delusions collapse in another climatic scene, which, quite consistently, involves a revision of all aspects of his imaginative worldview: his liberal, cosmopolitan attitude, intermixed with his class habitus; his trust in words and translatability; his complicity with uneven power structures. At some point during the final expedition on the river, Fokir brings Kanai ashore, to show him some tiger tracks – in an attitude that Kanai finds explicitly defiant. As soon as he lands, Kanai slips and falls spectacularly into the mud. When Fokir tries to help him, Kanai, utterly humiliated, starts screaming obscenities at him. This brings him to realise something deeply disturbing about himself:

> His anger came welling up with an atavistic explosiveness, rising from sources whose very existence he would have denied: the master's suspicion of the menial; the pride of caste; the townsman's mistrust of the rustic; the city's antagonism towards the village. He had thought he had cleansed himself of these sediments of the past, but the violence with which they spewed out of him

now suggested that they had only been compacted into an explosive and highly volatile reserve. (Ghosh 2004, 326)

For once, Kanai is particularly lucid about the origins of his actions. He understands precisely what is going on: an explosion of a class- and caste-based verbal violence. The latent violence of his everyday actions emerges suddenly into a set of beliefs that Kanai himself is able to identify. Bhadralok ideology, normally lying in Kanai as a habitus, emerges as an articulated, conscious form and provide Kanai with a basis for his assault on Fokir. Kanai can tap into such an ideological formation because that very system of beliefs is echoed in his everyday gestures and attitudes. Realizing that those feelings do exist inside him, however, gives the lie to the premises of his liberal/global anthropological imagination – ultimately, he does not really imagines all human beings as his potential peers, and he expects deference and respect from a subaltern.

Kanai starts only now to question his worldview, and, quite consistently, he does that by thinking in translational terms:

Raising his head, Kanai caught a glimpse of Fokir's eyes and the words withered on his lips. In Kanai's professional life there had been a few instances in which the act of interpretation had given him the momentary sensation of being transported out of his body and into another. In each instance it was as if the instrument of language had metamorphosed – instead of being a barrier, a curtain that divided, it had become a transparent film, a prism that allowed him to look through another set of eyes, to filter the world through a mind other than his own. These experiences had always come about unpredictably, without warning or apparent cause, and no thread of similarity linked these occasions, except that in each of them he had been working as an interpreter. But he was not working now, and yet it was *exactly this feeling* that came upon him as he looked at Fokir: it was though his own vision were being refracted through those opaque, unreadable eyes and he were seeing not himself, Kanai Dutt, but a great host of people – a double for the outside world, someone standing in for the men who had destroyed Fokir's village, burnt his home and killed his mother; he had become a token for a vision of human beings in which a man such as Fokir counted for nothing, a man whose value was less than an animal. (Ghosh 2004, 327, emphasis mine)

Kanai's epiphany is clear from an ethical point of view, but there is a fundamental ambiguity in the way he frames his insight: how can the feeling that Kanai is experiencing now, in Fokir's presence, be exactly the same as the one he experienced in the instances of "transcendence" he achieved during his work as an interpreter? Kanai frames two experiences that should be very different epistemologically as fundamentally similar: the feeling of *penetrating the mind of another* through translation, which becomes a "transparent film"; and *seeing himself refracted* in Fokir's eyes – which are themselves "opaque, unreadable". Both experiences are connected to Kanai's being granted an insight connected to the perspective of another person. However in the first case this insight involves the sensation of understanding the other completely, in the second case it is a realization about himself that only uses the other as a refractive surface. At best, Kanai, changing the way he thinks about himself, manages to visualize what Fokir might *possibly* think of him. And yet Kanai stresses that the two experiences *are* the same – implying, "unreadable eyes" notwithstanding, that he might be having a genuine insight into Fokir's mind.

There are several ways to approach this conundrum. One is to argue that Kanai's logical disconnections in the passage illustrate the fact that he is transitioning from an ethnographic encounter embedded in an epistemology that aims at transparency and absolute translatability to a more critical and self-reflective one, based on the need of interpreting reality. The other possibility is that Kanai and arguably the whole narrative are not entirely clear about the insights they reach about the cultural (subaltern) other – whether they want to argue that the subaltern other is "opaque, unreadable", at least up to a point, or whether it is fundamentally knowable (albeit only through grounded forms of knowledge that take into consideration an idea of shared humanity and are not tempted by supremacist tendencies). Even the whole argument about language and translation is not unequivocally resolved. It is true that, in the end, when Piya remembers Fokir's last moments, language is framed as not essential: "she remembered how she had tried to find the words to remind him of how richly he was loved – and once again, as so often before, he has seemed to understand her, even without words" (Ghosh 2004, 393). Yet it should be noted that Fokir and Piya's final connection is framed in a context where words and translation, provided by Kanai, are still essential, if approached more critically.

Towards the end of the novel Kanai gives Piya a translation of a part of the *Bon Bibi Johuranama* – the "national", foundational poem-prayer of the Sundarbans that tells the story of the forest goddess. We know from Nirmal's journal (which Kanai is reading) that Kosum "[has] told it to [Fokir] so often

that these words have become a part of him" (Ghosh 2004, 248). Kanai, humbled by the experience on the seashore with Fokir, decides to translate a central passage of the poem and give it to Piya. The nature of this gift – considering the deep, conflicted emotional attachments between the three main characters – is profoundly ambiguous, almost setting up a Cyranesque situation: Kanai is declaring his love by acting as intermediary for a rival, introducing the translation by saying that he wants "to ensure someone's happiness, even if it should come at the cost of his own" (Ghosh 2004, 353). Kanai presents the translation as an instrument through which Piya can finally reach Fokir's subjectivity – albeit partially – but that will hopefully remind her of Kanai's presence through some imperfections in the translation (differently from the love triangle in *Cyrano*, the whole point is that Kanai's role as intermediary is explicit and revealed). In Kanai's words:

> [The song of Bon Bibi] was the song you heard on Fokir's lips yesterday. It lives in him and in some way, perhaps, it still plays a part in making him the person he is. This is my gift to you, this story that is also a song, these words that are a part of Fokir. Such flaws as there are in my rendition of it I do not regret, for perhaps they will prevent me from fading from sight as a good translator should. (Ghosh 2004, 354)

The passage is supremely ambiguous from an epistemological point of view. It seems that Kanai has finally accepted that no perfect translation is possible – that the world is opaque, it is already "translated" and words cannot give a full understanding of it. Yet the importance of words is reinstated powerfully, not only because they are given a somehow solid, essential presence – Kanai talks of "words that are a part of Fokir" – but because, ultimately, the translation really seems to provide Piya with some genuine insight on Fokir, something more solid than – or at least complementary with – the instinctual, wordless bond she feels she establishes with Fokir.

I linger on the issue of translatability as a central plot point *and* metaphor in the book because I think it illuminates the way in which the multidirectional anthropological imagination works in the novel, as well as its ambiguities. Those ambiguities are well exposed in Neil Lazarus's reading:

> *The Hungry Tide* certainly plays with the idea that language is "only a bag of tricks", and fundamentally anti-mediatory, just as it plays with the ideas of incommensurability and interlinguistic untranslatability. But the suggestions as to the inaccessibility of experience to

language are of course precisely suggestions, that is to say, themselves based in language. In these terms the novel's commitment to the humanist idea that all experience is communicable is nowhere more evident than when it seems to be proposing that some dimensions of experience are inexpressible through language. (Lazarus 2011, 151)

I wonder if the presence of instances of incommensurability and doubts about the power of language are not, as Lazarus suggests, an elaborated "play", but genuine doubts about the fact that, if all experience may be communicable, we still need to find the means – or the words – to do that, and that we *may* ultimately fail. In this sense the novel is the expression of a genuine hesitation between the two ethical and epistemological possibilities of incommensurability and commensurability.

There is no doubt that the novel steers at least *ethically* towards the latter option. The ending reinstates the fundamental translatability of the forms of the experience, as we previously discussed with regards to Piya and Fokir. As for Kanai, quite curiously, it seems that also his sense of (liberal) self-improvement, if purified from its classist, deracinated underpinnings, is a worldview worth preserving: in the end Moyna is involved, part-time, in the managing side of Piya's new research project, also teaching her Bangla in exchange for English. Tutul, on the other hand, is granted a college education through the money Piya is able to gather with a chain letter on Fokir's behalf. The finale seems to respect Moyna's ambition – understandably – but also, more importantly, Kanai's imaginative understanding of her. While Kanai was clearly wrong in his judgement of Fokir, he was not too far off as regards Moyna: Moyna's subaltern yearning and Kanai's liberal ambition seems to be two languages that can, in the context of the novel, be translated into each other, mutually illuminating even if different in their cultural details.

Overall, it is possible to read the finale as a "glocalist" utopia, in which the cosmopolitan characters root their life and experience in a local dimension, providing an alternative to shallow or opportunist globalism. Conversely, in Alexa Weik's words, the ending "leaves out […] the disconnected political forces that cannot relate to persons and localities, but are driven only by well-meaning concepts [...] and global flows of capital," while foregrounding how the "engaged global, in contrast to these, actually becomes the local, not simply by assimilating or replacing it, but rather through complex, partially mediated, partially immediate processes of identification and affection" (Weik 2007, 135–36). Within the theoretical framework I am using, this means that the finale is the expression of a

multidirectional anthropological imagination that insists on finding a way to translate different languages and worldviews into a shared humanist language. The experiences of Fokir, Piya, Kanai, Moyna are ultimately framed as understandable through each other – translatable from one to the other, as it were. This does not mean that *any* experience is translatable into one harmonizing worldview: clearly the forces that are left behind in the finale are antagonistic towards and inassimilable within this humanist community. Precisely because they represent supremacist forces – talking a totalizing language that accepts only its own terms at the expenses of all the others – they cannot be translated into a shared experience. Instead, Fokir's forest ethics, Piya's scientific research and environmental commitment, Kanai's idea of "laying claim to a wider world" and Moyna's complex yearnings all speak – this is what the novel ultimately wants us to accept – a common language. In this sense, it is difficult to argue that Ghosh's work "is a case of fiction in retreat from the world, unable to face the crises of our times and seeking solace, instead, in some form or the other of writerly escapism" (Paranjape 2012, 364). *The Hungry Tide* offers a specific human and political solution: a locally grounded cosmopolitanism whose fundamental premise is the translatability of human experience on a humanist basis. Whether this is a satisfying or feasible solution is another matter altogether.

Ghosh's multidirectional anthropological imagination is thus based on a syncretic humanism, which presupposes that all forms of knowledge, all forms of life, regardless of their source and imaginative horizon, are comparable, translatable into each other, as long as they share a fundamental core of (humanist) values. These two pillars of Ghosh's imagination are perhaps more explicitly voiced by Kusum and Nirmal respectively. It is Kusum, on the eve of the final attack against the island community of Morichjhãpi, that spells out, quite simply, what it means to be human. As she tells Nirmal:

the worst thing was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt or dust. "This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for from people from all around the world." Every day, sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people? Do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these

things, it seemed to me that this whole world had become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No one could think this is a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil – (Ghosh 2004, 261-262)

Kusum's speech defines the human experience as a series of activities enacted on nature to guarantee the survival of human beings, and hence it claims the right of human beings to act on the environment they live in. At the same time, she ultimately rejects a neat distinction between nature and culture: human activity is defined precisely by being organically embedded in an environment, which is in a complex relationship with human beings. Her way of imagining human beings implies an anthropological imagination that must necessarily take the environment into account – there is no human experience outside a specific environment that is shaped by human interaction with non-human agents. Ironically, it is the government's protectionist policy – as well as its global patrons – that enforces a rigid dichotomy between nature and culture, selectively persecuting human activity if it transgresses within the realm of "nature". Kusum's speech unveils the profoundly colonial and authoritarian imagination of the government: it is both typological – trying to enforce rigid boundaries onto organic, integrated environments – and ultimately aimed at authoritarian governance and exploitation – subalterns and "nature", once separated, can be subjected to profoundly different forms of governance that yield maximum profit. Kusum, appropriating the language of this form of imagination, uses it to carry out her accusation: assuming that a neat distinction between humans and animals exists, as the governments is repeatedly yelling at the settlers, then it is clear that the governments and its enforcers *are* animals.

It is important to notice that Kusum's idea of environment is not harmonic or Edenic. Her father, after all, was killed by a tiger, and she is very much aware of how the land and water that have nourished her can be relentless and cruel. Instead, she argues for an idea of human beings according to which men and women are part of an environment that is, for best or for worse, part of their self, and hence an environment whose different languages can be translated into each other – and therefore into human experience. In this sense it is significant that the two fundamental non-human presences in the

Sundarbans – tigers and dolphins – are forms of life that are variously associated, under the different perceptions of the various characters – with aspects of the Sundarbans and its human inhabitants.

Dolphins, for Piya, are the key to understand the complexity of the marine environment of the region; they are, for Fokir and Kusum, also aligned with set of ethics that preaches the balance between all the forms of life in the forest. Ultimately they are fundamentally similar to the victims of the supremacist forces at work in the Sundarbans: they are environmentally threatened because, as Piya remarks in her very first encounter with Kanai, they are under-represented in popular imagination, differently from tigers – and like the subaltern population of the tide country. When Piya, right before the storm, finds the corpse of a dolphin calf in a small creek, the narrative frames this as another instance of government violence, pointing out that the calf was probably killed by "the propeller of a fast-moving motorboat" which "was probably some kind of official boat used by uniformed personnel – maybe from the coastguard or the police or even the Forest Department" (Ghosh 2004, 346). Considering that the Forest Department is one of the main forces of authoritarian governance that looms in the background of the whole story – taking environmental protection as an excuse to oppress and exploit the subalterns – it is quite clear that a link between dolphins and instances of oppression like Morichjhãpi is being established here. But the dolphins are also the focus of Nirmal's poetical imagination, when he is brought to Garjontola by Kusum. As a dolphin looks at him, he understand "why Kusum found it so easy to believe that these animals were something other than what they were. For where she had seen a sign of Bon Bibi, I saw instead, the gaze of the Poet" (Ghosh 2004, 235). Multidirectional imagination works precisely by translating forms of life into "something other than they [are]".

Tigers, on the other hand, tend to be aligned precisely with governmental forces: they are, differently from dolphins, hyper-visible, as well as the core of the environmental programs that threaten to damage the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. This is also consistent with the fact that tigers prey on the forest workers – not unlike the government itself; and, in the legend of Bon Bibi, they are associated with the ferocious demon Dokkin Ray, who assumes the shape of a tiger to attack and devour the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. Kusum's accusations – the oppressors of the settlers are animals, most likely tigers – follow this multidirectional epistemic operation that grants the possibility of switching between different sets of relationships – between humans, between humans and animals – contained

within different epistemic paradigms – science, politics, folklore, poetry – to variously articulate an imaginative understanding of various forms of life.

In this sense, Kusum is one of the most proficient "translators" of the different languages of the tide country – switching from religious through folkloric to political thinking as a framework to understand human beings and animals alike – and it is only understandable that Nirmal should be attracted to her. Devoted to Rainer Maria Rilke's idea that "life is lived in transformation", Nirmal thinks and writes in messy combination of different languages and epistemological paradigms. As Kanai describes him:

> Nirmal was perhaps the least materialistic person I've ever known. But it was very important for him to believe he was a historical materialist. […] For him it meant that everything which existed was interconnected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature. He hunted down facts in a way a magpie collects shiny things. Yet when he strung them all together, somehow they did become stories – of a kind (Ghosh 2004, 282-283).

Nirmal's journal, consistently, encapsulates the same attempt of the novel to bring together different epistemological paradigms and worldviews so that they can occupy a shared space, a humanist conversation that, as Kanai points out, can also be, quite simply, the space of narrative, of storytelling. Seeing storytelling as a common ground for different epistemological perspectives is something that also Frank Westerman endorses, perhaps even more strongly than Ghosh. It is to Westerman's specific approach to multidirectionality that I now turn.

4.3. Frank Westerman

4.3.1. The Dutch Approach of a Sceptic Unbeliever

Like Ghosh, Frank Westerman's multidirectional approach is influenced by his specific cultural milieu. Born in 1964, Westerman grew up as the Netherlands underwent radical social changes. Dutch society, from the late 19th century to the 1960s-1970s, had been structured according to the principle of

"pillarization" (*verzuiling*). Different religious and political communities used to organize themselves as a separate, autonomous and self-contained "pillars" of society. Specifically, the main three pillars in the Netherlands were the Protestant, Catholic and Social-democratic ones. Those pillars provided their members with an entire spectrum of institutions and organisations: schools, universities, political parties, clubs, associations (Oostindie, 2011, 8). A significant part of life could be lived, therefore, within one specific religious and cultural environment. Pillarization, however, started to fade away in the 1960s and 1970s, in a quick and thorough process of secularization. As Gert Oostindie argues:

> The Netherlands launched into a rapid process of secularization and a strong wave of individualization pulled the rug from under *verzuiling*, which was increasingly experienced as claustrophobic. Within a matter of decades the Netherlands had changed from a sober and prudent country to one that was overwhelmingly secular, in which citizens took less and less notice of the traditional authorities (Oostindie, 2011, 9).

Westerman's narration of his deeply religious (Protestant) education and the fundamentally secular perspective that replaced it over the years reflects this development quite neatly, and it is found in bit and pieces in several of his works. It is particularly in *Ararat*, a book on the relationship between faith and science, that Westerman explores religion as a theoretical problem. Right from the beginning, Westerman clarifies his position on religion:

> I realized that I had not prayed in more than twenty years; I couldn't do it any more. Actually, there had been no drastic break, no explicit rejection. I simply came to regard religion, in all its manifestations, as a form of theatre, a perpetual stage play that human beings had conceived and enacted by themselves (Westerman 2009, 33)

Certainly such smooth transition from religion to secularism is at least in part enabled by the thorough secularization of Dutch society that Westerman's generation could fully experience. But rather than simply echoing societal developments, this passage contains two fundamental aspects of Westerman's position: a non-confrontational but robust secular perspective that is not willing to sacrifice certain rationalist positions; and an interest for the *narrative* aspect of the various epistemological perspectives, including religion.

It should be noted that the reference to theatre in the passage quoted above is, in a way, as illuminating as misleading. It is illuminating because, by referencing a performative art, Westerman is foregrounding how he is aware of the performative nature of religion, and the fact that the sensitivity to a certain set of practices (not only to to certain modes of thinking) marks the differences between different secular cultures. In a passage of *Ararat*, as he is visiting a monastery in Armenia, he cannot help but being moved by a religious function, realizing that his very sensitivity is embedded in Christian culture. Yet, Westerman's reference to theatre might seem to establish a comparison between two collective, communitarian experiences based on a ritual element. This, however, is *not* a particularly important aspect for Westerman's understanding of religion "as theatre": in another passage of *Ararat*, as a Turkish bookseller confronts him with the idea that religion can mean primarily the fusion with a community, Westerman instinctively recoils from this idea, stressing that, for him, religion is mostly understood as a private, individual matter. He connects this approach not only with his temperament, but also with a specifically Protestant culture that focuses on an individual confrontation with a *text*. And it is specifically in these Protestant, textualist terms that he reframes, in yet another passage, his passage from a religious to a secular perspective: a way of seeking shelter not in the Word of God, in upper case, but in the profane word, in lower case (Westerman 2009, 229). This is the dimension in which he is willing to engage with religious discourse: as a form of storytelling – both fascinating and contestable.

It might seem surprising that a book that starts with a fundamental rejection of the authority of a religious perspective may turn into a lengthy reflection of the relationship between faith and science. This is, in many ways, the distinctive trait of Westerman's multidirectionality: while rooted in a specific epistemological position, he thoroughly investigates, up to the point where he seems to be actively undermining his own standpoint, different epistemological possibilities: religion, irrationalism, extreme forms of radical politics. Like Ghosh, he tries to find a shared ground between different epistemological positions but, differently from Ghosh, the space for negotiation is not as broad, precisely because Westerman is more open to the possibility to register how various epistemological perspectives can often remain incommensurable. As an aesthetical, stylistic and ethical choice, Westerman is definitely more willing than Ghosh to illustrate encounters that end with a breakdown of communication, lack closure or are not resolved in a shared humanist understanding.

Science and technology, alongside religion, are other fundamental fields of reflection for Westerman. Differently from Ghosh – whose education is, after all, in the *social* sciences – Westerman's formation as a tropical engineer is connected with a precise interest for the scientific method as an epistemological position. The "science" that we find discussed in his books – *Stikvallei* is an interesting example – reflects in part an insider's position, differently from Ghosh's interest in science more as a philosophical or historical perspective. Yet "science", as a broad historical category, interests Westerman also when it takes the form of a pseudo-science: in *Dier*, *Bovendier*, for instance, Westerman deals with the stories of the precious breed of Lipizzaner horses as a mirror of eugenics and "scientific" racism. If Westerman is a believer in the scientific method and affirms the epistemological superiority of secular positions when compared to religious ones, this does not mean that science, in his historical manifestation, is a "pure", ideal source of knowledge. If anything, science and technology in Westerman are always connected to narrative, ideology, politics, history.

Westerman's approach to colonialism and racism is also a reflection of his Dutch origins. It should be noted that the Netherlands is characterized by certain lack of articulation of his own relationship with the colonial past – not unlike Scotland and Italy, albeit in different patterns. Sandra Ponzanesi, precisely in the context of a comparison between the Netherlands and Italy, argues that while "the Netherlands has a voluminous history of colonial expansion to the East and West Indies, [...] what it has in common with Italy is a very belated acknowledgement of its postcolonial status" (Ponzanesi 2012, 55). [...] The result of this lack of acknowledgement is, according to Elleke Boehmer and Frances Gouda, that:

> The status of the Netherlands as an ex-colonial power remains unproblematized, and consequently the manner in which the history of colonialism might link up with the formation of national and migrant identities today is left insufficiently examined. Debates – about race, racism and identity in university forums for example – are not seen to link up in any direct way with conditions in the country at large. (Boehmer and Gouda 2009, 39)

Westerman's work in many ways reacts to this relative silence and self-complacency, but not in a straightforward way. With the relevant exception of South Moluccan terrorism, which Westerman faces in *Een woord een woord* and is perhaps the greatest moment of crisis of the Dutch way of dealing with

multiculturalism and a colonial legacy, it is precisely through the indirect mirror of other stories that Westerman, in a multidirectional epistemic move, addresses racism and colonialism in the Netherlands. What looks like a cop-out is arguably a way to double-down: by addressing stories that seem alien to Dutch colonialism and racism, Westerman is showing to what extent they do echo with the Dutch context, even if there are no explicit hints of a connection. In a way, Westerman is arguing that only an investment in a broader history of colonialism can compensate for the relative amnesia of the specifically Dutch colonial past. Westerman's anthropological imagination thus confronts a variety of colonial others, that, indirectly, reflect and redirect towards the Dutch experience.

As a final point, it should be noted that the core of Westerman's fieldwork, the kind of ethnographic encounters that he describes, as well as the structure of his books, are rooted in the practice of reportage. Therefore, Westerman can be properly defined as a literary journalist, if we take literary journalism to be a form of writing that employs literary techniques to add value to a piece of information, providing a literary elaboration of a piece of news (see Papuzzi, 1998, 9–10). Westerman's approach, more precisely, is to be understood through two fundamental stylistic, literary and journalistic influences: The American New Journalism and the work of Ryszard Kapuściński. These "traditions" embody two radically different approaches (see Bak 2011), both from a stylistic and epistemological point of view. Westerman freely takes from the features of both, mixing, for instance, Kapuściński's tension towards allegory with Capote's use of sociologically charged details. There is perhaps no best example of this mixture of literary journalistic traditions in Westerman's work than *El Negro en ik*.

4.3.2. *El Negro en ik*: the Mirror at the End of the Journey

Not unlike *In an Antique Land*, *El Negro en ik* features a double-helix structure, whose two alternating narratives are connected through the presence of a subaltern figure almost erased from history. Similarly to Ghosh's work, while one part consists primarily of historical research into this subaltern figure – but interwoven with the tale of how the research was concretely carried out – the other one is fundamentally a personal story, set on the background of broad trends in world history. The double-helix structure, in both books, connects seemingly unrelated locales and histories into a unified whole.

In spite of these similarities, which locate both narratives in the horizon of a multidirectional anthropological imagination, *El Negro en ik* is also effective to highlight the specificities of Westerman's style and ethical attitude towards such heterogeneous materials.

The book takes its cue from a trip in Spain that the young Westerman undertook in 1983, which is the focus of the first chapter. Reaching the Catalan town of Banyoles, Westerman visits a natural history museum – the Darder museum – where he suddenly finds himself face to face with a stuffed black man that the locals simply call "El Negro" ("the black man", in Spanish). Westerman has the uneasy impression that El Negro is looking at him, perhaps with disapproval. The reasons for this uneasiness are not difficult to fathom: El Negro immediately appears as a blatant symbol of uneven racial relations. He is a black man that someone (probably a European white) transformed into a piece of exotica. An inversion of this relationship, however, is "unthinkable" (Westerman 2004, 19). Filled with shame after this encounter, Westerman leaves the museum, not before buying two postcards of El Negro. Later, when he returns to the Netherlands, he realizes that the postcards and the label on El Negro's glass case in Banyoles report two different nomenclatures. For Westerman, this mistake is the culmination of the erasure of EL Negro's individual humanity:

> The uncertainty of his background was the mark of his dismantling as an individual. Besides his intestines, he had also been stripped of his personality. He had no name and no one knew the date of his birth or death any more. All his characteristics had been lost, to the point that there was even confusion on the population he belonged to. For [the inhabitants of Banyoles] he was simply El Negro. Not *Un* [a] Negro. No. *The* Negro. (Westerman 2004, 20)

El Negro is an empty shell – both literally and metaphorically – because he is denied the specificity of an individual history. The double attribution of ethnicity signifies that his background is ultimately irrelevant – the two listed ethnicities are fundamentally interchangeable. In this sense the choice of the definite article is consistent. The indefinite article would imply a plurality of histories and hence the need to further specify to which history the stuffed human being belongs, but this is clearly not a priority. His skin colour simultaneously defines him entirely and makes him an adequate representative – in Banyoles, at least – of virtually all black people.

Similarly to how Ghosh, at the beginning of *In an Antique Land*, is driven by the desire of reconstructing the slave's life to bring him back to history, the young Westerman imagines that, if someone were to find out who El Negro was, he would become a human being once again. Yet this project is temporarily set aside, for the young Westerman, at the time a student of agricultural engineering who is specializing in irrigation systems, has an alternative, more practical way to fight the legacy of racism and colonial power relations: becoming a development worker, redressing the misdeeds of the colonial past by bringing his practical, technological knowledge to "developing countries". Development work and international cooperation are clearly charged, for the young Westerman, with deep political significance – they are framed as a precise desire to work to alleviate the suffering of the wretched of the earth:

> I wanted to become a development worker, someone who makes himself useful by transmitting practical knowledge to oppressed and exploited populations. The studies I had started – tropical agrotechnologies – trained engineers that devised and built irrigations systems in Third-World countries. (Westerman 2004, 15)

This position is informed both by Westerman's religious education and by the political climate of the early 1980s: the young Frank perceives a dramatic gap in the ethically rigorous Protestant education he has received and the reality of global imperialism at the dawn of the neoliberal era. The very same teachers that tell him to love his neighbour and turn the other cheek turn out to be supporters of Regan's foreign politics. As a protest against this hypocrisy, the young Westerman and his friends cultivate, as it were, a militant anthropological imagination that sees in the "oppressed and exploited populations" of the Third-World as allies in a global political struggle: "It was the time when the first Palestinian Keffiyeh appeared at our school. We boycotted the grapefruits from South Africa, we ate muesli biscuits in the cafeteria, we supported the revolution in Nicaragua – and for us, all these actions of support and disapproval were intertwined" (Westerman 2004, 16). Development work seems initially a way to join the struggle without renouncing to the pacifist principles Westerman also hold dear.

Westerman's experience with international cooperation and the reconstruction of El Negro's story ends up being the two fundamental threads of the book. On the one hand, Westerman describes a number of formative experiences over the years and in various parts of the globe – Jamaica, Peru,

Sierra Leone – that ultimately led him to abandon his project of becoming a development worker to turn, instead, to journalism; on the other hand, he tells of his attempt, started twenty years after his first encounter with El Negro, to discover what happened to El Negro after he was transformed into a valuable piece of taxidermy. This search will lead him to Paris, to Barcelona, to Banyoles once again, and finally to South Africa and Botswana – the ancestral land of El Negro – which represents an ideal epilogue for both sections. The link between these two narratives is the evolution of the Western anthropological imagination towards the non-Western others. Westerman, by linking the story of El Negro with his experience of developmental work, makes a genealogical connection between the 19th century ideas about race and imperialism and present-day attitudes towards the non-Western world, including the seemingly innocent and benevolent desire to foster development in "Third-World countries". The text – in a procedure that recalls *In an Antique Land* – establishes its two narratives as mirrors of each other: each narrative provides insights on the forms of the anthropological imagination that are described in the other, and the multidirectionality of the whole structure lays in providing a connective tissue for what might appear – in a summary description – as inordinate rambling. Westerman is able to create a number of mirrorings across time and space: the people of Banyoles, 19th century taxidermists, European developmental workers, Peruvian peasants, Sierra Leonean insurgents and post-apartheid South African citizens – as well as Westerman and El Negro – are juxtaposed in a unified vision. This vision is made up of a consistent pattern of racial relations, cultural supremacism and uneven economic relationships. Studying the cultural specificity of each of these groups provide insights into the predicament of the others.

It is important to notice that Westerman, while covering an extremely vast array of geographical, historical and political material, constantly tries to warn the reader that the tapestry he is weaving is created through a personal perspective. As he specifies in one early chapter, Westerman wants to incorporate his own experiences alongside the story of El Negro because focusing only on "a tale over El Negro that could make visible how whites saw non-whites" is "too general and therefore too disengaged" (Westerman 2004, 49). The sociological inquiry into the European anthropological imagination that the story of El Negro allow him to tell must therefore be conjoined with a personal narrative, foregrounding the biased nature of the whole account. This is meant to structure the narrative in a way that negotiates between individual and collective perspectives, which is, according to John Hartsock, an operation that literary journalism is particularly suited to carry out. For Hartsock, literary

journalism is able to provide, within a piece of narrative, personal details that are immersed into broader cultural revelations (Hartsock 2016, 131). This results, for Hartsock, into an inquiry that is paradoxically "more objective" because it denies the "spurious kind of omniscience" that traditional journalism relies on (Hartsock 2016, 23). In our theoretical terms, this kind of journalism, by reminding the reader that its ethnographic authority is based on personal experience, simultaneously highlights its partiality but also vindicates the legitimacy of expressing a unique voice. This is consistent, at least in *El Negro*, with the fundamental self-reflective nature of the book – and it is not a chance that the balance between self-reflection and knowledge of cultural others is one of the points on which the book ends.

The personal narrative of *El Negro*, exploring Westerman's passage from agricultural engineering and development work to journalism, can be read as an autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, in which the protagonist – Westerman – becomes gradually aware of some naive aspect of his initial *Weltanschauung*. The crucial insight that the personal narrative of *El Negro en ik* elaborates is not so much about the nature of colonialism and imperialism – consistently framed as predatory and exploitative – but rather that Westerman's early form of the militant anthropological imagination, if carried out through the paradigm of developmental work, easily falls pray to the very colonial and imperialist dynamics it is meant to fight. Westerman's reasoning echoes Mahasweta's "Pterodactyl", in her harsh critique of opportunistic, ineffective or epistemologically naive aid work. Westerman's solution, indeed, will be similar to Puran's – taking up the pen – but the kind of epistemological endpoint of his search will be more introspective than political.

The chapters in this section variously illustrate a number of harsh lessons that Westerman learns over the years. When he is in Jamaica, in 1985, on a "mid-studies" trip that is meant to test his capacity of living and working in a "Third-World country", he learns that it is impossible to undertake practical, useful development work outside the framework of local politics, of corruption and racial hierarchies. No idealistic or colour-blind approach is feasible. But perhaps the most destabilizing moment is a confrontation with an agronomist of Indian origins, Musheer. After making an inopportune comment about how Musheer should handle a specific situation, Westerman realizes that he has behaved arrogantly and starts questioning his very presence in Jamaica: "I asked myself what I, rooted as I was in the cold earth (more precisely: in a provincial Dutch culture, dominated by Calvinism), could teach to an *Indian* about *rice cultivation*. What was I seeking? Why was I there? Did I really saw myself as a

future development worker?" (Westerman 2004, 44). Westerman perceives in himself the seed of what could potentially develop into an uneven way of encountering the natives. It is this form of relentless self-questioning that *El Negro* carries out throughout his chapters, creating a fundamentally self-reflective undersong that constantly accompanies Westerman's explorations.

This seed of doubt slowly grows in the following chapters of the personal narrative. In 1987 Westerman is in Peru, doing an internship in development work and gathering materials for his thesis. The political climate is tense: at the same time Mario Vargas Llosa is taking his first steps in the political arena with an ultra-liberalist programme, the Maoist fighters of the *Sendero Luminoso* carry out their violent actions in the countryside, animated by Abimael Guzmán's vision of revolution; they are ferociously opposed by the army, with its liberal use of torture. Westerman, instead, tries to focus on the practicalities of development work. After his internship is interrupted due to the fighting between supporters of the *Sendero* and of the government in the area where he is working, Westerman moves to the *comunidad campesina* of Cucho Esqueña, working as an anthropologist to study the traditional irrigation system of the area.

Westerman's experience in Cucho Esqueña ends with two shocking revelations: firstly, the irrigation system is embedded in local culture and based on such a delicate balance with the local environment that it cannot be changed or "improved" without altering for the worse the life of the inhabitants. Secondly, Westerman realizes that even in this community his presence is profoundly suspicious and that he can easily take the role, simply by virtue of his being foreign, of oppressive forces that have historically exploited the natives. At some point a rumour circulate about the presence of a *karisiri* – a folkloric figure that allegedly steals the fat from his victims. Westerman is told that he is probably the primary suspect, because he is a foreigner that has arrived in the community with seemingly good intentions – a pattern shared with a number of figures historically associated with the *karisiri*, like past colonial masters, American secret agents or representatives of multinational corporations. By deploying this folkloric trope, Westerman, as a foreign expert, is thus associated with "all the other outsiders that had turned out to be extortionist and robbers" (Westerman 2004, 100). The way of the development worker, in other words, is not a straightforward method to do something and to express solidarity with the oppressed: it runs the risks of actively damaging them and must be disentangled from a legacy of exploitation with painstaking care.

It is at this point that Westerman sets aside his ambition of becoming a development worker to turn to journalism. He fully articulates his position in the chapter on his trip to Sierra Leone, where he goes to document, as a journalist, the ongoing civil war. Sierra Leone, in the narrative, becomes the exemplary case of a country that, in spite of decades of foreign aid, is not escaping endemic poverty and is precipitating into systemic violence. It is in this framework that Westerman fully elaborates the connection between development work and imperialism. His analysis covers a vast number of structural flaws in the system of foreign aid: the fact that it increases dependency; that development programs are shaped according to "purely Western concerns, which [change] every ten years according to the dominating trend" (Westerman 2004, 133); the fact that they impose cultural models, feeding a sense of Western cultural supremacism; and, worst of all, that they can be easily involved in neocolonial projects. The latter point is proven, with remarkable bitterness, by an explicit reference to the Dutch effort to send tropical engineers to former colonies:

> Why did the Netherlands, in the fifties, decide to send out their tropical experts? 1. To place their former colonialists that had been sent away from Indonesia, and 2.to be on the spot in time "before the Soviet block could use gifts to take hold of less developed countries" – that was literally what was written in a 1954 governmental note. (Westerman 2004, 135)

Westerman realizes that the project he has embraced in his youth has been implicated on many levels in a neocolonial enterprise – and this is even more relevant for him due to the colonial origins of the technical knowledge he has acquired. It should be noted that Westerman's journey, while denouncing general trends, is not meant to *equate* aid work with colonialism and exploitation: one the one hand, the book present several examples of committed aid workers whose work is not portrayed as useless or opportunistic. Westerman's bleak view of aid work – especially as *development* work – is once again, a negotiation between personal and cultural revelations that wants to propose a deeply personal choice as an informed opinion on a more general issue.

Journalism, in this sense, seems appealing because it looks like a more neutral choice, which can try to maintain detachment and analytically understand the causes of the events. It should be noted, however, that Westerman ends the chapter with a moving encounter with two professors of the Fourah Bay College that, in the midst of the military actions and violence throughout the country, try to carry

on with their job. Westerman, reporting his instinctive reaction to the encounter, tells the reader that "they were heroes. All my journalistic detachment had evaporated" (Westerman 2004, 162). The ending of the chapter indicates that *El Negro* does not aim to replace the militant, single-minded vision of Westerman's younger self with the intellectual sobriety of sheer detachment. The end point is rather the more personal kind of narrative of literary journalism – far more unpredictable from an emotional, ethical and epistemological point of view.

Westerman's reflection on development work acts as a mirror for the story of El Negro. In particular, he is interested in a "posthumous biography" (Westerman 2004, 48) of El Negro, which, by tracking the way the stuffed human being had been seen and perceived by its owner over the years, aims at reconstructing a general history of the European thinking on race. Therefore there is a fundamental ambiguity in Westerman's project, which in many ways sets it apart from *In an Antique Land*. Although the first time he had seen El Negro in Banyoles he had fantasized of "[discovering] who El Negro was", when he actually commits himself to the project, years later, Westerman seems to be interested in El Negro primarily as a *European* cultural artefact, rather than in a specific subaltern subjectivity. This allows Westerman to focus on a shared intellectual concern in the two sections, but at the same time El Negro risks becoming *exclusively* an elaborated mirror for the European self, something that the finale explicitly dramatizes.

There are four fundamental moments in El Negro's journey: his passage from what is now Botswana to Paris, as part of the collection of the Verreaux brothers, two renowned naturalists that were personally responsible for snatching the body of a dead black man from his grave, in the early 19th century, and to transform it into the piece of exotica that Westerman sees in the museum; his passage from Paris to Barcelona in 1886, when El Negro is acquired by the naturalist Francisco Darder; his relocation in Banyoles, when Darder donates his entire collection to the city in 1916; and finally, after a ferocious public debate on the legitimacy of the presence of El Negro in a public museum, his final return to Africa, to be properly buried, in 2000. The forms of the anthropological imagination that Westerman encounters while following this trail are consistent with a culture that could condone that a black man could be stuffed like an animal: the France where the Verreaux brothers operate is a place where racial hierarchies are enforced through Darwinian and Lamarckian evolutionist paradigms, and where the civilizing power of slavery – after the shock of Haitian revolution – is a widespread belief. In

spite of his hopes that Darder could provide a different perspective, Westerman finds out that, if anything, he was an enthusiast of the most decisively racist forms of anthropometry.

Things turn more complex in the chapter where Westerman finally returns to Banyoles, to track down the most recent parts of El Negro's posthumous history. El Negro, however, is not in Banyoles anymore: in 2000 he has been brought back to Africa. As usual in the "historical" part of the book, the narrative works on two levels: Westerman's present-day interactions with several informers; and the actual reconstruction of the events surrounding El Negro's movements. But this chapter, in particular, is perhaps the most distinctively journalistic part of the whole narrative, containing a small reportage within the book. Westerman is physically in Banyoles, and although he is reconstructing events that took place in the previous years, his sources are primarily interviews with local people. Specifically, it focuses on how El Negro's presence and then disappearance transforms Banyoles into a postcolonial stage – the setting of a multi-layered postcolonial social drama – creating disturbing connections between the inhabitants of Banyoles and the various forms of the anthropological imagination that the book has explored in its previous chapters.

What Westerman reconstructs through interviews and archival work in Banyoles is that, starting from 1991, a Haitian doctor named Alphonse Arcelin (based in another Catalan town) had started to demand the removal of El Negro from the Darder Museum. Arcelin, a black man himself – as well as an activist for black consciousness at the University of Seville in his youth – finds the presence of El Negro in Banyoles deeply offensive. Invited by Joan Solana, the mayor, to visit the museum, he comes, bringing friends and journalists with him, visits El Negro, prays in front of what he calls "the glass coffin" (Westerman 2004, 173), and then leaves, not before having been threatened by the people of Banyoles. While Westerman's direct sources do not include the most violent members of the village, he talks extensively with Georgina Gratacós, the museum's curator, who cannot stand Arcelin and voices the reasons of the village people.

The conflict escalates: while the Spanish media are fairly lukewarm on Arcelin's campaign, the case attracts the attention of the international media that are, instead, overwhelmingly supportive, and are outraged at the discovery that a human being is being displayed as an animal in a glass case. Arcelin is able to gain even more coverage during the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games – especially because the rowing competitions take place precisely in Banyoles. The inhabitants of Banyoles react defensively: El Negro belongs to them, he is "their business". El Negro suddenly becomes a matter of identity:

people from Banyoles start to brand local products with El Negro's image and, more disturbingly, they organize parades in which they dress up as stereotypical African tribesmen, in blackface, as a form of "solidarity" with El Negro. Other reactions include Georgina Gratacós' defence of El Negro as a unique, invaluable piece of taxidermy – a rationale she calls "museum ethics" (Westerman 2004, 182); or the mayor's suggestion that the Darder museum should become, instead, a space dedicated to multiculturalism, where El Negro would remain, but his presence would be critically examined, addressing the colonial history behind it. But ultimately El Negro is not only removed from display: international pressure is strong enough that in 2000 Banyoles is forced to return El Negro to Botswana – the man who became El Negro probably came from there – where he is officially buried.

A useful category to understand the kind of narrative that Westerman is adopting in this chapter is to read it as a "social drama" – a concept famously explored by Victor Turner. Turner, as part of a broader critique of the static idea of society embraced by the functionalist orthodoxy of British social anthropology, promoted an idea of society based around change, liminality and conflict. The "root metaphor" (Turner 1974, 26) of his anthropology is a theatrical one. Conflict, for Turner, "[manifests] itself in public episodes of tensional interruption [...] called 'social dramas' " (Turner 1974, 33). Turner defines social dramas as "an objectively isolable sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive or agonistic type" (Turner 1988, 33). Social dramas, in particular, are focused on the issue of loyalty: "in the social drama,[...] though choices of means and ends and social affiliation are made, stress is dominantly laid upon loyalty and obligation, as much as interest, and the course of events may then have a tragic quality" (Turner 1974, 35). The other crucial feature of social dramas is that they unveil structural characteristics of society that are normally invisible: "conflicts seems to bring fundamental aspects of society, normally overlaid by the customs and habits of daily intercourse, into frightening prominence" (Turner 1974, 35). Both aspects are central for the kind of narrative Westerman wants to tell in Banyoles. What does this specific social drama unveils and what forms of "loyalty" comes into play?

Overall, the social drama Westerman explores reveals the incapacity of the inhabitants of Banyoles to read or acknowledge the colonial history that, however haphazardly, has been brought to their town with El Negro. The inhabitants are completely indifferent to El Negro's history as a colonial artefact – let alone as a human being – to the extent that an accusation of racism connected to his presence in the museum takes them apparently by surprise. The only way they can interact with El

Negro is trough a complete and utter appropriation. Since El Negro is an empty shell for the inhabitants, they can simply project their identitarian anxieties onto him. This is how El Negro becomes a symbol of the town identity, always interpreted in absolute possessive terms which cast a disturbing quality on the townspeople's professed manifestation of affection towards "their" *negrito*. Such identification with El Negro is actually an appropriation that manifest an aphasia not only towards colonial history, but also towards the power and racial relations that such past entails.

Westerman argues how El Negro is therefore transformed into the instrument of an oppositional Catalan identity. The pressures to remove El Negro are interpreted as an authoritarian act of the central Spanish government, simply re-inscribed into a completely different local history of conflict. Again, this prevents any meaningful conversation on the meaning of El Negro, because the inhabitants of Banyoles seem insensitive to any argument about race or colonialism. In this sense it is particularly meaningful to see how Alphonse Arcelin's legitimacy to intervene in the issue is undermined by the Catalan press. The issue is fundamentally summed up by Georgina Gratacós, who at some point confesses that, since the Haitian doctor does not speak Catalan, in spite of having lived in Catalonia for several years, he should not be allowed to have a voice on what she perceives as a local issue. The fact that he is a Haitian expatriate whose career as a doctor depends exclusively on tourists because his fellow villagers avoids him is not acknowledged. The only affiliation that matters in the social drama as it is lived in Banyoles is a loyalty to a certain view of Catalan identity. All other histories are deemed irrelevant.

Westerman, interestingly, deals with the different layers of the social drama with a variety of narrative strategies, ranging from didascalic exposition to subtle forms of allusion. As for the manifestations of Catalan nationalism that he encounters in Banyoles and their staunch opposition to the central Spanish government, he resorts to fairly blunt expository passages, explicitly spelling out his thesis that El Negro, quite simply, has been opportunistically chosen as the terrain on which the battle for Catalan self-determination is fought:

> Apparently no one was allowed to lecture the Catalans. And whether the interference came from Alphonse Arcelin or Kofi Annan, the Catalans, with El Negro, defended their recently recovered right to self-determination. [...] In this showdown with Madrid they had turned El Negro into a mascot of the Catalan issue. (Westerman 2004, 185-186)

Westerman is clearly not particularly interested in the subtleties of Catalan nationalism, and his tone is visibly annoyed by what he clearly considers a regionalist and provincial tendency. It is important to see this evaluation as a counterpoint of the book's transnational setting. Westerman reads Banyoles' provincialism not as generic narrow-mindedness, but, in Milan Kundera's words, as the "inability (or the refusal) to see one's own culture in the large context." (Kundera 2007). Arguably it is not (only) the identitarian obsession of the Catalan town that bothers Westerman – although he clearly has little sympathy for it – but the fact that this narrow perspective prevents the inhabitants of Banyoles to acknowledge the heterogeneous nature of their local reality and the layered significance of "their negrito". Their identity, in Rothberg's terms, is constructed as a form of *competitive* memory: the process (antithetical to multidirectional memory) according to which public articulations of memory whose genealogy diverge simply cannot coexist or converse in the public sphere. Westerman's narrative, instead, is attempting to forge a form of multidirectional memory based on El Negro. This is why he is, after all, intrigued by Joan Solana's proposal of creating a museum of multiculturalism centred on El Negro instead of removing him from display.

It is worth noting, however, that Westerman's telling of the social drama becomes particularly effective thanks to rather subtle rhetorical, structural and stylistic strategies. To fully understand how Westerman operates, it is important to confront his work with the American New Journalism. New Journalism is a term used to describe an American school of literary journalism developed in the USA during the 1960s and 1970s. Tom Wolfe, in his fairly influential definition, summed up New Journalism as a series of literary techniques that a journalist, while remaining fundamentally faithful to an idea of chronicle and reportage, could use to expand a bare piece of news into a complex sociological analysis. Wolfe describes New Journalism in terms that could easily be compared to classic ethnography, including, quite curiously, the idea of "being there" – the exact same expression that Geertz uses to talk of fieldwork as a traditional source of ethnographic authority (see Wolfe 1996, 35). Indeed the epistemological framework of New Journalism is fairly classic, clinging quite strongly to an idea of objectivity. Stylistically, the ambitious aims of New Journalism are achieved, according to Wolfe, with four main techniques: firstly, "the scene-by-scene construction, telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to sheer historical narrative" (Wolfe 1996, 46); Secondly, the use of dialogue – to be reported in full. Thirdly, the "'third-person point of view', the device of

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presenting every scene to the reader through the eyes of a particular character" (Wolfe 1996, 46) – a point of view that could only be effectively represented through extensive interviews. The last point is the use of descriptive realism, in particular the recording of all manner of details that the journalist encounters in the everyday life of the people he or she meets.

The best-known example of New Journalism is famously Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (although Capote defined his work a "non-fiction novel"). The book tells the story of the brutal murder of a wealthy family in the American Midwest through a montage of different points of view – the victims, their neighbours, the sheriff tasked with finding the killers and, most importantly the killers themselves. It is the result of vast amount of archival work and, most importantly, of a long period of time spent interviewing the protagonists of the events – although the book relies on several layers of fictionality, and the rearrangements of the "facts" operated by Capote results in what he himself defined as a *distillation* of reality (Voss 2011, 80–82). Capote's chief strategy is to disappear entirely as a character and as a narrator (consistently with Wolfe's insistence on internal focalisation), focusing on the subjectivity of the characters and their interactions, explored through dialogues and intensive, detailed descriptions. For instance, this is the first interaction between the two killers – Perry Smith and Dirk Hickock – who are preparing to drive across a significant stretch of the United States to carry out a robbery in the town of Holcomb, with the intention of leaving no witnesses:

> Dick was driving a black 1949 Chevrolet sedan. As Perry got in, he checked the back seat to see if his guitar was safely there; the previous night, after playing for a party of Dick's friends, he had forgotten and left it in the car. It was an old Gibson guitar, sandpapered and waxed to a honey-yellow finish. Another sort of instrument lay beside it – a 12-gauge pump-action shotgun, brand-new, blue-barrelled, and with a sportsman's scene of pheasants in flight etched along the stock. A flashlight, a fishing knife, a pair of leather gloves, and a hunting vest packed with shells contributed further atmosphere to this curious still-life.
>
> "You wearing that?" Perry asked, indicating the vest.
>
> Dick rapped his knuckles against the windshield. "Knock, knock. Excuse me, sir. We've been out hunting and lost our way. If we could use the phone…"
>
> "*Si, Señor. Yo comprendo.*"
>
> "A cinch," said Dick. "I promise you, honey, we'll blast hair all over them walls."

" 'Those' walls," said Perry. A dictionary buff, a devotee of obscure words, he had been intent on improving his companion's grammar and expanding his vocabulary ever since they had celled together at Kansas State Penitentiary. (Capote 2000, 20–21)

Capote employs all the strategies that Wolfe describes: he sets a scene with as little as possible narratorial intervention, firmly taking the perspective of one of the two killers – Perry. He describes with accuracy bordering on the sociological the "curious still-life" of the killers' car, highlighting, in particular, the disturbing juxtaposition of Perry's guitar and the various objects and weapons that the two men need to carry out the robbery and the brutal murders. Such a short passage – and the highly realistic dialogue – allows the reader to start gathering details on the two killers: their working-class background; the violent and unstable nature of Dirk, as he already anticipates the moment of the slaughter; and the more cerebral, "artistic" inclinations of Dirk, who, while not above unspeakable violence, has a more complex, pensive personality. This imaginative precision allows Capote, as he reconstructs the events "scene by scene", to expand a piece of news into a psychological examination of the various characters and, in turn, into a sociological anatomy of American society. The two killers, in particular, seemingly driven both by the desire for wealth and success, as well as by deep-seated frustration, appear as a nightmarish twist of the American Dream, and consistently wreak havoc on the middle-class society who enjoy the fulfilment of the promises of prosperity at the core of the American way of life. Crucially, not much of this is explicitly told to the reader, but must be inferred by Capote's use of details, characterizations and descriptions.

Capote represents a useful point of reference to read Westerman's narrative strategies for his "reportage" in Banyoles. There are significant differences: most importantly, Westerman is an active protagonist, featuring both as a character and as narrator. This, from an epistemological point of view, allow him to clarify to what extent his perspective affects the research and how he acquired the information that he uses in the book. The book is therefore epistemologically more transparent, even at the expense of "immersion" into the characters' minds. But a core procedure remains similar: Westerman's narrative consists in a juxtaposition of various "scenes" with different characters that rely both on dialogue and on a plethora of small details to convey important layers of meaning and create a sociological texture which complements the expository passages. This create a significant sub-text of gestures, hidden meanings, subtle implications that the reader must be constantly aware of.

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Alphonse's Arcelin's description is a good example of this strategy. Before interviewing Arcelin, Westerman reports a sign on the doctor's ambulatory:

DR. ALPHONSE ARCELIN – GP
ON PARLE FRANÇAIS
IL PARLE ITALIANO
WE SPEAK ENGLISH
SE HABLA ESPAÑOL (Westerman 2004, 169)

The sign, with its significant absence of Catalan, is particularly relevant, as it suggests both Arcelin's proud internationalism – that, in turn, can be connected with his Pan-Africanist sympathies – and his isolation within the local context – anticipating both the hostility of the Catalan press and Georgina's bitter accusations. Moreover, it foreshadows Arcelin's profound anxiety for communication. Right from the beginning of the interview Arcelin manifests a certain restlessness: "Arcelin sat down and said that he had fought all his life against *the insanity of racism* [in English in the original]. He immediately paused for a moment to make sure that I noted down that statement. 'Or would you rather speak Spanish?'" (Westerman 2004, 169). He is clearly eager to tell his story, but at the same time is worried to be misunderstood, deliberately or otherwise. The presence of this anxiety is maintained throughout the chapter through a number of gestures and attitudes, for instance by the clear excitement and passion which takes hold of him as soon as he starts to show Westerman the various newspaper articles regarding the El Negro controversy, "continuously" (Westerman 2004, 174) turning from one page to the other.

Both aspects of his personality are complemented by a physicality and body language that are distinctively transparent, characterized by a perpetual smile and by a display of powerful emotions. At the beginning of their meeting Westerman notes how "he smiled continuously, but he warned me in advance, also with a smile, that while speaking of El Negro he would not be able to hold back his tears" (Westerman 2004, 169). Over the course of the conversation, Westerman turns to Arcelin's smile as a privileged feature to capture the psychological nuances of his personality beyond his public role as a political activist. Arcelin's smile disappears when he tells of how he was forced to escape Banyoles, only to reappear, distinctively more sardonic, when he shows Westerman the symbol of a decisive

victory over his enemies – a support letter from Kofi Annan. Westerman portrays a distinctively melancholic figure – complemented with a complex and painful history of emigration and exile on top of his engagement with El Negro. This melancholy is justifiable also because one of Arcelin's last political actions, suing the town for non-material damages, spectacularly backfires, deeply indebting Arcelin due to the legal expenses. When Westerman asks what is he planning to do, Arcelin, most typically, shrugs and puts up a smile (Westerman 2004, 191).

Georgina Gratacós is the symbolical rival of Arcelin, as well as the spokesperson for the town of Banyoles. Differently from Arcelin's bittersweet melancholy and passion, she is introduced as pragmatic, youthful, dryly efficient: her face, who looks like that of a girl "in spite of her being thirty-six", is "alert and detached" (Westerman 2004, 166), and she looks "sturdy and resolute" (Westerman 2004, 166). Her lack of sentimentality, however, does not mean that she is dispassionate: in particular, she is proud of the collection, which she has known since her childhood and she has studied extensively. She greatly admires Francisco Darder as a great taxidermist, as much as she is dismissive of Arcelin, whom she consider an arrogant and ignorant attention-seeker. Westerman attentively documents her reactions to certain passages of the controversy. As for Arcelin's first petition to the mayor, "she thought it was scandalous that he had written his open letter [to the mayor] without having seen El Negro once" and wonders how Arcelin "could [...] then feel offended" (Westerman 2004, 172). She is outraged by the fact that Arcelin does not visit the whole collection but goes straight to El Negro's room: "But isn't it impolite that he didn't even give a passing look to the rest of the museum? If you ask me, that Arcelin had barely seen the inside of a museum in his life" (Westerman 2004, 173). Georgina's defensive and polemical attitude contrasts profoundly Arcelin's warmth.

Ultimately she admits that it is the fact that Arcelin is not "assimilated" that really bothers her:

When I asked her if she had something personal against Arcelin, she took it as a trap to paint her as a racist:

"The point is not that he is black", she said with emphasis; Banyoles was no backward hole and she had enough of having to defend herself against that image.

"Ok", I said, "but then what is it?"

"How can I explain…". The curator put a hand on her side and sighed as if she was exhaling cigarette smoke. "That man has been living in Catalonia since 1979 and he doesn't even speak

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Catalan". She found unbearable that someone like that could dictate what was allowed to be displayed in a museum here in Banyoles. (Westerman 2004, 191)

Whether we agree that with the fact that Arcelin should have learnt Catalan, it is highly questionable that his lack of linguistic knowledge in this sense should really matter more than Arcelin's racial identity in this matter. The point is not that whether or not Georgina is secretly racist, but that she literally embodies – in the sense that also her body language is a signal of that position – a number of attitudes on race and El Negro that makes her a sophisticated, educated expression of the town provincialism. Her arguments against Arcelin are never based on an attempt to engage with his point of view, but rather boil down to a proud, self-referential defence of the scientific importance of the museum and to the fact that Arcelin, as he is neither Catalan nor "integrated", should not have a voice in the debate. The juxtaposition of the two characters, their personality, different attitude and physicality construct an important sociological sub-text: Arcelin's whole being is constantly trying to find a space to voice his own arguments, and consistently is presented as a confrontational, communicative, "centripetal" figure. Georgina – a proxy for Banyoles – is denying him that space, just as she is denying him the possibility of dialogue, and therefore gives the impression of a "centrifugal" character, inward-looking and defensive.

Although Georgina is not the most despicable or controversial character of the book – Westerman certainly admires her attachment to the museum and her expertise – she becomes one of the key prisms that keeps together, with its refractions, the forms of the anthropological imagination explored in the text. As Georgina is the direct heir and chief admirer of Darder, her argument about "museum ethics" seems a repackaging, in a more politically correct fashion, of the scientific racism that sustained the body-snatching gesture of the Verreaux brothers and Darder's own scientific vision. All those perspectives reify a human being – El Negro – in the name of a scientific discourse that overrides ethical or historical considerations or frames itself as detached from them. Moreover, Georgina's strong argument for assimilation triggers two, equally important connections.

Firstly, Georgina represents the respectable, educated version a more distinctively violent line of racist reasoning that is active in the town. At some point Westerman realizes that there are, in fact, some black labourers in Banyoles. Westerman realizes, with a certain surprise, that he has stopped to stare at them – as if, by spending time thinking about a stuffed black man, he had not considered that

actual living black men could exist there. Puzzled, he asks a local barman whether they participated to the debate. The barman says they did not but that at some point they were used as a sort of bargain chip for El Negro's presence in Banyoles:

> If they had known about El Negro, they sure did not make a fuss about him […] "But at the very last moment, when they were about to take him away, things suddenly got ugly". [The barman] said that a small crew of ultra-nationalists had made its appearance to distribute some leaflets, whose gist was: "If El Negro has to go, so do all the niggers!" (Westerman 2004, 186-187)

The passage, which is doubly uncanny for the sudden discovery of these marginalized figures and the hidden violence of the citizens of Banyoles, allows Westerman to arrive at the core of the revelations engendered by the social drama. The comment reveal that the framing of El Negro as a Catalan symbol is far from innocent, and that behind the controversy there *are* latent xenophobe tendencies. The silence of the black workers also complements Arcelin's passionate desire for being heard: it is clearly from a similar space of silence that he is actively trying to escape. Conversely, in this light, Georgina's "non-racist" argument on the Catalan language acquires a more sinister perspective.

Secondly, Georgina's idea of assimilation resonates with Westerman's broader argument on development work as potentially connected to (cultural) imperialism, as both positions share a desire for erasing otherness. It is not a chance that Westerman goes back to reflect on assimilation in the last chapter of the book, in which he follows El Negro's trail first to South Africa and then in Botswana, to visit his grave. After participating to a debate with South African students, and barely managing to speak due to their strong, instinctive, emotional reaction to the story, Westerman, travelling towards El Negro's grave, reflects on the legitimacy of his research. He wonders whether he can intervene productively in the debates and discussions that El Negro provokes, especially in Africa, in the same way he had discarded the possibility of intervening in non-European economies. One passage is particularly significant:

> I'd rather keep my opinions for the society where I belong: what do I think, for instance, about the fact that the Netherlands is leading the way in Europe in terms of forcing the foreigners within its borders to adapt to the dominant (white) culture? While I think about it, I realize that the process of adaptation that the "white" Netherlands demands from the "black" Netherlands rests on the same

misconception of development aid: the greater the force of the "become like us" is, the greater the resistance is and therefore the divide.

Did I have to travel eight-thousand kilometres for that? (Westerman 2004, 222)

Westerman's end point seems to be inward-looking, rejecting the possibility of articulating an opinion except for the society he belongs to. The book, in this sense, seems here to be self-defeating: the journey seems pointless. This is further enhanced by the fact that, when he looks outside a train window as he finally enters in the region where El Negro supposedly came from, he sees "only the reflection of the train compartment where he is sitting" (Westerman 2004, 222).

With the final image of El Negro's ancestral land returning only Westerman's mirrored image, the text reminds the reader that the encounter with El Negro has been, right from the beginning, a false ethnographic encounter. El Negro's eyes, after all, are made of glass, they do not really cast glances, they reflect the image of the observer – like Fokir's "opaque, unreadable eyes", which can only return an image of the self rather than providing an insight into a cultural other. Westerman here is articulating the risks of the multidirectional anthropological imagination in its fundamental epistemological operation of mirroring: it risks using the other as a mere occasion for reflection – in both senses – on/of the self. Westerman's sense of self-reflectivity, in other words, comes full circle and understands the limits of a focus on the self in social research. Westerman, in this sense, deliberately exposes himself to the kind of criticism that has been moved towards the postmodern, self-reflective traditions of ethnography – specifically, as Charlotte Davies puts it, that self-reflection can ultimately turn into self-absorption, and ultimately "[deny] the possibility for social research" (Davies 2008, 5). Not all is lost, however: the question "did I have to travel eight-thousand kilometres for that?", after all, can also be answered positively. Perhaps it was indeed necessary to travel through geography and time to realize a truth about the self – whether the self is "Frank Westerman" or "the Netherlands" – because the truth echoes now with insights and experiences from other histories and contexts, it produces a form of knowledge that, like any good work of anthropology for Comaroff, engenders a "critical estrangement of the lived world" (Comaroff, 2010, 530).

Stressing a certain awareness of the self-reflective focus of the book and questioning – without rejecting – its multidirectionality is a fundamental ethical and epistemological choice that ultimately involves the reader in the interpretative process. In this sense it is particularly interesting to confront

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Westerman with one of his models, Kapuściński. Considered one of the greatest reporters in history, Kapuściński has also been repeatedly questioned for the blatant misrepresentations, generalisations, inaccuracies and fictive layers that characterize its work. The best example is perhaps *The Emperor*, a reconstruction of the last years and ultimate fall of the last emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie I. The book is constructed almost exclusively through direct quotations from what are claimed to be former notables of the fallen autocrat. Together, these "interviews" create a mesmerizing portrait of an incredibly complex, self-absorbed, brutal and competitive sub-society – the imperial court – that slowly dissipates as political strife engulfs the country. But however genuine Kapuściński's declared intent of "[recapturing] the world that had been wiped away by the machine guns of the Fourth Division" (Kapuściński 1983, 4) might seem to be, the "interviews" are full of blatant interpolations. Most notably, the elaborated court language that the notables use is largely invented; and many suggestive details regarding the emperor that contribute to create the peculiar atmosphere of the book are historically wrong. A common defence for the book has been that it was not meant to be about Ethiopia at all, but was rather meant as an allegory of the political situation of Poland, where dissent against communist autocracy was growing – an interpretation that Kapuściński himself later endorsed (Ryle 2001).

In a short article, Westerman, explicitly citing the case of Kapuściński, similarly endorses with enthusiasm a reading of El Negro as a metaphor for the Dutch tradition of Zwarte Piet (Black Peter) (Westerman 2014). Since Zwarte Piet, the companion of Saint Nicholas, is a black man, dressing up as this character involves wearing blackface and stereotypically "black" features, a fact that has recently sparked controversy about the lack of awareness about colonial history in the Netherlands. The parallelism with the Banyoles case – especially the parades in blackface – are indeed quite clear. Therefore Westerman is willing to lend its book to an allegorical reading, but his case is different from Kapuściński's. If an allegorical reading, especially if belated, is weak excuse to defend a book whose inaccuracies has been revealed – as in Kapuściński's case – there is no denying its capacity to connect seemingly unrelated locales in a metaphorical fashion. Most importantly, differently from Kapuściński's books, *El Negro* provides the means to appreciate the epistemological limits of allegorical or metaphorical connections, or any juxtaposition that engenders a process of mirroring of the self. The reader is warned that such strategies, as well as Westerman's multidirectional gaze more generally, might be more insightful on the reality that they allude to rather than the one they actually

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represent. By highlighting the inevitable distortions of a multidirectional anthropological imagination, Westerman is able to approach its benefits with a more awareness, leaving the reader the final choice of accepting or rejecting the complex net of juxtapositions that he has created.

4.3.3. *Stikvallei*: *Homo Narrans*

El Negro works on the multidirectional anthropological imagination in a geographical and historical sense, using people from different times and places as mirrors of each other in a way that remembers the structure and the scope of *In an Antique Land*. *Stikvallei* is more similar to *The Hungry Tide*, meaning that it is explicitly structured as an exploration of different epistemological approaches to the world and different ways of framing human and environmental realities. This investigation is carried out by focusing on a specific event: the 1986 Lake Nyos disaster. This catastrophic event took place in North-Western Cameroon, in the middle of the region known as the Grassfields. On 21 August 1986, a toxic cloud emerged from Lake Nyos and spread through the eponymous valley, suffocating 1746 people and more than 8000 livestock. The gas wiped out all human and animal life in Nyos valley, as well as displacing 4430 people.

Since disasters, according to Mark Schuller, have a "very sexy media appeal" whenever they are framed as unique and unprecedented (quoted in Zhang 2016, 89), it can be legitimately argued that this particular catastrophic event was an extremely sexy disaster at the time. Its suddenness and the mystery regarding its causes attracted great media attention. Westerman himself, as he tells in the first pages of the book, had done a television reportage on Lake Nyos in 1992. The premise of *Stikvallei* is that Westerman decides to go back to Cameroon years later and to write a book that, while describing his own trip towards Lake Nyos, also retraces all the narrations originated from that catastrophic event. These include: the scientific debate about the origins of the disaster; the ways of framing the disaster by various Christian missionaries and other religious figures; and the speculations and stories by Cameroonian victims, writers and anthropologists. He wants to discover "which words tied themselves to the facts, and how they interlocked into sentences, metaphors and stories" (Westerman 2013, 28).

The three different perspectives are therefore connected by an overarching narratological-anthropological interest for the origins of myths. The choice of a disaster, in this sense, is particularly

appropriate to gather a number of different "stories" from a variety of epistemological paradigms. Any disaster is experienced and represented differently by various communities and groups, although a common feature of disaster discourse, regardless of the paradigm in which they are framed, is an attempt to "rationalise" them (Grell 2007, 25). Moreover, every disaster has multiple and radically different receptions and afterlives at a local, regional, national and global level. This, according to Westerman, is bound to be even more true in relation to Lake Nyos, because the several unresolved mysteries connected to the event have made easier for stories to emerge. Westerman sees the Nyos Lake disaster – an enigmatic, recent event affecting a very small area – as the perfect opportunity to see how stories can grow literally out of nothing throughout the years.

At the same time, investigating the narratives emerged out of a disaster acquires a particular relevance as regards the anthropological imagination. According to Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susan Hoffman, "disasters are totalizing phenomena, subsuming culture, society and environment together" (Oliver-Smith 2002, 6). Moreover, they also "display and articulate the linkages between the local community and larger structures" (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002, 10). Because disasters connect with virtually every aspect of the environment and communities they affect, framing a disaster in a specific epistemological form always implies the endorsement of a certain form of the anthropological imagination regarding those very communities: it implies adopting a specific set of epistemic moves that frame the affected communities in a certain way while defining or making sense of the disaster. Hence the three "catastrophic discourses" of Westerman's book are also three forms of the anthropological imagination focused on the victims and the survivors of the disaster, with Westerman himself providing a fourth imaginative possibility.

The first part is entitled "myth-killers" (*mythedoders*) and focuses on the work of the a number of scientists involved in the research on the Lake Nyos disaster. Scientists are called myth-killers as they supposedly cut though the deceptions of myths and legends to look at nature with objectivity and disenchantment. If the staring point of the book is the question "what happened at Lake Nyos?", the question can initially be paraphrased as "what physical phenomenon released the gas cloud?". The first chapter, therefore, finds its dramatic tension in the clash between two coalitions of volcanologists. One is led by Haroun Tazieff, a French scientist who supports the idea that a volcanic explosion released the toxic cloud; the other is led by the Icelandic Haraldur Sigurðsson, who instead supports the idea that

the cloud emerged from the lake due to an excessive quantity of carbon dioxide in the water, suddenly released by the action of an unknown agent.

In this chapter Westerman mixes genuine admiration for scientific work with an exploration of its limitations. Like the scientists, Westerman is hungry for facts, is not initially interested in myths and legends. But in spite of the supposedly "objective" nature of scientific discourse, Westerman foregrounds how pride, passion, opportunism or political expediency ultimately play a part in the survival and defeat of scientific explanations – of scientific narratives, as it were – even within a field that is theoretically regulated by criteria of objectivity. As Haraldur Sigurðsson himself sums it up, "science's only imperfection [...] is that its practitioners are human beings. […] There is nothing wrong with the method. A better way to acquire knowledge and understanding doesn't exist. But the scientist is the weak link" (Westerman 2013, 84-85) The consequences of this "only imperfection" include, for instance, the partisan nature of the scientific debate, or the fact that support by various international and national actors is granted according to political and economical expediency.

Highlighting the limitations of the scientific debate serves also to stress its limits in providing a satisfactory narrative of disasters, and, in turn, of the community that they affect. One of the strongest limitations that Westerman detects in scientific community that works at the Nyos disaster is its indifference to the local context. Westerman insists that "for the foreign experts […] Africa is just an incidental scenery and the tale of the survivors: local colour" (Westerman 2013, 22). This is largely connected with the fact these experts approach disasters within what we can call a technocratic paradigm. In Kenneth Hewitt's definition (Hewitt 1983) the technocratic visions of disasters is characterized by seeing them as natural occurrences that are the result of an exceptional circumstances, disconnected from ordinary life. Such perspective focuses its attention exclusively on the geophysical monitoring of said catastrophes. Disasters are seen as events that disrupt the social order and that technology and scientific knowledge should be able to predict and neutralize.

One of the shortcomings of a technocratic paradigm is that its only parameter is an abstract idea of "order". Consistently, the area hit by a disaster is no longer considered a "vernacular landscape" – a landscape that is "shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations" (Nixon 2011, 17). Instead, it is transformed in a mere "region of risk" (Bankoff 2007), defined only for its dangerousness and that can only hope to be rescued through various forms of intervention by an external force. The construction of a "region of risk" is in most cases an

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Orientalist move, projecting abstract, generic anxieties onto vast territories. It entails a colonial anthropological imagination of an authoritarian kind, understanding the communities as passive victims due to an inherent, well-defined "environmental" danger that defines their existence, and hence to be subjected to proper governance.

Westerman's first chapter explores and is structured to mimic this perspective. Consistently, in this first part, the survivors are semi-invisible: they are barely mentioned, they have no voice and are framed only as passive recipients of technological expertise and foreign aid. It should be noted, however, that Westerman is not arguing that the scientific method *per se* is inherently colonialist or epistemologically compromised. Arguably he endorses Sigurðsson's defence of the scientific method but is aware of how its intertwining with human factors can steer scientific practice towards epistemic violence. A particularly revealing moment is when one of the scientists, Sam Freeth, notices that the local witnesses have not been questioned in their native language and this has created a number of ambiguities on the real meaning of the reports. Yet, what is clearly a lack of ethnolinguistic skills from the researchers' side ends up affecting the imaginative constructions of the natives: "Sam Freeth requests that all African ocular witnesses are disqualified as unreliable. The fact that *they are not able to provide a coherent vision of reality* has, in his opinion, several causes" (Westerman 2013, 83, emphasis mine). While Freeth is correct in pointing out the flaws of his fellow researchers, he frames his arguments in a way that simultaneously disempowers the victims. It is not the rationality of scientific method itself that is inherently problematic, nor the legitimate anxiety for cross-cultural misunderstanding, but constructing the "Africans" as inherently "irrational" and incoherent due to what it is, after all, a lack of preparation of the researchers themselves. This results in fixed typologies – rationality, irrationality – that disconnect the scientist from local reality, instead of approaching it with a critical sense of local knowledge.

Ultimately Sigurðsson's hypothesis triumphs, and it is established that Lake Nyos released the toxic cloud because of an excess of carbon dioxide in the water. The valley is deemed unfit for human residence until the lake is fully degasified through special equipments. Cameroonian soldiers take charge of the valley, with the survivors settled for the time being in a number of refugee camps. Also on this point, Westerman cannot help but commenting that the great selling point of Sigurðsson's hypothesis is that "you can do something with it" (Westerman 2013, 97), namely investing and researching on the process of degasification. While he does not take a stance on the correctness of the

hypothesis, Westerman points out how this kind of hypothesis – politically and economically more appealing – may have possibly resulted in a "stronger" narrative.

Now it is the turn of religion. Westerman is specifically interested in the perspective of Christian missionaries and converts of the area. Religion allows Westerman to introduce the important question of the search for a *meaning* of disasters – something that goes beyond the physical explanation and the rationality of science, and that aims at making sense, from an existential point of view, of catastrophic events and the suffering they engender. This mode of approaching disasters predate the technocratic paradigm, and in particular the Christian modes of framing disasters that Westerman explores represents, from a European perspective, the historical rival of the scientific paradigm (see Grell, 2007, Weber, 2007). Westerman calls the missionaries myth-bringers (*mythebrengers*), in the sense that they are the promoters of an "imported" myth, which aims at reading the disaster through a number of pre-existing narrative patterns. Some of these include seeing the disaster as "Satan's work"; as divine retribution; or as a redemptive moment for the survivors and as an occasion to reinforce their faith. The disaster, read through the resources of Christian religion, does not assume a relevance in itself, but is subsumed within a pre-existing discourse to reinforce a theological, universalizing narrative. Westerman, for this section, chooses a Dutch missionary, Jaap Nielen, as main point of reference. While he admires his relief efforts for the post-disaster refugees, Westerman is sceptical of the totalizing narrative that Nielen offers. As regards to Nielen's way of reading reality, he comments: "That's how [preachers] see the world: they read reality allegorically. They are masters in thinking about parables to suggest links that do not necessarily exist. The spiritual guide […] elevates the small stories towards the great one" (Westerman 2013, 155).

Westerman sees the missionaries as a deeply ambivalent forces in the context of postcolonial disasters. Their presence represent a continuity with colonial forms of cultural imperialism – for instance, the mass conversions of the colonial era. At the same time, the missionaries are effectively a part of the local environment. They are integrated into Cameroonian society, and are among the most active agents in the initial wave of support to the victims. It is by telling of the massive relief efforts undertaken by the religious men that the mass of displaced people in the aftermath of the disaster finally appear in the book. So the refugees, in this part, are at least physically present, appearing as suffering bodies that the missionaries can help. Apart from this possibility, they do not feature as active

agents in shaping the meaning of the disaster, nor are the Biblical narratives able to shed much light on the Cameroonian context, its history, its local and global implications.

Paradoxically, what bothers Westerman in Jaap Nielen's approach to the disaster echoes the kind of criticism he makes to the scientific debate, namely that it attempts to detach itself from the local context to follow a universally valid narrative – with the difference that this narrative is theological and not techno-scientific. Westerman cannot follow him down that particular path, nor does he find a particular value in its epistemological perspective, wondering how a person with a Ph.D. in philosophy and that agrees with him that experiences and perceptions are subjective "could consider something so private as his own religious convictions as superior to the those of the medicine-man", to the point of "[making] an exception for a certain metaphysics that he experienced as objective, whose universal value he had to convince others of" (Westerman 2013, 179-180). Westerman significantly comments: "on that point, our ways parted" (Westerman 2013, 180). Westerman is particularly harsh with Jaap Nielen, perhaps because, as a Dutch from a protestant background, he understands the internal logic of reading reality through an "unshakeable grid […], an authoritative pattern of biblical tales" (Westerman 2013, 167). Jaap Nielen, in this sense, is a mirror for Westerman's self, displaced in time: it is not a chance that a person Westerman interviews paints him as a person "living in two worlds, […] the archaic and the contemporary" (Westerman 2013, 149). Quite intriguingly, however, the Christian way of assimilating stories into a broader allegorical narrative may also be read as an example of a faulty use of the multidirectional anthropological imagination.

That said, Westerman has to admit that the Christian narrative can also be, paradoxically, inherently local: at some points he hears about a survivor of the disaster, Anthony, who has become a preacher under the tutelage of Nielen, and whose faith and identity is now entirely based on the fact that he was "miraculously" saved by the disaster thanks to God's grace. Westerman is suspicious: "who had led him to believe that he had been spared, no: chosen to preach the word of God, because fate had not struck him by a whisker?" (Westerman 2013, 122). At the same time, when he meets Anthony, it is quite clear that this specific Christian narrative have given him purpose and direction in his life. If Westerman can oppose Nielen's inconsistencies on a logical level, it surrenders *vis-à-vis* Anthony's religious *Weltanschauung*, even though he cannot share it, implicitly admitting that this is a perspective that is unavoidable to understand that environment and simply cannot be dismissed as invalid.

In the last section Westerman gives voice to a number of "properly" local readings of the disaster. The definition he uses is that myth-makers/creators of myths (*mythemakers*). The myth-makers are all those people – native Cameroonians – that have to creatively elaborate the disaster with local materials in order to make sense of it, and, at the same time, use the disaster as a starting point to make sense of the local reality. In this sense, the last part of the book do not represent a specific, homogeneous epistemological paradigm, but its different sources are unified – in sharp contrast with the previous two paradigms – by an adherence to a local context. Westerman gathers a number of different sources in this last section, most of them encountered during his trip to Cameroon to research the Nyos disaster, and all coming from the area of Cameroon, the Grassfields, that was hit by the disaster: an anthropologist, Paul Nkwi; a playwright, Bole Butake; a Fulani survivor, Umaru Sule, that later migrated to America; the local, traditional elite; and various displaced refugees of the disaster that still, after more than twenty years, cannot move back to the Nyos valley. Although this part is quite heterogeneous, on the whole this section of the book moves the focus from the physical cause of the disaster, or to the search of its meaning in purely spiritual terms, to the social and cultural implications of the disaster itself – even if channelled through traditional or supernatural narratives. The disaster, framed in this way, unearths and registers colonial and neocolonial history in a global perspective; it becomes a revealer of the dynamics of the society in which it took place; but also illuminates on the specificities of the Grassfields culture.

If anything, this section can be legitimately called an anthropological perspective, in the sense that it looks at the disaster as a social and cultural phenomenon rather than as a technical problem. According to the anthropological definition of disasters provided by Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, a disaster is:

> a process/event combining a potentially destructive agent/force from the natural, modified, or built environment and a population in a socially and economically produced condition of vulnerability, resulting in a perceived disruption of the customary relative satisfactions of individual and social needs for physical survival, social order, and meaning. (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002, 4)

So the vulnerability of a population – which is an essential component of a disaster together with a hazard of some kind – is not "natural" but is socially and economically produced. Moreover, a disaster

is not exclusively identifiable with the manifestation of a hazard – an event – but is instead a process, with a history that precedes the event itself and an afterlife that follows it. This is particularly important for the Nyos disaster, because at first this event presents itself as the handbook definition of a "natural" catastrophe. Since the emergence of the gas cloud was highly unpredictable and mostly unprecedented, no one could be blamed for the Nyos disaster, at least according to a technocratic perspective, which cares only for geophysical monitoring. But if we adopt a vision of the disaster that takes into consideration the social production of vulnerability before and after the catastrophic event, it becomes perfectly possible to articulate a coherent narrative that connects the Lake Nyos disaster with the political situation of Cameroon.

One of the possibilities that Westerman explores is the idea that the origins of the Nyos disaster were not natural at all, but rather the effect of a bomb that the central government allowed foreign powers to test in the Grassfields. This idea is variously mentioned throughout the book, and generally dismissed as a conspiracy theory. In this chapter, however, Westerman shows that the idea actually is not particularly absurd from the perspective of a lot of Cameroonians. The main reason is that the Nyos valley is located in North-Western Cameroon, one of the two anglophone areas of the country. anglophone Cameroon, since the country's independence, has historically asked for a greater degree of autonomy. This desire has got even stronger throughout the years, with many political forces aiming at complete independence, because anglophone Cameroon was gradually subjected to considerable cultural marginalisation and economic exploitation on the part of the francophone central government. In particular, Paul Biya, the second president of Cameroon – in charge since 1982 – has often brutally repressed any protest from anglophone Cameroon, both violent and pacific. Unsurprisingly, anglophone Cameroon is also the stronghold of the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Front, the main adversary of the party in power, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement. The so-called "anglophone problem" is still an open issue in Cameroon – a new phase of protests and repression has been going on in the North-West since the end of 2016 (International Crisis Group 2017).

Therefore, the idea that the government allowed foreign powers to test a bomb in this area in particular does not seem too far-fetched for many anglophone Cameroonians. In exploring and giving space to this narrative, Westerman's aim is arguably not to suggest that the bomb was actually tested, but to show how this narrative is able to powerfully articulate the marginalisation of anglophone Cameroon – and of the Nyos refugees in particular. Even if we do not admit that there was actually a

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bomb, the fact that the Biya government did opportunistically profit from the disaster and treated the refugees unfairly was variously argued by many. Several sources, for instance, maintain that the vast majority of the aid for the refugees was embezzled (Bang 2013, 497). The survivors, meanwhile, have been forced to live out of the Nyos valley in inadequate refugee camps for over thirty years. In the camps, they had to face the hostility of host communities, perpetual stress, precarious health conditions, and cultural and economic impoverishment. One thing that definitely does not help stopping the rumours is the fact that several refugees have been pressed into voting for the government party as the only possibility to improve their situation speedily (Bang and Few 2012, 1154). As part of the anglophone minority and as political enemies, the Lake Nyos refugees are treated as typical "bad victims" – a category that is commonly employed whenever people in need of aid are considered ungrateful, or politically dangerous (Zhang 2016, 91).

The bomb-theory, moreover, is a particularly powerful narrative because it is not unique to the Lake Nyos disaster – it is a narrative pattern that actually emerges quite consistently whenever the Grassfields population feels that the state is not only failing them, but is also actively damaging them out of greed. This is partly explained by the fact that the bomb-theory is constructed over the model of a traditional, and therefore easily accessible, narrative pattern, namely that of sorcery. As Ivo Quaranta argues in his book on the perception of AIDS in the Grassfields (another phenomenon that generates similar conspiracy theories), the *modus operandi* of the traditional figure of the sorcerer, in the Grassfields culture, is to betray his friends or relatives and sell them to the cannibalistic sorcerers of the night in exchange for magic power. Similarly, the government is said to be selling out the population that it is supposed to protect in order to curry favour with foreign powers. This parallelism between politics and sorcery is an effective framework that can encompass a bomb plot at the expenses of a minority and the general neglect of the refugees, but is also a fair assessment of Biya's policies: his government has historically carried out a programme of massive liberalisation – including privatisation, destruction of welfare, and opening up the markets to foreign corporations. All this has drastically increased the social vulnerability of the Cameroonians through a subtle form of slow violence. Cameroonian neoliberal policies, in this sense, can be legitimately defined as a form of state-sorcery (Quaranta 2006). Therefore, framing the Nyos disaster as a plot organized by the state and corporations against the people cannot be simply equated as falling prey to collective paranoia; it involves

acknowledging the connections between natural disasters and neoliberal, authoritarian and predatory forms of governance.

At least two of the local narratives that Westerman collects articulate that the government is, in many ways, responsible for the social production of the vulnerability of the refugees, while simultaneously providing insights into what the disaster means within local culture, history and traditional cosmology. The first of the two, the playwright Bole Butake, is particularly straightforward in his accusations. When Westerman asks him whether there will be any form of celebration for the 25th anniversary of the disaster, he comments:

> Do you think president Biya has any desire for a commemoration? What is supposed to be commemorated, anyway? The fact that the victims were abandoned to their fate and that they still can't go back after twenty-five years? The pilfering of the aid money? (Westerman 2013, 248)

This is why Butake claims that he can at least consider the hypothesis of a bomb: the political and economical advantage that Biya has gained after the disaster simply cannot be ignored. Yet Butake's most interesting insight derives from his play *Lake God*, which Westerman amply discusses and partly incorporates within his own narrative. The play, set during the colonial period, focuses around the decision of the *Fon* of Nyos (a local title for chief or king) to abandon traditional customs, under the influence of Christian missionaries and his obsession with Western culture. In spite of the resistance of a secret order of women – the *Fibuen* – the fon bans traditional sacrifices, provoking the wrath of the lake and sealing the death of the village. Butake's use of a colonial narrative to represent the fate of modern victims of the Nyos disaster allow him to place the disaster into the long history of modern Cameroon, articulating how the vulnerability of the Grassfields people has been long in the making, involving the connivance of colonial forces, local elites and religious authorities. As Westerman sums it up, the plays uses dramatic and poetic means to voice the perspective of the victims and highlight how they had been deprived of social cohesion, asking the question: "Who or what has disrupted society to the point that it collapsed?" (Westerman 2013, 228). The answer is clearly: *not* the gas cloud, but the political choices that came before and after that event.

Similarly to how Butake uses colonial history as a mirror for the present predicament of the Grassfields, Paul Nkwi uses his knowledge of local cosmologies and cultural systems to offer a

possible local reading of the disaster. Westerman lingers on his intervention at an important 1998 anthropology conference in Zagreb. Nkwi argues that in the eyes of the Grassfields people, "unnatural events" such as premature death are usually interpreted as the manipulation of supernatural forces. Since Lake Nyos – or lake Lwi, as it was known before the disaster – was considered the "good" lake in traditional culture, its devastating release of the gas could only be interpreted as an unnatural event in traditional cosmology – possibly a punishment for the Fon's disregard of his traditional duties. And yet the amount of devastation caused by the disaster was entirely disproportionate to any crime that the fon may have eventually committed, so that traditional cosmology could not explain the disaster. Nkwi concludes with two important points: firstly, it is precisely this inability of traditional cosmology to provide a satisfying explanation that lend credibility to the bomb-theory. Secondly, traditional myths of the Grassfields cosmology are actually full of catastrophic events connected to lakes – hence they are more relevant to the work of geologists than it might initially seem.

How does Westerman position himself with respect to these narratives and epistemological perspectives that he weaves together? In order to answer to that question, it is worth noticing that Westerman, while expressing himself on specific points – for instance, the disregard of the scientific narratives for the local context; the totalizing nature of the Christian narrative; and, conversely, the sociological insight contained in a local conspiracy theory – refrains from making extended comparisons between the different epistemological paradigms. Ultimately, it is the narratological reflections on the relationship between myths, stories and fact that provides a tenuous link between the various perspectives. Scientist, missionaries and Cameroonians are, therefore, unified in their nature as "animals that tell stories to each other" (Westerman 2013, 27), as Westerman puts it at the beginning of the book.

Westerman needs the narratological investigation, the focus of stories and words – which, it is worth remembering, is for him a secular space that is nevertheless grounded in a textualist Protestant sensitivity – to compensate for a fundamental paradox in the premise of the book. The structure of the book suggest that to properly understand the Nyos Lake disaster – and, in turn, to gain an insight in the environment and communities that have been affected – it is necessary to look at the event from different epistemological paradigms. Indeed, Westerman's multidirectional anthropological imagination in this books rests precisely on its insistence on using multiple epistemologies to frame the environment and people of the Grassfields. If the book rests on this premise, differently from *The*

Hungry Tide, where all the different epistemological perspectives are "grounded" in the local context and are ultimately able to reach a humanist form of understanding, such harmony does not seem possible in *Stikvallei*. The different perspectives remain isolated from each other, with little possibility of communication and fundamentally hostile to each other. There seems to be no common ground on which the interests of the scientific, religious and local narrative can meet.

This relatively unsatisfying result, this inability to provide a synthesis, is perhaps the reason why Westerman, in the ending, seems to turn to a form of affiliation towards the inhabitants of the Grassfields. While in the first two parts the reader may still have the impression that Westerman is simply exploring a variety of perspective, the third one forces the reader to reconsider the moral hierarchy of the book. Westerman's final chapter seems to be trying to establish a form of solidarity, on moral grounds, with the so-called "myth-makers". This is especially relevant in the last pages of the book: Westerman has actually reached the Nyos valley – he wants to visit the Lake as a culmination of his fieldwork. In the eerie atmosphere of this deserted valley, he finally sees Lake Nyos. While he is contemplating the waters, he sees a number of black and yellow birds flying about, coming and going from their nests, which are built on the branch of a tree that hovers on the water of death. Westerman comments:

> Hanging from that branch, there is an entire collection of possibly the most beautiful structures an animal can build: fragile balls of interwoven grass blades, swaying in the wind. They look like Chinese lanterns, fresh green and busting with life – dangling less than two meters above the water of the Nyos. (Westerman 2013, 307–8)

The birds are a clear symbol for the people of the Nyos valley – both the victims and the displaced survivors: inherently precarious subjects whose life has been either swept away by the disaster or is still uprooted from its ancestral home. The books ends with a close up of living beings instead of the sublime mystery of the Killer Lake: the final image of the book, the vision Westerman is granted by visiting the lake, is not about the lake itself, but about the people, their home, the life that they want to and was (or still is) denied to them.

The paragraph that follows – and that ends the book – is equally significant. Westerman receives an e-mail from Butake that confirms that no commemoration has taken place, and that the Nyos

disaster has been completely ignored by the authorities. It is at this point that Westerman comments: "after reading the message twice, I shut down my e-mail program and open a new document. I start writing this story" (Westerman 2013, 308). Westerman wants to suggest that the silence on the Nyos disaster and his desire to start writing about it are connected – which is not, quite crucially, the rationale he had introduced at the beginning of the book, namely a more detached examination on the origins of stories. At this point we can look back at *Stikvallei* not merely as the juxtaposition of three perspectives on a disaster, but rather as an an exploration of the reasons why and how this silence was created and maintained, and as a logical step to fight that silence. The project seems to have acquired an increased level of moral clarity, indeed switching from a multidirectional anthropological imagination – with its focus on seeing natives and their environment in multiple, perspectives, and possibly finding convergences and mirrorings with other, seemingly unconnected instances – to a militant one – which would see the natives as an ally within a specific political struggle.

One way to read the book is to see how it has the reader cross different patterns of visibility and invisibility regarding the survivors, setting up a journey for the reader that in its very structure – from the most visible to the most invisible forms of narration – mimics the structures of global power that regulate the various catastrophic discourses. The book asks the reader to look back at the gap between the highly visible, highly glamorous "sexy disaster" that is initially introduced at the beginning and the invisible plight of the survivors that becomes apparent by the time the book is finished. If it is true, as Rob Nixon argues, that "any interest in form must be bound to questions of affiliation" (Nixon 2011, 32), Westerman's narratives structure is meant as an open examination of various discursive possibilities that ultimately lead him to side with the position of the "myth-makers". Yet the puzzle that Westerman sets up is so complex, involving so many voices and perspectives, that this final affiliation with the victims, while ethically grounded, does not really solve the epistemological tension between the various perspectives. In spite of the ending, the book, on another level, does not really reject its multidirectional approach. The three specific narratives that Westerman decides to explore remain in perpetual tension, and remain, in Westerman's vision, as incommensurable from each other as mutually illuminating.

4.4. Conclusion

The two epistemic operations that I have explored in this chapter seem, at first sight, rather bizarre: seeing cultural others as mirrors of the self and/or reflections of other, seemingly unrelated socio-historical existences; and seeing cultural others by tackling simultaneously a number of epistemological paradigms. They do not seem intuitive or spontaneous procedures, and yet this is what Amitav Ghosh and Frank Westerman consistently try to do in their works, to the point that these epistemic operations can be legitimately seen as a form of the anthropological imagination – a rather stable pattern of epistemic operations that frame and make sense of cultural others. Yet it is essential to note a fundamentally different attitude in Ghosh's and Westerman's way of weaving multidirectional patterns. Ghosh's concern for finding a humanist common ground between different epistemological perspectives, conjoined with the preoccupation for the supremacist tendencies that might arise in an ethnographic encounter (whether they are economical, political or religious), leads him to be more willing to finds narrative ways to supersede the inherent conflicts generated by these different positions. Ensuring that a form of dialogue goes on and, conversely, restraining any form of supremacist tendency is a fundamental ethical imperative for Ghosh, which is why, at least in fiction, he prefers to envision models of integration rather than of conflict, actively trying to visualize how dialogue and "translation" between different languages and ways of life can be enacted.

In an early essay in which he discusses the representation of violence, Ghosh argues that, because "it is all to easy to present violence as an apocalyptic spectacle, while the resistance to it can easily figure as mere sentimentality, or worse, as pathetic and absurd", it is important to "find a form – or a style or a voice or a plot – that [can] accommodate both violence *and* the civilized willed response to it" (Ghosh 2005b, 89). If the violence in this sentence can also refer to the epistemic violence of supremacism – the violent imposition of an imaginative worldview – Ghosh has clearly undertaken the task of finding a "form – or a style, or a voice, or a plot" in which this supremacist tendency is replaced by instances of dialogue and compromise. In this sense, his latest work, *The Great Derangement*, is consistent with these concerns: given a supremacist force that has virtual dominance over the entire globe – neoliberal capitalism in the era of the Anthropocene – and a form of existence that must be incorporated into a humanist dialogue – non-human agency – Ghosh issues a call for a form that is able

to imaginatively portray climate change, as the realist novel failed to do, but also, most crucially, to [recognize] "an all-encompassing presence that may have its own purpose about which we know nothing" (Ghosh 2016, 5).

Framing climate change as a lack of integration of the non-human into a humanist conversation – and therefore within the imagination – is consistent with Ghosh's syncretic humanism as he has been practising throughout his career. However, the space of dialogue that he envisions – not only regarding the human and the non-human, but more generally – is not inherently, or consistently, secular. This dialogue is based also on the acceptance of forms of irrationalism and faith that for Ghosh are legitimate "matters of the spirit". This is a path on which Westerman cannot follow Ghosh. His own strategy to create connections and equivalences always relies on a translation into specifically secular languages. Should this transition into a secular language fail, Westerman can only humbly acknowledge the incommensurability of his own position and the one he has attempted to translate, but he does not surrender or accept its mystery or its inherent validity. So the bomb-theory about the Nyos Lake, as well as the cosmologies of the Grassfields people, are valuable because they can be translated into a secular vision: they provide historical and sociological insight on the environment they emerge from. This is why Westerman is ultimately comfortable within the unifying and fundamentally secular dimension of storytelling: even Christian religion can find a space within this dimension, translated into a "stage play" – a narrative that can be both rationally enjoyed and rationally questioned.

Conclusion: from the Anthropological Imagination to World Literature (and back again)

The starting point for this work has been the current debate on world literature. My attempt, in structuring my work through a typology of the forms of the anthropological imagination, has been to create a platform for new literary connections. I believe that the dynamics of the ethnographic encounter, and especially how, out of those encounters, relatively stable imaginative patterns are created, are widespread and complex phenomena that deserve the broad comparative perspective that world literature can provide. I have tried to create juxtapositions of writers that, together, manage to pinpoint crucial moments in which the different modes of the anthropological imagination emerge. I hope that their combination creates a sufficiently compelling pattern with its inner logic, spanning through geography, time and different possible identities and positionings. I do not expect my typology to be exhaustive, but to provide at least some insight on six, mutually illuminating starting points from which the imagination on the cultural other is shaped and registered in a literary form.

Hopefully also the transversal connections between the authors presented in the individual chapters create a number of productive intellectual pathways. Arguably a *leitmotiv* of those pathways is a concept that I have already mentioned in the previous chapter, what Comaroff calls a process of "critical estrangement of the lived world" (Comaroff, 2010, 530), which he deems to be one of the fundamental epistemic operations of the anthropological praxis. Throughout my exploration of the work of these six different writers, the received meaning of several categories and concepts – the state, religion, the secular, reason, history, civilisation, barbarism, the human, the environment, development, political solidarity, disasters, insurgency, and love – has been interrogated and critically estranged. I think that all these writers, in spite of the differences in the epistemological paradigms they adopt, share at least this fundamental procedure – and in this sense they are inherently anthropological in Comaroff's definition.

Another common pattern, arguably, is that all these explorations of the anthropological imagination stumble, in one way or another, on some irresolvable contradiction. This is, of course, an asset rather than a flaw: literature, due to his narrative dimension, has the advantage of presenting us contradictions that do not necessarily need to (or cannot) be solved. You cannot write a new ending to "The Beach of Falesá" that corrects Wiltshire's complex and contradictory feelings. Or rather, you can

– it is called a sequel or fan-fiction – but that does not make the original ending more right or wrong: it simply exists as a registration that the way we imagine others and the way we establish relationship with them is an inherently messy process.

Is the anthropological imagination just an interchangeable topic for world literature, an excuse to establish new connections between literary histories and historical periods? Not necessarily. I have already argued, in the first chapter, that world literature and anthropology can cross-fertilize each other, as both are comparative disciplines that work under the assumption that local specificities may have something to teach about a more general phenomenon, that constantly wonder about the epistemological and political implications of comparative methods, and that must be aware that their knowledge on cultural otherness is not co-opted in exploitative mechanisms. The examination of the various forms of the anthropological imagination and their constitutive epistemic operations is indeed one of the ways in which an anthropological approach can inform the practices of world literature. But I want to emphasize that examining the forms of the anthropological imagination, more specifically, allows us to reflect on the very modes in which comparisons can be established, or the ethical and political rationale for endorsing them – in other words, they are also methodological, political and ethical models for the enterprise of world literature itself.

In my thesis the various forms of the anthropological imagination are also implicit models for the ways I establish my juxtapositions and comparisons. For instance: the colonial anthropological imagination represents primarily an attempt to frame a cultural other through typological classification. Typologies are, I argue, a legitimate modes of knowledge. They do become problematic when they are are overly general and/or essentialized, let alone when they are deliberately constructed with a political agenda in mind. But, at the same time, they represent a fundamental way to organize the world, provided that they are accepted as provisional. They can become, therefore, projects focused around organizing diversity intelligibly, which is a central aspect of any comparative enterprise. My work is focused on a typology, albeit a fairly provisional one. I do not think that any of the positionings that I have highlighted, nor the connection between the authors and their form of anthropological imagination, are beyond questioning. But at least they represent a starting point for further discussion and more refined classifications.

The multidirectional anthropological imagination, instead, is based on seeing cultural others as mirrors for other historical experiences and other epistemological perspectives. This is potentially

misleading and dangerous. But at the same time it follows a necessary effort of the imagination towards making valuable connections that were not there in the first place. Seemingly risky juxtapositions in world literature – which can be, besides, historically grounded – allow for new ways of understanding and articulating the cultural and historical actors that are involved in this process of mirroring. In my work, this epistemic operation has been essential to visualize most of my connections and juxtapositions before I had scholarly, historical or textual material to back them up. Multidirectionality means taking an imaginative leap of faith.

Lastly, also the militant anthropological imagination, which frames others as potential allies in a political struggle, contains the risks of epistemic violence and appropriation. And yet it remains a crucial framework, considering the global dimension of several political, environmental, economic struggles that requires us to think about cultural others beyond mere identity politics. We need, in this sense, a world literature – both as an object and a field of studies – that is able to imaginatively connect those struggles, and to critically reflect over them. Throughout my work, I have tried to stress how political alliances and the development of solidarities are an essential way cross boundaries and establish meaningful relationships with others. Most importantly, this is not a mere intellectual exercise: it is an act of the imagination that allow us to perceive seemingly different struggles as one.

The forms of the anthropological imagination are the ways in which we imaginatively make sense of cultural others, and the praxes they imply can be at the root of projects of world literature. But it is worth noting that the reverse is also true: a project of world literature always implies an anthropology. Moretti, commenting on Lukács, argues that "the way we imagine comparative literature is a mirror of how we see the world" (Moretti 2003, 81). But what does "seeing the world" mean? For Moretti it means "[understanding] the great political dilemmas" of our time (Moretti 2003, 81). But perhaps seeing the world in a certain way means also seeing the people that inhabit it in a certain way – in other words: according to a certain form of anthropological imagination. It follows that world literature is always a form of anthropology: the way we imagine world literature is a mirror of our anthropology of cultural others.

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WORLD LITERATURE AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION.

ETHNOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTERS IN EUROPEAN AND SOUTH ASIAN WRITING, 1885-2016

Dottorato di ricerca in LINGUE, CULTURE E SOCIETA' MODERNE E SCIENZE DEL LINGUAGGIO

(in cotutela con ....)

Ciclo 31°

Anno di conseguimento del titolo 2019

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Studente: Lucio De Capitani

matricola: 956216

Dottorato: Lingue, Culture e Società Moderne e Scienze del Linguaggio

Ciclo: 31°

Titolo della tesi: World Literature and the Anthropological Imagination. Ethnographic Encounters in European and South Asian Writing, 1885-2016

Abstract:

Gli studi letterari, con l'apertura del dibattito sulla *world literature*, sono alla ricerca di nuovi approcci comparativi. Una possibile strada in tal senso è rappresentata da un dialogo interdisciplinare con l'antropologia. La mia tesi si propone quindi di mappare le forme dell'immaginazione antropologica – i diversi insiemi di operazioni epistemiche che un individuo o un gruppo utilizzano per comprendere un altro culturale. Mi concentro su come l'immaginazione antropologica venga registrata in una serie di testi letterari di sei autori europei e indiani: Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Carlo Levi, Mahasweta Devi, Amitav Ghosh e Frank Westerman. Ogni capitolo mette a confronto due autori – un europeo e un indiano – che utilizzano o rappresentano simili modalità di immaginazione antropologica. Le tre modalità che tratto sono quella coloniale (Stevenson/Kipling), militante (Levi/Devi) e multidirezionale (Ghosh/Westerman). A livello teorico, mi avvalgo dei dibattiti sulla world literature e di vari studi storici e riflessione metodologiche all'interno dell'antropologia.

In the wake of the recent debate on world literature, literary studies are looking for new comparative approaches. The possibility that I explore in this thesis is an interdisciplinary dialogue with anthropology. My aim is therefore to map the different forms of the anthropological imagination – the various constellations of epistemic operations that an individual or a group rely on to make sense of a cultural other. I focus on the ways the anthropological imagination is registered in fictional and non-fictional literary works by a number of authors from various South Asian and European contexts: Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Carlo Levi, Mahasweta Devi, Amitav Ghosh, Frank Westerman. Each chapter juxtaposes a European and a South Asian author that tackle similar or complementary forms of the anthropological imagination. The three main forms of the anthropological imagination that I address are colonial (Stevenson/Kipling), militant (Levi/Devi) and multidirectional (Ghosh/Westerman). From a theoretical perspective, my research is informed by the current debate on world literature and by various historical studies and methodological reflections within anthropology.

Firma dello studente