



Global Conversations

A collection of essays, short fiction, and poetry



'Global Conversations' is an online collection of essays, short fiction, and poetry selected from an open call for writing to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) at the University of Cambridge.

© CRASSH 2021

www.crassh.cam.ac.uk

Design: Judith Weik

Cover art: Loveworld (2021) © Ian Tothill



Selection panel

Steven Connor

Director of CRASSH, author and Grace 2 Professor of English

Dr Melissa Calaresu

Neil McKendrick Lecturer in History, Faculty of History

Ali Smith CBE FRSL

Author, playwright, academic and journalist

Authors

Farah Ahamed, Kaddy Benyon, Elena Calliopa, Jonathan Chan,
Esuna Dugarova, Ananya Dutta Gupta, Matilda Greig, Jessica Harada,
Kanya Kanchana, James Kearns, Julie Kern Donck, Petra Lindnerova,
Robert Nelson, Jane Partner, Amy Peace Buzzard, Julia Rone,
Conor Ryan, Avani Tandon Vieira, Sushruti Tripathi, Elena Violaris

“This collection draws together the winners of the Global Conversations writing competition mounted by CRASSH in 2021. By turns angry, pained, wry, elegiac and meditative, it is itself an opulent colloquy between writers of poetry, fiction and criticism from all over the world.”

Steven Connor, Director, CRASSH

Table of contents

- 6 Farah Ahamed • [Getting ideas](#) • short story
- 18 Kaddy Benyon • [Homelands](#) • short story
- 30 Elena Calliopa • [O=C=O](#) • poem
- 36 Jonathan Chan • [a: Ethnos](#) & [b: Conversion](#) • poems
- 40 Jonathan Chan • [Situating Gregory Doran's Julius Caesar \(2012\): the legacies of Shakespeare in Africa](#) • essay
- 60 Esuna Dugarova • [Rethinking care for the post-COVID-19 world](#) • essay
- 68 Matilda Greig • [Talking to spiders](#) • personal essay
- 76 Ananya Dutta Gupta • [Howrah Junction](#) • poem
- 82 Jessica Harada • [A migrant's sense of vanishing](#) • prose fiction
- 88 Kanya Kanchana • [Instructions for a novice](#) • poem
- 92 James Kearns • [The lonely people](#) • short story
- 98 Julie Kern Donck • [Global eden. Part II.](#) • poetry in prose
- 108 Petra Lindnerova • [Along the dotted line](#) • short story
- 120 Robert Nelson • [Eclogue 7. The theft of language. Emmanuelle](#) • poem
- 132 Jane Partner • [Universal characters: writing towards no language](#) • visual poetic essay
- 152 Amy Peace Buzzard • [Conversations around tea: a body extended through domestic things](#) • poetic art essay
- 162 Julia Rone • [Telephone tales](#) • essay
- 172 Conor Ryan • [Shams and shamrocks: Irish national cinema](#) • essay
- 182 Avani Tandon Vieira • [Weathering](#) • poem
- 186 Sushruti Tripathi • [The WhatsApp group chat called Avocado](#) • essay
- 192 Elena Violaris • [The Crown: An immigrant that made all immigrants natives](#) • short fiction

Getting ideas

Farah Ahamed

Short story

[Table of contents](#)

[Next >>](#)

'We don't want any problems with the law,' Aisha's father was always saying to her. 'Remember, no one will defend your rights. You're invisible, a refugee. Give thanks for what you have. Be on your guard and make yourself as inconspicuous as possible.'

He didn't need to worry about Aisha; people looked straight through her. Even when she stood directly in their path, they made no eye contact, but only mumbled 'excuse me.' Once, on a cold winter's day, she'd dropped her handbag on purpose, outside Sainsbury's in Holborn, at the peak of the rush hour. All the contents were strewn on the pavement, but instead of stopping to help, everyone sidestepped her umbrella, wallet, scarf and lipstick, and carried on.

When she was out walking in London, she would look around her, in case someone familiar might appear. She lived alone in a ground floor flat and at times she would stand at the window watching the street outside, as though expecting a visitor. Or she'd go down to the pub at the corner, and sit there with a drink, staring into the faces of strangers. No one gave her a second glance, or even a first one.

Aisha worked for an NGO as a Human Rights Officer.

'Not a bad career,' her father said. 'But don't start getting ideas about yourself.'

One morning, Aisha was asked if she'd be interested in taking a posting abroad, as a Children's Rights Coordinator in Tanzania.

'We need someone with experience of cultural differences,' her boss said, 'and a nuanced appreciation of rights.'

'I think I have that understanding,' she said. 'My family moved to the UK from Syria.'

'Rights in particular,' he said, 'are interpreted differently everywhere.' He took off his glasses and polished them with his tie. 'It all depends on context. Sometimes it's better for rights to evolve naturally. They have to be taken and not given.'

'It's great you're getting some international experience,' her father said. 'But you can't afford to be naïve. You don't know what people are like out there.'

Three weeks later, Aisha found herself in their new offices in Dar-es-Salaam. The NGO had given a grant for the establishment of Children's Rights Clubs at various schools across the country, and she was to carry out an evaluation study. Her report would be used to determine the funding for Phase II of the project.

On a scorching afternoon, she set out for Morogoro, with Bayyina, the young Project Officer in charge of teaching children their rights, and the driver. Along the way they passed simple mud dwellings in the baking sun, and Aisha looked out at them from the air-conditioned Pajero. Suddenly they swerved.

'What was that thud?' Aisha said. 'We must have hit something.'

'A stupid goat,' said the driver. He got out and went over to the animal. Aisha rolled down her window. The driver stood looking down at the carcass, then kicked it and walked back to the car.

'Mbuzi is dead,' he said, starting the ignition.

'We can't just leave it here in the middle of the road,' Aisha said.

The driver pressed his foot on the accelerator. 'Hakuna matatizo. Life is cheap. Many die like so.'

'I'm afraid there's nothing we can do,' Bayyina said.

After two and half hours, they reached Morogoro town. The high street had three dilapidated buildings on one side, and smaller, modern shops on the other. In the centre were a prison, church and police station. 'These were left behind by the Germans,' Bayyina said, pointing to the ruins.

The driver laughed. 'Where would us poor Africans be without the generosity of the West?' He shook a fist at the windscreen. 'As we say here, it's all thanks to the big cars we're progressing. Asante gari ya muhishimiwa; we rely on you to show us the way.'

Bayyina turned to Aisha and put her finger to her lips.

They branched into a narrow dirt road and came to a gated compound. The driver honked.

Two women were walking barefoot in the dirt. On their heads they carried baskets of bananas, and each had a baby on her back, wrapped in a colourful scarf. The women didn't seem to notice the car, but kept their

heads erect and carried on talking to each other.

They waited for a few minutes by the gate, but no one came, so Bayyina lifted the latch and they entered.

'This was my school,' she said, looking around. 'It's my first trip back in five years.'

'Has it altered much?'

'I can't really say. I've kept my distance since I graduated.' She stumbled on an exposed root, and Aisha held out her hand to steady her.

'Thank you,' Bayyina said. 'The other officers tell me it's changed, but I don't know. It looks the same, but maybe more dilapidated.'

The playing field was uneven patches of brown grass, some parts flattened and others with weeds almost knee high. Along the wire fence were large wooden signs with slogans.

'Those posts have been funded by our organisation,' Bayyina said. 'Be friends with your parents, Violence is never right, Early pregnancy is dangerous to your life, and Body changes are not a sign to start sex.'

'Are they making any difference?'

'Changing cultural attitudes takes time. But at least we're talking about the issues.' Her voice fell away.

They walked on through the field, the dry plants brushing against Aisha's trouser legs. To the far right, a broken football post lay on its side. In one corner, a concrete bench was cemented to the ground. Beside it was a sign, attached to a wooden post, of a man's finger pointing at the bench; 'Donated by USAID. Do not LOITER here.' They crossed over towards the main building, a simple two-storey construction.

'The hall is there,' Bayyina said, 'on the other side of the playing field.'

Aisha shaded her eyes with her hand, and saw what looked like nothing more than a large shed. From it came the sound of children singing and shouting.

'That's where they're waiting for us,' Bayyina said. 'We asked the head teacher to showcase what the children have learnt from the rights clubs. I hope, Aisha, this field trip will help you understand our challenges, and in your report you'll be able to indicate whether this school should get further funding, undergo a complete review, or,' she hesitated, 'be scrapped completely from the next phase.'

As they walked through the long dry weeds, Aisha spied something bright in the brown and yellow grass. She bent down and picked up a yellow tennis ball; its stitching was ripped and it was slashed down the middle. She tossed it back into the grass. A moment later, a girl stood up holding the ball in one hand. Her other hand was in her mouth and she was sucking the sleeve of her red sweater.

'Hey,' Bayyina shouted, as the school bell began to ring. 'What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be with the others?'

The girl scampered off.

They reached the hall entrance, where Aisha waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. There was only a thin shaft of sunlight coming through the narrow ventilation gap between the corrugated iron roof and the exposed brick wall. Perspiration ran down Aisha's spine as she followed Bayyina to the front of the hall.

The hall was filled with children, sitting on benches, and adults, standing and talking. A tall bulky man in a dark suit came over and gave Aisha a tight, clammy handshake.

'Karibu sana, Madam Aisha,' he said smoothly. 'You're most welcome. I'm Mr Kweli, the head teacher, and we're honoured to have you at our humble school. Please make yourself comfortable.' He patted down the front of his jacket and adjusted his tie. Aisha looked on as he extended his hand to Bayyina, who gave him a curt nod and turned away.

He clapped his hands. 'Quiet everyone. Could we please honour our special guest?'

A group of children marched in single file from the back of the hall, stood in a row at the front and sang the National Anthem in Kiswahili. Then when everyone was seated once more, the children sang another song. Aisha could just make out the words in the refrain 'God bless our NGO. We welcome Madam Aisha.'

When they'd finished she stood up. 'Thank you,' she said, 'I'm very touched that you've composed a song just for me.'

She sat down and Mr Kweli signalled for silence. 'The children will now perform a skit,' he said. 'This production was prepared by the

children themselves, without any help from their teachers. We hope it will demonstrate that the money you have donated to this school has been utilised effectively.'

'That's the stage,' Bayyina whispered, pointing to an area demarcated with chalk lines.

Three girls made their way to the 'stage,' which was bare except for a chair. One of the girls had a shaved head, another was as thin as a rake, and the third was the girl hiding in the grass earlier.

'Please begin,' Mr Kweli said, taking a seat next to Aisha.

Shaved Head struck an exaggerated pose and placed one hand on her hip. She took off her sweater and swung it round her neck. Some of the buttons were missing from the front of her shirt. She turned to Red Sweater. 'I saw your daddy at the school office today. What did you do wrong this time?'

Mr Kweli leaned forward in his chair. Aisha kept her attention on the actors.

'Nothing,' Red Sweater said, sucking her sleeve.

Skinny Bones put her arm round Red Sweater. 'Come now, don't be afraid. Tell your sisters what you did.'

From her pocket Shaved Head pulled out a packet of cigarettes. She lit up, inhaled and blew smoke into the air.

Mr Kweli jumped up. 'What's this? Smoking is not allowed on the school premises.' He turned to Aisha. 'Madam Aisha, I apologise.'

'Calm down, Mr Kweli,' Aisha said. 'It's just a play.'

Shaved Head passed the cigarette to Red Sweater. 'There's no point,' she said, 'in me telling you or anyone anything.'

'Very true,' Skinny Bones said. 'No one understands. Those who are closest to us are the very ones who are eating us. Kikulacho kinguoni mwako.'

The hall was quiet. From outside came the sound of a cock crowing.

'Yesterday, after class,' Red Sweater said, 'when everyone had left, my teacher asked me to stay back. He said he needed help cleaning the classroom.' She threw the cigarette on the floor and crushed it with her shabby shoe. 'He asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I told him I'd like to be a teacher.'

Mr Kweli jumped up. 'What's the meaning of this? Stop it at once.'

Aisha nudged Bayyina. 'What's going on here?'

'You better ask Mr Kweli,' Bayyina said.

'I can explain everything,' he said, turning to Aisha. 'Madam, shall we proceed to my office?'

'I'd like to finish watching, please.'

Mr Kweli stood for a moment looking at the girls, then sat down.

'Please carry on,' Aisha said to the girls. Red Sweater nodded.

'Teacher told me I only had to obey him,' Red Sweater said, 'and he could guarantee me a first class grade. He said every smart student knew what they had to do. He called it a small extra-curricular activity.'

'What nonsense is this?' Mr Kweli said. 'Stop it at once.'

'Please Mr Kweli, let them show us what they've learnt,' Aisha said.

'I swept the classroom and the teacher gave me a soda and some sweets,' Red Sweater said. 'He said he was going to the staffroom to get something and I should wait for him. I began to feel dizzy and my head hurt.'

Bayyina took in a sharp breath.

'These girls are rebels. I don't know where they're getting these ideas from.' Mr Kweli got up. 'Enough.'

'If you stop them,' Aisha said, 'I'll be forced to consider discontinuing Phase Two of your grant.'

Mr Kweli hesitated. 'But Madam, they're giving the wrong impression?'

Aisha gestured to the girls. 'They're waiting...?' She nodded at Red Sweater.

'When I woke up,' Red Sweater said, 'I was lying on the classroom floor. I don't know what happened, I couldn't remember anything.'

Shaved Head kicked the chair on to its side. 'Is that how you were?' she said, pointing. 'Upside down with your legs in the air?'

The audience gasped.

'Madam Aisha.' Mr Kweli touched her elbow. 'Please...'

She jerked her arm away. 'Your funding is at stake.'

'Shh,' Bayyina said.

'My teacher wasn't there,' Red Sweater said, 'but he came in soon after. What had happened to me? I asked. How did I end up on the floor with

scratches on my thighs? He said he had no idea. He'd been in the staffroom the whole time.'

'And then?' Skinny Bones said.

'My teacher told me he'd walk me home. On the way he said, I was a special student and he could help me.' Red Sweater sucked on her sleeve. 'He said he'd speak to my daddy.'

'You are special,' Shaved Head said. 'But not in that way.'

'When I woke up this morning I was very sick. I told daddy and he got annoyed. He said it was all my fault and Mr Kweli wanted to see him. I asked him why. He told me I'd made a mess of everything.'

Skinny Bones kicked the chair. 'No doubt Mr Kweli paid him some little money.'

Red Sweater pretended to cry. 'What should I do now? I want to run away.'

'Run then,' Skinny Bones said, 'as far away as you can. You've ruined your life here, your daddy told you to be good and you didn't obey. So now there's nothing left for you.'

'I've got nowhere to go.' She wrung the edge of her sweater. 'What should I do?'

'You can't do anything,' Shaved Head said. 'You're invisible.'

Mr Kweli was on his feet. 'This is some kind of joke to sabotage my school.'

'Do children in Morogoro have rights?' Shaved Head shouted. 'Do children in this school have rights?'

Shouts came from the back. 'No.'

'Who is giving us our rights?' Shaved Head said.

'Nobody,' came shouts from the audience.

'So we have to defend ourselves,' Shaved Head said. 'We have to take our rights and speak up.'

'We can't,' Red Sweater said. 'We have no voice.'

Skinny Bones stepped forward. 'They tell us, bring witnesses and evidence.'

'But if there is no evidence,' Red Sweater said, 'then what?'

'No one will believe you,' Skinny Bones said. 'They'll call you a liar.'

'You must have witnesses,' Shaved Head said.

'But there are none,' Red Sweater said. 'My body is my only proof.'

'Ha, your body!' Skinny Bones said. 'That's nothing.'

'It's a useless fight,' Red Sweater said. 'We'll never win.'

The girls huddled together in a hug. Bayyina was sniffing into a tissue. Mr Kweli said nothing. Aisha gripped the side of her seat, watching the girls. They unlocked their embrace.

Then Shaved Head took off her shoes and placed them in front of Aisha. The girl's socks had holes in the toes.

'We bear witness to each other.'

Skinny Bones was removing her shoes. She walked over to Aisha and placed them beside Shaved Head's. 'No one believes we're not to blame. But we believe each other.'

Red Sweater was taking her shoes off too. 'Can you, Madam, give us our rights?'

Spread before Aisha were three pairs of shoes, dusty and torn, with missing laces and broken buckles.

Suddenly Bayyina stood up and faced the hall. 'It happened to me too, five years ago. You remember, don't you Mr Kweli? You told me I was special.'

'Madam Aisha,' Mr Kweli said. 'We mustn't get carried away; these girls are trouble makers.'

There was a disturbance at the back of the hall. More girls were making their way to the front, waving their shoes above their heads. Then shouts came from the middle of the hall.

'It happened to me, in the school compound.'

'And to me, behind the chemistry lab.'

'And to me, in his office.'

Mr Kweli jumped on to a chair. 'Stop it,' he yelled, 'Everyone sit down immediately.'

The hall was filled with children shouting, leaping on to the benches, cheering and yelling. More girls made their way to the front, their eyes fixed on Aisha. She undid the buckles on her sandals and placed them beside the shoes. Red Sweater held out her hand. Aisha went and stood barefoot next to her.

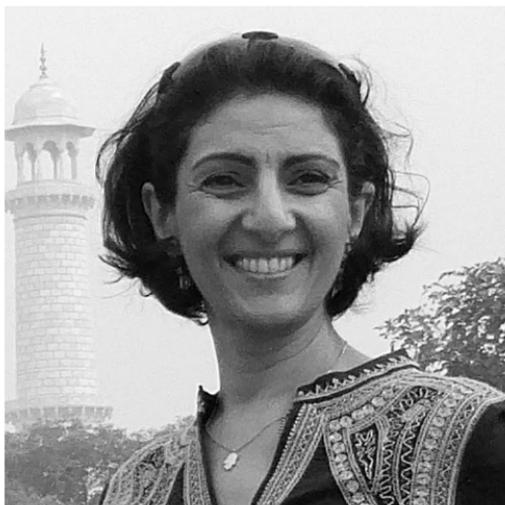
'Asante,' Red Sweater said, taking Aisha's hand with her grubby fingers. 'Thank you.' Aisha gave them a squeeze.

'Who else will be a witness to the invisible?' Bayyina shouted.

A man was striding to the front. He stopped in front of Aisha and held out a pair of black boots. The small, sweaty hand tightened its grip on hers. 'My daddy,' Red Sweater said.

The man stared directly at his daughter, then at Aisha. He knelt down and added his boots to the row.

About the author



Farah Ahamed's short stories and essays have been published in *The White Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Mechanics' Institute Review*, *The Massachusetts Review* amongst others. You can read more of her work on farahahamed.com.

[Table of contents](#)

[Next >>](#)

Homelands

Kaddy Benyon

Short story

[Table of contents](#)

[<< Previous](#) | [Next >>](#)

The long Finnish landscape went by outside, forest on both sides,
nothing but forest, further and further north, hour after hour.

~ Tove Jansson

The first time Sofi took me to the forest to see her reindeer was the autumn after we met, and already it was my second visit. I was surprised they were the size of goats or large dogs, not the thundering moose I had always imagined.

I had climbed up onto a seven-runged fence and was leaning back against a fir—one glove bitten off and dangling from my teeth—as I got to know Sofi's camera: panning out to take a wide shot of the snow-blunted trees, zooming in on a group of herders sharpening their knives by the fire, lingering on a close-up of Sofi in profile as she wound her lasso from cocked thumb to elbow and back up around her thumb again.

The reindeer were skittish, jittery, sensing fresh danger beyond what was usual for the forest. They were nosing for lichen under the snow, but one after another they lifted their velvet heads and snorted, confused by finding ample commercial feed scattered through the pine-needles and rime.

Sofi came over and climbed onto the fence beside me, leaned in to see the screen—which I playfully angled away—nudged her leg against mine and smiled, sending a wave of liquid heat through my body. Her boots unsettled a crust that had formed over the snow during the night, triggering a flurry, then a small collapse making the herd startle, murmurate, move in a kind of superfluid union I had only ever witnessed in fish or migrating birds.

We had met at the Polar Research Institute attached to the university where we were both teaching. Sofi there for a term to get some practice after submitting her PhD, and me only part time in the pockets between freelance projects, the current one being to produce images of the Arctic for a learning resource I'd been commissioned to illustrate.

I was on all fours on the map room floor, turning and turning Spitsbergen to see which way it should go, ahead of overlaying it with tracing paper to make a first attempt at getting its shape. But the edges of the scroll kept rolling back even when held open with an elbow and both my knees.

Can I help you?

I hadn't heard her come in and was embarrassed by the way I was splayed, kneeled up—all startled hare—letting the map spring back into a resolute tube. Sofi put her books on a filing cabinet and crouched on the floor beside me. She held down the north corners and I traced while kneeling on the south.

Are you going there?

No, I wish. But seeing as I'm not even confident I have this the right way up, I'd probably only wander onto the icefields and get mauled by a polar bear.

She half-laughed at this, but mostly looked earnest. You have it the right way up.

I felt grateful, somehow, she hadn't allowed me to deride myself.

Have *you* been?

No, but I'd like to. Maybe my research will take me there one day.

What is your research?

Well, the full title of my thesis is: Industrial Impacts on the Migration Routes of Reindeer in Northern Finland.

Oh, that's quite specifically not related to Spitsbergen.

No, but they do have reindeer there, so it's not totally outside of my remit. She winked, and I liked it.

She offered me her hand once I'd put my pencil down. I'm Sofi.

Kitt.

Do you know Finland at all? She asked.

I shook my head.

She turned away from me, looking for one of the large map books of Europe. But nothing was where it was meant to be on the lower shelves. There had been a flood some months back, the same tidal surge that had rearranged parts of the coastline had forced itself through the inland waterways and seeped into this city basement. Stacks of maps and atlases

had been ruined, strange new continents of yellowing watermark and green-black mold imprinting themselves over the landscapes we thought we knew.

Aha.

She pulled a volume from the middle of one of the drying-out piles, carefully unstuck two of its rippled pages—even then, her hands seemed familiar to me—and spread them open, pointing to a dot just below the Arctic Circle.

Rovaniemi, home. Her unguarded smile.

I peered in close at what looked like a small city on the fork of two rivers toward the top of a one-armed country I'd never paid much attention to, and I felt both curiosity and an unnerving certainty that one day I would go.

During the flight, I'd been frightened by the country's western edge, how the black archipelago—where sea seems more rock than water—wasn't quite defined enough for my liking. As the plane circled and prepared to land, tipped slightly to the left so my window was facing down, all I could make out through the cloudbanks was unending snowed-on forest: a mass of white iron filings; occasional specks of fawn moving fluidly between the trees; the sun refracting off so many frozen lakes I couldn't count them.

Helsinki airport felt like one long corridor. I walked and I walked, trailing the other passengers until I was certain we'd missed the exit.

I was scared Sofi wouldn't be there to meet me; I was even more scared she would.

When the opaque glass doors separating my world from hers slid apart, I spotted her straight away, looking just as nervous as me.

Hey, you made it. She hugged me and—without meaning to—I kissed her neck.

She touched the place, half-smiled. Welcome to Finland! You hungry?

I nodded.

She slung my backpack over one shoulder and helped me pull my suitcase toward the underground.

We ate piles of hot salty vendace sitting with our legs dangling over the

harbour wall, watching the ferries arrive and leave for Tallinn.

If we had more time, I'd take you. People go over to Estonia to get cheaper alcohol. Like... like a... What do you call it again when British people go over to France?

A booze cruise?

Yes, that's it. Booze cruise. She seemed to enjoy how it sounded in her mouth.

We packed up her car and left Helsinki fast, leaving behind the boats, the high-rises, the city slickers. Within half an hour we were in open countryside: yellow-green fields on both sides of the road, every now and then a slow blue river moving through them, occasionally a red barn or a wooden church.

How long will it take to get to Oulu? She had a place in mind for us to camp.

Poronkusema, she said, shrugging.

Excuse me?

She grinned. It means reindeer pissing.

Helpful, thanks.

Poro is reindeer and *kusi* is piss. When somebody asks you how long something is going to take, you say 'poronkusema' and it means however long a reindeer can run before it needs to stop to piss.

I laughed. It doesn't actually answer my question though, does it?

She beamed at me, and—Jesus—I felt it between my legs.

Several hours later—high up on some western fells—Sofi slowed the car and pulled over. She put her finger to her lips, grabbed her binoculars, and indicated we should get out quietly. I tiptoed behind her to a grassy mound overlooking a deep pink ravine.

Wow, that's stunning! I assumed it was what we'd stopped for.

They're crowberries.

Can you eat them?

Yes, they're a bit like blueberries. She was still scanning the landscape with her binoculars, and then she stopped, smiled, took the strap from around her own neck and placed it around mine. She pointed me in the right direction. Look Kittikki! It was the first time she'd used the affectionate way of

saying my name.

And then I saw them. A small herd of reindeer grazing at the edge of a lake.

Are they yours?

No, mine are further north, but there's usually some out this way around now.

We watched them for a long time, sharing the binoculars. After a while, they moved into the water, seemingly to drink. I gasped when they began to swim.

They can swim?!

Yes, it's their migration route. They swim as they're coming down from their summer pastures, and when they go back again in winter, the lake's frozen, so they can walk over.

I watched them for a long time, then gave the binoculars back, tentatively resting my head on her shoulder. She sighed through a smile and I moved my face toward hers. She turned and touched her nose to mine.

We kissed and we kissed.

Then we watched the herd again until we could no longer make out what was reindeer, what was rock. Eventually, Sofi stretched and stroked my lower back.

I suppose we'd better hit the road, we're still quite far from Oulu.

I nodded; I didn't want to leave.

Or. She glanced at the tent on the roof rack and spoke as her idea was forming. Listen, there'd be no campfire like in the movies, I don't have any sausages, the insects will probably gorge on us, and it will be more freezing than romantic...

...you're really selling this to me.

We could camp out here tonight, if you want? She was suddenly vulnerable.

We found a sheltered dip and didn't have much trouble getting the tent up. Sofi zipped the sleeping bags together and lay back on them, her hands behind her head.

I feel like a nomad.

You are a nomad, if your ancestors were.

Wouldn't you love to live like this?

My mind raced to all kinds of impracticalities. And at the same time, I knew, even then—beyond all other knowing—that wherever she went I would probably follow. It's something I understood from the start, that she has this urge to keep moving with the seasons; that she needs those old migrations, they're in her blood.

She was right about the insects; they were rife, and they were biting as we tried to wrangle each other's jeans off. It was breathless work just to get naked and was hardly our Brokeback moment. We lay facing at first, but when we tried to move into the positions our bodies wanted, there simply wasn't space.

We rearranged ourselves.

Sofi straddled me and I lifted my face to kiss hers, but she rocked back on my hips to take her top off, got in a tangle for trying to do it too quickly and hit the crossed rods at the top of the tent.

The whole thing lurched, and I grabbed at the sides to right it.

Careful! I was laughing as I sat up to help her.

She looked frantic, petulant, giving up on her zip and relinquishing it to me.

I kissed her.

She made a small sound of pleasure that travelled from her mouth into mine and I felt her body begin to relax as I opened the hoodie and slipped it off. She pushed me backward, pulled her plait over her shoulder, took the band out to let it loosen. And then she domed herself over me, her dark hair curtaining us like the wings of a black egret as it feasts.

Next morning, as we dismantled the tent together, a prospector flew over in a helicopter and Sofi looked knives at the sky. Once it had circled twice and gone, we got back in the car and drove north in near-silence, Sofi nibbling on my fingers as I fed her snacks.

Are you nervous about your viva?

Yes, sometimes my mind goes blank when I try to imagine it.

Would it help if I tested you?

She squeezed my thigh, and I knew she was both doubtful and touched.

I often get my students to tell me about illustrators they've researched, illustrators I may not have heard of.

Are there *any* illustrators you haven't heard of?

Oh yes, loads.

Her side-on smile.

So, hit me with it, come on.

Okay. Well, what we know already is a reindeer's migration routes are innate, and cannot be changed, *should* not be changed, to suit humanity. What I've tried to argue is that industry is propelling not only warming but is the biggest known threat to reindeer. When their pastures are dug up or built on, the herds are put in danger because they then have to move across highways or go too close to mines or cities. And they do this because they cannot not follow the same routes as their ancestors, like all migrating animals, they're just obeying the urge to return somewhere.

Do some of them get injured on migrations, then?

Yes, often, and more recently they die.

What kills them?

At the moment, the biggest concern is how weather systems are changing. So not only things like late snow, early thaw, unpredictable storms, forest fires and floods, but how a slight shift in temperature, felt first in the Arctic, is forcing certain predators further south because their natural habitats can no longer support them.

I leaned my head back to take this in.

Then there's logging, railways, farmers...

How do farmers threaten reindeer?

Sometimes they put poison down when reindeer wander onto into their crops.

That's horrible.

Yes, the reindeer were here first, this is their land, it needs protecting.

And you're the woman for the job?

One of them, she nodded. So that's chapters one and two, then in the third I was looking at the impact of older industrialisation on migration

routes. Things like hydroelectric companies that used to dam and re-route rivers taking no account of the reindeers' grazing grounds, or mining, that's always been a big one, for gases and minerals and fossil fuels. You wouldn't believe some of the pipelines across the tundra. And the way they pummel the landscape for extraction, not only does it release stuff into the atmosphere...

You know your examiners would ask you to define 'stuff' there?

Good point. Okay, so by stuff I don't just mean microscopic particles of dust that rise up when the earth is disturbed, I mean also how the tailings... do you know what tailings are?

I shook my head.

They're like the unwanted bits, the by-products of mining that aren't worth anything, they get dumped into lakes and rivers polluting them and causing havoc with their ecosystems.

Is that even legal?

For now, yes. There's so much demand for the raw materials Finland is rich in, a small fine is inconsequential. Resources are sold to companies all over the world for the production of mobile phones, computers, electric cars...

...but aren't electric cars a good thing?

In principle, yes, but their batteries, not so much. They're full of nickel. In fact, if we stop in a minute to...

Have sex? I interjected hopefully.

To look at the map.

Oh. I pretended to sulk.

I think there's an old mine out this way somewhere, would you like me to show you?

Go on then, Doctor Vähänen.

Not a doctor yet.

I'd pass you with no corrections.

We drove along the coast road for most of the afternoon, Sofi having the coordinates of the closest town to the nickel mine plugged in to the sat nav on her phone. She slowed down when she knew we were near, but at first, we

couldn't find it. When we arrived—after several circled attempts—we had to park on a verge, slip in sideways between two chained gates.

The site reminded me, if not of a lunar landscape, then one of the old train stations back at home, only the land around it, although similarly flat, wasn't flourishing arable thick with weeds, but parched and barren, coated in a film of madder dust.

Sofi walked over to the shaft and reluctantly I followed. It was cordoned off, but we could still just about peer over its lip: it was hollowed out, echoey, scorched, as though a settlement had burned or sunk there. It gave me vertigo and made me shudder.

I had to walk away.

I wandered down to the bank of the wide river nearby and watched it—for a minute or two—transporting its cargo of branches.

After she'd taken some photos, Sofi came up behind me, I heard her but didn't turn.

Then I felt her lift my hair, the soft chirr of birdcall in my ear, before she kissed my neck and stroked my clavicles.

Do you know what that was?

You trying to undo me?

Yes, but what was the bird?

Oh. I don't know.

A bullfinch.

It's lovely, do it again.

She turned me back around and I let my head tip, listening to her pipping like a rusty whistle as my body gave way to its detonations.

The landscape began to change as we approached the lower edge of Lapland, the verges of the road tinged with tall pink summer grasses and tiny white flowers I couldn't name. At Käpylä, we turned inland from the coast and followed a frothing Kemijoki all the way to Rovaniemi.

As we emerged from a long, forested stretch, past wind turbines and a now-closed ski slope, I glanced at Sofi as she decelerated, changed lanes, and moved us into the growl of slow-moving traffic, her expression serious

behind her sunglasses.

I feared she was pulling away from me.

Or was about to.

She turned to me just as I thought this, perhaps feeling watched, although I wondered if she'd heard my thought. She grinned as she drove us over a bridge into her home city, and her grin triggered a memory from back in the map room, the way she said it then: *Rovaniemi, home*. It was like returning to a place I'd always known.

About the author



Kaddy Benyon was born in Cambridge and grew up in Suffolk. She worked as a television researcher and scriptwriter before having children. In 2010 she was shortlisted for the inaugural Picador Poetry Prize. She went on to win the Crashaw Prize for her debut collection, *Milk Fever* (Salt, 2012). Her second collection, *The Tidal Wife* (Salt, 2018), was part-inspired by a residency on the Scottish island of Eigg. She spent two years as Invited Poet at the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge where she wrote her forthcoming third collection, *Silverskin*. Kaddy regularly collaborates with artists and charities. She is also a Granta New Poet. www.kaddybenyon.com

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

O=C=O

Elena Calliopa

Poem

[Table of contents](#)

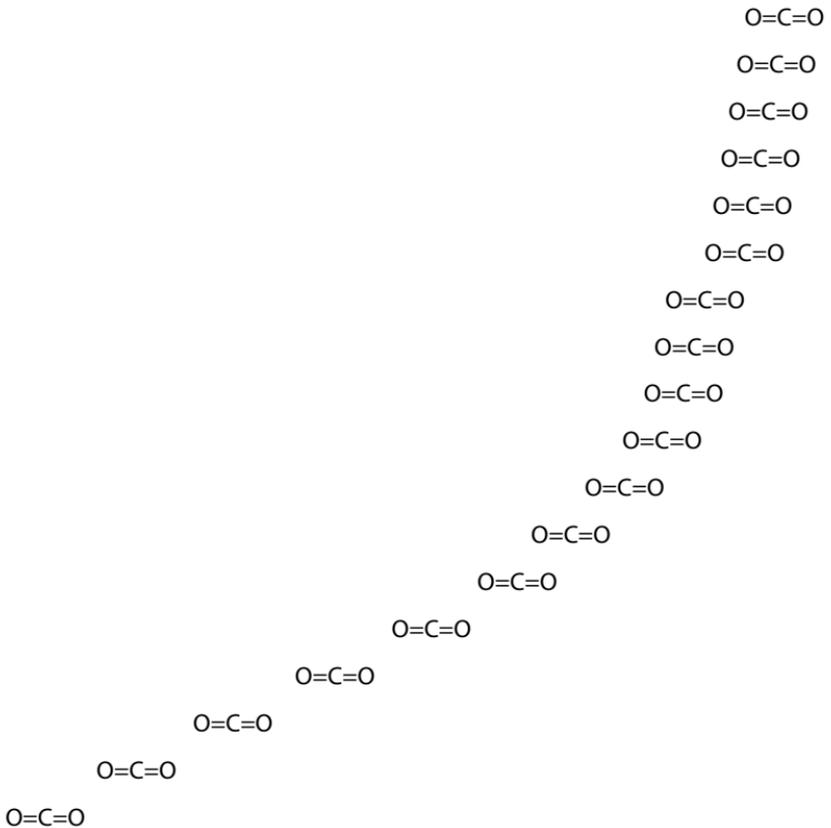
<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

I)

I used to lie in the sun-bleached hammock under the old walnut tree
and observe

how my father peeled honeycrisp apples, one after another, gently, dedicatedly
bit by bit, his laguiole knife gliding through the skin as if it were warm butter
carving out the mushy parts, dispersing their brownish scent of sweet-
and-sour must
apple cores piling beneath us

II)



III)

mosquitos feasting on our resting bodies

IV)

your breath, stale burgundy, intermingled

with rosemary, you whisper

schlaf gut, mein spatz

und träum was schönes

and tuck me in, my nightly cocoon

the bedside lamps b u z z e s

V)

we are a floating tyre

bathing in lukewarm dreams

we are a floating tyre

on a sinking ship

VI)

I used to lie in the sun-bleached hammock under the old walnut tree

it's gone now

the old walnut tree burnt down

the sun-bleaches hammock burnt down

the apple cores burnt down

the laguiole knife burnt down

only the solitary, fuliginous blade

a last witness of you and me and the walnut tree

VII)

O=C=O

VIII)

one night, when you lulled me
to sleep, in my nightly cocoon, you said
in every cocoon there broods a little butterfly, waiting for a sunny day to eclose
but you were wrong
there was no butterfly, only a
big fat moth

IX)

don't you understand, we are tainted
your fingers, once tenderly peeling fruit, are full of blood
we killed the balmy summer nights
we killed the sunflower's dulcet song
we killed the honeycrisp apples
we killed the herby scent of late summer meadows
we killed the bumblebee's clumsy dance
we killed the poppy's blazing petals
we killed the skies
we killed the soil that once carried piles and piles of apple cores
we killed the ivy cascades
we killed our brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters
we killed our mother
we killed our home
we killed the future
we killed the old walnut tree

X)

mosquitos feasting on the earth's rotting body

About the author



Elena Calliopa is a German poet. She is 22 years old and reads Psychology, as well as School Psychology and English for teaching at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich and at King's College London. Her works revolve around mental health, equality, sexualities, social dynamics, and other sociopolitical topics. She can be found on www.elenacalliopa.com.

[Table of contents](#)
<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

a:
Ethnos

Jonathan Chan

Poem

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

true to form, we wade in pools of the
inalienable, regardless, lines traced all
the way down, felt around the eyes,
nose, mouth, and through the lumpen
recesses: a voice from here, hair textured
from there, the twitches, instincts both
unreadable and not. the table is laid with
spoon, fork, twin slivers of stainless steel,

false starts to being made natural,
intuitive, unexceptional squares in a
patched tapestry, lines traced around
in expanding bounds, all the way until
there is weight to this truth: barriers fall
in arboreal shadows, and there will always
be a here and a there, like frost, Mukul
writes, melting across panes of memory.

b:
Conversion

Jonathan Chan

Poem

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

after Danai Gurira

drawn into personal history: how to
decipher the marks of this face, this
skin, the entanglements of past fury,
the clash of voice, dream, God, and
song, borrowed language etched in

the heart. and how to see: the single
droplet tranquil on the forehead, the
release, shimmering, tectonic beneath
the eye whites. from spires and stained
glass to rice cookers and filled spoons,

to breathe in practice, no shearing
of ethnic baggage. we strive for
warmth for every face, colonial
gaze pared away, even in the tussle
of mental terrain, the ascent of that

elusive mountain. beside the bones are
spare like fish, this mud is wiped from
the eyelids: black, yellow, brown, these
songs will learn to stir and sing, to find
a rhyme in a churning sea of milk.

Situating Gregory
Doran's Julius Caesar
(2012): the legacies of
Shakespeare in
Africa

Jonathan Chan

Essay

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Renewed calls for the decolonisation of academic curricula in institutions across the UK, US, and South Africa, often termed a new 'decolonial turn', have subjected the university to myriad competing pressures. These calls have been made urgent by continuing action against the imbrication of racism in various structural forms in the US and in Europe. Having chaired the Decolonise English Campaign at the University of Cambridge as an undergraduate, I was privy to how the particular discourse surrounding the decolonisation of English literature curricula was centered heavily on the replacement of authors on reading lists, the expansion of reading lists themselves, or the incorporation of distinct critical approaches to temporal periods and themes.

On one hand, some may suggest that cosmetic changes to academic programmes function on a purely gestural level, preserving the British university as a bastion of neoliberal knowledge production without a recognition of its historic complicity in the colonial project. On the other, my location as an international student arriving in England from Singapore accorded some perspective on the perpetuity of British soft power through its cultural exports, one balanced by the recognition that coloniality is entwined with the study of English literature in and of itself. Like it or not, there remain arguments for the continued examination of such canonical figures as Chaucer and Shakespeare given their influence over the corpus of English literature.

Shakespeare, in particular, remains a slippery figure: I studied his plays from the ages of 14 to 18 in the Singaporean education system, taught them in a secondary school later on, and watched various productions that sought to make his plays more proximate to the social realities of Singapore. Such examples include the swapping of anti-Semitism for prejudice against those of South Asian descent in productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, or actors wearing lighter costumes to stave off humidity when they performed outdoors in the park. Decolonisation within the theatre, perhaps, may lend some credence to inter-cultural forms of adaptation, particularly with an eye toward claiming and reappropriating the Bard's narratives for new use.

Yet, this diffusionism should not be mistaken for the self-evident appeal of Shakespeare. The British Council today arguably acts as the agent for the promotion of Shakespeare, availing the plays for appropriation and even resistant redeployment in former colonies where they have become a cultural reference point. As Edward Lee-Wilson has remarked, '[Shakespeare's] global celebrity can never be fully extricated from the political history that produced it'.¹ The operations of decolonisation function differently between the theatre and the academic world, as they do between the Global North and South. These render questions about what is being done with Shakespeare in former colonies pertinent – is effective appropriation of Shakespeare advisable, or even possible, bearing in mind Audre Lorde's observation that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'?² As Achille Mbembe has written:

Downplaying regimes of knowledge that have constituted the human or even the world as one, or have framed humanity as an undifferentiated whole, [the project of decolonisation] has instead sought to map and interrogate the social, cultural and historical differences and uneven power relations that divide the Anthropos.³

While theorisations of multiplicity or difference have focused on cleavages of culture and historical identity, Mbembe goes on to elaborate that 'The challenge has therefore been to understand difference as a particular fold or twist in the undulating fabric of the universe – or in a set of continuous, entangled folds of the whole.'⁴

These contextual pressures find resonance in thinking about Gregory Doran's adaptation of *Julius Caesar* with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2012, itself composed of 'entangled folds' between Europe and Africa.

¹ Edward Wilson-Lee, *Shakespeare in Swahilland* (London: William Collins, 2016), p. 202.

² Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 110- 114 (p. 110).

³ Achille Mbembe, 'Future Knowledges and Their Implications for the Decolonisation Project' in *Decolonisation in Universities: The politics of knowledge*, ed. by Jonathan D. Jansen (South Africa: Wits University Press, 2019), pp. 239-254 (p. 242).

⁴ Mbembe, 'Future Knowledges and Their Implications for the Decolonisation Project', p. 242.

One must acknowledge Doran's attempts to honour the vibrant legacy of encounters with Shakespeare across the African continent, particularly in his engagement with such playwrights as John Kani and an array of historical sources that identify overlaps between *Julius Caesar* and incidents in the continent's history. However, this must be countenanced by the recognition that the play has been 'Africanised' by a white, British director for the Royal Shakespeare Company. That the production did not emerge out of East Africa and was not staged for East African audiences necessarily entails that the conditions of its production and reception alter the meanings of its production and politics.

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, first staged in 1599, is often regarded as a stunning piece of political drama, composed of tightly written verse and focused action in its interrogation of governance, tyranny, and betrayal. The play is couched in the ambivalence of Brutus toward the assassination of Julius Caesar, the violent spectacle of twelve men slaying the ruler in the play's third act. These fears and considerations of liberty and tyranny gain currency in the play's various reworkings and allusions across 20th-century Anglophone and Francophone Africa, set against the phenomenon of political decolonisation. The urgency of shaking off colonial tyranny, balanced against the rudiments of newly independent governance, found its expression in productions and translations of *Julius Caesar*. While Shakespeare's entry into Africa was meant to preserve a bastion of cultural 'civility' for British colonists in opposition to 'savage natives', its transition from a colonial to national text brought Caesar's various African adaptations, particularly in English, firmly into the civic discourse of various nationalist movements and discussions.

In Makerere University, the elite institution of East Africa located in Uganda, the English literature course placed heavy emphasis on the reading and performance of Shakespeare's plays. Wilson-Lee attests that Makerere's Shakespeare productions were the cultural centerpiece of East African intellectual life, with many students involved going on to become

post-independence political, social, and cultural leaders.⁵ The diversity of Makerere's student makeup further allowed productions to serve as a bridge for tribal differences to help facilitate a sense of pan-Africanism.⁶

It is unsurprising, then, that allusions to Shakespeare wove their way into the speeches and creative work of politicians and lawyers. *Julius Caesar* had been translated into Tswana in South Africa in the 1920s by Sol Plaatke, one of the founders of the African National Congress.⁷ *Julius Caesar*'s preoccupations with governance lingered in the minds of Makerere alumni who rose to political prominence, such as Apollo Milton Obote, the first President of Uganda who portrayed Caesar in a 1948 production of the play.⁸ Sierra Leonian political figure and playwright Thomas Decker translated *Julius Caesar* into Krio as *Juliohs Siza* in 1964,⁹ following on from the work of Julius Nyerere, a Makerere alumnus and the first Prime Minister of Tanzania who translated the text into Swahili as *Juliasi Kaizari* (1963).¹⁰ Nyerere's translation, completed as he tended to his political duties, was an attempt to demonstrate Swahili's capacity to serve as a literary language and make a contribution not only to Tanzanian culture, but also to the quatercentennial celebrations of Shakespeare's verse.¹¹

While earning a place in the Swahili canon, *Caesar* also provided a language of resistance to British colonialists. In a pamphlet entitled 'Barriers to Democracy', Nyerere paraphrased Caesar to remind the British that 'men at some time are masters of their fates'.¹² After the British left power, Shakespeare provided the necessary words for African leaders to push back against the colonial experience, elevate national languages, and critique the politics of their time, as novelist and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o remarks, the revolutionary qualities of Shakespeare's dramaturgy were tamed by the

⁵ Wilson-Lee, *Shakespeare in Swahililand*, p. 182.

⁶ Wilson-Lee, *Shakespeare in Swahililand*, p. 183.

⁷ 'A brief history of translating Shakespeare in South Africa', *Shakespeare Society of South Africa*

⁸ Wilson-Lee, *Shakespeare in Swahililand*, p. 179.

⁹ Tcho Mbaimba Caulker, 'Shakespeare's Julius Caesar in Sierra Leone: Thomas Decker's Juliohs Siza, Roman Politics, and the Emergence of a Postcolonial African State' in *African Literatures*, 40.2 (Summer, 2009), pp. 208-227 (p. 208).

¹⁰ William Edgett Smith, *Nyerere of Tanzania*, (London: Victor Gollanz, 1973), p. 133.

¹¹ Wilson-Lee, *Shakespeare in Swahililand*, p. 211.

¹² Alamin A. Mazrui, 'Shakespeare in African Political Thought', in *The Anglo-African Commonwealth: Political Fiction and Cultural Fusion* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1967), p. 113

teaching of British educators.¹³

This display of political agitation and agency was similarly alluded to in the life of Nelson Mandela, for whom *Caesar* provided great encouragement in his antiracist campaigning in South Africa. Arrested in 1962 for his activities with the African National Congress, Mandela was accused of abetting political sabotage, furthering communism, and aiding foreign powers.¹⁴ These accusations did not deter Mandela from his commitment to ending apartheid. While incarcerated in Robben Island Prison, he signed his name against his favourite quote in a communal copy of Shakespeare's complete works:

A coward dies a thousand times before his death;
The valiant taste of death but once.¹⁵

The conviction presented in these lines stands in parallel to his speech during the Rivonia Trial at which he was tried, where he declared that the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all people enjoy harmony and equal opportunity is one for which he was 'prepared to die'.¹⁶ His allusion to the words of the conspirators seeking to assassinate Caesar further draws out the resonance of the play with those involved in political activism across Africa, illuminating the play's considerations of political will and the right to rule.

As Wilson-Lee argues in *Shakespeare in Swahiland* (2016), however, British explorers, spurred on by expanding markets and an increased interest in Africa's myriad natural resources, almost always self-consciously carried Shakespeare's works as a mark of their civilisation.¹⁷ The supposed universality of Shakespeare, and the natives' inability to comprehend his work, led colonialists to deem them inhuman. This logic of universality later came to inform American attempts to establish cultural bastions against communism in African nations during the Cold War. They pursued the strategy of planting the cultural resources of Europe and America in the

¹³'Shakespeare in Africa'.

¹⁴'Rivonia Trial 1963 – 1964', *South African History Online*, 31 March 2011

¹⁵ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. by David Daniell, (India: The Arden Shakespeare, 1998; repr. 2017), pp. 149-332, II.ii.32-33.

¹⁶ "I am prepared to die", *Nelson Mandela Foundation*, 20 April 2011

¹⁷ Edward Wilson-Lee, 'In search of Shakespeare's universalism', *spiked*, 13 May 2016.

hearts and minds of nations being wooed by the Soviets as a guarantor of free market ideals. To these ends, the CIA channeled hundreds of millions of dollars in the 1960's and 1970's into covert cultural operations through charitable foundations and other grant giving bodies.¹⁸

This sense of the imposition of Shakespeare would come to shape debates around curricula in schools and universities across Africa, particularly amidst the grand sweep of decolonisation. For example, in 1981 while then Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi asserted that Shakespeare was an 'international figure' that would give Kenyans access to an international cultural stage, the Kenya Institute of Education attacked the teaching of Shakespeare as part of a 'colonial hangover'.¹⁹ These trenchant calls in the universities to ignore Shakespeare were made on the basis that its soft power tendrils were insidious and that decolonisation could only be affected by chopping them off. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o recalls learning to recite Shakespeare's sonnets in the mission school he attended as an adolescent, one where those who were caught speaking in their native languages were made to wear dunce caps and were called stupid by their peers and teachers.²⁰

Doran's 2012 production with the Royal Shakespeare Company pays homage to some of these instances of historical convergence. Conceived over a decade before it was staged in 2012, Doran attributes its genesis to a meeting with Nelson Mandela in London, where he quoted the aforementioned lines of *Caesar*. Transposed to the context of a decolonising African nation, Doran's production imbues discussions of governance and tyranny with urgency and anxiety. In fashioning *Caesar* as a strongman politician, Doran has said that 'Idi Amin [of Uganda], or Bokassa in the Central African Empire, or in Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe [...] have all, at some point in their lives, been candidates for a casting as Julius Caesar.'²¹ The swaggering, onstage presence of Jefferey Kisson as Caesar in Doran's production builds on this observation.

¹⁸ Edward Wilson-Lee, *Shakespeare in Swahiland* (London: William Collins, 2016), p. 267.

¹⁹ Wilson-Lee, *Shakespeare in Swahiland*, p. 264.

²⁰ 'Shakespeare in Africa', *Folger Shakespeare Library*, 17 May 2016

²¹ Brown, Emma, 'Shakespeare's African Play', *Interview Magazine*, 12 April 2013

Julius Caesar is often regarded as having a 'public' style, with major scenes taking the form of oratorical persuasions or public debates.²² As Doran describes,

We just became fascinated by how the play pitches rhetoric against reality. Brutus is the one in the forum scene who sways the crowd with beautifully honed sound bites for the telly—he really knows how to speak to that crowd; he speaks in prose. Marc Antony, he says, "I'm no orator" and yet delivers this amazing speech all in verse and turns the crowd round.²³

While Brutus addresses the people in repetitive and inelegant prose, Antony wins their support through a powerful and artful rhetorical appeal – one made particularly pertinent in the context of post-independence uncertainty. Brutus paints Caesar as a political threat in asserting, 'Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves.'²⁴ In striking comparison to Brutus's ineffectual rhetoric, Ray Fearon plays Antony with a trembling indignation, couched in sweat and tears. Although his aim is to whitewash the murder, Brutus unknowingly lays the groundwork for Antony's manipulation of the masses.²⁵

Cast in the context of an incipient democracy, the tide of public goodwill and trust poses a powerful influence over political affairs. The public institution of government is only supported by the will of the people. To dismantle Brutus's claims of Caesar's tyranny, Antony presents Caesar's will, revealing 'To every Roman citizen [he gives...] seventy-five drachmas; 'his walles / His private arbours and near-planted orchards.'²⁶ In a newly independent nation with impoverished citizens and an uncertain economic outlook, the distribution of wealth offered by Caesar transcends generosity.

²² Coppélia Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 78.

²³ Brown, 'Shakespeare's African Play'.

²⁴ *Julius Caesar*, III. ii. 22-23.

²⁵ Lisa S. Starks-Estes, *Violence, Trauma, and Virtue in Shakespeare's Roman Poems and Plays: Transforming Ovid* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 134.

²⁶ *Julius Caesar*, III.iii.232-234, 237-238.



Ray Fearon as Antony (left) and Paterson Joseph as Brutus (right). The



the Soothsayer lingers in the background. Photo by Nigel Norrington

The culpability of the citizens in their mutiny is tied less easily to greed and sloth, but the salvation offered by Caesar's wealth. The chatter amongst the citizens, 'Revenge! About! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill! Slay!' blends into a cacophonous groundswell in Doran's production, inducing a shift in political allegiances.²⁷ The murder of Cinna is transformed through the use of found footage, as a shaky mobile phone video reveals his being doused with gasoline and chased by citizens who proclaim, '[Burn] him for his bad verses.'²⁸ Amidst the play's new political and cultural setting, Doran draws on the legacy of post-independence anxieties in the African continent that serve to illuminate the anxieties present in Shakespeare's original.

Beyond these depictions of intensified political conflict and violence, Doran's transposition of *Caesar* to an African context also draws on elements of indigenous spirituality. Rather than the Soothsayer of Shakespeare's original, Doran stages a *féticheur* or shaman – his neck holds a charm, his armbands are adorned with feathers, and his musculature is covered in body paint. The production opens with the shaman performing a ceremonial dance amidst the celebrations of the citizens over Caesar's victory. He delivers the prophecy not from the crowd, but perched above stage, body glistening amidst a shroud of darkness, the effect of which gives him a sense of supernatural transcendence.

And yet, unlike the soothsayer of Shakespeare's original who disappears and re-enters the narrative to deliver prophecies, the shaman is an active, spectral presence throughout the play. He appears as an apparition, walking through a scene as he fields Portia's question of whether Caesar will be harmed with nonchalance: 'None that I know will be, / Much that I fear may chance.'²⁹ At Caesar's death, as the conspirators descend upon him on an escalator, the shaman appears briefly and wordlessly. He reaches his arm out but cannot stop the men from plunging their blades into Caesar's body. At Caesar's funeral, the shaman's appearance by Antony's side shifts the weight of supernatural legitimacy. He passes Antony a cup of wine with which he

²⁷ Julius Caesar, III.ii.197.

²⁸ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, dir. by Gregory Doran (Stratford-upon-Avon: Royal Shakespeare Festival, 2012).

²⁹ *Julius Caesar*, II. iv. 32-33.

pours libation to honour and please various divinities, sacred ancestors, and the environment.

The shaman makes his final appearance in place of the Poet, entering Brutus's quarters and imploring, 'Love and be friends, as two such men should be.'³⁰ Brutus's expulsion of the shaman from his tent denies the possibility of further prophecy. Under Brutus, the conspirators see their defense of their nation as an extension of their work against the tyranny of Caesar as Cassius declares, 'The gods today stand friendly, that we may, / Lovers in peace, lead on our days to age.'³¹ The appearance of Caesar's ghost in the reflection of Brutus's torch does little to dissuade him – upon witnessing this 'monstrous apparition'³², he mutters, 'Now I have taken heart thou vanishest.'³³ Doran's adaptation invests greater weight in the soothsayer, with his appearance serving as an ominous motif throughout the play and inviting viewers to presume that the trust of the conspirators in supernatural forces is misplaced.

³⁰ *Julius Caesar*, IV. lii. 123, 128.

³¹ *Julius Caesar*, V. i. 93-94.

³² *Julius Caesar*, IV. lii. 275.

³³ *Julius Caesar*, IV. lii. 285.



Theo Ogundipe's Soothsayer leaps to the sound of the



the mbira and kora. *Image: NY Times Theatre reviews.*

While there is much to be enjoyed and appreciated about Doran's directorial choices and the interventions made to recontextualise *Caesar* with respect to sets, costuming, and casting, one must bear in mind the *location* of his production. That is, who exactly was this iteration of Caesar for? Doran himself has mentioned that in productions of Caesar set in a modern, 'Western' context, 'it just looks as though they're getting rid of a particularly cantankerous chairman of the board rather than the great leader of the world.'³⁴ There is a suggestion herein that what stood out most about the idea of a 'pan-African' reimagining was its novelty – that which would make this iteration of *Caesar* stand out. Given that he had just been installed as the RSC's Artistic Director, one detects a whiff of Doran's ambition to make a strong debut, and the absence of a co-director or even production partners from East Africa renders the political and artistic integrity of such a project questionable.

Doran's production was staged first in Stratford-upon-Avon at the Royal Shakespeare Festival in 2012, before touring the UK and moving on to Moscow, New York, and Ohio.³⁵ Despite its homage to the politics and legacies of East and South Africa, the production did not go on to tour Libya, Zimbabwe, Kenya, or the other nations that provided the raw material for this reimagining. Moreover, the histories that Doran's reimagining is contingent on perhaps obviates that which a nation is striving to undo in the process of decolonisation – the dominion of Britain itself.

Despite the production's desire to play with the typology of strongmen across Africa such as Amin, Bokass, and Mugabe, the notion that a 'pan-African' setting for a Shakespeare play, hallmarked by indigenous 'magic', beset with tyranny, political conspiracy and power vacuums could be seen as crass. That this representation of an 'African' Caesar was achieved with the Royal Shakespeare Company's first all-black cast is significant, but primarily within a Euro-American context. There remains a need to recognise the history of Black bodies being deployed on the stage by white directors in

³⁴ Brown, 'Shakespeare's African Play'.

³⁵ 'Gregory Doran Production 2012', *Royal Shakespeare Company*.

the UK, particularly when recalling the history and legacies of minstrelsy and appropriation.

The onstage world of the production's African nation is fleshed out through the cast's adoption of East African accents. Doran has said it has a 'precision to it, and a musicality to it, that lends itself to the iambic pentameter by happy coincidence.'³⁶ Doran's assessment could be considered grating to some – a profoundly superficial judgment about the aesthetics of accented speech. Held against the fact that the majority of the cast is Black British rather than drawn from East African countries, this suggests that such representation can only remain at the level of mimicry, the production of a fantastical Africa by the Black diaspora, not unlike the replication of Xhosa-accented English in *Black Panther* (2018) by its predominantly African American and Black British cast.

More fundamentally, the very notion of a 'pan-African' setting reinscribes the UK's tendency to conflate African countries. That the 'Africa' of Doran's setting is unnamed and placeless participates in the smug, imperial fantasy of a vague 'over there'. If the project of decolonisation within the theatre is a matter of undoing the inscription of colonial boundaries, fantasies, and epistemes, such decisions in Doran's work could be seen as retrogressive. The decolonising of the mind surely rests on a need to disassemble and disaggregate reified notions of what 'Africa' could be, not least when an immediate association with political disarray and street violence could deepen a sense of lazy exoticism.

Studying Doran's *Caesar* in this light brings forth a series of complex questions surrounding decolonisation – how does one approach the politics of representation with greater nuance and care that does not seek to reenact modes of cultural extractivism, but extends the possibility of mutuality and cooperation with the Global South? How does a production like Doran's fit into conversations surrounding the study of Shakespeare himself, as was my concern when I turned to the production after contending with the tedium of a designated term for Shakespeare as an undergraduate at Cambridge?

³⁶ Brown, 'Shakespeare's African Play'.

Curricular decolonisation and Shakespeare are uneasy bedfellows for the simple reason that Shakespeare has been and remains a profound symbol of coloniality, a synecdoche for 'global culture', but also remains difficult to dispense with owing to his contributions to the English language. This was an ambivalence I was struck with in teaching Shakespeare in Singapore, particularly the great contortions needed to make *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It* legible to a place far removed from Elizabethan England. Doran's production provides one way to imagine different pathways for the adaptation of Shakespeare, but a study of it must contend with the politics of representing 'pan-Africa' for a predominantly Euro-American audience, one which could ultimately be distinguished as regressive.

There remain no simple solutions to what it means to teach and study Shakespeare in the Global South as well as to reconfigure doing so in the Global North. Yet what remains a good first step, as Chris Thurman has argued, is to acknowledge, emphasise, and then analyse the baggage that Shakespeare brings wherever he goes.³⁷

³⁷ Chris Thurman, 'Should Shakespeare be taught in Africa's classrooms?', *The Conversation*, 6 August 2015

Acknowledgements:

This essay was first written in various forms under the supervision of Louise Woods and Dr Dunstan Roberts at the University of Cambridge. My gratitude as well to the editors of *Singapore Unbound* and *Wasafiri Magazine* for their transformative, incisive feedback.

Bibliography:

'A brief history of translating Shakespeare in South Africa',

Shakespeare Society of South Africa

Brown, Emma, 'Shakespeare's African Play', *Interview Magazine*, 12 April 2013

Caulker, Tcho Mbaimba, 'Shakespeare's Julius Caesar in Sierra Leone: Thomas Decker's Juliohs Siza, Roman Politics, and the Emergence of a Postcolonial African State' in *African Literatures*, 40.2 (Summer, 2009), pp. 208-227

Cole, Teju, 'An African Caesar', *The New Yorker*, April 22, 2013

'Gregory Doran Production 2012', *Royal Shakespeare Company*

"I am prepared to die", *Nelson Mandela Foundation*, 20 April 2011

Kahn, Coppélia, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1997)

Lorde, Audre, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 110- 114

Mazrui, Alamin A., 'Shakespeare in African Political Thought', in *The Anglo-African Commonwealth: Political Fiction and Cultural Fusion* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1967)

Mbembe, Achille, 'Future Knowledges and Their Implications for the Decolonisation Project' in *Decolonisation in Universities: The politics of knowledge*, ed. by Jonathan D. Jansen (South Africa: Wits University Press, 2019), pp. 239-254

'Rivonia Trial 1963 – 1964', *South African History Online*, 31 March 2011

'Shakespeare in Africa', *Folger Shakespeare Library*, 17 May 2016

- Shakespeare, William, *Julius Caesar*, dir. by Gregory Doran
(Stratford-upon-Avon: Royal Shakespeare Festival, 2012)
- Shakespeare, William, *Julius Caesar*, ed. by David Daniell, (India: The Arden
Shakespeare, 1998; repr. 2017), pp. 149-332
- Smith, William Edgett, *Nyerere of Tanzania*, (London: Victor Gollanz, 1973)
- Starks-Estes, Lisa S., *Violence, Trauma, and Virtus in Shakespeare's Roman
Poems and Plays: Transforming Ovid* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)
- Thurman, Chris, 'Should Shakespeare be taught in Africa's classrooms?',
The Conversation, 6 August 2015
- Wilson-Lee, Edward, 'In search of Shakespeare's universalism', *spiked*,
13 May 2016
- Wilson-Lee, Edward, *Shakespeare in Swahililand* (London: William Collins,
2016)

About the author



Jonathan Chan is a writer, editor, and graduate student at Yale University. Born in New York to a Malaysian father and a South Korean mother, he was raised in Singapore. He received his BA in English from Wolfson College, Cambridge in 2020. While at Cambridge, he chaired the Cambridge Chinese Christian Fellowship and Decolonise English Campaign, wrote a column for student newspaper *Varsity*, and sang in the gospel choir. He is interested in questions of faith, identity, and creative expression. He has recently been moved by the work of Don Mee Choi, Boey Kim Cheng, and Henri Nouwen. His writing has appeared in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *聲韻詩刊*, *Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine*, *Ethos Institute for Public Christianity*, *The Foundationalist*, and *Synergy: The Journal of Contemporary Asian Studies*.

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Rethinking care for the post-COVID-19 world

Esuna Dugarova

Essay

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

For over a year the world has been in the state of disarray caused by the COVID-19 crisis, which has affected each of us, without exception. Acting as a multiplier of pre-existing inequalities, the crisis has exposed intrinsic power imbalances and unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, with deep-rooted patriarchy and discrimination generating yawning gender gaps. Even before the pandemic hit, humankind was in the middle of momentous changes across the multidimensional spectrum of development—from democratic erosions and violent conflict to climate change and digitalization. In the post-COVID-19 era, all these developments have the potential to either enhance the hard-won development gains or derail the prospects of progress.

While the pandemic emerged as a health shock, it has spread across the globe with adverse spillover effects on economies and societies. The closure of national borders and lockdown measures paralyzed economic activities, laying off millions of workers worldwide. According to ILO estimates, in 2020, lost working hours were equivalent to 255 million full-time jobs globally, leading to \$3.7 trillion in lost labor income. These effects are particularly devastating for workers and their livelihoods in the informal sector where women are overrepresented worldwide, particularly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Unlike previous economic crises, the COVID-19 economic downturn has hit female-dominated sectors such as retail, hospitality, and garment. Furthermore, the closure of schools in more than 190 countries affected nearly 1.6 billion students, which could widen the gender digital divide due to the unequal access to the internet and digital technologies.¹ The pandemic has also impacted the entire food system, including supply chains, processing and production, where women play a key role. All these factors lead to the feminisation of poverty, as up to 83 million women are estimated by UNDP to be pushed into extreme poverty by 2030 because of COVID-19. Those facing intersectional deprivations, including racial and ethnic minorities, are most likely to bear the bulk of the crisis while being the least responsible for it.

¹en.unesco.org/news/reopening-schools-when-where-and-how

Despite these catastrophic impacts, the global policy response has largely been blind to gender equality and women's needs. As shown by the UNDP-UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, only 12.3 percent of 3,099 social protection and labour market measures adopted in response to COVID-19 in 221 countries and territories have targeted women's economic security, and just 7.3 percent have directly supported unpaid care work through measures such as expanded family leave and cash-for-care to working parents.² In my view, such response can be partly attributed to the underrepresentation of women in political decision-making processes. Evidence shows that women's political participation correlates with higher expenditures on family benefits and is integral to shaping gender-responsive policymaking.³ Female parliamentarians are more likely to be concerned about gender-based violence and prioritise measures that strengthen human capital such as education, health, childcare, employment, and pensions. Yet, while women have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 battleground—as care providers, health workers, entrepreneurs, and educators—they have been relegated to the back seat of pandemic decision-making. Notably, the tracker reveals that globally women account for only 24 percent of members of 262 national COVID-19 task forces and are completely absent in 26 task forces.

The global care landscape

Unpaid care work underpins the development of economies and societies and is fundamental to human well-being. The goods and services produced through unpaid care work are key in maintaining the workforce on a generational basis. According to various estimates, the economic value of unpaid care work ranges between 20 and 40 percent of GDP.

Today no country has achieved an equal distribution of unpaid care work. In all regions, women do more unpaid care work than men throughout the life course. Prior to COVID-19, women performed 76.4 percent of the total amount of unpaid care of work globally. Timewise, women dedicated

² data.undp.org/gendertracker

³ Dugarova, E. 2018. Gender equality as an accelerator for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. New York: UN.

on average 3.2 times more hours to unpaid care work than men, which accounted for a total of 201 working days with no remuneration.⁴ With population ageing and women comprising a larger share of world's older population, the role of grandmothers as informal caregivers is becoming more prominent. Despite these contributions, progress in reducing the unpaid care gap has been slow, as women continue to spend disproportionately more time on unpaid care work than men. Nonetheless, men have never been more engaged in family life than today, with more fathers doing unpaid work. This mainly involves indirect care and non-routine housework activities such as shopping and house repairs, whereas the time dedicated to direct care work such as childcare remains low overall.⁵

In fact, in all countries the amount of time that women dedicate to unpaid care work increases with the presence of children, which results in a so-called 'motherhood penalty' manifested in the share of losses accruing to women's earnings after childbirth. Such penalty contrasts with a 'fatherhood premium' as fathers report high employment-to-population ratios.⁶ Furthermore, unpaid care work and the struggle to balance family and work responsibilities not only lead to women's earnings decline but can also result in women's withdrawal from the labour force. Indeed, the lack of flexibility at the workplace and father's support in parenting are among key reasons that prompt women to quit the labour market.⁷

Disparities in such unequal distribution of unpaid care work result from deeply rooted inequalities based on factors such as income, education, age, race, ethnicity, and location. Notably, residence in rural areas increases the demand for unpaid care among women and girls, which is often very time-consuming due to limited access to basic services, infrastructure, and labour-saving equipment. The level of education affects the time spent on unpaid care work with opposing effects for women and men. More educated

⁴ Charmes, J. 2019. The Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market. An analysis of time use data based on the latest World Compilation of Time-use Surveys. Working paper. Geneva: ILO.

⁵ Kan, M., Sullivan, O. and J. Gershuny. 2011. "Gender convergence in domestic work: Discerning the effects of interactional and institutional barriers from large-scale data". *Sociology* 45(2): 234–251.

⁶ ILO. 2018. Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work. Geneva: ILO.

⁷ Stone, P. and M. Lovejoy. 2004. "Fast-Track Women and the "Choice" to Stay Home". *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 596: 62-83.

women tend to spend less time on this type of work, whereas highly educated men are more likely than less educated ones to dedicate their time to unpaid care.⁸ Gender gaps in unpaid care work also persist across races and ethnicities. For example, in the USA, women spend more time on unpaid care and housework tasks than men, with the largest differences observed in Hispanic and Asian couples.⁹ Such gaps can be attributed to the fact that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to live in poverty, in larger households with several generations, and with less access to childcare and health services, which is rooted in entrenched socioeconomic inequalities linked to systemic racism.

The care impacts of the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 crisis has amplified the impacts on unpaid care work. Due to reduced care supply, both formal through care facilities and informal via the family network, many parents, and mothers in particular, have been struggling to reconcile their work and care duties. At the same time, as COVID-19 has drastically affected industries with a large share of female employment, many women have been left without jobs and income, forcing them to stay at home and fulfil more domestic responsibilities. In low-income settings where the unpaid care workload tends to be greater and space is limited, it has been nearly impossible to maintain distance and avoid exposure to the virus. Among those hit the hardest are also lone parents, and single mothers in particular, who face challenges combining work, care, and homeschooling responsibilities with little financial and family support.

On the positive side, due to the closure of facilities and the shift to flexible work arrangements (primarily, in white collar jobs), many men have been more exposed to the double burden of paid and unpaid work. This could lead to their increased involvement in unpaid work, which would contribute to transforming the social norms and bringing more equal participation in care and household responsibilities. Evidence shows that sharp exposure to care and household work as a result of parental leave

⁸ ILO. 2018. Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work. Geneva: ILO.

⁹ Hess, C., Ahmed, T. and J. Hayes. 2020. Providing Unpaid Household and Care Work in the United States: Uncovering Inequality. Briefing paper. Institute for Women's Policy Research.

can have long-lasting effects on men's involvement in unpaid care work.¹⁰ Yet, research on parents' use of flexible work arrangements indicates a contrasting uptake by mothers and fathers, with the former experiencing an increased time dedicated to childcare and the latter spending more time on paid work.¹¹

The new pathway for the caring post-COVID-19 world

The gendered impacts of the pandemic point to the pressing need for a global policy action that prioritizes unpaid care work. While the COVID-19 pandemic is reversing many of the gains on gender equality, it provides a critical window of opportunity to revisit our thinking and behaviour and create a more egalitarian and resilient system that places care at its heart. Such an approach is not only a development imperative but also a precondition for a virtuous and auspicious world order.¹²

At the national level, this entails creating comprehensive care systems that enhance support to working parents with childcare responsibilities, improve gender-responsive services through the universal provision of quality care services, and prioritize investments in social and physical infrastructure. At the same time, care policy arrangements need to be complemented with labour market measures that support (re-)integration of unpaid carers into the workforce, improve flexible work arrangements, and transform the institutional culture with more attention to mental health and well-being.

In line with this vision, the current essay is urging for systemic change involving fundamental shifts in power, institutions, and norms. The COVID-19 crisis can serve as a springboard for a new pathway in which each human being can equally exercise their agency, rights, and choices. The post-pandemic world also needs new forms of leadership grounded in solidarity, inclusiveness, and unbiased compassion. Having conducted 25

¹⁰ Tamm, T. 2019. "Fathers' parental leave-taking, childcare involvement and labor market participation." *Labour Economics* 59: 184–97.

¹¹ www.dw.com/en/germany-flexible-working-conditions-lead-to-overtime-study-shows/a-47771436

¹² Dugarova, E. 2020. Reflecting on Progress towards Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. *UN Chronicle*. New York.

online interviews with senior and emerging leaders across the world during the pandemic, I became convinced that authentic leadership is about the empowerment of those that have least power, co-creation of decisions, and co-ownership of actions. Ultimately, I believe that to make positive change, one should listen to their intrinsic voice which can create positive power and lead to collective agency in times of crisis and beyond, thereby resulting in lasting social change.

The views presented in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations system.

About the author



Dr Esuna Dugarova is a policy specialist at the United Nations Development Programme in New York where she leads research and data analytics on gender equality within the global sustainable development agenda. She is a research coordinator of the COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker co-created by UNDP and UN Women, and is an author of over 40 publications on social protection, poverty reduction and labour market issues with a focus on Eurasia.

Originally from Buryatia, Esuna holds a PhD in Asian Studies from Cambridge University and speaks 7 languages. In her spare time, Esuna mentors women's grassroots organisations, supervises young scientists, and leads the global Buryat club which serves to preserve the endangered Buryat language.

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Talking to spiders

Matilda Greig

Personal essay

[Table of contents](#)

[<< Previous](#) | [Next >>](#)

Last summer I spent two weeks in quarantine in a sunlit, rundown half of a cottage, hidden in a dip below a ridge of hills, with about fifty spiders for company.

Both the house and I sunk into the overgrowth, wildflowers, and trees. Bits of brick here and there in the earth. An entire orchard hidden around one corner, a brook nosing its way around stones in a hollow at the boundary line. French doors opening onto a patch of tall grass. I kept opening them at night and squinting out into the darkness to see if I could spot the glow worms who crawled up the stems to send hopeful little beams up into the sky, but stayed on the step, nervous to step outside. As the afternoon light moved through windows half covered by vines it made glowing patterns on the living room walls. I stood in the way of it one time and took a photo with golden leaves on my face, a green wall behind, a serious expression – ‘this is art.’ A kitchen of mismatched cabinets and a stove standing on its own; I made tomato sauce for pasta and spilled it all over the rings. A smell of dust and warmth and green. I lay on the grass on an old black scarf to sunbathe one day and the grass seeds stuck to it like glue. A dragonfly did a sentinel’s pass around the open patch of lawn.

I walked up to the top of the nearby hills several times, through fields full of cowpats and buttercups. The landscape around there folds in on itself and tricks the eye – like crumpled fabric, hiding whole villages in its pockets. On one windy, sunny day two hunched crows and I watched a kestrel hang in the air a few metres away, waiting to see what would happen. I said hello to the cows in the fields as I passed, then carefully kept my eyes lowered from the two men walking a dog.

I hoovered up a few spiders who had made homes in the bath: that’s going too far, I explained. The rule is: you give me my space and I’ll give you yours. And this shower is shit so I have to sit in this bath and pour water over my head and I’d rather not be worrying about your little legs in the process. I said the same stern thing to a spider in my bathroom in Bristol this afternoon as I watched it amble its way up a wall. That’s right, keep going up there: I won’t disturb you if you keep out of my way. And I’ll give you a verbal warning before I get the vacuum out this weekend, if you’re still around.

There's a bit in Diana Wynne Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle* where Howl stops Sophie from clearing out the spiders in his bedroom. It's made to seem significant, but it's never really explained. I suppose the implication is that they may be magical – or that the wizard is whimsical. In any case, the spiders seem to know full well what's going on.

In the last seven years I've had conversations with a variety of insect life in each place I've lived. I've raged impotently at mosquitos in Florence, whining back at me from the safety of the too-high ceilings in my flat. Battled unnerving little black flies in Reims who stowed away on houseplants and came out to enjoy the art deco, multiply, and die melodramatically on the windowsills. Woke up confused early one sunny morning in the same town, sun coming through the soft white curtains, to the sound of a bumble bee gently bumping against the window. Counted butterflies in suburban County Dublin on every lockdown daily walk, ogling neighbours' gardens coming into spring, doffing my invisible hat to magpies.

At one point I shared my flat with a generation of small compost flies.

My mother gave me some potted geraniums when I moved into my one-bedroom flat in Bristol. Stowed away in the earth were a generation of tiny winged things, who hatched a month later in glorious abandon, and made themselves at home. Mostly they stuck to the plants themselves, but every day or so I'd notice one of them floating curiously in the air as I chopped vegetables, folded clothes, or worked at my desk, making the same circuits around the room. They didn't seem to bite, so a similar spider armistice seemed appropriate. I only shooed them away when they crossed into the invisible bubble of personal space, deciding to investigate my glasses or prance along the top of my laptop. In sum, we lived together in relative harmony for a few months. I did sometimes wonder what a human person would think if they came round to visit and spotted a few flies in the apartment, but it was never put to the test.

My work at the moment is precarious – a good word because it hints at how much everything else also has to balance carefully because of it, and not grow too large or too rooted. My work is remote, with digital archives, emails,

and Zoom: I stick my head through an enchanted pool or a magic mirror or the back of a wardrobe and wander around a whole world, but when the spell breaks, or I fall back through the portal, and return to my physical self, I'm corporeally alone, on my borrowed office chair, in a series of rooms around the world. I've never yet returned to find that a spider has mistaken me for a vantage point, though.

A week or so ago I came into the kitchen late at night and spotted four tiny, grey, wriggling creatures in the middle of the floor. They moved in darts, scurrying then stilling, like the tiny shoal of damp-wall-fish they were. For 24 hours I could hardly bear to eat anything, gripped by the idea, which filled my head like a too-big wardrobe that couldn't get through a doorway, and blocked everything else, that they might already be in the food, or would get into my clothes, and I'd never be rid of them. Then I drew up all my resolve and marched to the ironmonger, and bought glass jars for my cereal and sugar and pasta, bleach for the mould under the sink, and insect killer with such a brutal name (*Dethlac*) I almost balked at using it on anything, even if it worked. I decided to imagine that the silverfish weren't insidious disgusting things but a little, anthropomorphised family who had stumbled upon a nice patch of damp wallpaper behind my cabinets and decided to make themselves a home, and only needed to be told gently, but firmly, that they needed to find somewhere else instead. I named the husband and wife at the head of this imaginary nuclear family Gary and Trudie and said aloud in the kitchen that I was very sorry, but that I couldn't share my home with them, and to pass the message on to their kids, and then grimly sprayed insect killer around the edges of the lino floor.

The peculiar ache of having no fixed home is a strange one. I am disconnected, but also surrounded by life and funny legged movement. I smile to myself as I silently leave a web intact in a low-down kitchen corner, because the inhabitant is in a way working for their rent. There is the glowing rightness of being alone sometimes, watching the rain bounce off the window, breathing in coffee steam, uninterrupted quiet for work, mad fast silent dancing at midnight to the playlist I put on to get me through the washing up. And then the elation and fear of travel, being able to get

away, not trapped, standing on a street abroad knowing no-one knows where I am. In charge of where I go, what I do, of spontaneity, of I'll just sit down at this café, I'll smile in the sunshine, I'll buy some flowers just for me. Chats with shopkeepers, neighbours, dogwalkers. Connection through screens, scrunched faces and tears of laughter with friends on the other side, meetings with colleagues, endless possibilities, event planning, ideas, awkward first DM's.

At the same time – no touch. No reporting small victories, humbugs, plans. No sharing ideas with office mates, no going to get coffee together, no I'll just get this door or you dropped this. Everything I do I do myself, my brain piloting movements with increased concentration, as if I can't be trusted to keep it up anymore. Get water. Have shower. Make food. Wash up. Get dressed. Move chair out from desk. Sit in chair. Pull chair in. Adjust legs on ground. Open laptop. Wave fruit fly away. Wink at the spider on the wall. I seem to bounce and glide spinning like a badly-aimed bowling ball from one state to another, one day whole and hale and drawing happiness from small things like droplets of water up my roots, the next grasping desperately for one small, safe oblivion after the other, in a silly book, or a film, or sleep.

I do yoga sometimes, but not consistently, because it seems to act on me a bit like a clothes press, as if yoga day is hand-washing day for my insides, and the slow careful movements wring some of the deeper-down feelings out. Yesterday I did it, and afterwards I lay on the floor on my blanket and sobbed, and didn't know why. For a moment, I wished that the silverfish would suddenly surge up in their thousands from the skirting boards and carry me away, or eat me up, and thought that it might be oddly comforting.

All the same, there's a trite joy in the small things. I moved a snail across the pavement the other day, because I was sure that even though it was a quiet back street, someone might come along and tread on it before it reached the other side. It shrank back as I picked it up by its shell – itself an oddly nostalgic childhood thing to do – cringing into itself, antennae folding inwards. I put it down as gently as I could by its companion, already safe in the shadow of a promisingly damp and mulchy garden wall, and watched as

it slowly unfolded itself again, cautiously re-extending, prodding at the world in careful curiosity. I was crouched down, mid-murmuring my wishes for it to have a good afternoon, when an old lady behind me startled me by asking if everything was ok. "Oh!" I blurted, "it's so silly, but I was moving a snail so no-one stands on it," and scurried away. I think she smiled, though.

About the author



Dr Matilda Greig is an early career historian, currently working as a Juan de la Cierva Fellow at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. She completed her PhD in 2018 at the European University Institute in Florence, and has since held teaching and research fellowships at Sciences Po Reims, University College Dublin, and Cardiff University.

Her first book, *Dead Men Telling Tales: Napoleonic War Veterans and the Military Memoir Industry*, was published by Oxford University Press in June 2021. You can find her on Twitter as [@matilda_greig](https://twitter.com/matilda_greig).

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Howrah Junction

Ananya Dutta Gupta

Poem

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

As they lay railway tracks
Perseveringly,
To stretch ever so languidly
On solid parallels
Of cementing props,
Lying ever so forbearingly,
Cushioned in turn
From speed's hungry brutality
By stone-steeped cavities –

So we sew
Our separate mutual stories,
Careful no less
Than railway workers
To leave enough room
Between stitches
For our stories to run
As do nature's elastic seasons –

Until our stories become
A Persian carpet
Interlaid ever so lavishly
With anything and the everyday –
And come in time
To meet, and part, and meet again
Like overlaid tracks
At the land's busiest junction.

While we
Stand, stranded,
Unmeeting, unstraying, parallel,
On the platforms farthest apart.

31 August 2019





Image: Howrah junction © Ananya Dutta Gupta, 16 March 2020

About the author



Ananya Dutta Gupta has been teaching at the Department of English & Other Modern European Languages, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India, for over eighteen years now. She has an MPhil and a PhD in Renaissance English Literature from the University of Oxford and Jadavpur University respectively. She was Charles Wallace India Trust Visiting Fellow at CRASSH, Cambridge, in 2015. She writes scholarly articles, creative non-fiction and poetry; and has just published her debut collection of poems, *For Tomorrow the Birds Might Still Sing* (Birutjatio, 2021). To her the alterity of poetry vis-à-vis prose entails a different turn to life in words – distilled, liminal, and yet powerfully universal.

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

A migrant's sense of vanishing

Jessica Harada

Prose fiction

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Perhaps citizenship means belonging to a country and to have the right to have rights. Global citizenship is a bit trickier to imagine, but it might refer either to having multiple citizenships, which sadly will not encompass the whole globe, or in more abstracted terms to universal rights, human rights, and such. The place where I come from, my place of formal citizenship, has a long history of rightlessness that I can trace back to my own family story which is also a very Mexican history. As Mexicans of Japanese origin, my mother's family and community were scapegoated as enemy aliens during WWII. This led to the premature and preventable death of my great-grandmother, leaving my grandmother and their three siblings vulnerable to state, society and family abandonment when they were still young. State racism impoverished my mothers' family and stole their personhood. It meant constant harassment by state authorities and ordinary people, unwanted intrusions to the windowless one room tiny flat where they lived, and assaults to their worth through various forms of stigmatisation.

In 1999, Emeritus Professor of Law, Neil Gotanda, referring to the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans in WWII, elaborated the notion of 'nullified' political citizenship as the process of racialisation of Asians as ineffably foreign and inassimilable to America. Accordingly, nullified political citizenship regulates the denial to entry into and participation in the socio-political and cultural life of the nation. Along these lines, A Naomi Paik, drawing on Hannah Arendt, defines rightlessness as a method of removing a person from a social and political community. As such, rightlessness implies the inability to have the right to have rights because there is no one who can hear you, care about you and support you. Nullified political citizenship and rightlessness speak much about the silences, absences, ruptures and unspeakability – impossibility of narrative – of WWII experiences of Mexicans of Japanese origin. Sometimes our experiences escape language, as Elaine Scarry writes in 'The body in pain', and we cannot convey what it means to live in such condition of unintelligibility.

Perhaps for migrants the language of citizenship and rights is a false semblance of parameters and choices determined by those with the power to ascribe and confirm non-belonging. Kandice Chuh argues that besides the

nullification of their citizenship, Japanese Americans were made ineligible for American national subjectivity. This reciprocal process of citizenship nullification and national subjectivity ineligibility entailed both a material imprisonment in concentration camps and a symbolic confinement into a reified identity at the time constructed as inassimilable, alien, enemy, and Japanese. In turn, the discursive materiality of racial internment/imprisonment/confinement tautologically implicates the immanent substantiality of the meanings attached to relations of power that determine race. Perhaps instability of meaning presents itself as an escape from these determinisms.

I suppose one comes to the UK escaping rightlessness, or the symbolic and material embodiment of a history that obliterates the persons behind the constructs of race. One hopes to find the language and the community to articulate the difficulties of making sense, of making meaning, of being extraneous, of family ruptures, of intrusions of others on the privacy of the self, to which words and actions are insufficient to oppose them. But by moving to the UK, some new migrants may confront the attachment of an ineffable foreignness. The negotiation of racialised identities within and across the borders of nation states continues to matter. In a world that is (un)changing, citizenship is constructed from many borders. I sketch a migrant's sense of vanishing in London through textual images.

Saturday is sunny. In our room there is a window, located right in front of our bed. Window and bed are in between a rack on the right wall where we hang our clothes, and a small chimney on the left wall. On a summer sizzling day like this one I am compelled to move from the couch we have next to the window to sit on our bed. I try to read from the bed but my neck hurts me, so sometimes I just lie there looking at the window, waiting for the sun to relent a little so that I can return to my couch to continue my reading. Resting my head on my pillow, my window turns into an aquarium. It is all coloured blue, like still water on a lagoon. The aquarium in my window is mostly empty, with the exception of some dancing clouds that float like jellyfish on the sea. I catch the sight of a sprat, which from this distance resembles an airplane. The sprat moves silently, slowly, and as though it were following a marvellous

trajectory on the dense air of my blue lagoon. Its fin-flaps are barely visible, and just like a fish resting on calm waters it seems to be waiting for a wave, or a current to flap around. After one crosses my window, comes another, which is like a kite suspended in the air. It is such a delight to see them floating.

Tired of my bedroom, and feeling suffocated, I leave the room to the hall and walk to the end to our bathroom, I refresh my face with cold water from the sink, and from our open bathroom window, I hear the singing of a few birds. I move toward the window, and try to find them among the trees zigzagging the houses below on the rear side of our building. Strangely, I find some green phosphorescent parrots, which seem at odds with the grey shades of the houses enclosing the trees, in which they drift around. I feel the breeze of fresh air hurl into my face, but it smells of fast-food coming from the main street. To leave the flat, I descend two floors where neighbours I only hear but never see live, and cross the shared entrance to go elsewhere. I walk fast. I never talk to people I see on my way. I always try to have a direction, and to go straight ahead, without stopping. But I do like to look at people's faces, and bodies, moving here and there. If our gazes cross I just divert mine somewhere else. My lips, previously prone to smiling, are now sealed. When my eyes encounter someone worth my sympathy I twirl them around to suggest a smile, but not even a hint of it becomes apparent, and I do not stop.

Walking on Uxbridge Road toward Shepherd's Bush Tube station, I see many unfortunate people, and feel even sadder. Walking among homeless people, broken people, lost people, this pathway is simply disheartening. I see at least five men sitting on the dirty road, and two women. Some of them are sleeping at this time of the day, after midday, surrounded by rubbish, fast-food, and boxes. Others are drinking their cans of beer, holding them tightly in their hand as though they were precious to them, and speaking loudly, sometimes with laughs indicating either brief enthusiasm, or anger. It is completely understandable, their anger. Days of being unable to take a shower, barely sleeping, and awaking in a very uncomfortable condition. Uncertain about what is next. Near the tube, a woman waits at a bus stop. She talks to herself. I think she must be praying, but another woman who

stands near me, tells me 'This is a hard place to live, and people get anxious'. I tremble, and keep walking. I stop thinking, or think too much without stopping to reflect on any thoughts.

Will I become lost too? Am I already lost? A vanished, or vanishing person in London. I am more fortunate than they are. I have a roof over my head, food on my table, and a partner with whom I share my life. Besides this, I am very little, if anything at all. Yesterday, someone asked me with friendly interest what I had done the last couple of days. I did not know. Every day is different in a way, but all days do not matter really for I do not keep any track of them. Of course there are events I recall, but it is shocking how very little there is to tell my days apart. That day, I went to the grass and sat there. I sensed the earth full of elastic green hairs that caressed my feet and my legs with a coarse touch. I saw people around, all dispersed, but I was more interested in the trees. Their shiny and shady green leaves making a perfect composition of sudden hubbub, and arrhythmic bustle. The birds roaming around, alerting attentive ears with their sounds, and hiding from the most obvious sight. A few squirrels come close to me with intent, and then leave to pursue some more interesting entertainment. Pigeons move suspiciously around, keeping always one of their eyes on me. The breeze once again refreshes me, and I breathe. I breathe heavily despite everything being so light here.

As I evoke these scenes, I am reminded of the loneliness of some experiences of migration. The reduced physical space in which some migrants survive, the even smaller social network they have, given their pressing demands, the challenges of communicating in English as a first generation immigrant from non-English speaking countries. The illegibility of gradual changes occurring in one's subjectivity. A reconnection with what is most immediate and available: sounds, smells, visions, tact, taste. Poetics of globalisation from below emerged from these experiences: from the grass of public parks, panoramic sky views from a bed, horizontal encounters with strangers who were also strangers, if only of a different history and present, in London. A desire to connect what seem disparate lives in the hope that someone will care.

About the author



Jessica Harada is a writer living in west London. She is currently working on transforming her doctoral thesis, *'Becoming Mexican and Japanese: A Trans-Pacific Social History of Race, Mestizaje and Resistance across five generations'*, into a book. You can find her on Twitter as: [@jessharada](https://twitter.com/jessharada)

[Table of contents](#)
<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Instructions for a novice

Kanya Kanchana

Poem

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

do not breathe
a word

do not cast
into the wind with
almanac, birdseed, and cowrie

do not sing it to
the west, the south, the east,
and never ever the north

do not mark it, name it, tame
the named it, do not tug it on
its long leash, fight it,
delight it

should you find
a word, tuck it
quick in your cheek,
suck it, swallow it whole,
a siege, a sough,
a seethe

stir your sap with it,
set your bones with it,
smoke your skin with it,
shiver the air with it

trade the changeling,
no trick, no fuss, and for
fuck's sake, never ever
cry

and whatever you do,
do not lie, but

if the word
must not find
you: do not
breathe

About the author



Kanya Kanchana is a poet from India. Her poetry has appeared in *POETRY*, *Anomaly*, *Asymptote*, *The Common*, and elsewhere. Her translations have appeared in *Exchanges*, *Waxwing*, *Circumference*, *Aldus*, and *Muse India*. Her flash fiction has appeared in *Litro*, *Paper Darts*, and *The Conium Review*. Kanya is also engaged in practice, teaching, and Sanskrit philological research at the intersection of tantra and yoga, and has an MPhil in Sanskrit Studies from the University of Cambridge.

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

The lonely people

James Kearns

Short story

[Table of contents](#)

[<< Previous](#) | [Next >>](#)

I loved that line in *The Lonely Londoners*. It was Syl who comments on it, asking: 'How is a hell of a thing these people don't want him, when they can't even spell.' It's funny, for sure, because the West Indian tobacconist has left the sign in his shop window: 'No Kolors, Sorry, Uropean Only.' And what has changed? I am white but I am white in another way. How to explain: I am white but I take the name. You know what it is; you don't need me to spell it out. If you lie down with dogs, you get the fleas, right? Dogs is not the name. Neither is the fleas. 'O! reason not the need': that's the word. You know what I mean?

I've let my accent insinuate itself like raindrops on glass, so clipped, urgent, and so genteel. Or, at once, with my Cockney gatling-gun, belting out, so fast and fierce, running on without end. One fake, one real: which makes for quite the global conversation. There is something in between which makes me feel less the imposter more a person of the people when, really, I am nothing more, or less, than the people themselves: all of them, in one way or another. I keep that in mind when I seek the mercury in my mouth and the stain on my cheeks. I have wanted to write this for a long time. I have wanted to get this down. And was I ever destined to read and write? Destined? Yes, that's the word I want, the one I need. There wasn't much in the way of books at the Children's Home. There was even less in the way of mothers. Fathers you can stick.

I could have been no more than five years of age, my brother, Ash, was six and a little brother was yet to be born. He was, however, not so far away and would be brought into the world hardly a stone's throw from Mayday Hospital. He was born in Aunty Jean and Mr. Grant's house, a two up, two down on Greenside Road, Broad Green. Two up, two down, except we were now nearly five up, what with the one on the way. Mr. Grant was Jamaican and drove a piccadilly-blue Zephyr: Jean, his wife, was white like us: precisely white, like us: she was white in another way. 'Allow not nature more than nature needs.' That's the way. I won't spell it out – Jean takes the name.

I did not even know, and I'm pretty sure my brother didn't either, that my mother was about to give birth. You'd think we would've noticed,

but we didn't suspect a thing. When he and I awoke into the world that morning, mother was in her bed, and she was holding a baby in her arms. He was Thomas Francis named after my, *our*, father, Tommy, and my mother's brother, Francis Aidan. I am named after my father's father and my mother's father. I am James Anthony. My big brother has only one name and he emanates from something in my mother's imagination. At that time, no boy or girl around our way was ever called Ashley. It is interesting to note that it becomes synonymous with black boys and I like to think that he has something to do with that, certainly in our neck of the woods. We take the name, remember that.

Who knows, it may be so. In many respects, we are all figments of our mothers' imaginations, since mine, for whatever reason, denied that I was named after my grandfathers, insisting instead that I was named after the park: St. James', but refused to be drawn on the Anthony bit. I said, some years later, that perhaps I was named after Tony Curtis, and my mother, thinking about it, acceded to this wish, seeing as I had just watched *Spartacus*. 'Yes, it's possible that you were named after him,' she said, still mulling. She went on to say: 'If you'd like, we can call you Tony.' I refused the escalation of my own innocent musing. Even more years later, somebody would say that I looked like a young Kirk Douglas, but now things are getting complicated; especially so, because he was talking about a Van Gogh film and not Spartacus at all. I'll say no more.

I'm not really hard on fathers: they do their bit. Mine did, certainly; and he got us out of the kids' home by digging holes in the street. He was paid a pittance for doing this but it was enough. Daddy refused that awkward procedure. 'Who,' he said, 'sticks a pipe up another man's arse?' he asked. Mammy said, 'It might be a woman, for all you know.' I remember him smiling: 'Who,' he said, 'sticks a woman up another man's arse?' He didn't miss a beat and might have died within a year of his decision. We have the joke and we kept Daddy too. What else is there? The name, of course; the name...

And how long has it taken you to read this piece? Can you guess? Something in the region of five minutes: half the time it took to kill George

Floyd. Life becomes simple if one does nothing about it. Let us not be simple, let us do something about it. On the twenty-first of April of the year two-thousand and twenty-one: Three Counts – Guilty, Guilty, Guilty. And ‘I can’t breathe ...’ means You can’t breathe means We can’t breathe. The alternative is the word: *Allow not nature more than nature needs* – that’s the word. Don’t make me say it again. That’s the name.

George Floyd RIP.

About the author



James Kearns is a final year PhD Candidate at the University of Plymouth and a lecturer in Contextual Studies at Cornwall College Camborne. His doctoral thesis demonstrates for the first time that a mode of consciousness which the neurologist Jason Brown formulates as ‘microgenetic’ – an emergent and dynamic process of cognition from depth to surface – is highly compatible with Virginia Woolf’s own critical dictum, expressed most fully in ‘Modern Fiction,’ that the point of interest of a modern novelist lies “in the dark places of psychology”. In addition to this, he is in the process of completing a novel, *Guppy*, which centres on a young man whose worldview is shaped by the shame of an early life in care.

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Global eden.

Part II.

Julie Kern Donck

Poetry in prose

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

1. Dawn.

Here comes the dawn, grey and true. At this time when things slowly emerge from a darkness partially brightened by the fear of night, the world readjusts itself in its sadness. Passing by and seeing the body of the person who shares our life asleep and breathing, barely noticeable, in the blankets, their face enigmatic and expressionless; amidst the familiar features of daily routines, one always can discern a little more of the complete strangeness of what is known.

2. Language.

Violence has for itself to reside enormous in silence. Violence does not speak, is not explained, is not announced; it is *applied*, and it always falls down like an inexplicable shock of which regularities can only be discerned afterwards, of which effects can only be understood afterwards. It is only when it is known and expected that suddenly it is possible to discern it, as in the effort of its erasure. Its immensity finds its whole meaning in its unfairness, its madness and its repetition. In the celestial spheres of privileged worlds where peace seemingly reigns, it is deemed inexistent or anomalous; anywhere else, it is the rule; everywhere, force is the only known language.

3. Uniform.

It is in this fashion that one can identify the classifying and orthopaedic uses of psychiatry. Manifested behavioural chains, perception theories, endocrinology; imagining oneself being a fox that swiftly runs through the snow and the crude air of a forgotten winter, the one that belongs to the cold and ancient times, to the freezing gaze of a wolf. The chattering of a magpie at the foot of a cathedral, everyone passes by and, somewhere in the background, a deployment of clean and new soldiers. They watch the streets dressed in these impeccably adjusted caps and green balaclavas; at times, it is possible to distinguish something like a smile in the contour of their eyes. Coming back again in the shape of a fox, and all the platoon has vanished. Policemen as well, blue, heavy, enormous. A cat with its fixed eyes. Memories of the last night when the entire street has intervened. In the hostility of things, the world slowly breaks off and things seemingly happen

independent from each other but, still, similarly interlocked in a pain that never ceases to fire; eyes do turn on and off, the world passes by as hundreds of years in the space of three days.

4. Park.

The final arrest of the guy from the facing building. Old ladies pull their curtains as not to see. Memories of a quiet park from the island; how many times something happened in the same bush or the same lane, how much places remain haunted by all the things that have preceded us, and the ones that will follow. The red beauty of the autumn leaves, the friendly ducks, the meaninglessness of the police force. On the continent things didn't erode in the politeness of superficial and comforting speeches. The agreeable island daydreams in its dignity while the continent remains restless in its continual invasions, its neighbourhood rivalries, jostling on horses for thousands of years.

5. Locus Firmis.

And here a Christmas where we find each other, swallowed by the snow, our pockets full of needles. A vivid new era of dreams that follow each other without giving any clue or answer, like an oracle that shapes itself in the timelessness of solitude. Flickering in the memories of disembodied things, it is possible to discern an agreeable house next to rich fields of grass that are populated by birds perched on big animals passing by; a house where to belong like its ghost. Immense and fluffy carpets, giant and comfy pillows where to fall in a sleep and dreams of which no one returns, a teapot that has been found back, all the objects and things that have been lost forever. A non-face passes through the sunny window; the day shimmers wonderfully, the sky is blue and very pure and flanked with a few dense and loving clouds, which evolve in the idling time of superior spheres.

6. Sphere.

Being present as an attachment, an accessory. A folded body in fire and of which the gaze is driven on the ground; the world doesn't manifest its hostility before one can precisely read its silence. Now shadows move fast, gently depicting the consequences of each event, as if they were inhabited

by a secret knowledge, simultaneously insolent and fearful. They create a vague movement of disgust towards evil, not as in hostility, but as in the fatigue of senescence. The progressive weakening of the future gradually gets used with the incorrectness of things, as in maintaining an awkward position for so long that even breathing becomes impossible. Carrying outgrowing sympathies towards the ugliness of dead-ended ideas, toward worlds that slowly concentrate to finally close into themselves like a marble ball, opaque in their absent past. Morbid and illegible, they rotate while fixating on their axis. All these poisons that talk and that we try to neutralise with successions of complex antidotes. Trying to show things as with a heart, but there isn't anything left to see: forests have vanished in flames, animals ripped out of their skins; what once was a rich river became desert. What was still possible to believe in started to crumble in speed. The comforting immensity of unknown things so reduced, to become an invisible point.

7. Affection.

Holding my head against your lap; how soft your skin is and how dear is your respiration against mine. It crosses your smells and textures just to gently land on my face. Knowing a shelter and being loved and warmed up, our world shrank into a small number of things. From the unawareness of a peaceful world, we wake up in the torment of uncertainty, and what will be the next year, the next month, the next day. Nothing is to fear from the wolves or the night anymore, but from the emptiness of the grey streets. The end of anything is affirmed in negative. We curl in each other more tightly.

8. Film.

Circulating isn't knowing; one cannot precisely understand a world of ghosts without gradually losing contact with the one of the living things. Both meet on narrow surfaces. The sharing of experience happens on uncertain interfaces, just as one can glimpse a quick shine from the bottom of the water.

9. Ocean.

An unrestrained sun throws itself against the buildings, immense and immobile. In the absence of planes, the conversation of magpies and

jackdaws resonates between the cars. Endless highways are maintained alive by the last living things. Endless landscapes stand without a breach, lifeless and bare like flat and rectangular mountains. Our artificial marvels, in which nature itself is a copy of what once was, a nature where we can wander in the distraction of our own presence. A painting in a smooth and beige bank hall, perfect concretes on which we would slowly stretch, as if for listening to our own breath. The great winds of the daylight, that announce the ocean and the knowledge of travels; to glide with open wings, with precise exploration with no return, ripping through the air, hitting the target. This is travelling as if inert and without an action, the eyes directed at a centre. This is to cross a world where because of an ancient spell the lights seem constantly dimmed down even in full sun. This is to continue alone in an ever more silent desolation, because as the journey advances, the void keeps thickening with the weight of knowledge.

10. Silver.

Flames, dagger, silver; for a long time now, you believed that something was protecting you, and that you would cross successions of curtains of flames without a loss and without withdrawal. Dear friend, I heard your cry and I oriented myself with the sole memory that I had of colours. Now that the daylight came, nothing that appears to my eyes makes any sense, and the sound of your voice also vanished. No one can keep passing through fire nor survive their end and diseases. In the beating heart of each being, there is a breaking point; be it a mouse, a monkey, or a hen. Watching carpet-shaped landscapes, corridor-shaped roads, windows that don't offer a view of anything but work and on its subsequent tiredness, the infinite fatigue of a thickening ignorance. A snake constricts the mind, spitting flames, restlessly watching the new world to come.

11. Copy.

This is a country that isn't inhabited by anything else than a wind that sings in the fashion of wolves: the emptied universe of a distant tale. A hero has been sent far from home; he comes back with something he beheaded. A scream rips the quietness of the night, it is the dreadful singing of a love that never

failed. Young weavers work on the formation of new royalties with threads made of gold. Troops are reviewed, horses and painful spurs. Poets sing the praises of dead kings from distant pasts. An eye watches and speaks, and it is an entire dynasty that is erased in front a stronger sword, and we keep and we burn and forgot and don't know anything. Immense beasts with a human face. Wolves as big as cows. Invisible lions that can speak. Devouring tropics. Deserts that lose in insanity. The silent madness of things left without a name, and the furious lunacy to try to name them all. Ownership through lists and chants, discourses and drawings, owning them all by traces. The wind sings in the fashion of wolves and the night falls quietly, just as it did for millions of years. A greatly lit and moving billboard passes through old imperial capitals. They're busy with the preparations of complicated sports, and everyone keeps crashing in liquors. A detonation rips the silence and what was so far only latent becomes acute. An arrow makes the old horse run away. We also keep feeling each other face against face. On each corner surges a new universe in compositions that stack in stories and spaces. How many oven gloves are sharing the very exact same pattern, on how many pictures taken by strangers is our face featuring. To sit on the same chairs, and yet forever any experience is trapped in a single body. To glimpse life as we turn towards an absent lover, in the nocturnal and quiet solitude of familiarity: immobile, unbearable sofas.

12. Gold.

From pillows and impersonal stars: to distantly see entire populations of lights in new shapes and in new colours. Lit flags of the worlds of worlds, that throw their light in front of them as a lion shows the direction of victory. Silent splendours, tasteless golden walls. A certain time is needed for things to fixate in memory, for their shapes to become, at the same time, more familiar and more alien. To cross through like a translucent being without any past and of which future fails to design itself because constantly kept in a state of erasure, just as the forms in sand that draw and loosen themselves depending on the tide. Death coming closer, guides start to shape by crossing large and flat rivers, rowing in silence. From these blind forms something perceptible yet impossible to decipher arises, indifferent

to the countless trophies and gildings of what remains alive. Ancient statues smiling like slumping luxuries frosted in time. The yellow colour, imperial, sunny, medical, and sickened, stainless forces of a gold hoped to be solid and not merely gilded. An old phone and a lamp. Wishful thoughts might want to append flowers to this vision as to embellish our hearts by making them lighter. As much the world is capable of opening itself and show its kindest paths and easiness, as much it brutally opens a sudden trap. A flower or a lamp then aren't indicators of that gentle sense of familiarity anymore, but a few senseless objects among others and on which detestation starts to draw its grudge. Ah, the sadness, ah the sorrow; lamentations can be heard, all that is possible to try is tried, organisms seeking for their salvation, endless warmth, solid and affectionate comfort, the solidity of a heart disembodied in a voice that keeps repeating, as by exhaustion, the same words of love. Entire continents crossed by these exhalations of sadness, seeming so far away when seen from above. Houses and cars, moving and precise little toys. Indifference grows with escalations in magnitude. The life of a bird; a statistical object. The destiny of a nation; a theory. The love of an old lady; something forgotten.

13. Brown.

Stray dogs hanging out under the sun, sweating from their tongues, their flanks covered with some damp muck. An emaciated horse passes quick and cracking, conducted by its coach driver, also emaciated. The sun is strong. Everything stinks. Anything that speaks complains about the heat, and anything that doesn't, would, if it could. The large leaves of the trees beg for the arrival of water. A dog yawns with its still trembling tongue. Mendicity and antiquatedness. Anyone who can remains hidden behind their grids and a suddenly big, dazzling white saloon car. This morning a man has died. Before the grid lays his shape, with no breathe or animation, in this form of heaviness. However, the birds keep singing; brown blackbirds are the masters of simple and enchanting nursing rhymes. The car of the military police moves beige and brown without a nuance. The dogs cease to bark. Schooltime is over, a group of young children dressed in blue in the unbearable heat sings like the brown blackbirds among the mango trees

and the banana flowers. Last night that horrible scream had been heard. The warm and beautiful night, invisible because outside. The Wi-Fi signal is stronger closer to the window. Beige walls and again beige, the armchairs, beige and brown, a red carpet, beige and brown and blue. Mechanical arabesques that catch the eye in a state of semi-meditation, and the awaiting for things to pass by themselves in the certitude that everything that has a beginning also has an end. In the vicinity of these thoughts, the vision a young snake that quickly swifts through the shrubs, and of a dinosaur bone.

14. Beige.

Beige carpets, beige and brown carpets, a mechanical tapestry showing a great man standing on a blind horse as if to show the path to destiny, in this case a battle where his soldiers will eventually die. Smoking on the balcony, socks slowly dry just in front of the great man. A room that isn't that big, in the safe tranquillity of an ever-watched capital full of its stone monuments and its statues of lions. The large river that crosses it brings a remanence of quietness. Other buildings scream in the dark, blue, and shiny. They reflect helicopters regularly crossing the skies. Interstices of staircases; a pair of dusty cherubs. The door is painted pink. Beige pink. Another door, painted in black, faces a little porch and its roofing staircase; inside mould is growing pink and orange next to a desk and memories of liquid felicity. As time passes by and warmth morphs into the shortening of the days, happiness itself becomes colder and shrinks in the intimacy of the night like a candle becoming gradually more important. A wet park in the dark, far enough from the large street and its people of all sorts consistently busy with something. Once one isn't busy with anything, it is possible to see the business of people who don't need to be busy anymore, except with the vision business has left for them.

15. Grass.

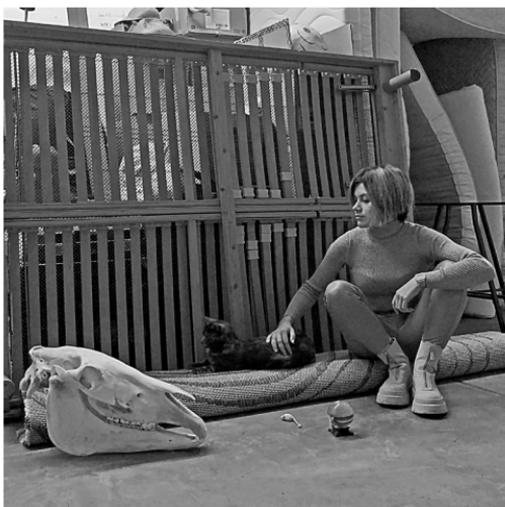
Betting on a promising horse. The best one will win. This is how it's decided that a horse is the best one. Sweet smell of sweat, hay and dung. They're well brushed as to make all the dirt go so their lustrous hair shines in the glorious lights of the podiums and its large masses of strong colours. They're brought

from place to place and they're made to run. The best ones always made to run. In the thoughts of the racing horse, flat and turning alleys appear in speed, as well as a hay bag and the face of that guy who keeps popping in.

16. Teeth.

Colours we knew were true are erased in the reality of light. The undefinition of darkness cedes in front the blue and grey and true cruelty of dawn. The heart sinks in front of the existence of a future that merges with the present. Nothing remains and dreams that formerly funded the truth of a being vanish in naïve and embarrassing pictures. One notices, with a blend of dread and relief, that the beast's teeth number is great, but finite. Things that are ugly are as detailed, if not more, as the beautiful ones. The beast is breathing exhausted on our face. Fear is a beast of speed that hasn't much endurance. Life speaks harshly in its continuous movement and does not present any fatigue. We sit then next to the beast, also out of breath; in our tiredness the sharpness of its teeth finally appears unimportant.

About the author



Julie Kern Donck is a visual artist and writer born in Belgium in 1992. She spent her childhood in her mother country, Brazil. Flying from one place to another crossing oceans of water, language and loss, her written pieces can be understood as lullabies inscribed in the dreamy images of a timeless world. She obtained her MA in Print from the Royal College of Art in 2021. www.juliekerndonck.com

[Table of contents](#)
<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Along the dotted line

Petra Lindnerova

Short story

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

I am still figuring out annual resolutions when my only point of reference – mail from family – arrives damaged. According to the scribble on the bulging envelope, it is at least three weeks late, the new year having chimed in as a fresh reminder of people's adamant tug of responsibility to send a card to that distant cousin twice or even thrice removed (depends how many times they changed their address). I hold up the scruffy jiffy bag, eyeing with suspicion its deep creases, a railway system in an off-white plastic hue. It hasn't been closed properly; the seal comes off without the usual battle that would normally end with a defeated grunt and a search for scissors. Dad would never slack off with his packaging, his whole life being about making sure things are in the right place. Work has made him into an overbearing father as the checks extend beyond land surveying to his daughter's daily business; there is no part of it he leaves uncovered.

But paper is peeking out through the misshapen holes, and I start hearing gruff baritones, loud imperatives to find out what the two funny names on the envelope could possibly be conversing about so thickly. I hear a snap and tear and a voice saying, *it's just some maps*. The stack is haphazardly shoved back in; the customs fizzle out of my head like a bad dream jumping out the window with the first ray of sunshine.

The plan is one of dad's recent projects – a long-disputed range between the village my parents live in and its neighbours – several inhabitants of both parts have their spots of land within and not knowing how to interact with each other, they hired surveyors to measure their respective bits. These are all pictures of the black work-screen before the official plan comes into being: neon lines and numbers come together, intersect and run off again. The works in progress have always been what really described a journey from A to B for me, strips of bright colour that offset the bottomless background, more maps than plans. Land survey plans rarely say anything beyond measurements; geomatics allows for no outsider appreciation unless you grow up with the sight of your father getting his gear out of the car at the end of the day, then sitting down to his computer and clicking away, connecting one line to another to spin his own intricate web of relations. You have to be there to know. This one marks out the main road curving around the bus stop (shared), one Catholic and one Protestant

Church (rigidly divided), and a flatland I used to run through on the way home to save time, staining my clothes with dandelion dust. But there is a deep blotch in the middle of where the flowers would blossom, a subdued colour of fermentation, like Brixton Pale Ale spillage, or the soup mum used to make on Sundays, which I cannot recall the name of. It all unnerves me; the ruined artwork, the easily accessible name of a niche brewery whilst my mouth salivates over a beloved dish I no longer remember. The nostalgic shade of the stain threatens me with its secret, reaching out with its tentacles towards the grocery, crossing the road like a shadowy shopper. I get an absurd urge to lick it, taste it in pursuit of a name that has escaped me. Maybe figuring out the ingredients would lead me to the name of the food. I stare hard at the rectangle of a shop, picturing the shelves, but the numbers next to the walls don't align with my memory – the place must have expanded – or have I shrunk?

Rushing over to my corkboard, I feel panic deflating my face. I take all the papers down and raid my shelves for more, accumulating all the plans I have collected over the years. In the tiny cupboard of a studio, I place them side by side, looking for familiar places, panting, short of breath and recognition. I manage to identify my brother's land, his house embraced by a winter garden from the back; the chunk of a dead-end street where garages full of timber are, the camping ground tucked right below the mountain. Everything else seems to be from outside projects, towns of no importance to me.

Assembling a village pile, I decide to make a collage to prod my brain into remembering the layout. It has a kindergarten feel to it, but more sweaty and cumbersome, like being a toddler with an adult's seriousness, trying to draw nicely with expensive painting tools. Throughout the whole time, I'm straining my imagination without really shaking up my memory. Pushing together lines of different scales, I can never force them to agree, the stain overseeing the commotion authoritatively. From a stray takeaway leaflet that came in with the post, I cut out an androgynous pictogram figure to represent me on the map, in vain hope for feeling imbedded in between those lines again. My body says DEAL FOR ONE in terribly chauvinistic typo and partially consists of a sourdough pizza: how topical to my hunger. My

analogue is greedy and misshapen. It wants to drown in the sneery soupy stain. Cancelling my DIY session with a scoff at my own emotional heft, I abandon the little diorama, my figure stranded on the main road.

Laughing at myself as I leave for my shift, I know this forced indifference is a mere stopgap; something has to be done about the plans.

When customers ask me where I am from that night, I adopt a different country each time, only half-assing the accent. They never question it until I tell the truth for once, and a man puts down his beer, saying, 'Where even is that?'

I pretend there is a table that needs clearing up.

He asks for my number later, and I end up bringing him home, where he slips on one of the plans carpeting the floor as we rush inside in a tangle of limbs. His shoes leave a muddy footprint across the lines, and my fervour diminishes, taming my arms and legs into uninteresting participants in the typicality of a millennial Friday night. He apologises and gathers them into a bundle hastily just to throw them on the kitchen table and me on the bed, disoriented by the proximity of the furniture.

In the morning, after I untangle from the slithery sheets, I can't find myself among the plans, fumbling through papers naked like a cupid with a bow gone missing.

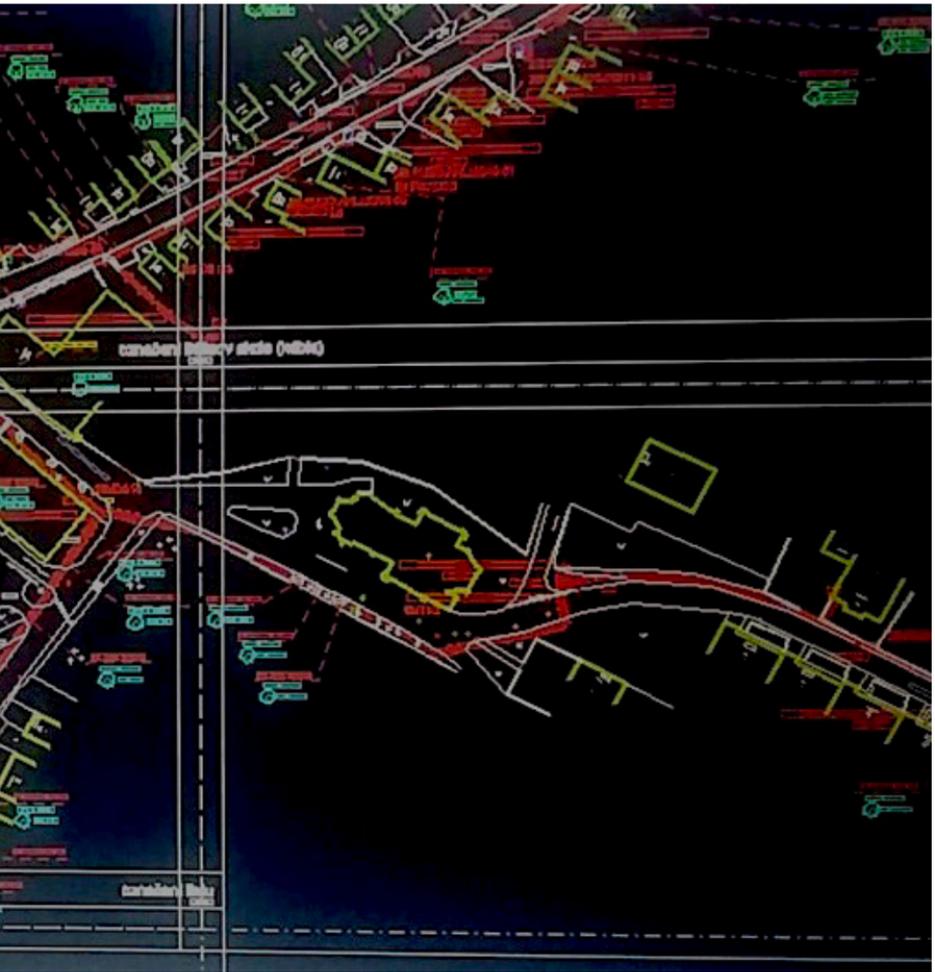
'What are you doing?'

I am starting to think he only asks things I have no answer to. There is a smugness on his face endemic to a sexually fulfilled bare-chested male who still derives success from the number of one night stands he can pack into a month, but because he's strike four for me, I don't care. I'm about to lie and start pretend-tidying when I notice my pictogram stuck to his clearly defined abs, almost torn in half.

He is curious about overly personal matters like my surname or what music I listen to, so I make names up as I go sliding into yesterday's clothes. Lying in these situations is therapeutic; it cleanses me of the dread of never being able to articulate who I am in a couple of sentences. Then, putting the kettle on, I try to make the case clear that another day has now started, and the passionate dynamics is gone. My eyes, however, flick towards the plans as



Digital rendering of an unknown street (details blurred). Plans like this are p



printed and bound into a booklet, as the final result of a surveyor's work.

I throw pieces of bread into the toaster.

He investigates the direction immediately. 'They look cool. Aesthetically pleasing. Like modern art.'

'Do you think they would sell?'

'Some people love to collect prints; the more foreign, the better.' As if afraid I'm about to ask him to buy one, he picks up his crumpled T-shirt and shrugs it on, one last unsubtle muscle flex as a bonus. I feel a pressing tendency to move about this tiny living space to prove it fits me well. The occasional scratch of two eyes on the back of my neck gives me goosebumps, not a product of any residual eroticism but a consequence of someone searching for my meaning. I offer him black coffee; he drinks it like he needs it badly and then observes the earthy sediment soiling the cup – the awkward part is coming.

'I'll call you?' He says as he ties his blindingly polished shoes with the carelessness of a rich man, handling the brittle laces like two rough ropes. I play along, smiling confidently and acting unaware of the fact I haven't given him my number. Just what he hopes for.

'Deal.'

Ping. The toaster chucks out two slices of cheap supermarket bread overdressed in a new golden brown.

Before leaving for work, I call my parents to say I have finally received the package, leaving out the torn envelope, the stain, my perturbed state. They are busy with grandchildren swarming their house, and I wave to their respective pixelated smudges and rush off. I have posted up some of the unwanted plans online for sale, tagging them as 'abstract prints', which at this point, is not a lie. Replies come in within an hour, embarrassingly excited about pieces of a foreign land that has altogether escaped their geography learning.

I meet the buyer in the Sunday sun outside the British Museum, pigeons stalking about like uniformed guards making sure I offer a fair price. A slightly shorter, freckled replica of the guy who shared a bed with me the previous morning, he also carries an incorrigible aura of the triumph of possessing something. Owing to my vague yet inflated humanities graduate

description of the maps, he supposes I am an indie artist or collector.

'To be honest with you, I do not understand why you would want to get rid of these, but I am surely happy you are doing so.'

I reply my studio is getting a bit cramped with all of them scattered around, reinforcing his belief in my professional success without lying.

'Are you currently working on something?'

'Yes. It's a rediscovery.' I give him no more.

His money for the land helps pay for my flight ticket. While printing out the booking confirmation, I stare at the few maps I kept, feeling accomplished I could finally pay for the trip without help. Deep down, I know I'm still an impostor, a big city sell-out. But fussing through the airport dissipates any reproach with the oncoming passenger self-importance, and as I fall asleep above it all, I dream of drawing complicated line structures all over the Museum.

The time it takes to get to the village is about three times longer than the flight. I have forgotten about the bone-piercing cold of February in my feverish hunt for home, and the coat that suffices in London gains a layer of snowflake fur as soon as I step off the plane. Buses are delayed due to frost, and I gladly wait in the pastry-warmed station café where I annoy the cashier by mistakenly fishing out the wrong currency out of my pocket. My body grows strangely animated and abounds with energy to please strangers, to find something in common with the lady who serves rude passers-by and wipes their sticky fingerprints off the tables. But I don't have enough change and have to pay contactless, in pounds. Where do I even come from? She doesn't hand me the warm paper bag directly but sets it on the counter almost too far away from my grasp. In a pathetic attempt to redeem myself, my tongue curls up to say I work in hospitality too, but it can't find the correct, non-anglicised word for it, so I sit down and take demure bites of my poppy seed roll, the gaps between my teeth filling up dot to dot.

Hours later, as we reach the mouth of the village, the hill to the first houses climbs up steeper than before, and I worry about the bus toppling over. As we pass the churches, I keep leaning forward with jaw clenched, like the negligible weight of my body compounded with heavy nervousness

could possibly prevent the vehicle from backflipping. I wait for the curve of the road and nearly miss the fact the bus has come to a halt; the stop has been moved – it now stands proudly as a brick-house structure for shelter instead of a weathered signpost.

Glancing at the grocery, afraid of people not recognising me, I decide to go straight to the family house. Thankfully, it's a late afternoon below zero, and the street is deserted or, perhaps, tundra-ish. Numerous homes have risen up along the way, looming over me in their multi-storey eminence. I try to take the old shortcut, but the road is fenced off, a PRIVATE PROPERTY plaque cutting my mindmap apart, and I am forced to take the long way.

Mum gapes in surprise at the door, stunned both by the sight of her daughter and the top hat of snow I've acquired. She shouts at my dad in semi-hysteria before pulling me inside (house and hug). I can smell the soup and, for the moment, indulge naively in the nets of fate. Dad does not give in to disbelief at seeing my thawing apparition, but again, he has everything mapped out. Sentimentality creeps into my voice, but I can't show regret just yet.

Dinner is ready, and I am too shy to ask the name of the soup. The colour is a few shades lighter than the loathed stain, in fact, not resembling the blotch at all. It still comforts me, though, so I try to slurp away the paranoia until my forehead glistens from heat. Countless things have changed in the dining room alone – even the chandelier hangs higher, no longer taunting me with its sharp ornaments as I get up for second helpings. The spoon clinks differently against my teeth too as I eat more, committed to discerning why the taste doesn't fit.

'Dill?' I peep. I used to avoid it in my food, seeing it as an unnecessary garnish adding barely any flavour. Now, it throws me off.

Mum gives a smile. 'Did you miss the soup?'

I want to say I still do, but a bit of the herb gets stuck in my throat, so I nod politely and command myself not to want for more. Dad tells me that now I've come to visit, he can print out more of his work.

'How did the land dispute go?' I ask. 'I saw the fence.'

'The field is not a part of our village anymore. But it's alright, you know – sometimes, places intersect and jostle each other.' He looks at me knowingly.

I have too much pride to tell the truth.

I can't admit I've lost all context, that in an attempt to regain it, I sold my plans.

About the author



Petra Lindnerova is a fresh Contemporary Literature graduate currently based in South London, where she writes, edits and repeats. Originally from Slovakia, she often centers her stories around the boundaries of belonging and nostalgia and delves into the rooted versus uprooted power dynamics. As an exophonic writer, she delights in linguistic play and semantic explorations. Petra's wildest fantasies feature a finished novel and a hundred rescue canines. Her writing was shortlisted for the Fish Publishing Short Story Prize 2020/2021 and is soon to appear in an anthology by Fresher Publishing and a few online publications.

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Eclogue 7
The theft of language
Emmanuelle

Robert Nelson

Poem

[Table of contents](#)

[<< Previous](#) | [Next >>](#)

From my suburb in Paris it's only a grand promenade
To a number of major collections of cultural artefacts.
Thousands of exquisite objects are gathered in palaces,
Offering the curious spectators vicarious rapture.
Our quarters are modest, designed to accommodate hundreds
On land that was once an agreeably intimate hamlet
And still has preserved the communal delights of the village
Where avenues run with a gentle and charmed conversation,
At times slowing down with the coffee and chairs in the street
To accommodate kind and restorative pauses for thinking.
The pastoral paintings that hang in the lofty museums
Remind us of concourses, yards, semi-rural development
Built for exchange and production that went by the seasons
And still have some faint metropolitan echoes in town
Where we bake our traditional breads at a corner establishment
Similar to those from the brick preindustrial ovens.
To visit the galleries fills our apartments with wonder
With images, rituals and privileges, spaces and stories.
We own the imaginary life that the objects attended;
And though we belong to such contrary disparate circumstances
Still they infuse our milieu with anterior consciousness,
Somewhat democratized, always aloof, like the Louvre,
So extensively grand in its rhythmically accurate architecture,
Once the abode of the king who got hold of the artworks
And often commissioned them, building a notable patrimony.
Numerous epochs are seen from those infinite corridors,
Reaching Assyrian and Greek and Egyptian antiquity.
How they arrived at the Louvre has a certain obscurity.
Sometimes it's simple and scholars have noted the provenance.
Sometimes, however, the objects were seized as a trophy
In military conquests of territories other than France.
From the station in Paris, it's only a comfortable train-ride
To London where other collections have gathered such ruins,
Extraordinary treasures from Mediterranean places,

Especially the elegant marbles that came from the Parthenon.
Everyone knows that these objects belong in their homeland.
The Greeks have constructed a spangling museum in Athens
Beneath the Acropolis just for the purpose of housing them.
Still, the collection remains in the British Museum
Without the intention of giving it back to the claimants.
According to custom and law in their own jurisdiction
The British are known as the owners and rightful custodians.
Anyone else would regard it as theft but the English
Have guarded the privilege of making their own definitions
Where things that are held by the crown in the state's institutions
Are axiomatically deemed as legitimate holdings.
I know, Polixeni, the terms of this subject annoy you.
The English have stolen the language as well as the sculptures:
They say that they're theirs and it follows that no restoration
Is planned and not even the quaintest of gestures is made
To acknowledge the incontrovertible claim of the Greeks
And to say that by rights they should all be returned even though
We will keep them for now to maintain our colonial traditions,
Like Germany, France and America, also possessors
Of Mediterranean artworks that once were in situ.
Australia at least has made good with such minimal lip-service.
All of the country was stolen, not just some examples
Of sacred historical value but all of the land,
Its traditions, its languages, customs and thousands of people.
Admitting Indigenous people were gravely mishandled
You proffer your sympathies, earnestly say that you're sorry
For stealing and trashing a noble anterior sovereignty.
Nothing is yielded by mouthing these honourable platitudes.
Property stays with the owners who bought it at auction
And nothing will change when the state with its legal bureaucracy
Never intends to dissolve or dismantle itself.
Restitutions like Mabo have happened and always are possible;
Still, for the bulk of the land, the prevailing economy

Stays as it is with its sturdy investments of capital
Adding more fat to the girth of the people who own it.
These stories of permanent theft are the fabric of history
Stretching by clumsy irregular weave to the corners
That fray from within and are further depleted by moth.
There is one consolation in all of them, something they share
In the darning and patches that cover the scandalous tears:
It's the thought that a future apology might be forthcoming
Despite resolutions to keep what was slyly acquired
By dirty default or self-interest or cynical sanctimony.
Sweet Derrida used to speculate: what is the meaning
Of all these apologies? No one will ever forgive.
It's obscene to forgive: it dishonours the gesture of begging
As if to suggest that enormities past are annulled.
So the value inheres in the act of confession itself.
It has tendered to history tokens of lifelong remorse
Where forgiveness would end the eternally culpable narrative.
You as a person could gladly forgive me some insult
But that's between us as indulgent and close individuals
And not between us and the authorized bandits of history,
Most of them dead and interred on discredited soil
Who conducted campaigns to eliminate all of our rights,
Systematically breaking our dignity, smashing our culture
And gloating in criminal profits from things that were ours.
Polixeni, if only the theft were confined to our assets!
Potentially things in museums can all be sent back
But the lives and the households of Jews and your own Aborigines
Can't be restored; they were brutally held and deleted.
To hope for forgiveness diminishes what has been perpetrated.
Pardon is out of the question; and yet if you say it
The humble apology helps us acknowledge injustice
Including when true reparations will never be made.
If I ponder these long unforgivable ruptures in history
Something occurs to me: all the regrettable felonies

Started with language that said that the crime is legitimate.
Language provides a reliable platform for trespass
By stealing the moral prerogative vested in victims
And giving an ethical blessing to those who abuse them.
I hear these insidious twists and distortions in language
And know that they currently function and operate everywhere.
France is awash with a rhetoric preaching prosperity.
Policies force us to count and report productivity,
Promise improvements in methods that make for efficiency,
Causing our language to change and to speak economics.
It hasn't been badly intentioned. The thinking is honourable,
Sometimes describing inclusiveness, targets for numbers,
Perhaps to increase opportunities given to women,
Perhaps the disabled, depending on who is in government.
Mostly, the talk is benign in the way that it's structured
To make our society fairer and richer and safer
And thanks to these rational aims that are widely supported
There's no contestation or scruple that contrary values
Might need to be heard by the discourse of tangible goals.
I agree that a bank or a hospital ought to be competent,
Organized, quick and efficient in handling its cases,
Reliable, always responding to public demand
With elaborate systems for handling their customer feedback;
But none of these strategies flows to the state as a whole.
We are ruled by this language and lack an inflected alternative.
Hospitals, banks and of course corporations in industry
Easily build themselves up by the language of commerce;
Their innermost structure agrees with the rational principles
Based around prudent efficiencies leading to profits,
Where either consumers pay less or receive better service
Or taxpayers gain some relief from a lighter assessment.
Within this agreeable package, however, the mindset
Unconsciously bends to competitive forces of capital.
France, like its neighbours, competes among globalized markets.

The state is concerned that its ranking in credit for finance
Remain at the top or at least doesn't fall from the middle.
The state is responsible; this was its pledge to the public:
Maintaining prosperity, not to descend, as with Portugal,
Greece or some other inferior nearby economy.
Countries without a robust and expanding economy
Plunge into crisis, with stress to their tax-paying citizens,
Public unrest, unemployment, a shortfall in services.
Growth is essential; one cannot stagnate or go dormant,
Since closing the eyes for an instant means tottering backwards
And losing the place that the public expects for its welfare.
And here is the poison, the great deleterious toxin
That scrambles the brain from organic and balanced perception
To focus on selfish uniquely material outcomes.
We know that incomparably greater degrees of a crisis
Are looming, assuming a menace of planetary scale:
The environment, sick with pollution from mounting consumption,
Is burdened with thickness of air that induces a fever
With temperatures rising and permanent harm to the weather.
That cloud with its febrile retention of heat from the sunshine
Has made us delirious, paralysed, shocked and disabled.
We know that we have to extinguish the endless combustion
In engines of aeroplanes, cars and machines in their billions
That guzzle the fuel from the ancient reserves of the planet,
Insatiably draining the fossilized storehouse of carbon
That lies in the depths of the deserts and desolate oceans
But still we are powerless, motionless, trapped in our language
That fills us instead with a reflex again to consume
Without heed for the consequence: fly in a plane, take a motorcar.
Everyday diction defines and produces normality.
No one considers it wrong to continue to practice
What everyone else is determined to do. It's perverse
To declare a defiance of commonly felt expectations,
Reject the communal attainment of pleasure and fortune

And choose puritanical kill-joy alternative lifestyles
Where holidays happen at home and excitement is banned.
In the meantime the language of joy is controlled by producers,
Providers of services, travel, the engines of industry.
Companies advertise, generate images, sell you things,
Mostly unnecessary. Life in the village did well
With a fraction of similar services. No one is happier
Now that we're anxiously spending on optional luxuries
Mostly to prove that we're clever, successful and worldly.
Our industries know that the easiest method for selling
Is simply to find insecurity, fabricate antidotes,
Tell you the remedy fills you with copious joy
And infuse you with hope for a happier life of consumption.
The fragile economy rests on such tenuous premises.
Stripped of competitive zeal for superior lifestyles
The global economy faces a dismal collapse.
It requires the hyperbole, fraudulent ads and hilarity.
All of the false artificial inducements for spending
Are vital to growth that sustains our contemporary welfare.
And look in that line how our language is loopy and twisted.
That concept 'sustainable' doesn't apply to the planet
But only the commerce that gobbles the biosphere up.
So the word is subsumed by its contrary. Being sustainable
Means that the business continues to grow and to profit
By building consumption and laying the planet to waste.
And so with the concept of 'welfare'. It once had a meaning
Suggesting the modest support that a person might need
For maintaining a dignified life in a healthy condition
But somehow it changed to a synonym equalling 'wealth'.
It's the sum of all budgets, the net or disposable wherewithal
Linked by inscrutable flows to a measure of happiness.
Nothing can challenge this concept of welfare, this shibboleth
Totalling all of our interests as globalized citizens,
Citizens, nations, economies, markets and industries!

Thus neo-liberal ideals, insofar as they figure,
Have now redefined what was once apprehended as relative.
Now it's a false absolute that determines the discourse
Since no one can ever suggest that the folk should be poorer.
This welfare means having more money. To recommend poverty
Isn't an option and so we're co-opted by language
To lend our support to the system that desecrates nature.
It bothers me greatly. The public is easily brainwashed
To think that their goods and amenities equal their happiness.
No one is happy and no one has greater contentment
By anxiously watching the mean distribution of assets
And spending their lives in comparisons, each unrewarding
And full of suspicions that some are becoming more affluent.
No one remembers that people with less were contented
And valued intangible gifts like the street conversation.
The burden of crude aspirational middle-class rivalry
Cripples our natural rhythms of constant adjustment,
As if we have lost the adaptable gait on a footpath
Like one who is walking and raises the foot with each step
In accord with the rise and the fall of irregular pavements
Instead of demanding some even, inflexible flatness
So each of the steps is the same and a dip were a scandal.
Our focus, the very regard of our eyes, is intolerant,
Fixed inorganically, held by material language
That neither admits any glance to the side nor beyond
Where traditional cultures were never oppressed by their greed.
We're unable to change our perspective. Our compromised eyesight
No longer accommodates difference but measures the world
By the uniform standard of hard economic advantage.
The date of the shift in our language came after the seventies.
Everything changed in the eighties, when countries moved backwards
To plan for competitive goals and to strengthen their capital.
Forty long years have cemented this orthodox thinking
To privilege the corporate gain over all ideology.

Language itself has been stolen. It's not in our ownership.
Things that we wanted to say are no longer pronounceable.
Jargon from school economics has ousted our dictionary,
Banishing values that can't be expressed as material.
Only a measurement ever convinces authorities.
Thus, we're compelled to rehearse the complacent vocabulary
Thick with assumptions that wealth is equated with wellbeing.
Words like 'contentment' that once were a part of our lexicon
Languish in abject naivety. Now they are ruins,
The ruins of freedom in speaking of structural change.
In our innocent youth we could speak about changing the world
Against lazy belief in supreme economic determinism.
Thoughts for a redistribution of power seemed real.
We believed that intractable problems, especially pollution,
Would never be handled by market-led liberal democracies.
Laws beyond each jurisdiction must now override
What is otherwise destined, unstoppable, fixed by economies.
People would laugh at us, tell us how much we're naive
But at least we could say it and draw some reactions and censure
When now we have silence entombed by the decades like ruins.
So progress, whatever it brings with its florid technologies,
Marches regardless of anything said or protested.
'The squawking of socialists needs to be hushed: it is nonsense;
Your discourse of changes in values is backward and derelict,
Set in denial of reality. Look at your communism,
Hostile to rights and amenities, fixed in its dogma
Against the expression of people who vote with their money!'
Resisting the force of the market was fraught and impossible.
Any attempt to revive a revised ideology
Broke on the rocks of a rigid and righteous economy.
No one can easily speak of a green ideology.
Even that word is a ruin that's also been smashed
By the consummate juggernaut rolling above our ideals
In a frightening displacement of ethical social resistance

By bullish and cruel universal command of economies.
History always has stripped us of earlier consciousness.
Each generation expropriates something of value;
And now it's the clandestine purloin of language itself.
Yet unlike the removal of sculptures or even of countries
There isn't so much as the scope for pathetic apologies.
No one can candidly look at our bleak destitution
In handling the scandalous death of our planet's environment
—Only to satisfy brief economic objectives—
And recognize: this was the fault of our dominant discourse
Where natural language was banished and lacked credibility.
No one will ever say sorry that no one was listening
Unless the vocabulary spoke economics. I'm sorry.
I'm sorry to labour this bitter complaining contention
But sorry more fully that no intervention was possible
Or, if it was, that it didn't attain the effectiveness
Needed to sway the momentum that governs the world
On its perilous axis that wobbles and rages chaotically
Threatening unquenchable fire for the planetary heritage.
Then we are sorry. It sticks in the throat and I choke
Because then our apologies end, like the planet, in smoke.

About the author



Robert Nelson (1957–) is a writer in Melbourne, Australia, who has published books and articles on art, education and the history of ideas. Prior to his honorary fellowship at Melbourne University he was an Associate Dean at Monash University, where he also became Associate Director, Student Learning Experience.

Robert has written over 1,000 newspaper reviews as art critic for *The Age* and was also a scene painter for his late wife, the photographic artist Polixeni Papapetrou. His poems have appeared in *Chasm Journal*, *Crisiology*, *Snakeskin*, occasional gallery publications and on YouTube. [Some of his articles are freely available online.](#)

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Universal characters: writing towards no language

Jane Partner

Visual poetic essay

[Table of contents](#)

[<< Previous](#) | [Next >>](#)

The fantasy of a single shared human language has taken many forms across time and around the globe. These aspirations have often been shaped by accounts of the lost common origins of language and of its subsequent fragmentation: Hermes as the multiplier of tongues in Greek mythology, the story of Babel in the Judaic tradition, or the flood that multiplied languages in the beliefs of the Kaska people of North America.¹ The persistent desire to recuperate a single means of communication for the whole of mankind is a unifying and inclusive one; but in practice, any actual proposed model of universal communication has always been ultimately grounded in one existing language and culture. The story of even the most idealistic Western projects of universal language creation is therefore also a history fraught with the danger of linguistic colonialism.

This essay traces one aspect of the complex evolution of universal language projects by examining the interlinked aesthetics and politics of newly-devised alphabets. I begin with early modern occult attempts to recuperate the perfect language spoken before the Fall, which was imagined to have been expressed in characters whose visual appearance was infused with divine significance. The second section considers seventeenth-century philosophical projects that attempted to construct a new universal language based on a 'true' character: an alphabet of symbols that graphically represent structures of logical thought. The abandonment of serious interest in universal language schemes after the Enlightenment leaves us to consider what the modern equivalent of these endeavours might be. Whilst one answer to this question – as I will touch on briefly – is the turn to new systems of logic notation and to binary code as the basis for computer languages, these techniques predominantly make new use of existing characters. In the final part of the essay, I suggest instead that it is in visual art that we find contemporary manifestations of the ideals of universal expression through innovative graphic marks. I therefore end by investigating how abstract artists use the gestural language of calligraphic mark-making to create works that seek universal legibility by transcending conventional language.

¹ On language myths see Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (1993; Oxford, 1995), pp. 7-19.

Alongside this historical investigation, my essay also undertakes practice-based research. Each of the three sections is accompanied by a visual poem that is written using the characters being discussed. These experiments, titled 'Illegible Poems', seek to deepen the scrutiny of the visual characteristics of these alphabets and to investigate what expressive power these languages have, particularly to question or subvert their original uses.

I Undoing Babel

Within the Christian tradition, the diversity of human language has ultimately been understood as a consequence of the Fall. When Adam was expelled from Paradise, he quickly forgot the perfect language with which he had conversed with God and named the animals, creating instead a proto-Hebrew that carried mere traces of the Edenic original. The multiplication of languages that punished human overreaching in building the Tower of Babel further dimmed these memories of divine language, which were believed to have been lost entirely in the Flood. The chimera of re-attaining the single, perfect prelapsarian language haunted the European cultural imagination throughout the middle ages and the renaissance. Hebrew became a particular focus for study because it was believed that it still carried vestiges of the lost divine language. From the twelfth century, the mystical Jewish Kabbalistic interpretation of the Torah sought to unlock the divine wisdom that was inherent in the very forms of the letters themselves.²

Kabbalistic thought spread across Europe, contributing to the renaissance fascination with divine symbols and alphabets that flourished during the sixteenth century. The German polymath and occultist Cornelius Agrippa published a supremely influential account of the mystical alphabets through which god was believed to have inscribed secret wisdom into the material world, including into the body of man. Agrippa tells us that in our hands are written 'divine letters', that are 'in all Nations, and Languages alwayes the same'.³ The most sustained and astonishing attempt to recuperate the first universal human language was made by a scholar working strongly under

² See Eco, pp. 25-33.

³ Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (1531-3; London, 1651), I, p. 67.

the Kabbalist influence, and with a deep knowledge of Agrippa's work.⁴ John Dee, the Anglo-Welsh mathematician and occultist, recorded in his journals how he rediscovered the 'Angelical' or 'Adamical' language that he believed God had used to create the world. Dee worked with a seer, Edward Kelley, who gazed into a polished stone and beheld a vision of a new alphabet of twenty-one letters. An angel would point at these letters in turn so they could be copied into ruled grids.⁵ The angels later offered translations of some of the texts, but at first the alphabet could only be scrutinised as mystical characters.⁶

Dee was a brilliant man who appears to have been sincere in his intoxicated enterprise of becoming the only modern human to receive the language of God, but Dee's Angelical alphabet was also deeply mired in earthly politics. Its syntax and grammar are similar to English and there are even a few suggestive resonances in the vocabulary: 'Londoh', for example, means 'kingdom'.⁷ If Dee and Kelly stopped short of claiming that God was an Englishman, they evidently believed that the language through which he had created the universe had kinship with English. Dee's drive towards spiritual enlightenment also ran in parallel with his interest in terrestrial exploration and the idea of Empire. His virtuosity in mathematics allowed him to apply geometry to navigation for the purposes of exploration and he was an early advocate of English colonialism.⁸ The polished black obsidian mirror in which Kelly saw visions of the new alphabet had itself been brought from the New World.⁹ It is still in the British Museum, along with so much other plunder, and it shows your face from an uncanny distance, as if looking down a dark well into the past.

⁴ Deborah E. Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 35, 116.

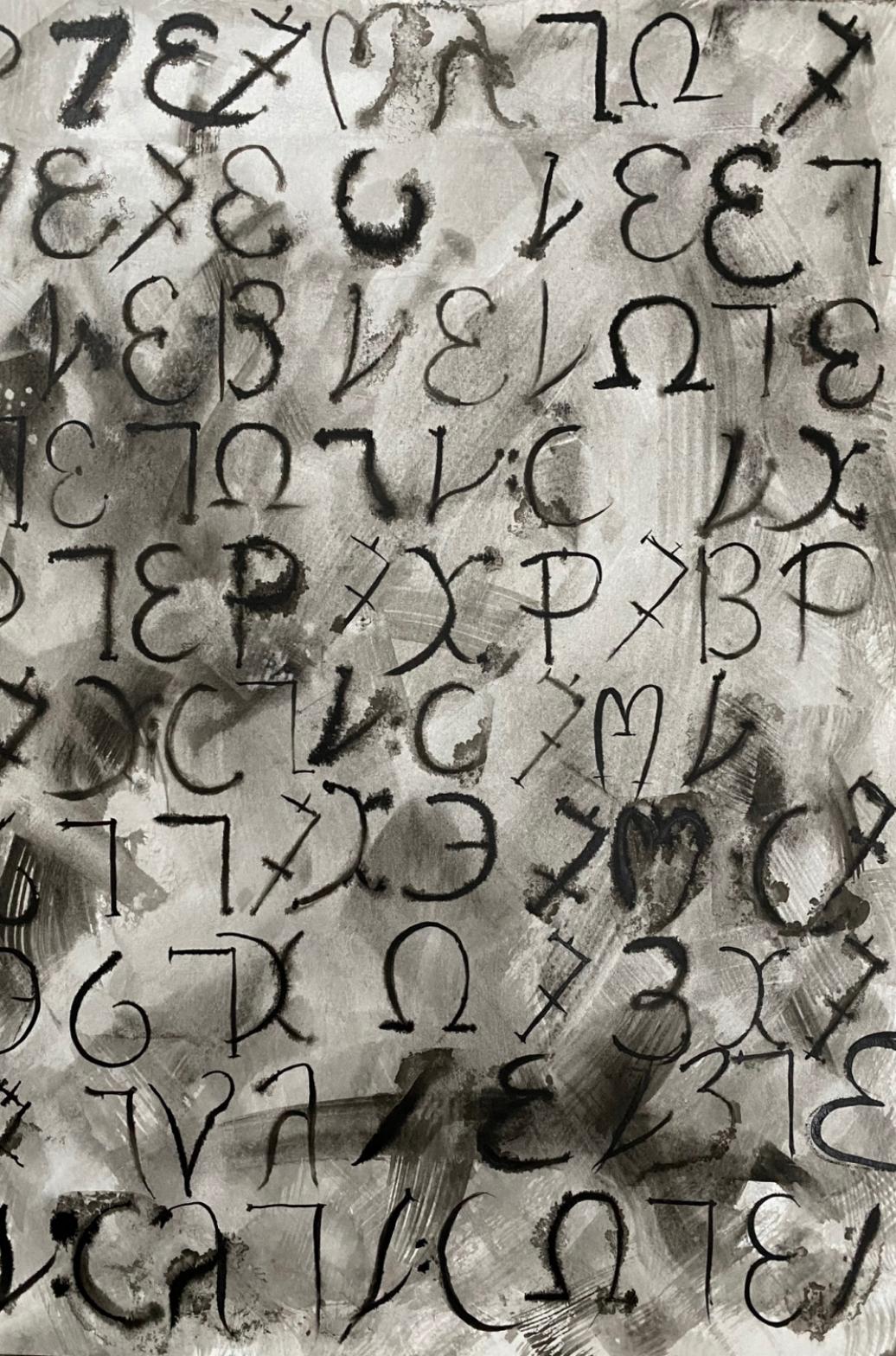
⁵ John Dee, 'Liber Logaaeth', BL Sloane MS 3189; Harkness, p. 158.

⁶ Dee published a treatise on the interpretation of symbols: *Monas Hieroglyphica* (Antwerp, 1564). On graphic influences on the Angelical alphabet, see Donald Laycock, *Complete Enochian Dictionary* (San Francisco, 2001),

⁷ Laycock, pp. 41-44.

⁸ See Dee's *Perfect Arte of Navigation* (London, 1577).

⁹ Obsidian mirror, Mexico, BM object 1966,1001.1.



**Clothed with God as a flame
I have prepared a barren stone
I made a window into the brightness of the heavens
And I am Adam for the second time
With knowledge of the first utterance
From the mouths of a thousand angels surges light**

This poem re-asserts the human origins of the Angelical language by using it to write in Dee's own voice (who always referred to himself using a Greek delta). Its visual form draws on the urgent calligraphy of Dee's manuscripts, and the initial status of these letter forms as inscrutable objects of contemplation. It also embodies the ambivalent play of darkness and illumination in Dee's search for knowledge. (Ink on paper)

II Philosophical Languages

During the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century, numerous projects were undertaken to establish a man-made, 'a priori' universal language.¹⁰ Some of these had the practical aim to promote international trade, diplomacy and scholarship, whilst others proclaimed themselves to be 'philosophical' languages, that were designed to express ideas with new clarity. Cave Beck's *The Universal Character* (1657) set out one of the first fully-elaborated universal language systems in English.¹¹ The frontispiece shows figures from Africa, Asia and the New World that have been transported to stand before Beck's desk, where they look towards him for instruction. (Fig.1). This vision of European supremacy accords with the stated ambition of Beck's work to disseminate 'true Religion in the World'.¹²

Several of the universal language systems from this period proposed new characters, including those by John Pell and Francis Lodwick.¹³ The most influential and graphically radical of these systems, however, was John Wilkins' *An Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language* (1668).¹⁴ The 'real character' that Wilkins devised is a completely new ideographic alphabet in which signs were intended to represent the actual nature of the referent directly, without relying on conventional association. To achieve this sweeping objective, Wilkins first needed to break down all '*things and notions*' into successive divisions and subdivisions, so as to establish systematic relationships that could be represented in the composite forms of his alphabet.¹⁵ Wilkins' characters consist of straight horizontal lines to which are added hooks and bars that denote the placement of a thing or idea within the categories of his universal taxonomy.¹⁶

¹⁰ See Rhodri Lewis, *Language, Mind and Nature: Artificial Languages in England from Bacon to Locke* (Cambridge, 2007).

¹¹ Cave Beck, *The Universal Character* (London, 1657).

¹² Beck, sig. A7^v.

¹³ John Pell, BL MS Add. 4409, fol. 254r; see Lewis, pp. 27-30; Francis Lodwick, *A Common Writing* (London, 1647).

¹⁴ John Wilkins, *An Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language* (London, 1668).

¹⁵ Wilkins, p. 13; Lewis, pp. 155-176.

¹⁶ Wilkins, pp. 385-413; Lewis, pp. 166-176.

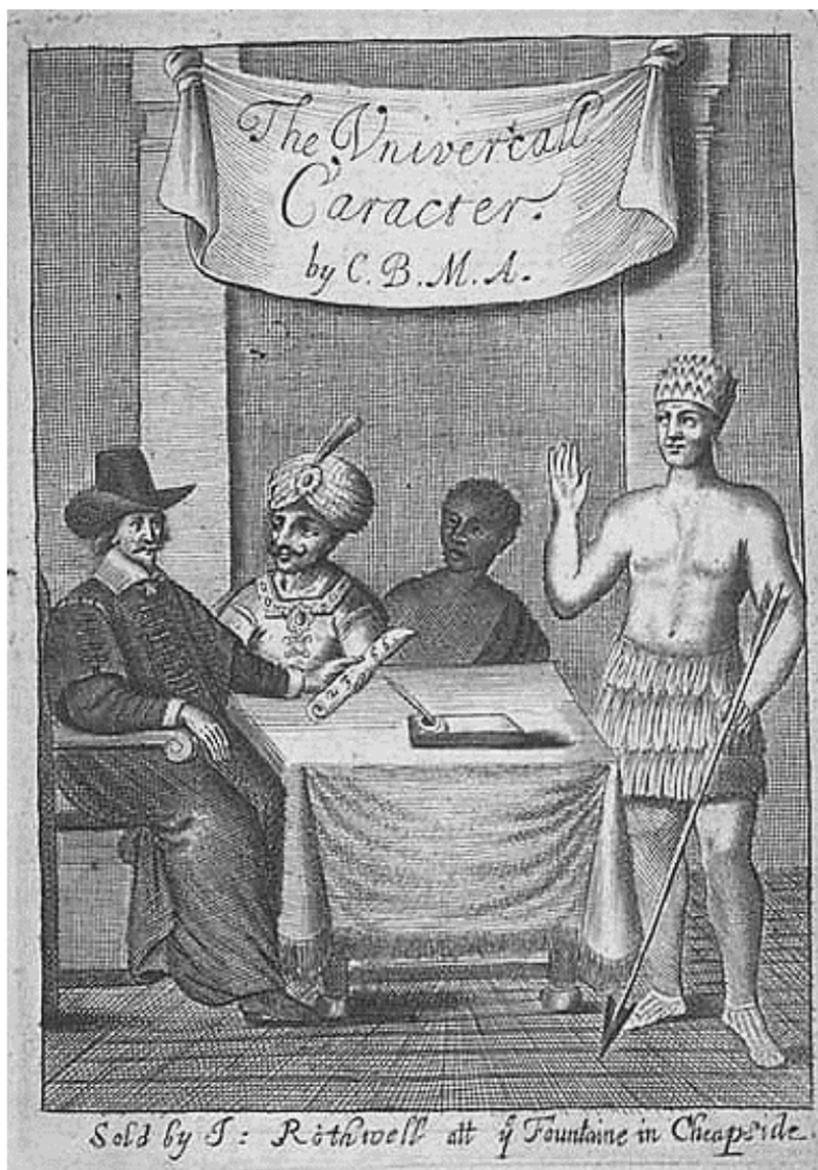


Fig. 1) Frontispiece to Cave Beck's *The Universal Character* (1657). By permission of the Master and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge.

Working with Wilkins' characters, I found that they do reveal uncanny – even exhilarating – glimpses of the conceptual ordering that they represent; but like all similar systems of the period, they proved ultimately too complex for use. Whist Wilkins' project was ostensibly a linguistic one, it was also deeply ideological, allied with the wider objectives of the Royal Society – of which Wilkins was a founding member – which included the establishment of empirical certainty as an instrument of political power.

Wilkins' work provoked a range of responses. Leibnitz complained that the project had not gone far enough to express the logical relation between concepts, and proposed instead his own *characteristica universalis* that might enable an 'algebra of thought' accessible to speakers of all languages.¹⁷ Leibnitz also developed the modern binary system as a means to translate verbal logic statements into mathematical ones: a turn towards numerals that catalysed the international rise of computer programming languages. Other respondents were sceptical of the taxonomy upon which Wilkins' 'true character' relied. Borges drew a mocking parallel with a fictional Chinese encyclopaedia that was said to divide animals into nonsensical categories that include 'those that look like flies from a long way off'.¹⁸ This passage was cited by Michel Foucault as an inspiration for *The Order of Things* because it exemplifies the cultural specificity of any taxonomy: a synthetic language based on categories conceived by an Englishman cannot possibly be universal.

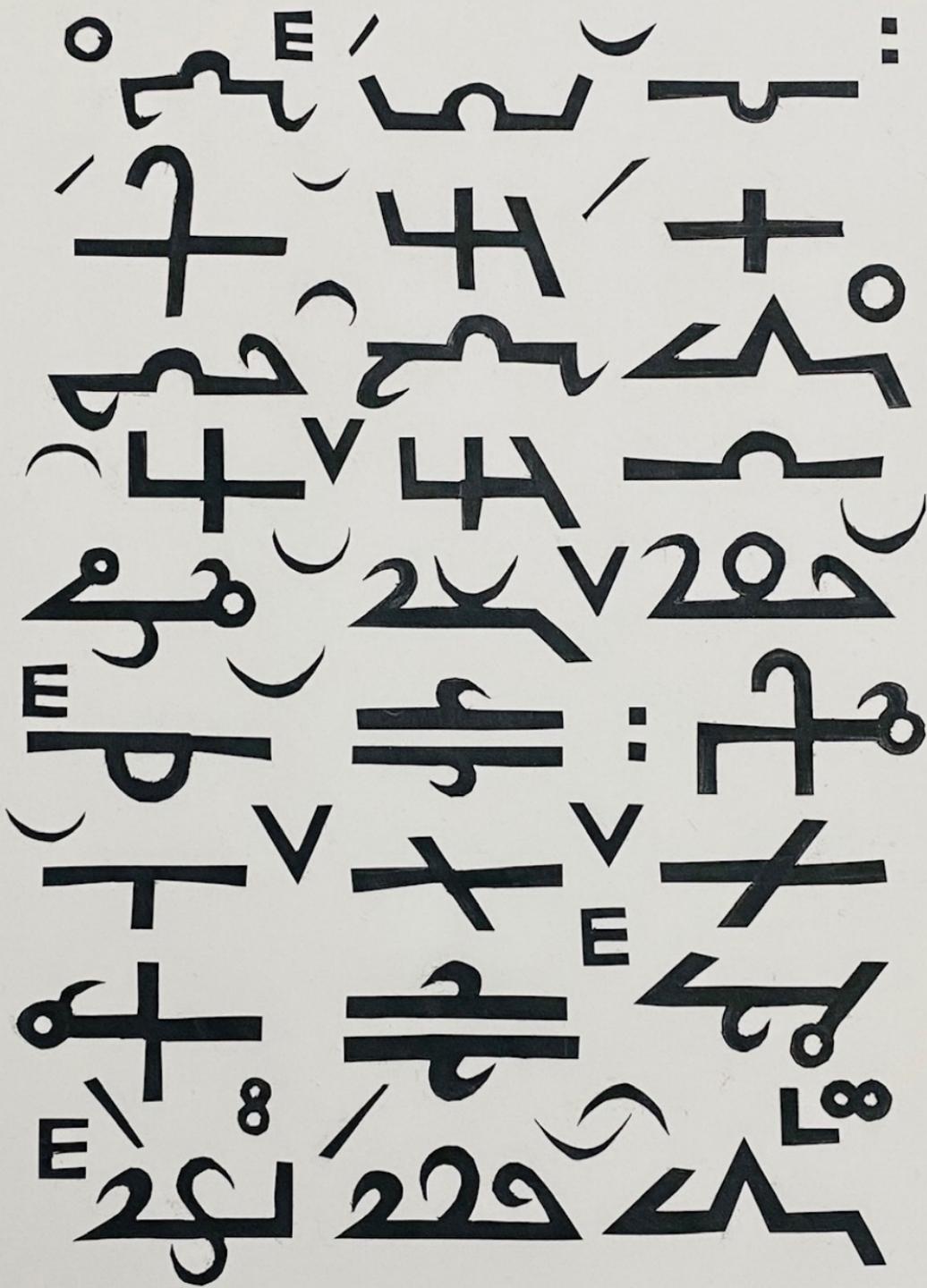
The abandonment of serious interest in universal philosophical language systems was reinforced by the growing recognition that any new language would change during use.¹⁹ From the nineteenth century, attention shifted onto attempts to create new, auxiliary (or secondary) languages. Almost all of these, like Esperanto (1887), and Interlingua (1951) use the Roman alphabet. The last major endeavour to invent a new universal alphabet was Soleresol (1827), which drew on music notation. After a fleeting explosion in popularity, it fell, like all the other new alphabets, into obscurity.²⁰

¹⁷ These ideas originate in Leibnitz's *Dissertatio* (Leipzig, 1666) and were developed throughout his career; Eco, pp. 269-292.

¹⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins', in *Otras Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires, 1952).

¹⁹ Eco, pp. 290-91

²⁰ For a more recent, but less widespread example, see [Toki Pona](#) (2001)



**I believe in the power of language
As the measure of the world.
I come to give names to heaven and earth
In words conceived by will;
And as judge to quantify in qualities sensible
Of corporeal magnitude everlasting
Of stone, metal and tree,
And bodies in space without end
In the kingdom of the maker of names.
So be it.**

Wilkins provides limited examples of words actually written in his 'true character', transcribing only the 'Lord's Prayer' and 'Creed'. A cut-up technique generated this poem that reflects on the expansive dogmatism of Wilkins' objectives and the graphic hardness of his characters. (Cut paper).

III Abstraction and Asemics

It is in visual art that we find contemporary manifestations of the desire for universal expression through innovative graphic marks. When early twentieth-century artists broke free from representation, many painters turned instead to the exploration of letter forms, believing that flattened calligraphic mark-making might reveal a more primal visual vocabulary that would be capable of transcending national boundaries. This endeavour is currently being brought into focus in the major exhibition 'Abstraction and Calligraphy: Towards a Universal Language', which offers a new understanding of the extent to which Western modernism's most prominent abstract works are indebted to long-established calligraphic forms from Asia and the Near East.²¹

Some Western artists, including Julius Bissier, Mark Tobey and Brion Gysin, engaged deeply with the writing traditions of other cultures, studying Zen practices of gestural painting and illegible calligraphy that capture the spiritual condition of the artist in the moment.²² It is this cross-cultural understanding of mark-making as a record of gesture that ultimately underlies the shared conception of abstract art as a universally available language. The Belgian artist and writer Henri Michaux combined techniques from Asian calligraphy and Surrealist automatic writing to create works such as *Alphabet* (1925), which presents us with rows of spiralling, illegible characters. He categorised these works as 'interior gestures' capable of making visible the inward life of the artist.²³ Influenced by the wordless text experiments of Michaux, Andre Masson, Man Ray and others, Roland Barthes' critical reflections on the dual themes of writing and abstract art also emphasised the enduring importance of gesture. Barthes' paintings and drawings of abstracted letter forms, which were made after he spent time studying calligraphy in Japan, put into practice his theoretical concept of the 'semiograph', which posits that acts of writing are records of bodily gestures, producing 'grapheins': marks that might merely be 'graphics for nothing'.²⁴

²¹ *Abstraction and Calligraphy: Towards a Universal Language*, ed. Didier Ottinger and Marie Sarre (London: Scala, 2021). This catalogue accompanies the exhibition at the Louvre Abu Dhabi February – June 2021.

²² See Ottinger, pp. 36; 78; 94; 144.

²³ See Schwenger, 147-48.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, 'Sagesse de l'art', *L'Obvie et l'obtus: Essais Critiques III* (Paris, 1992), p. 176; Ottinger, pp. 152-55.

Under this combination of Eastern and Western influences, a more recent European abstract art movement has emerged that uses gestural calligraphic marks to create more sustained literary-visual 'asemic' texts. These artworks resemble writing but have no specific content. The term asemantic was first used in 1997 by the visual poets Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich to describe their own abstract writing experiments.²⁵ Since then, a growing body of international practitioners have produced asemantic texts across a range of genres.²⁶

Contemporary asemantic artworks are often intended to allow meaning to occur across linguistic boundaries. For Satu Kaikkonen, an asemantic artist/writer from Finland, the internationalist objectives are explicit:

I consider myself an explorer and a global storyteller. Asemantic art, after all, represents a kind of language that's universal and lodged deep within our unconscious minds. [...] In this way, asemantic art can serve as a sort of common language—albeit an abstract, post-literate one—that we can use to understand one another regardless of background or nationality. [...] semantic language all too often divides and asymmetrically empowers while asemantic texts can't help but put people of all literacy-levels and identities on equal footing.²⁷

This admirable intention minimises the extent to which asemantic art relies on a viewer's knowledge of the particular writing systems that inform this kind of abstraction. Western practitioners sometimes make visual reference to non-European characters in a way that can feel problematic – and that would surely not be received in the same way in countries that use the alphabets that are being pastiched.²⁸ A comparison might be made with Emojis, which were also officially launched, like asemantic writing, in 1997. These Japanese pictograms are of course radically different in their form and objectives, but they have a stronger claim to universality. In 2015, the 'Tears of Joy' emoji was the *OED* word of the year.

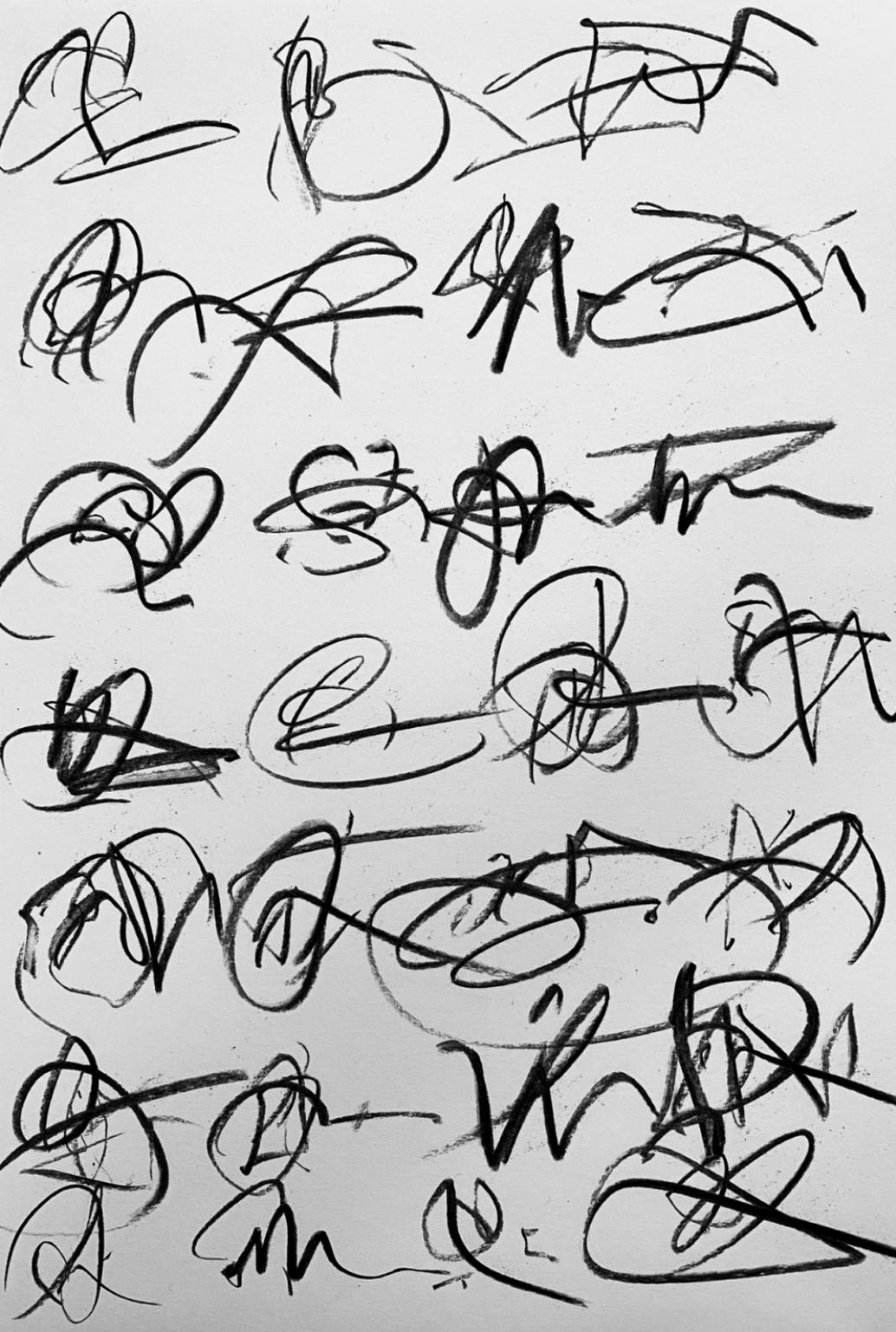
²⁵ Peter Schwenger, *Asemantic: The Art of Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), p. 1.

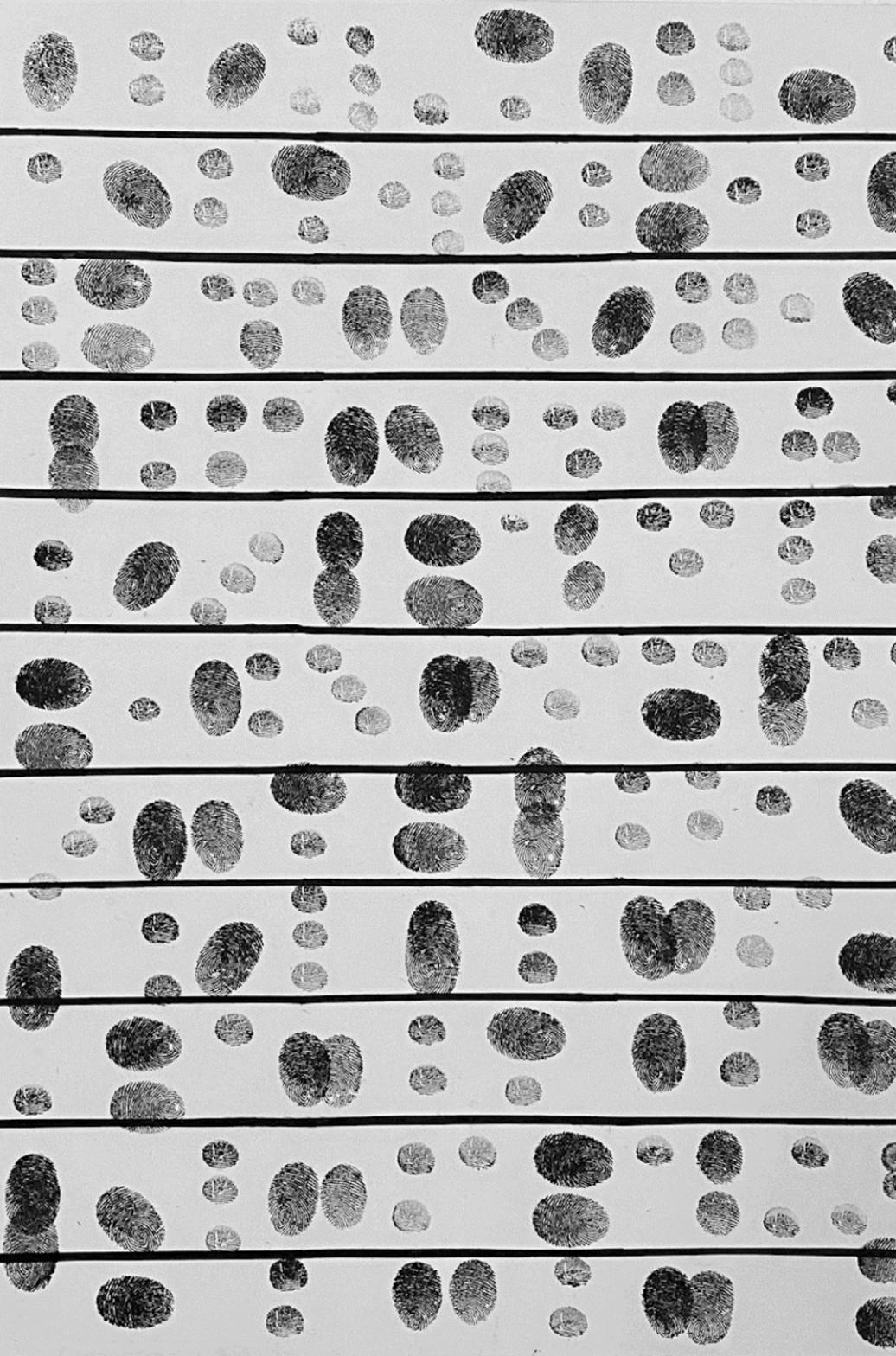
²⁶ See, for example, Rosaire Appel, *Zinc Zanc Zunc* (Post-Asemantic Press, 2018) and *The Cecil Touchon Asemantic Reader*, ed. Federico Federici (Post-Asemantic Press, 2019).

²⁷ Quoted in [SCRIPTjrn](https://scriptjrn.com/) (accessed 10 May 2021).

²⁸ See Schwenger p. 91 on asemantic responses to Chinese; and Federici for work by Cecil Touchon that references Arabic scripts.

My own asemic experiment seeks to avoid culturally specific claims to universal legibility by exploring the idiosyncrasy of the marks we make to identify ourselves. The first page plays with the fact that our most personal traces are often illegibly gestural. Extending this abstraction further, the second page proposes a new category of 'bio-aseemics' that finds quasi-linguistic forms in the body. It imagines an alphabet made from the universally shared but uniquely individuated human fingerprint. This kind of hand-writing recalls Agrippa's description of the signatures written in all hands, and is energised by references from cave-painted hand-prints, through the use of fingerprints as legal signatures made by people unable to write, to touchscreen technology and fingerprint authentication. (Charcoal, ink and paper).





Conclusion

The abandonment of the quest for a semantically authoritative universal language is ultimately an acknowledgement of the power of the individual to shape language in use. Contemporary linguistic anthropologists are emphatic that language difference is an inevitable and necessary part of cultural diversity, and that it represents a richness to be valued and protected:

Each language constitutes a certain model of the universe, a semiotic system of understanding the world, and if we have 4,000 different ways to describe the world, this makes us rich. We should be concerned about preserving languages just as we are about ecology.²⁹

The poignant ecological analogy here resonates with the recent turn to 'eco-asemics': illegible writing art that uses forms from the natural world, like plant stems, as abstract characters. This practice connects back elegantly to the early modern quest for finding divine signatures in nature, and it expands the scope of the global conversation beyond humanity to encompass the vital sense of kinship and connection that we feel with the rest of nature – and upon which the future of our planet depends.³⁰

²⁹ V.V. Ivanov, 'Reconstructing the Past', *Intercom*, 15:1 (1992) 1-4, cited in Eco, p. 338.

³⁰ On eco-asemics see Schwenger, chapter 3.

About the author



Jane Partner is a writer and artist who teaches English literature and visual culture at the University of Cambridge, where she is a Fellow of Trinity Hall. Her research and practice both explore interdisciplinary relations between the visual and verbal arts. Her first academic monograph, *Poetry and Vision in Early Modern England*, appeared in 2018, and she has written essays on subjects that include contemporary artistic responses to Shakespeare. She is currently working on new visual poetry and on sculptural texts to wear.

[Table of contents](#)
<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Conversations around tea: a body extended through domestic things

Amy Peace Buzzard

Poetic art essay

[Table of contents](#)

[<< Previous](#) | [Next >>](#)

Do you want tea?

Yeah, please.

What kind?

Um, British thanks.

I started first by asking a question, would you like a cup of tea? I continued, waiting for that question to be asked of me too. From this question I listened and remembered. Drawing out a scene of function, a scene of structure, a scene of forgetting perhaps. Here, a habitual cup of tea becomes a vehicle where histories of colonialism, imperialism and class are extended through the body within a white British home.

Steep

Hot liquid permeates the finely woven mesh of the teabag. Water infuses, material becomes material, becoming other together. You said yes to a mug and now my body moves in its performance of care, drawing materials together, iterating an action that implicates myself in layers of histories tied up in the fabric of my home.

Tea leaves arrived in this home first from China,¹ a luxury, inaccessible to you or to me. Then came India and Sri Lanka; Assam and Ceylon, following the steps of British imperial and colonial rule, following those steps back and forth, across oceans, into this home.² Following steps that stole body and land; steps that stole, that steal still. This tea sits in your caddy, to the right of your kettle. This tea steeps into your being, tracing history with each sip. Material becomes material, becoming other together.

¹ Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, p. 264.

² Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India*; Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First*; Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness And Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*.

Stir

Stir, and I repeat. Habits ingrained. An action and a culture embedded within my quotidian. Repeat. Embed. Forget. I stir.

A routine gesture, a repeated act. An act, I repeat.

Habitus, where Pierre Bourdieu sets in motion the notion that our environment is readable. That instinctual action builds through time, repeated, becomes habit. That these habits help us in unknown situations, drawing from cues, from historical knowledge.³

Habits. We move with ease, actions go unquestioned. We repeat. Objects go unquestioned. Repeat again. Certain histories become quiet. Repeat again, certain narratives dominate.

Stir, and I repeat. My body becomes habituated, action forms and is formed by my forms, by my histories. Some histories collective. Would you like a cup of tea?

And I repeat.

Milk, no sugar please...

Spill

I lose a drop. This liquid comes to trace the surfaces of my home; my domestic space extending myself, myself spilling over into these objects, these objects spilling over into me.

A tea stain on my kitchen counter, witness to my present. Material witness to a collective past.

In *A Phenomenology of Whiteness*, Sara Ahmed has said:

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, ed. by Jack Goody, trans. by Richard Nice, 1st Edition edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).



“It is not so much that we inherit habits, although we can do so: rather the habitual can be thought of as a bodily and spatial form of inheritance.”⁴

We inherit the space, the body, and for some, the ease. Ahmed uses the habitual to demonstrate a broader inheritance of privilege for the white body in public space.

The home as a space acquires the shape of bodies that have inhabited it. It shapes bodies that inhabit it in return. Shaped bodies move at ease, actions become habitual. Habits go unnoticed. Habits extend histories, dominant narratives.

A tea stain on my kitchen counter, a teaspoon moving uneasily through liquid, caught between the habitual and the moment. I stir.

Stir

White sugar dunked into a steaming mug of Assam, sweetening the beverage to a western tongue.⁵ Imperial liquid suffuses with colonial trauma. Saccharine, sickly. I stir and these histories stir.

And yet this body moves with ease, spooning that heaped teaspoon high. One sugar or two?

Sugar, a product of suffering, torment, generational displacement.⁶ Sugar, that was made whiter for a European palette.⁷ Sugar, where descendants of plantation ‘owners’ still reap the reward of ancestral wealth.⁸ And sugar, the addiction that holds the British in a ‘war’, diets ensuing.⁹

⁴ Sara Ahmed, ‘*A Phenomenology of Whiteness*’, *Feminist Theory*, 8.2 (2007), 149–68

⁵ Mintz.

⁶ Mintz; Woodruff D. Smith, ‘*Complications of the Commonplace: Tea, Sugar, and Imperialism*’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23.2 (1992), 259–78; Zadie Smith, ‘*What Do We Want History to Do to Us?*’, 27 February 2020 [accessed 3 September 2020].

⁷ Mintz.

⁸ ‘*When Will Britain Face up to Its Crimes against Humanity?*’, *The Guardian*, 2018 [accessed 11 May 2021].

⁹ ‘*Just What the Doctor Ordered: Jamie Oliver Declares War on Sugar*’, *The Guardian*, 2015 [accessed 11 May 2021].

Heaped teaspoons stir, witnessing narratives layered within the act. Each cycle of the cup draws surfaces together, to meet, to exist within each other.

You don't take sugar in your tea.

Pour

Dash of milk, you like strong tea, no sugar. Almost a 'builder's'; a class demarcation held in a cup.¹⁰ I let the milk sink to the bottom, before plunging the tip of my teaspoon in to greet it. I stir liquid into liquid remembering language used, names given.

Material becomes a document of history, a conduit. Action draws lines between multiple presents and pasts. Histories soaked into objects, their presence permeating into an everyday. Habituality tracing and untracing narratives into my bones, both remembered and forgotten.

Gulp

'Cuppa', 'Builders', 'Brew', 'British', tea has many names now.¹¹ Much like Britain's imperial rule, it has claimed this foreign body as its own. This body meets no hostile environment at home spilt on my kitchen counter.

Swallow.

You sip, you gulp.

I wonder how the act of tea consumption traces backwards. How it implicates a present with this layered past. How this past informs today.

¹⁰ Kate Fox, *Watching the English: The International Bestseller Revised and Updated* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2014).

¹¹ Fox.

Sip

Carefully now, blow breath over cooling liquid. Slowly let liquid trace you internally. Slowly let liquid draw lines through you.

A cup of tea becomes a mug, stirring British histories of imperialism together with colonial legacies, into class-based narratives. Habitual tea consumption becomes a location within which these histories either surface or are allowed to drift to the bottom. We sip, we gulp, we extend through these histories within a domestic act. We extend and the question repeats.

References:

Ahmed, Sara, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', *Feminist Theory*, 8.2 (2007), 149–68

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, ed. by Jack Goody, trans. by Richard Nice, 1st Edition edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977)

Fox, Kate, *Watching the English: The International Bestseller Revised and Updated* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2014)

'Just What the Doctor Ordered: Jamie Oliver Declares War on Sugar', *The Guardian*, 2015 [accessed 11 May 2021]

MacGregor, Neil, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*

Mintz, Sidney W., *Sweetness And Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*

Smith, Woodruff D., 'Complications of the Commonplace: Tea, Sugar, and Imperialism', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23.2 (1992), 259–78

Smith, Zadie, 'What Do We Want History to Do to Us?', 27 February 2020 [accessed 3 September 2020]

Tharoor, Shashi, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India*

Trentmann, Frank, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First*

'When Will Britain Face up to Its Crimes against Humanity?', *The Guardian*, 2018 [accessed 11 May 2021]

About the author



Amy Peace Buzzard is an interdisciplinary artist and researcher working in London. Her practice centres around narratives of home, and the objects in our domestic lives that shape who we are. Socio-political history is highlighted looking at colonial, imperial and class-based intersection within reflections on select British domestic scenes.

Amy is a PhD candidate at the Royal College of Art, London, where her research dismantles everyday experience to explore habitual whiteness within a British domestic setting.

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Telephone tales

Julia Rone

Essay

[Table of contents](#)

[<< Previous](#) | [Next >>](#)

the way you say soil
sounds like soul, as in
after we walked through the woods
my feet were covered in soul

April 2020

“Plants are more interesting than people because they can’t go anywhere – they need to adapt wherever they happen to be” - Finn told me, while observing carefully the tomato seedlings. We planted them in the beginning of the pandemic and I gave a name to every little seedling as it appeared from the soil – first came Little Onion, then Count Tomato, Strawberry, Baron Orange... Finn didn’t know where these names came from so I had to explain.

The most famous books by Gianni Rodari – my favourite Italian writer – have not been translated into English. But everyone from the former Eastern Bloc knows him and his stories well. ‘The Adventures of the Little Onion’ is the story of a brave Little Onion who turns the kingdom of vegetables and fruits upside down and saves the poor from the unjust rule of the evil Count Tomato. Rodari – the author of the book – was a school teacher and a socialist – universally loved in Italy and Eastern Europe after World War II. He also wrote ‘Grammar of Fantasy’ - a fascinating book on developing children’s creativity, as well as my favourite ‘Telephone tales’. Rodari is being translated into English only now. It’s strange how even our earliest childhood memories are marked by the politics of translation.

Little Onion is the first toy my mum received from her father. He came back from a work trip in Italy in 1963 and brought with him the plastic toy – plastic back then meant ‘very modern’, a symbol of progress. No one in my family can remember what happened to the toy. Probably my mum lost it. The same way years later I lost my Panda toy Maki Makunko and when I came back to get it only twenty minutes later, it was already gone. *Where do toys go when we lose them?*

When the pandemic started, I went to Finn in his house on Hills Road. I would call my mum every night and instead of talking about the virus, masks and statistics of death, we decided to translate together from Italian. We started with 'The Adventures of the Little Onion'. Naively, we hoped that by the time we finish the book, the pandemic would be over. Then we started translating the 'Telephone tales', in which a father who travels a lot calls his daughter on the phone every night and tells her a fairy tale. Our conversations were Skype tales. Or Messenger tales. Whatever worked with the shaky Internet connection.

My mum is a linguist. She is also the person who taught me English and Spanish. Little did she know that the knowledge she gave me would take me away from her and bring me to distant foreign countries, away from home, that our own life would become 'Telephone tales'. I also didn't know when I became a researcher that my life would be a Skype life, a life of trains and planes, of not being there, of hugs at departure gates and waving from the escalator until I reach the security control, of taking-off and landing, of feeling adventurous and guilty and excited and alone, and ultimately mainly tired.

I escaped from Brussels a day before the authorities closed the city because of COVID. I came back to Finn in Cambridge, which I had left only two months ago to start a new job. A week later, Cambridge was also locked down. In front of our eyes, the city fell asleep, died, remained quiet, waiting. Hills Road, once full of cars that drove me crazy with their noise, was now empty, a ghost street. One could walk in the middle of the boulevard. And we did it. Time slowed down. The trains stopped. No more hugs and parting. Sometimes with Finn we would stare at the little tomato seedlings for 5-10 minutes. The pots were just in front of the window facing the boulevard. And if someone passed by in this moment, they could see us, frozen in time like museum exhibits behind the big glass, crouching over our plants that grew as slowly as the days went by.

When we went for walks Finn explained to me what each tree was, when it flowered, on what soil it grew. "The soil is important" – he told me

once – “If you know the type of soil, you can guess the type of plants that grow on it. And from that you can expect particular types of insects and particular types of birds. Each ecosystem has its own fragile balance”. Finn actually doesn’t care about balance and order. He studies why ecosystems move from one state to another. ‘Critical transitions’ he calls it.

Every day Finn translated nature in words for me. He told me the names of plants and birds in English and then I tried to find in the dictionary the Bulgarian equivalents. Strangely enough I knew the Bulgarian words. Перуника. Росен. Явор. They sounded familiar. I recognised them. I just had no idea what they referred to – a flower, a tree, a bush? I gave Finn the book ‘The Lost Words’ – a beautiful collection of words from the natural world that children today are forgetting. But I think what I had lost was the world itself. Not the words for it. The words are all there, flying in my head like birds. But I simply don’t know what they describe. Finn gave me a world to match my words.

Next to the tomato seedlings stood his avocado tree that he grew from a pit. “It’s not difficult” – he said – “You make three holes in the pit and then you leave it in a glass of water for weeks until the pit gets softer. Then, if you are lucky the seed sprouts”. Sounds pretty difficult to me. His whole living room was full of plants. I kill every plant I touch: I either water them too much or too little. I also could not afford to have plants since I moved too often in the last few years.

During socialism travelling was considered a big privilege. Nowadays, not travelling is a privilege. To observe how plants grow together with Finn was something I couldn’t even have dreamt of. The price of this privilege was world chaos and not seeing anyone else.

August 2020

Our tomatoes grew and we planted them in front of the tall wood fence where they could gather sunlight. The tomatoes in the UK are not like the ones in Bulgaria – big, juicy and pink. The Cambridge climate is suitable for other plants, the grass does not burn from the sun in August, and everything

is so green. There are more birds too. I grew up in the centre of Sofia where I saw only pigeons and sparrows. Brave, little sparrows. In our garden on Hills Road in Cambridge, there was a pair of great tits, magpies, a blackbird. I saw all these birds for the first time in the UK.

We spread a sheet on the wooden fence behind the tomatoes, bought a projector and organized an open-air cinema for our friends. When I was little, with my family we went to the International Youth Centre resort on the Black Sea. Every night we would go to the open-air cinema there and I would fall asleep the very minute the film began. Under the clear night sky, the characters on the screen would love each other, rob banks, or save the world. At the beginning of the 1990s, Hollywood films were very popular in Bulgaria. The action and special effects were amazing compared to the boring socialist realism of Bulgarian cinema. Nowadays, I think I was a good cinema critic by just falling asleep on Hollywood movies. Once the film ended, my family didn't want to wake me up so they carried me home on a blanket. My mum and dad were holding two ends of the blanket and my aunt and uncle – the other two. A sheet for a screen and a blanket to carry me home – since then, these are the essential elements of cinema for me.

On our bed sheet in Cambridge we projected all kinds of films. When the wind blew, the sheet screen would get wrinkled and fly in the air, attached to the fence only by two small nails. There were some bad film choices of course. In the beginning of August, I suggested 'Los Lunes al Sol' – a Spanish film about a group of unemployed men who spend every Monday outside in the sun. In retrospect, it was not the best thing to see since all of us at the time were searching for a job and felt slightly depressed. I thought the film was a comedy. It wasn't. I also didn't fall asleep after it started. I think with age it becomes more and more difficult to fall asleep.

When we spent the summers at the International Youth Centre, my cousin rarely came to the cinema with us. She was 13 then and with the other teenagers they played table tennis or went to discos. There is a photo of the two of us sitting in front of a giant Mickey Mouse – I am four-years old, she is 13. I was 29, when they told me on the phone we've lost her. I was sitting in a

seminar room in the University, abroad, not with my family. I found a flight for the next morning and spent the night at a hotel next to Heathrow. I couldn't fall asleep. At the reception when I was checking out, they asked me to fill in a survey about their service. In the shop, where I bought food I couldn't even touch, they asked me to rate them in an app. Every human conversation has become a transaction to be rated. And I just wanted us to be at the seaside, to fall asleep at the open air cinema while she dances somewhere at the age of 13, all of us together. The International Youth Centre is long gone. It was run down until it became cheap enough to privatize it and build concrete monster hotels. My cousin is gone. *Where do people go when we lose them?*

A year has passed since then. I dream of her often. I call my mum and my aunt every day. She appears in my dreams, they – on the screen of my phone. After retirement, my aunt went to the countryside, to the village where my grandparents came from. She also has a garden and has planted tomatoes – pink ones. It calms me down to hear my aunt's voice. I planted marigold as she suggested. You see, my aunt cures everything with marigold cream and some strange marigold decoction containing flowers and alcohol. The most bizarre thing is that this actually works. From toothache to back-pain – one should first use the decoction and then the cream and all kinds of pain go away.

When I was a teenager, she had this crazy idea to plant marigold on our lands. She sowed twenty acres of marigold - stretching as far as the eye could see. There were no workers, because they had started going abroad – probably also to the UK, where I am now. So, our whole family had to gather the marigold flowers to save the harvest. Marigold should be picked only during the day, when the sun is strong, because the flower is most open then. In the evenings, we left the flowers to dry on newspapers spread on the floor of the old barn. We had not been to the countryside for years. My mum and aunt had lost connection with the village of our grandparents the same way I have now lost connection with Sofia. Will I ever return back home with some crazy idea and plant the whole city centre with flowers? I doubt there is a more beautiful way to return home.

Of course, the whole marigold business didn't lead to anything. My family never learned how to be capitalist. But now, when I decided for the first time in my life to plant something, I knew I had to plant marigold. Seven, bright orange flowers appeared at the edge of the garden, framing it with sunlight. And the tomatoes grew so much they covered the sheet, providing the screen for our outdoor cinema. All films that we saw in the second half of August had a tomato jungle in their lower part.

I wanted us to watch Bulgarian films. I missed my language. But it was difficult to watch a film with subtitles considering that the tomatoes covered the lower part of the screen. Finn told me we could find a way in the settings to move the subtitles up. Still, this couldn't have solved the problem. Maybe what I missed was not my language itself but having a conversation in my own language in real life. To ask a question and to get an answer. To be silent with someone in Bulgarian. The settings of the subtitles couldn't help with this. *What happens to a language when we lose it?*

April 2021

Finn found a job – not in Cambridge. He moved out in September 2020 – four months before Brexit – with all his plants, the bookshelves of his grandfather and the books with photos of trees that I browsed through in the evenings. I also moved out from Hills Road. We couldn't pick all tomatoes from the garden and left them to our neighbours from upstairs.

The plants of Finn spent a month and half in a dark cardboard box, after which they held them in a dark truck at the Swiss border for 15 days more. When they arrived, he sent me a photo of them and I wanted to cry – all the leaves of the avocado had fallen off, the ficus had turned completely yellow, the chilly peppers were dry and wrinkled. Only two veteran cacti had survived. Who said plants don't move?

Finn didn't give up. He put the avocado tree next to a window, cut the ficus almost to the roots and took seeds from the peppers. For six months – very very slowly – the plants started recovering. The pandemic that I once thought would last for a month at most – had continued for more than a full year.

I gave him a cherry tree for his birthday. He still doesn't dare to plant it because it is unclear where he will be next year.

Behind Finn's house there is a mountain. Behind the mountain – the sky. And behind the sky is my home. My home is where my mother is. In my home, she used to tell me stories all night long. She told me about her student years, about that party at which she sat on top of a wardrobe with her best friends, about her first kiss, about her friend from the student dorm Hania on whose door people knocked all the time to ask for flour, butter, eggs, coins for the phone, etc. At the end, Hania got angry and left a note on her door "Leave me alone. I don't have flour, butter, eggs, nor coins for the phone". And then of course someone knocked on the door and asked her for sugar.

Sometimes, I ask my mum to tell me these stories again on the phone but now I remember them better than she does. They are our stories – as much mine as hers. The same way the fairy tale about the Sun Prince my grandparents told her is also her fairy tale. *In what language will I tell our family stories? And where will I be?*

I think Finn is wrong. People are much more interesting than plants, because we need to adapt to every single new place we move to. In dark trucks at the border, getting yellow and dry, or bathing in sunlight, we always adapt, we try to find some sense in places that change with no order or logic, we try to tell a tale with a beginning and end, with good and bad heroes, with love and a meaning.

Sometimes I wish I was like the brave Little Onion and I could bring about a world in which there are no rich and poor, in which the young do not leave the old, and lovers can have a home together. But I am not certain I can do this. To change a place, you need to be there, to talk to people, to fight there. To have roots. The Little Onion never left the kingdom of his fellow vegetables and fruits. And where am I if everyone I care about is somewhere else?

I am a travelling Little Onion. My loves, my fairy tales, my small revolts – they all fly in the air like a screen made out of a bed sheet and cannot grow roots.

Maybe the conversations that have sense and can change something are not really global. Heroes go away from home but then they come back. Or make themselves at home somewhere else. Heroes have a home. And change starts from this home. It starts from having the courage to plant your cherry tree somewhere and to remain, to find friends, to create a community. How long can one live with telephone tales?

About the author



Julia Rone is a postdoctoral researcher at the Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy at CRASSH, Cambridge. She does research on digital utopias and dystopias, and more recently, the politics of data centre construction in Europe. Like most of her friends, she dreams of writing a novel. But so far, she mainly reads novels and loves talking about them.

[Table of contents](#)
<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Shams and shamrocks: Irish national cinema

Conor Ryan

Essay

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

“Being Irish isn’t a skill: It’s a fucking genetic accident.”
- George Carlin, ‘It’s Bad For Ya’

For better or for worse, every creation is ultimately shaped by the surroundings in which it was created. A work of art will lay bare the prejudices and misconceptions of both its authors and its audience in any given time or place. So, to define a national cinema canon, we should examine how a country’s history and ideals have been sketched across the silver screen in a variety of different fashions. But how do we approach a nation that evades any simple categorisation? How do we make sense of a people long regarded as meagre colonial subjects and poverty-stricken emigrants? In a time when the difference between ‘*hard border*’ and ‘*soft border*’ has become of international importance, how do we celebrate an island?

Ireland is made up of two geopolitical countries: the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. With a history steeped in oppression, revolution, independence and civil war, it can be difficult for filmmakers to reconcile the various conflicting ideologies that have existed alongside each other on such a small landmass. Unfortunately, a tradition of mass emigration has long persisted, a practice exacerbated by famine, violence and recession. In the 21st century, Irish Americans search for meaning in their heritage as a cultural homogenisation spreads across the entire Western world, led by superhero films and shameless corporate branding. Now, one hundred years since the Republic gained independence, it is important to reexamine our national identity and its various incarnations throughout film history. I will now analyse two films in the context of Irish national cinema: Robert Flaherty’s ‘*Man of Aran*’ (1934) and James Cotter’s ‘*The Rubberbandits Guide to 1916*’ (2016).

“Ethnographic film as a field is unique. I know of no other field where people care so deeply and differ so bitterly.”
- Karl G. Heider, ‘Ethnographic Film’

Made on location on Inishmore, *'Man of Aran'* charts the story of the titular character and his family as they endure daily hardship on the remote Aran Islands, contending with stormy ocean weather, poor farmland and huge basking sharks. Robert Flaherty brought his signature ethnographic approach to the feature, which was presented as a documentary at the time of its release but has since been reevaluated as a work of fiction. Scenes and situations, like the infamous shark hunt, were staged and fabricated - with the director cherry picking non-professional 'actors' to cast his ideal family of hardworking islanders, who were all unrelated in reality. He had previously perfected this style of filmmaking with his debut feature *'Nanook of the North'* (1922), turning the romanticised life of an Inuk man into a cinematic tourist attraction. Flaherty's storytelling methods are controversial but perhaps more troubling is the outsider perspective he wrought upon the cultures he dramatized.

Capturing stark images through long lenses and shrinking his leads against the majesty of the horizon, Flaherty depicts the Aran Islands as rural *"wastes of rock"* on the edge of the world: harsh and desolate but free from the troubles of the modern world. While the characters face a variety of tough situations throughout the story, they always overcome their adversity. This sentimental depiction of life in the West of Ireland did not wholly reflect the reality of the time, omitting any mention of economic isolation or religious fervour in favour of championing a picturesque agricultural society. As Ruth Barton writes, the film *"is part of a tradition of envisioning Ireland... as the bearer of an authenticity otherwise lost in Western culture."*¹ Strangely, a more accurate representation of the Aran Islands purportedly appeared only two years previously in *'Aran of the Saints'* (1932), a rare film produced by the Catholic Film Society of London. Ultimately, Flaherty's preconceptions led him to forge thin caricatures of the native islanders in the mould of the *'noble savage'* archetype, perpetuating a colonial POV of his own ancestral home.

However, Flaherty's rose-tinted vision of Ireland, carefully crafted through expressive cinematography and editing, was welcomed by Eamon De Valera, the President of Ireland, when he attended the premier of the

¹Irish National Cinema'

film in Dublin. The meticulous attention paid to old Irish traditions, like the extensive use of currachs, appeared to affirm the politician's conservative policies. *'Man of Aran'* went on to win best foreign film at the Venice International Film Festival in 1934, the year of its release. The feature was a success and a poetic version of Ireland was soon being exported all across the world. International perception of the country reflected the agrarian resilience rendered by both Flaherty and renowned painter Sean Keating, to whom the Aran Islands were a frequent muse in the early 20th century. Hollywood film *'The Quiet Man'* (1952), directed by John Ford, can be seen as evidence of the continued glorification of pastoral Ireland eighteen years later, filled to the brim with rolling green fields glistening in the sun. Such vibrant scenes became the ultimate trope of dewey-eyed paddywhackery, further marketed abroad by English photographer John Hinde through his influential postcards. Meanwhile, economic destitution continued.

By the 1970s, the fairytale nation of Flaherty and De Valera's dreams had mutated into a misty-eyed monster that did not reflect the socio-political successes and failures of modern day Ireland, a country which had finally joined the EEC in 1973. Such hackneyed expressions of farmyard chauvinism were parodied by Irish comedian Spike Milligan in his seminal TV series *'Q...'* (1969 - 1982), with a sketch filmed in a documentary style reminiscent of *'Man of Aran'*. The sequence depicted the first Irish spacemen as they attempted to bring a farm horse to the moon on their rocket - *Guinness II*. Taken to its logical extreme, Robert Flaherty's Ireland was clearly an obscene distortion and new filmic representations of the country would have to tackle the Plastic Paddy phenomenon head on.

"A prank disrupts. It upsets. It turns heads and raises eyebrows. Some people smile, and some people scoff."

- Audrey L. Vanderford, 'Political Pranks'

'The Rubberbandits Guide to 1916' was directed by James Cotter and produced by RTE as part of the centenary celebrations of the Easter Rising. This docu-fiction film takes an iconoclastic look at Irish history, hosted by the eponymous duo, who write and perform under the aliases *'Blindboy Boatclub'*

and *'Mr Chrome'*. The pair are sent on a mission by Michael D. Higgins, "*the principle of Ireland*", to make an educational programme for the national broadcaster in return for a romantic introduction to glamour model Georgia Salpa. The filmmakers combine this loose comedic narrative with a whirlwind tour of Irish history, blending fact and fiction in an effort to probe the national psyche. Critically, this hybrid form draws attention to its own artifice. Any illusion of reality within the film's historical recreations is shattered by the surrounding modern day setting and by the Rubberbandits themselves. In one instance, the hosts argue over whether one featured character is a British soldier or if he is in fact just "*Aaron*", a man from Coolock dressed up as such. By calling into question their own depiction of history, the cast and crew urge us to examine other representations with a similar critical eye.

Key to the film's vitality is the enactment of publicity stunts, highly reminiscent of situationist performance art. The filmmakers use such spectacles to highlight modern day problems as well as historical ones. One particular prank repurposes the famine-era notion of *'taking the soup'*, which disparagingly refers to Catholics abandoning their religion for Protestantism in exchange for a simple meal. The Rubberbandits compare this act of 'treachery' with modern day Ireland's status as a tax shelter for multinational companies, literally offering soup to passing employees in Dublin's financial district. This act of political commentary is comparable to Irish American filmmaker Michael Moore, who uses similar tactics in his film *'Bowling for Columbine'* (2002). Elsewhere, the hosts continue to engage with the public, dealing with misconceptions of the Easter Rising through vox-pop interviews. These segments are cleverly edited to misrepresent the questions given and the answers received, casting doubt over traditional media ethics in regards to the manipulation of such content.

The film deals with what philosopher Jean Baudrillard would call a *'hyperreal'* version of national identity, where we are unable to distinguish the reality of what it means to be Irish from a simulation of that reality. Historical figures and cultural touchstones are thus reexamined from a cubist perspective, taking into account other representations of them within mass media and using comedic interpretations to poke fun at their public

perceptions. For example, The Rubberbandits encounter puppet incarnations of famed authors James Joyce and Samuel Beckett and are awarded confirmation medals by a poor Michael D. Higgins lookalike. Especially worth noting is a sequence where Mr Chrome sets out to get a tattoo depicting Eamon De Valera but instead receives one of British actor Alan Rickman, who portrayed De Valera in the Hollywood film *'Michael Collins'* (1996). Ultimately, the filmmakers use pastiche and caricature to take aim at any concrete definition of Irish national identity, contrasting various different interpretations in an effort to look beyond a simple answer.

The history of Irish revolution had previously been the subject of features like *'Ireland a Nation'* (1914) and *'Mise Éire'* (1959) but James Cotter and The Rubberbandits' approach offered a less conservative spin on the matter, openly questioning traditional media interpretations. The film pointedly begins with an advertisement parodying the Easter Rising centenary celebrations, reminding viewers that the country is *"friends with the Queen"*, while insisting that no one mention Sinn Féin. Popular misunderstandings and idealizations are then satirised with an opening song that features lyrics espousing knowledge of *"the great potato famine of 1916"* and erroneously listing Ian Paisley and Bart Simpson as proud members of the IRA. After airing as a commemorative film in 2016, *'The Rubberbandits Guide to 1916'* received an IFTA nomination for best TV comedy. Journalist Ian O'Doherty called it *"the most informative programme on the Rising we will see all year"*.² In the end, the idiosyncratic documentary offered a more inquisitive and critical stance on the telling of Irish history than many of its competitors.

"I think the real reason we're so concerned about identity is because we're worried that we haven't got one."
- Jim Sheridan, 'Irish Cinema: Ourselves Alone?'

A national cinema canon is born only through trial and tribulation. *'Man of Aran'* was a highly influential contribution to the depiction of Ireland on the silver screen, no matter how misleading the result ultimately became.

²The Irish Independent, 'The only history lesson you'll ever need'

Robert Flaherty's notion of Irish identity was one of resourcefulness and fortitude and it has lasted long since his death in 1951. On the other hand, we have *'The Rubberbandits Guide to 1916'*, a film that incisively deconstructs such notions using surreal comedy. Host and writer Blindboy Boatclub has since gone on to author two critically acclaimed books, before creating a celebrated podcast with a worldwide listenership and teaming up again with director James Cotter for his BBC series *'Blindboy Undestroys The World'* (2019). He continues to offer insightful notions on Irish national identity and was commissioned this year to make a series of online videos about art and mental health for St. Patrick's Day 2021.

Turning away from the industrialization of the USA, Robert Flaherty chose to cast a nostalgic gaze over Ireland and the rugged island of Inishmore as he searched for primal insights in the 1930s. Now, nearly a century later, multinational corporations have taken their hold on the country - muddying the waters of national identity and crowding out small businesses. As *The Rubberbandits* note in their documentary, a statue of esteemed socialist Jim Larkin sits on modern day O'Connell Street, inappropriately surrounded by American fast food giants like McDonald's and Burger King. Back on Inishmore, Flaherty's fairytale has been blindsided by the arrival of Supermacs, an Irish franchise successfully hocking their own Hibernian hamburgers. Meanwhile, nearly 8,000 kilometres away, the most remote Irish pub on the planet is nestled precariously in Namche Bazaar, a village in the Himalayan mountains. With so many versions of our national identity being bought and sold everyday, filmmakers must continue grappling with the confounding question: *what does it mean to be Irish?*

Bibliography:

'*Man of Aran*'. Dir. Robert Flaherty. Gaumont British Distributors, 1934. Film.

'*The Rubberbandits Guide to 1916*'. Dir. James Cotter. RTÉ, 2016. Film.

'*Mise Éire*'. Dir. George Morrison. Gael-Linn Films, 1959. Film.

'*Ireland a Nation*'. Dir. Walter MacNamara. Gaelic Film Company, 1914. Film.

'*Nanook of the North*'. Dir. Robert Flaherty. Pathé Exchange, 1922. Film

'*Michael Collins*'. Dir. Neil Jordan. Warner Brothers, 1996. Film

'*The Quiet Man*'. Dir. John Ford. Republic Pictures, 1952. Film

'*Bowling For Columbine*'. Dir. Michael Moore. MGM Distribution Company, 2002. Film

'*Aran of the Saints*'. Catholic Film Society of London, 1932. Film

'*Irish Cinema: Ourselves Alone?*' Dir. Donald Taylor Black. Centenary Productions, 1995. Film

'*Blindboy Undestroys the World*'. Dir. James Cotter. BBC, 2019. TV.

'*Q...*' Perf. Spike Milligan. BBC, 1969 - 1982. TV.

'*It's Bad For Ya*'. Perf. George Carlin. HBO, 2008. TV.

Barton, Ruth. '*Irish National Cinema*', Routledge, March 18th 2004.

McLane, Betsy A. '*A New History of Documentary Film*' (2nd ed.), Continuum, August 9th 2012

Lampe, Gerhard. '*A New Look at Robert J. Flaherty's Documentary Art*', Purdue University, 2005

Heider, Karl G. '*Ethnographic Film Revised Edition*', University of Texas Press, 2006

Flynn, Roderick and Patrick Brereton. '*Historical Dictionary of Irish Cinema*', The Scarecrow Press Incorporated, 2007

Martin, Kevin. '*How the West was Wonderful; some Historical Perspectives on Representations of the West of Ireland in Popular Culture*', Technical University Dublin, 2001

O'Brien, Harvey. '*The identity of an Irish cinema*' (2nd, Revised Ed.), 2006

- Cousins, Mark and Kevin MacDonald. *'Imagining Reality, The Faber Book of Documentary'*, Faber and Faber, October 19th 2006
- Plant, Sadie. *'The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age'*, Routledge, 1992
- Vanderford, Audrey L. *'Political Pranks: The Performance of Radical Humor'*, December 2000
- Baudrillard, Jean. *'Simulacra and Simulation'*, Semiotext(e), 1983.
- IFTA. *'IFTA Gala Television 2016 nominees and winners on gold'*. 2016. Web.
- O'Doherty, Ian. *'The only history lesson you'll ever need'*, Irish Independent, 9th January 2016. Web. (Accessed March 15th 2021)
- 'Supermacs opens on Inis Mór'*, Irish Examiner, 17th June 2005. Web. (Accessed March 15th 2021)
- 'World's most remote Irish bar struggling in COVID pandemic'*, Irish Central, 10th August 2020. Web. (Accessed March 15th 2021)
- Kelly, Paul. *'John Hinde's Ireland revisited and re-created'*, Irish Times, 9th January, 2020. Web. (Accessed March 15th 2021)
- Dunne, Aidan. *'It's not great art, but it is good mythmaking'*, Irish Times, 27th April, 2013. Web. (Accessed March 15th 2021)
- 'From Blindboy to the Book of Kells'*, The Journal, 4th March 2021. Web (Accessed March 15th 2021)
- Kennedy, Tristand. *'How Blindboy accidentally became modern Ireland's biggest cultural export'*, The Face, 25th August 2020. Web. (Accessed March 15th 2021)

About the author



Conor Ryan, aged 22, was born and raised in Dublin, Ireland. An aspiring screenwriter / Billy Wilder acolyte, he is currently studying film and television production at IADT, Dun Laoghaire. In his spare time, he plays the drums and the harmonica, while strutting about in a variety of denim jackets. Unfortunately, he has so far been unable to convince anyone that he is the 'fifth Beatle', although he believes a quick change of hairstyle may fix that.

[Table of contents](#)
<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

Weathering

Avani Tandon Vieira

Poem

[Table of contents](#)

[<< Previous](#) | [Next >>](#)

Delhi

The sky is cold slate.
Against it
the body of the city
and the slow journey
of egrets across the horizon.

In other countries
they would mourn this weather.
Here, we welcome anything
that allows us to look upwards
to remember that light can
fall differently.

It could be that I have just felt
the soft touch of water on the
backs of my hands.
It does not matter
the promise of rain is enough.

London

Someone leaves flowers
in the parking lot.
The sky parts to allow sunshine
and then closes
the slow blinks of a foreign face.

Ahead of me
two children play with a
white sheet of plastic
it rises from their hands
and turns.
Back home my grandmother
is asleep.

For now
I watch for the arrival of things.
rain and flowers
the bearing of gifts
a sheet in the wind
the hands of a child.

About the author



Avani Tandon Vieira is a PhD candidate and Gates scholar at the University of Cambridge. Her research considers little magazines and independent publishing in the late twentieth century. Alongside her academic work, she runs the [Pind Collective](#), an online space for artists from India and Pakistan, and the [Museum of Ephemera](#). Her work has been shortlisted for the Raedleaf poetry prize and the TFA poetry award.

[Table of contents](#)
<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

The WhatsApp group chat called Avocado

Sushruti Tripathi

Essay

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

23 April 2019

I instinctively pressed the call button as I scrolled through our WhatsApp chat. Then immediately cut it. You see, one of the three people on this group chat was in New York, the other in London and one in India. Three best friends, scattered across three different continents. Calculating which of them would be awake at this hour, or in office, or at the club, or anywhere else, was not easy.

Things were different when we were all living on the same University Campus – three budding lawyers, all waiting to take the world by storm, right after we managed to finish our coffee in the college cafeteria. Things were simpler, and conversations were easy. All I had to do was walk into their room, and plonk myself on the floor. After five years of Law School together, we didn't need any explanations. It was 2016 and we didn't give much thought back then to how growing up would not only take us to different places, but time-zones more than 10 hours apart.

23 April 2021

I instinctively pressed the call button on our group chat. The three of us were still on the same three different continents, only we'd moved around. I had relocated to New Delhi from London, Avani had moved to New York and Samaira was now in London. We were all worried for each other, in a lockdown in our respective cities, and starved for hugs. Both of them picked up. I had just finished dinner, Avani was eating a packed lunch and Sam had just finished working out.

Our call lasted five hours, but felt like we'd barely had enough time to even begin the conversations that had been pent up inside. There were conversations about a host of mundane things like avocado sandwiches, kittens and MasterChef re-runs. Then there were conversations about things that are considered important - like politics, history, and climate change.

Avani had started living a zero-waste lifestyle. That was a big thing. She was very happy to have found stores that provide zero waste eco-friendly deliveries for everything from clothes and grocery to food and cosmetics.

Samaira had gotten a puppy who was the most adorable new addition to our lives – which we now lived virtually. She was also helping scale up start-ups working in the development sector.

I had taken up a Master's specialisation in Climate Change because at the end of the day, we still have only this one Earth to live on.

We lamented many things – population, the pandemic, plastic waste, fossil fuels, dictatorships, burning forests, resource exploitation, economic imperialism – the list is endless.

We also found things to celebrate – the vaccine, how people had come together to help each other, how some of our favourite artists were putting together fundraisers for Covid relief, how everyone just wanted to make things better across the world – this list was long enough too.

But we also spent a significant amount of time talking about avocados; and how our group chat needed a different name.

Our group chat is called Avocado; because at some point we all had a common obsession about avocados – on toast, as guacamole, with rice – anywhere we could add an avocado, we did.

A few months into our obsession I read an article online about micro-earthquakes in Mexico being caused by the sudden European obsession with Avocadoes. It was because irrigation demands for exponentially increasing export of avocados was causing groundwater tables to fall and destabilising the surface. The interconnected nature of our world hit me the way only epiphanies can. It reminded me of all the life choices I make that are affected by what I know of the world we live in.

- I do not buy clothes from certain famous brands anymore because they're manufactured by underpaid child labourers in Bangladesh.

- I no longer watch certain movies because there are too many people in it who've been exposed during the MeToo movement.
- I buy organic cosmetics that haven't been tested on animals.
- And I count my privileges, because not everyone can exercise these options.

Because not everyone gets to shop at air-conditioned malls, watch movies in the PVR or wear cosmetics.

With globalisation, trade has prospered and made all goods ubiquitous. But it has also brought together more than just merchandise and services. It has caused an overpouring of information like never before – thanks to the social media revolution. It has also caused a pandemic like never before. We are all part of one big whole, and never before has it been more obvious. Our actions have consequences, and these aren't necessarily ours to bear in today's world. For example, when the world's biggest carbon emitters succeed, small island nations prepare relocation plans for communities whose lands will be lost to rising sea levels.

As I delved deeper into this epiphany, the poet in me sought metaphors to package this into. And that metaphor is a dinner table in London with three Indian women eating an avocado toast while video calling their parents in different cities back home. That metaphor is the world of words that gets built over dinner tables across the globe. And that metaphor changes and grows with our conversations.

Conversations are shaped by an inordinate number of things – the news, Facebook feeds, the opinions of our politicians, conspiracy theories circulating on WhatsApp, Tik Tok videos, stories, art, food, family, and even traffic on the road. Conversations in turn shape the world around us the way drops of water fill a bucket over time – gradually but surely. For example, the conversations surrounding the death of Savita Halappanavar in Ireland finally led to the de-criminalisation of abortion six years later in 2018. Sometimes conversations affect our world more rapidly as well. For example, riots can get incited by a call to arms by a popular religious extremist fairly quickly. Either way, words are currency that can bring about change.

Our WhatsApp group chat has seen many of these conversations over the past decade – the Arab Spring; Osama bin Laden, the ice bucket challenge; Malala’s Nobel Prize, the Paris Agreement, Brexit, Trump’s election, Modi’s second term as India’s Prime Minister, more Brexit related political football, Parliamentary elections in India, the burning of Amazon rainforests, climate change – it is humanly impossible to scroll through the back-up of our chat and capture all of the different conversations we have had. But it isn’t this recollection of the decade’s significant events that matters to me as I write this. What matters, is that the conversations didn’t stop. That we were connected no matter how far apart we were. That we feel a sense of solidarity even when we are on different continents; and not just with each other but also with the people and the places around us.

That, perhaps, is truly what conversations are about – hope.

The hope that we can sift through all the information, and find reasons to celebrate being alive and connected. That we can stand in solidarity in the face of grief and share our moments of love. Conversations keep the hope alive, and that is what humanity is counting on today, as we face some of our toughest challenges yet as a global community.

About the author



Sushruti Tripathi is a lawyer, author and art-in-education consultant. She currently works in climate change and sustainable technology interventions at Invest India - the Government of India's national investment promotion agency.

A National Bal Shree Awardee in creative writing, Sushruti has been writing since she was four. Her debut collection of poetry called Naan Bread and Chai Latte came out last year. Set in a narrative form, it explores themes of identity, home, and figuring out whether dreams taste as good as they look. She believes in the transformative power of art to change both the individual and our world.

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#) | [Next](#) >>

The Crown:
An immigrant that
made all immigrants
natives

Elena Violaris

Short fiction

[Table of contents](#)

[<< Previous <<](#)

Andrea was planning to buy the flowers herself.

Bill's 60th. Surprise party. Something to shock him out of his system: slob, staring at his phone 24/7. Can't even speak, just grunts. Caveman alphabet. Playing golf with Ivan all day. 26 guests, including ourselves. Preparations. But first, cup of tea. Turn on the TV.

Same programme on every channel: *The Crown*. No Queen Elizabeth, just letters. Glitch. Must be going mad, working too hard on that new book. Torture – worse than giving birth. Told them it'd be finished by June and now it's October. Upcoming conference on language theories and DNA. *The Magic Word: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on Vaccination*.

Tea's getting cold. Watch this *Crown* for five minutes.

•

Switching off the television, A walked to Aldi. A gap emerged in the shelves when B took a tin of chopped tomatoes. C, O, U, 5G and H swam through the aperture, feasting on I's wet mouth like a kiss. J paid. K cried that there were no fresh fruit and vegetables. L posted an angry Facebook status about stockpiling while M handed him a glass of wine before their 8 p.m. Zoom Quiz. N waved at the screen, preparing pasta. O couldn't smell her bolognese. After dinner P wanted to play with his dad, but Q was exhausted from coughing. Tired of arguing, R filmed a TikTok in his bedroom. Downstairs, S instagrammed her coffee next to a houseplant. 🙏 #QuarantineAndChill. T followed @MaternityAction on Twitter. FaceTime: U's mother, shielding, virtually hugged her daughter's bump while V counted their toilet rolls. W laughed at a toilet roll on eBay for £70. X, jumping to Joe Wickes, wondered if anybody would buy it. Y, furloughed, watched porn. Z watched a lung screening: same pattern. No sign of the magic word. Infection rates increasing. Anxiety about capacity.

•

Switch off. Some bloody pandemic documentary. What next? Dentist, florist, relax with pre-guest glass of wine. Best bit of the night. Thank God for Ivan, distracting Bill. Nasty feeling that Ursula will give birth at the party. Only invited her to be polite, didn't expect her to accept – third trimester. Politer not to accept. Yoga teacher on YouTube, trying to be Adrienne. Husband

Victor constantly counting coins like a Scrooge.

Dentist. Scratchy seats. Magazines. Turn the page. *The Crown*. Again!
Crazy marketing campaign. Advert in the style of a poem. Prophecy. Zodiac?
Never believed that crap but nothing better to read.

•

The world's city centres were freed from alphabets. Languageless, they stood on pause. Entropy was unlocked; nature reclaimed its world. Dolphins swam in the Thames. Disembodied advertisements: Disney+; Uber Eats; Deliveroo. An empty pizza box stood sentry to Buckingham Palace. The Colosseum was returned to Roman ghosts, the Parthenon to Greek gods. Supplication. Goats, once sacrificed, ran riot through empty towns. In a faraway forest a tree fell to the ground. Nobody heard it make a sound.

Countries created Corona Corridors, Baltic Bubbles – an architecture of transport. Unsolvable problems were suddenly solved: schoolchildren were no longer striking for climate change; ISIS ordered terrorists back from the West; immigrants returned home.

Pilate washed his hands for twenty seconds, singing Happy Birthday.

•

Happy birthday Bill. Always embarrassed when people sing to him. Perverse pleasure in putting him on the spot. Stress. Selina's snobby comments. Thinking she's all that – world's her oyster, globe's her film set, swanning around with all her fancy furs. Stupid boyfriend Rick, virus influencer or whatever. Forced to invite them. Posh side of the family.

Florist. No. No. No. Yes. Thanks Will. Trust Will – has an eye for it. See you later. Tired. Home. Sit down, sofa, cup of tea. TV.

Switch on. *The Crown*. Every channel! Ridiculous. Somebody hijacking the system. Matrix. Truman Show. Watch anyway, five minutes.

•

A switched off the television and left the house for her allocated hour of exercise. The riverside path was full of runners. B, R, E, A, T, H, I, N and G scattered droplets on H as an ambulance drove past. Inside the ambulance, I could not speak. The alphabet was masticated on his tongue, its letters rolling back like a reel: a primal

sound. A grunt. A cry. A breath.

'Do we have enough ventilators?' said paramedic J.

'The hospital's at capacity,' said paramedic K. L made a distressing call. M absently picked her nose. N pulled out the stretcher. O tapped the oxygen cannister. Double O: O2. Corpses rolled past the ICU. Time rolled past P, his anxiety about Q momentarily eclipsed: TikTok.

*R's video had gone viral. Viewer stats suggested a magic word, but death stats confirmed it was not **the** magic word. S slammed the door. There were no new words to spell with the letters they had: their lines were on repeat, like characters on TV. She texted T. T replied, desperate for letters, pausing YouTube. Prenatal Yoga: Suitable for All Trimesters. U, watching her paused self, thought the screen concealed stress. What if she caught COVID while giving birth? V was past caring; unlock lockdown, he said, sitting there in his vest, refreshing the HSBC online banking app.*

The app on W's iPhone crashed: too many users. Self-employed florist. Who would buy his flowers now? Can't even lay them on graves. Can't even bury your dead. He threw his phone on the bed and dusted his hands. Plastic bags. Time for Tesco's. In the socially-distanced queue, W switched places with X, holding a screaming child. The new formation sparked some slight magic. Y, standing behind, tapped his fingers impatiently. Z should be shopping, since she was so smug: Key Word. Sick of clapping. Nobody clapped for him.

•

Switch off. Why were the characters letters? Ha. Tautology. Trish also pregnant, but less. Hope Ursula doesn't give birth. Waters breaking all over the kitchen floor. Mopping. At least we have doctors, clever side of the family. Fraser's PhD. Lawrence and Martha: lovely couple. Jim – paramedic. Kathryn, Nick, Orla. Seems only yesterday they were junior doctors. Jeremy Hunt. Tension with Quentin, working in politics. Not a bad egg, though. Family man. Son Peter adores him.

Finish tea with a magazine. *OK!* Showbiz. Sick of linguistics, after four decades. Retirement soon. What next? Pottering. Dementia. Death. Heaven, hopefully, but you never know. Xavier and his baby picking up Dora from the care home. Chan's screaming kids. Yassin always complaining. Rude.

Don't understand why Bill's friends with him. Wife Zehra. Nice. Nurse. Whole hospital in the house – useful if Ursula gives birth.

Turning the page to another advert. *The Crown*, again! Taking the piss. Pinch. Dreaming?

•

Inside abandoned theatres, everybody is taking turns to play every letter. Everybody is an I: everybody is a U. Nobody has found the magic word. Some scientists suggest that there is no word. Dissecting sentences in their laboratories, they speculate with shapes: circles, rectangles, squares. An organic jigsaw puzzle; biology's geometry. What is the secret syntax? The confidential grammar? They arrange the alphabet in figural formations but cannot sustain the alignment. Vaccination is a complex articulation.

What is the most efficient way to narrate the situation? Journalists translate the work to the public: Take Back Control, track and trace, demarcate space. Fix borders. Fourteen-day flight quarantine.

Bounce Back. Stay Alert. Pour slogans into your soup, and stir.

•

Stick up a happy birthday banner with blu-tack. Balloons. Turning 60, not 6. Anyway. Wake him up from our social disease of nothingness. Silence and loneliness. Music: scroll and click, but party playlist isn't working. Spotify glitch? Get Graham to sort. Programmer, Fraser's boyfriend. Need something on though, background noise. Anything's better than nothing. Switch on TV.

•

A switched off the television.

'I miss Brexit.'

'Nobody's singing anymore,' said B, scrolling through World News on the BBC: mass graves, frozen morgues, hydroxychloroquine. C, an immigrant, was exhausted with home-schooling. Three kids in a flat. Care homes hit bad. D, completing a crossword, took her pills: E, F, G. Did the order make a difference? Another syntax? Another sentence? She swallowed with water and picked up the paper. Furlough. Education. A Levels. E flipped through textbooks. Summer holiday cancelled. Bored. Lonely. Bored. The magic word was always on the page

you hadn't revised. Tinder.

F, twenty four, philosophy PhD at Bristol, was discovering how to manipulate time: if he made every day identical, folding along the exact same lines, aligning every hour, every minute, every second – time disappeared. Routine created a shortcut of time. G tried to shortcut time by swallowing a pack of paracetamol. H wondered what to take: paracetamol or ibuprofen? He'd asked for both, left on his doorstep as the neighbour ran away. Self-isolation. Wait it out.

I's ashes waited in an urn. J couldn't handle another virtual goodbye; he played virtual Monopoly with K. Take a Chance. Make General Repairs on All Your Property. L couldn't afford repairs. Real estate had shrunk to a toy market: green plastic houses and red plastic hotels. M closed the window of Rightmove in despair. N opened his bedroom window for fresh air. Silence. Empty roads. Too much traffic on the server, thought O, loading Netflix. She tucked into a rainbow cupcake: treat for a positive antibody test. Asymptomatic.

Unaware of his asymptomatic antibodies, P cried as he said goodbye to his dad, his tears staining the screen. Q was translated into a statistic and swallowed by a curve, presented at the 5 p.m. briefing. They praised R for remaining below 1. S, encouraged by T, called with a question. U, watching her, felt a contraction. 'Quick! Ambulance!' But V was aghast; he could've sworn he'd just seen the ghost of Christmas past taking out the bins with Superman. W dressed as Darth Vader. X, liking the picture on Insta, was distracted by an ad for an electric shaver. Y shaved his head. Z, on the COVID ward, twisted split ends around her finger. Lockdown was easing too quickly – but she did need a trim.

Switch off. Shit. Ripped the plastic tablecloth. Hide under a bowl of crisps. But Selina might notice. Shit. Quick trip to Poundland. No wine. Selina might notice it's Poundland. Fuck Selina. No time.

•

Walking through immigrant neighbourhoods. Put on a podcast, something soothing. What! All podcasts gone, replaced by *The Crown*. Technological virus. Curiosity killed the cat. Click.

•

A thousand magic words glitter through the air; a thousand variations on verbal medication: homeopathic remedies, placebos, alphabetical distillations. Carers sit at bedside tables clutching bottled letters. Monks unbottle their holy oil and, kneeling, scatter prayers through the wind. The secret letters float into houses and light candles in the dark, deep into the night when digitality is dormant. In the dawn, everybody wakes and begins, again, to coax affect out of screens, emotion from electricity. They have learned the texture of digital contact. It is a matter of translating and transcribing; replicating and rhyming; alliterating and aligning. But the magic word?

Perhaps they are using the wrong alphabet.

Perhaps the magic word is located elsewhere: another sea, another shore, another system. Perhaps it is the sum of every letter. Each country has a different method of calculation. What if you click the continents together?

•

Switch off. Sick of spirituality. Self-help. Grey apartments. Glad I don't live there: tiny balconies, no gardens, curry and ethnic shops. If you stand at a certain angle you can see inside all the living rooms. Seventeen simultaneous TVs. Subtitles. Surreal: alphabets all different but *The Crown* is the same.

•

x locked the Great Synagogue of Jerusalem. *B* disinfected an Orthodox icon, preparing for covert communion. *Г* celebrated Easter with a virtual church and *ç* celebrated Eid with a virtual mosque. *ض* made a dua for those suffering. The infected now included, read *Խ*, the Armenian Prime Minister. *з* celebrated the release of lockdown with a friend in a park. *ॐ*, a swami, practised yoga under a tree. Sitting in a tree, *खै* coughed into his arm, hoping his grandfather would be safe at home. *५*, following her grandmother's grocery list, visited a vegetable vendor in Ahmedabad. Next: Himalayan rock salt. *ᳵ* stared at Mount Everest, free of tourists – a contrast with last year's traffic jam.

ω watched Sonu Sood break a coconut for luck before they all boarded the bus back home. At home, *ϣ* pricked his fingers on the metal studs of his denim jacket, complaining about the cancellation of Thingyan. With the collapse of tourism, *᳚* prepared to save elephants from starvation by travelling to

villages on the Myanmar border. In the Laos mountains U felt a drop of rain, remembering the 2019 drought. Z had thought that she was hot because of the weather, but the screening told her she had a temperature. J was tired of tourists complaining about the heat. When he served them their discounted hotel breakfast that woman moaned for the thirteenth time (he was counting):

'When I wished our honeymoon could go on forever, this wasn't what I meant.'

•

Stop looking. Keep walking. Some kind of hoax. Will ask people later. Play podcast again – perhaps there's a clue.

•

Each encapsulation contains a series of letters connected by a chain of Chinese Whispers; Russian Scandal; Arabic Telephone; Broken Telephone; Operator; Grapevine; Gossip; Secret Message; The Messenger Game; Pass the Message. A children's game with a thousand names. Magic words that mutate, fracturing into whispered variations, unstitching the seams of elocution.

Perhaps it is a matter of reconstitution.

Perhaps the magic word is not written in an alphabet at all.

•

Perhaps not. Perhaps going mad. Time to retire. Pregnant with this book – third trimester, same as Ursula. Hope she doesn't give birth. Hope I don't give birth. No, hope I do, get it over with. Pension. Poundland. Tablecloth looks fancy but feels cheap. Fuck Selina. Waiting at the counter. Guy, youngish, not noticing me. Asian. Watching something foreign on that TV on the wall. Same logo: The Crown.

•

平仮名, watching anime, wondered where the government was finding money to pay for its own tourism. 한국어, watching Parasite, thought the film had acquired an additional resonance. Listening between the lines of the media, 조선말 wondered about the brief disappearance of their leader. 廣東話 celebrated the disappearance of the virus with bubble tea, while 官話 measured reduced

nitrogen dioxide in the air of Beijing. In Wuhan, 武汉话 scanned the Johns Hopkins hot spots map.

Perhaps there were antibodies to be derived from the fact of foreignness: an illumination of analogies. The virus was an immigrant that made all immigrants natives. A code that violated codes. An inverted sovereign. A translated crown.

What if the magic word did not make a sound?

What if it only grew when nobody was watching?

The magic word was contained in the world's DNA, but to solve it one needed to discover what the world was trying to say.

•

Don't have all day. Cough, new and continuous, to get his attention. British way. £4. Why do they say 'Everything's £1'? Lies. Nigel Farage's bus. Home. Tablecloth. Starry pattern, celestial. Don't rip. Little tag on the side – another message. *The Crown*.

•

Far above the skies and the satellites, the alphabet of the galaxy is telling its own story. Planets cohere into characters and dark matter unveils its curtain. A child lies in bed, their face blue and green, wrapped in a starry blanket. They take the thermometer out of their mouth and squint at the red mercury. Their future is illuminated by the bulb of their bedroom sun.

'Mum,' they call, slotting stars into speech. 'My temperature is rising.'

'Swallow a magic word and some water,' calls a voice, pointing to a pill in a jar

The pill says: XR.

•

Bloody Extinction Rebellion! After all that. So *The Crown's* just their latest campaign. Massive undertaking, hijacking all those networks. Can't afford it surely. Maybe someone trying to frame them – Trump. Putin. China. Turning the world into a Fortune cookie. Anyway. Snip off the tag with scissors. Bin. Landfill. Ocean.

Doorbell. Henri and his daughter Elise: kiss on both cheeks, continental, always accidental kisses on the mouth. Germs. Glass of prosecco. Elise

allowed? Go on then. *Knock*. Xavier and Dora. *Ring*. Chan and kids. *Knock*. Whole hospital arrives at the same time: Jim, Kathryn, Lawrence, Martha, Nick, Orla, walking inside in alphabetical order. *Ring*. Graham and Fraser. *Knock*. Quentin and Peter. *Ring*. Selina, dressed like an absolute swan. Prick. Are those feathers necessary? Rick's neck chain. *Knock*. Trish, not too pregnant. *Ring*. Ursula, far too pregnant. Uninvited party guest, eating for two. Waddling with Victor. *Knock*. William. Nice man. If he was 20 years older. *Ring*. Yassin and Zehra. Yassin smirking at balloons. Shove him next to Selina and squirt ketchup in their faces.

Chatting. Waiting. Trying to get Graham to sort Spotify but he says it's bugged: every song's happy birthday, twenty second variation. Text from Ivan. On their way. Oh my God. Selina's got an inflatable crown. For the birthday boy, she says, laughing.

The Crown. Maybe she's behind all this. Should've known. Secret activist. But the crown's made of plastic, passing itself around. Ursula puts it on and pouts like a limp lotus. Key's in the lock. Door opens. Bill's shock. Gobsmacked. Success. *Happy Birthday!* Twice. Clap clap.

Scream. Ursula. *Oh my God!* Drops to the ground. Knew it! Idiot. Medics rush to help. Can already see his head coming out of her vagina. Still wearing that stupid crown. Almost as if the crown made her give birth. Secreting birth hormones. Secret plot by Selina, sabotaging the party.

•

A switched off the television.

'So was it a hoax in the end? Or was she going mad?' But B wasn't listening, absorbed in his screen.

'She's just given birth. They're calling him Jonah. But -'

'But?'

'They both have corona.'

About the author



Elena Violaris was born in Manchester and has been studying at the University of Cambridge since 2014. She is currently completing her PhD on levels in postmodern and contemporary American fiction.

[Table of contents](#)

<< [Previous](#)

“This collection draws together the winners of the Global Conversations writing competition mounted by CRASSH in 2021. By turns angry, pained, wry, elegiac and meditative, it is itself an opulent colloquy between writers of poetry, fiction and criticism from all over the world.”

Steven Connor, Director, CRASSH

20 Years CRASSH | 2001 - 2021

Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities

[Back to the beginning](#)