Université de Montréal
CELCP, Best Essay Prize (English), March 15.
Asma Mestiri, Université de Montréal.

The smuggled Other and the Planet: A Possibility of a Horror-less Future

1/ The smuggled subject and the Planet:

While Pheng Cheah represents the 'cosmopolitical' as the zone of 'intersection' between local and global spaces, Gayatri Spivak promotes 'planetarity' and alterity as the zones where new conceptions of the cultural other will diverge from the local to the global space. All imaginings of these "zones" to this date have involved a movement or a "journey" of a subject, a movement in space, time, or both. In this paper, the journey of my interest is the smuggling journey. Most accounts of the smuggling journey whether in literature or photography have attested to the atrocity and horror encountered during the transition from different zones of tension in the world to the safer host countries. Different narratives stirred discussions around the representation of the subject at the moment of horror. The (in)accessibility to this terror in journalistic and popular photography and literature resulted in different imaginings of the subject formation in those lines of vulnerability, abjection, and terror. Pictures of "vulnerable" bodies in the smuggling chronotype and their imaginings in fictional and testimonial writings announce what appears to be a hybrid representation of the smuggled subject where the gendering, violence and horror economies "perform" interdependently to create what can be identified as a planetarian subject. For instance, *Exit West* by Mohsen Hamid, and Nilüfer Demir's photograph of Alan Kurdi deal with the different subject formations that occur at the moment of horror and highlight how literature and photography deconstruct through the moment of extreme crisis all

former assumptions about the Other's agency and proposes new mediums for imagining the smuggled 'other': an affective planetarian community.

Spivak dissipates the construction of the 'Other's subjectivity' in light of Western politics and Western human rights discourses and promotes 'planetary alterity' as the zone where new conceptions of the cultural other diverge from the local to the global space. In this view, the subject must learn how to inhabit two different ends without sublimating differences or aiming at a definite resolution. As a result, the constant repositioning of the dominant/dominated would annul this very distinction, and create a world of planetarian subjects. In her *Death of a discipline*, Spivak proposes "the planet to overwrite the globe". Nevertheless, she warns against constructing an undivided "natural space" in what she perceives as unexamined environmentalism. She also warns against the ruling ideology of the "authority of experience" and the danger of seeking the Other as a "collection of ourselves" (82). Instead, she calls for a "differentiated political space… that we inhabit on loan" (72). The smuggling journey procures this sense of spatial and representational 'inbetwenness' and constructs a planetarian condition, an interplay of differentiated subject formations and encounters. In those lines, a planetarian culture will no longer be hierarchical and will allow, "in the jaws of catastrophe," formations that are "not only humanist, but also hybrid, impure, and profane" (Gilroy 282).

This inaccessibility of the journey and the impossible space it creates reclaims a turn in how Otherness is perceived at the time of crisis and its depiction outside the globalized discourses of victimization and/or marginalization. Planetary studies indicate an ethical "turn" to the pandemonium of relationality and intersection in transcultural order(s). In their introduction to *Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*, Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru speak of "a planetary turn" that outgrows the geopolitical and economic

conditions of modernity (XI). Planetary studies represent "a new structure of awareness" compatible with the different cultural and identity formations that occur in the smuggling experience and the affect it generates(XI). Its vocabulary of "relatedness", "relationality", "commonality", and the "planet" accounts for the new a/spatial and a/temporal formations in this geoaesthetic condition of the smuggling journey. In this sense, the smuggling experience as a planetary imagery places the smuggled subject in the context of the eternal ecological struggle between human species and nature. The decisive potency of climatic changes or natural disasters in the smuggling journey beckons the need for a new vocabulary to account for the new spatial formations in the smuggling journey that seems to represent a "geoasthetic condition of planetarity" (Elis and Moraru XXVI). The vocabulary devised for this cultural domain as provided by the contributors in *The Planetary Turn* illustrates this "turn" and inaugurates a new chronotype for imagining Otherness.

2/ Horror and the sacred subject

Alan Kurdy was a Syrian boy whose body was found on a Turkish shore. The little boy drowned on 2 September 2015 in the so-called European refugee crisis, by European authorities and media [1]. His picture taken by Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir spurred international responses from political leaders and Non-Governmental organizations all over the world. Nilüfer Demir, the photojournalist who took Alan's picture, affirms in an interview with Vice News: "what I saw has left a terrible impression that keeps me awake at night". Her interviewer claims that her photograph "has become a symbol for the suffering of refugees in Europe. At the same time, the controversial photo has sparked a debate around the question of whether such a picture

[1] Labelling this crisis as European unveils a certain self victimization in the European politics and annulation of the Other. I do not think that it should be called Syrian or Middle Eastern, but calling it international, planetary, and/ or worldly would convey more a sense of compassion (or should I say alleged compassion and "care"?).

should or should not be published." Alan's suffering body becomes not only a symbol in the refugee crisis, but a site of resistance and change. The subject here emerges from an act of subordination to death —the latter evidently not being as the first threat or the first choice but certainly as the ultimate 'effect' of environmental and political subjection processes. The repetition of this "vulnerability" through the citational act of photography and the performative act of the body enacts a transcendental subjectivity that speaks from beyond expression.

In "Nostalgia for a Childhood Without," Kristina Lareau discusses different levels of child loving and identifies an "averted" adult gaze that "allows denial of childhood sexuality in favor of perpetuating childhood innocence". In those lines, an adult gaze "often renders nostalgia for a childhood lost— usually a childhood that is romanticized" (236). Alan's body speaks to an international community of adults who see innocence (or their projected old selves) attacked and are subjected to what seems to be an "active vulnerability" of the smuggled subject's body. Both Nilüfer Demir and her interviewer Ismail Küpeli question the excessive circulation of this photograph in different political agendas in the Syrian and other conflicts. And I am totally aware of the deliberate politicization of the suffering bodies of smuggled children and women. Nevertheless, the circulation of the smuggled subjects' images and the different performances of their bodies during the journey spawn different re-articulations of the subject's agency.

The representation of child bodies in the narrative enacts different signification processes taking place at a suspended moment of horror. The photograph of a horrified smuggled subject repositions its audience into a position of masochistic onlooker who acts only when s/he is faced with a catastrophic event. Indeed, in her/his citation of horror inflicted on him by the silent "Other", the smuggled subject endorses its subjection to object (i.e. to make the onlooker as object, and refuse her/his subjection). Understood in those terms as an "effect of subjection"

(PLP11), Alan's body acquires —through her/his depiction at the moment of horror— another kind of position, that of the abject. In her *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva claims that "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection." (4) Accordingly, the abject looms as "one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1) It follows that the abject is only object in the sense of being opposed to I. The abject is also a deject who is not only displaced but also has no space or temporality. S/he is "the excluded, [s/he] is never one, nor homogeneous, nor totalizable, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic. A deviser of territories, languages, works…" (8).

In abjection, time is also forgotten, condensed, then discharged "like thunder." The time of abjection "is double: a time… of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth" (8-9). It is in those terms that Kristeva defines horror and its powers. Indeed, the abject is born in horror in that suspended moment when life and death are external to the body in its no locality.

The smuggling journey procures this absence of a fixed setting where emerges our "deject," abjected, suspended and horrified. At the time of abjection, the smuggled is in "perpetual danger without being cut from whatever threatens the [her/him]" (9). The abject is not exhaustive, not a whole; it is fragmented and generative. In other words, something is always missing. Faced with death, Kristeva's abject assumes another position that of the sacred. In this view the abject assumes different shapes of the sacred that vary according to different symbolic systems. Not surprisingly, there seems to be this close tie between horror, the horrified and the figure of the sacred in what appears to be an existentialist drive in dealing with horror. It is, indeed, easy to perceive our smuggled subject in those terms of the "scapegoat" or to use Girard terms "the surrogate victim." While Kristeva relates abjection to an act of sacrifice in order to

purify from a defilement that is equivalent to the feminine body in most ritual practices, Girard employs the terminology of "the surrogate" to announce an ancient need for humanity to channel violence, innate to its formation since the archaic times. Here, it is noteworthy to mention that my conception of the sacred is inspired by Girard and his concept of sacrificial substitution; in that, I oppose Girard's notion of the 'sacrificial' or 'sacrifiable' to Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'bare life'. In his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben defines bare life as a life that cannot be sacrificed, and therefore, it can be killed without repercussion. Hence, the act of killing bare life is assigned to suppress the making of political meaning. In this view, the smuggled subject's death has no epistemological value.

However, Girard's conception of the sacrificial substitution is contradictory to Agamben's dialectic of the 'sacred' as opposed to 'bare life'. For Girard, archeological models of sacrifice evince that the sacred or the 'surrogate victim' is chosen arbitrarily and is mostly substituted in "bovine" societies. The depiction of the replicability of the sacred and the irreplaceability of human life in Girard's conception announces that there is no life that is bare.

In his book *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard investigates the figure of the sacred and the ritualistic imaginary of sacrificial substitution. In his view, violence is seen as "endemic" to all societies: "If left unappeased, violence will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area." Thus, "the role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into 'proper channels" (10).

In his essay "Violence and Metaphysics: An essay on the Thoughts Emmanuel Levinas," Derrida argues that "every philosophy of nonviolence can only choose the lesser violence within an economy of violence" (340). This economy of violence involves a process of decision-making in which the sacred is sacrificed. This process can be that of "a sacrifice that economizes" or "an

economy that sacrifices" (*The Gift of Death* 101). Derrida refers to the sacrificial act as 'the gift of death" – a gift that remains "irreducible to presence or to presentation, it demands a temporality of the instant without ever constituting a present" (65). Although Derrida's claim that this moment is secret, and it escapes the scope of human representation, I argue that the smuggled subject inhabits different positions that suggest different genealogies for its representation. One of these is the genealogy of the 'sacred' that emerges as "the" substitute for human innate truculence.

3/ Is another planet imaginable?

Alans' Kurdy infant body stands as a site of hyper-representation. It shocks and strikes the international eye. Its 'sacred' position intersects with that of the abject in horror, catastrophe and abstraction to perform the different reiterations of subject-formation. Moreover, these figures of the abject, deject and the sacred deconstruct the smuggled subjects' victimization in the figure of the 'marginal' or the 'martyr' (Jonathan Spencer, *Violence and Subjectivity*). Faced with the absoluteness of the sacred, the objection of the abject and the atrocity of death, the Western onlooker identifies with what appear to be planetarian features of the smuggled subject that alter her/ his depiction of latter as the 'Other' of culture, race and human rights. The moment of horror manifests itself when humanity becomes one. It is in that specific moment that the abject subject occurs in the artwork and deconstructs all the assumptions around the smuggled subject and neutralizes her/his location. This is not a moment of sublimation. Rather, the abject remains raw and visceral as a literary figure in the newly emerging narratives of human smuggling.

From different geopolitical realities emerge many smuggling stories and visceral subjectivities. In African imaginary one's country is conventionally depicted as the Motherland and is always refereed to as a woman, a mistress, in many instances an infidel one. Sami Bahri, a

known activist in his city Sfax, Tunisia, ventures to the sea with a group of artists and political activists in a small boat. Before departing, he shares his last words on facebook, a bitter goodbye, an expression of a great disappointment. On 19 April ,2018 Samy writes:

> I wished to live for her and of her... I wished to be her partner and her to be feathers to my wings. Art! I've been an artist and I am tired of artistic sweet hallucinations. I was raised to love her. I screamed, and I woke up and I cried when she was hurting. I could choose to see her from above from a plane's little window. I Could leave her with my visa and my luggage and my people praying for me. But I chose to be free. What is life without riding danger anyways! This is me my friends... I want to see what will happen after me (my existence) to my loved ones. I am curious. Will my city be worried about me and call my name and the other names ...Come back Samy. We miss your atelier, the barley truck, and sitting on the rough land, a movie lightening the dark street defying the bad smells of olive residue... defying the waste dump ... and defying ghosts and rabies. I miss Maamoun' graffiti's in the love avenues. And so, I wished and wished, and I wished... Forgive me if I was unfair to you I forgive your injustice.

While Alan Kurdi's subject formation as a smuggled/planetary subject can be described as "active vulnerability", Samy's artistic voice appeals to an Other "audience", that of the land who rejects the smuggled subject and pushes her/ him to illegitimate routes. The congesting political atmosphere and the economic crisis in Tunisia gave rise to joblessness that overtook different classes of society and reached intellectuals and skilled workers. Not fitting in the category of the war hero who is escaping the greater evil in the countries of origin, the latter are the most despicable smuggled subject to the international eye. Unlike Alan's corpse Samy's body is not

the receptacle of the different subject reiteration (subordination, abjection, sacred) and his agency cannot be described as "active vulnerability", for poverty and/or personal un-achievements cannot fit into urgency/ emergency criteria. Having a choice, not being a child or a woman, not being seen in those lines of vulnerability represents a threat to the international eye. The smuggling journey is, in Samy's story, a journey of liberation and a deliberate choice to "burn"[2] the frontiers. Most discussions of an undivided space where all subjectivities (smuggled subjectivity included) would be seen in terms of commonality and alterity speak to a host— though not very hospitable— audience, and are almost celebrated in the new discussions about new universalisms in Western Academia. Samy's narrative and its mainly social/ humanist discourse can almost visualize a smuggled that is caught in the inbetweenness of space and time, not knowing if he/she is facing the destination or the departure point. The nostalgic moments described is his last words as he partakes the sea with a group of political activists plead not to the host country. His choice of the genre and the language reveal a conscient political decision to transgress not because of a European dream, a safe country or a heaven, but to proclaim the right to "be somewhere else" and leave the place or the motherland that chose its sacred subjects and dejected them.

In her Undowing the Demos, Windy Brown describes sacrifice as a substitutional process that involves a subject displacement. She contests Hubert and Mauss's understanding of "sacrifice" to Girard depiction of the sacrificial act. While Hubert and Mauss argue that substitution is an essential element of sacrifice: "the sacrificer remains protected: the gods take the victim instead of him," and "the victim redeems him."36 René Girard, emphasizes that what the victim does for the community: sacrifice, is a "deliberate act of collective substitution

[2] In Tunisian dialect, "burn" does mean to set something on fire, but also to transcend the international frontier, namely to Italy as the first destination.

performed at the expense of the victim and absorbing all the internal tensions, feuds, and rivalries pent up within the community. Samy's story complies to an act of redemption fulfilled to protect the sacrificer (the motherland with its politics and economic conditions), but it also emulates a deliberate act of collective substitution absorbing all those feelings of being the state's burden. Brown also argues that the sacrificial act and its substitutional process(es) procure the restauration of "order". In this sense, religious sacrifice "often aims not only to nourish or propitiate the gods, but to rebalance the forces of life and common existence". Girard insists that "the purpose of sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric" (39).

Moreover, Wendy Brown argues that:

> Insistence that "another world is possible" runs opposite to this tide of general despair, this abandoned belief in human capacities to gestate and guide a decent and sustainable order, this capitulation to being playthings of powers that escaped from the bottle in which humans germinated them.

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* depicts the impossibility/possibility of another world or worlds where black doors in zones of tension lead you to the relatively safe zones of the world. It is not clear in the novel whether these doors are made by humans or a secret sacred power. Their distribution or "appearance" seems to be arbitrary and sporadic. No powers seem to be governing these doors. Depending on who discovers them first, states militants or smugglers can control these doors only for a short amount of time. Saeed and Nadia, a couple in love, escape what appears to be a civil war and venture to an unknown future more than once. The following passage describes their first crossing, which although through a magical door is still dangerous:

> It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born, and indeed Nadia experienced a kin of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it, and she felt cold and bruised and damp as she lay on the floor of the room at the other side, trembling and too spent at first to stand, and she thought while she strained to fill her lungs, that this dampness must be her own sweat. (104)

This passage resonates well with other realistic smuggling experiences, for crossing in both instances is dangerous. Smuggling involves a feeling of despair invoked by the general conditions of war, hostility, economic conditions. All the smuggled subjects seemed to realize "there was a possibility this was the final afternoon of their lives" (Hamid 102). Nevertheless, their representation differs from one mode of representation to another. While Samy's testimony and Alan's photograph epitomize the construction of a non- victim representation through the reiteration of the processes of, on the one hand, victimization through subjection and on the other hand agency through abjection and sacrifice. Hamid's subjects emerge triumphant and thus are rejected by the host countries with a lot of hostility and most of all fear. After their second crossing to London, a "nativist mob" attacked the couple. "The mob looked to Nadia like a strange and violent tribe, intent on their destruction, some armed with iron bars or knives, and she and Saeed turned and ran, but could not escape"(134).

Although *Exit West*'s setting seems to be futuristic—as it deconstructs former imaginings of identity, otherness and frontiers— it reiterates images from recent historical events. The "mob" attacking the "intruders" is not an imaginary scene. Political decisions, emergency measures and biased media have been feeding this fear of the Other in Western communities giving rise to attacks from both sides of the conflict. While the tension rises between the "we" and "them",

humanities and academia in general seem to be unable to concretize their imagining of a sustainable habitable future. Smuggling narratives attest to the possibility of this third place in that brief moment of horror, agency/non-agency, active/ passive vulnerability. These narratives find echo in what seems to be a rising international civil society trying to help dissipate images of "intruders", "invader" and all these labels that stigmatize the possibility of a futuristic imagining of otherness on the one hand and new universalisms on the other hand.

This third space seems to be able to transcend frontiers through building an international civil society still finding its way and building communication strategies, one of which is obviously art.

Bibliography

Brown, Wendy. Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution, Zone Books, 2015. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uh/detail.action?docID=3339951.

Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. Print.

---. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Cheah, Pheng. "What is a World? On world literature as World-Making Activity". *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitan Studies.* Ed. Gerard Delanty. London: Routledge, 2012.138-149. Print.

Dagnino, Arianna. "Transcultural Literature and Contemporary World Literature(s)." CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.5 (2013) http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/7/

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M., and George B. Handley, eds. *Postcolonial ecologies: literatures of the environment*. Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. The Gift of Death. Trans. David Wills. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995. Print.

---. "Violence and Metaphysics: An essay on the Thoughts of Emmanuel Levinas." Writing and Difference. Trans. Alan Bass. New York: Routelage Classics, 2001. 97-192. Print

Devi Mahasweta, and Gayatri C. Spivak. *Imaginary Maps*. Routledge, 1995. Print.

Edwards Justin D, and Rune Graulund. "Reading Postcolonial Travel Writing". *Postcolonial Travel Writing*. Eds. Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Print.

Elias, Amy J., and Christian Moraru, editors. *The planetary turn: relationality and geoaesthetics in the twenty-First century*. Northwestern University Press, 2015.

Heath, R. Scott. "The Other Side of Time: Theorizing the Planetary South." *Pmla*, vol. 131, no. 1, 2016, pp. 170–173, doi:10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.170.

Huntington, Heather and Erik Wibbels. "The Geography of Governance in Africa: New Tools from Satellites, Surveys and Mapping Initiatives," Regional & Federal Studies, 24:5, 625-645, (2014)

Jazeel, Tariq. "Spatializing Difference Beyond Cosmopolitanism: Rethinking Planetary Futures." Theory, Culture & Society 2011, 28(5): 75-97
DOI: 10.1177/0263276411410447

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Print.

O'Brien, Susie. "Narratives of Adaptation, Refusal, and Compromise." Resilience:A Journal of the Environmental Humanities. Vol. 4, No. 2-3, Spring-Fall 2017, pp. 43-65 University of Nebraska. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/resilience.4.2-3.0001 Accessed: 20-10-2017

O'Brien, Susie and Cheryl Lousley. "A History of Environmental Futurity: Special Issue Introduction." *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*. Vol. 4, No. 2-3, Spring-Fall 2017, pp. 1-20: University of Nebraska. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/resilience.4.2-3.0001 Accessed: 20-10-2017 19:48 UTC

Papastergiadis, Nikos. "Aesthetic cosmopolitanism." *Routledge Handbook of cosmopolitan Studies.* Ed. Gerard Delanty. London: Routledge, 2012. 220-232. Print.

Roos, Bonnie, and Alex Hunt. *Postcolonial green: environmental politics & world narratives*. University of Virginia Press, 2010.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Righting Wrongs-2002: Accessing Democracy among the Aboriginals." *Other Asias*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. Print.

---. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. London: Harvard University Press, 2012. Print.

---. *Death of a discipline*. Columbia University Press, 2005. Print.