



## CAPTIVE MINDS

### Norms, Normativities and the Forms of Tragic Protest in Literature and Cultural Practice (Introduction)

As a foundation and product of grand narratives, norms apply to any and every aspect of individual, communal, and social life. They regulate our behaviors, determine directions in the evolution of arts and philosophies, condition intra- and cross cultural understanding, organize hierarchies. Yet—when transformed into laws—norms become appropriated by dominant discourses and become “truths.” Those in control of language always construe them as “universal” and, as such, “transparent.”

The usefulness of norms stems from the fact that they facilitate our orientation in the world. In the long run, however, they are bound to block our imaginative access to alternative ways of living and thinking about reality, thus enslaving our minds in a construction of reality believed to be natural. In a world so determined, dissenting perspectives and pluralities of views threaten to disrupt norms and normativities, along with the order (patriarchal, racist, sexist, ableist, speciesist, etc.) build into them. Benefactors of a normative worldview and average individuals busily trying to fit in police the perimeters of the accepted, disciplining nonconformists, rebels, and nonnormative individualists of every stripe. “Assent—and you are sane,” quipped Emily Dickinson in her well-known poem, “Demur—you’re straightway dangerous—And handled with a Chain—”(209).

Notorious for their inimical attitude to repressive majorities, artists, philosophers, academics, and other “marginal” persons have always challenged deified norms. Opening up liberatory perspectives, they have tried to escape mental captivities and ima-

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gine the world otherwise: as a place where difference is cherished and where justice reigns. Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk, winner of the 2018 Nobel Prize in literature, imagines an alternative reality whose inhabitants, Heterotopians, constantly suspend commonly held beliefs in order to examine their validity. Passive perception, argues Tokarczuk, “has moral significance. It allows evil to take root” (43). Without a periodical suspension of belief in truths so deeply naturalized that they look like Truth Itself, we become perpetrators of the evil glossed over by narratives whose veracity we take for granted.

The concept of the captive mind became famous in mid-twentieth century due to another Nobel Prize laureate, Czesław Miłosz. In his book entitled *The Captive Mind*, first published in 1953, the Polish writer comments on the plight of intellectuals under communism. Comparing the crushing of independent thought in the Soviet Block to the effects of a Murti-Bing pill invented by a fictional Mongolian philosopher<sup>1</sup> to induce bliss and obedience in a conquered population, Miłosz writes: “A man who used these pills changed completely. He became serene and happy. [O]nce tormented by philosophical ‘insatiety,’ [he] now entered the service of the new society” (4). In the context of totalitarianism, the captive mind Miłosz writes about is one which chooses to adapt and stops asking perplexing questions. In the long run, however, conformist adaptation to a new regime of truth cannot but lead to schizophrenia.

Another influential formulation of the idea of the captive mind originated in the postcolonial world. In his 1972 article “The Captive Mind in Development Studies,” Malaysian sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas<sup>2</sup> argued that, trained in Western-dominated institutions, the postcolonial mind was unable of raising independent problems and, as a result, applied the Western template to problems of the non-Western world. This kind of mental captivity, in contrast to the one theorized by Miłosz, is unconscious. As demonstrated by a recent wave of protests in the postcolonial world—The Dakota Access Pipeline protests on the Standing Rock Indian reservation immediately come to mind—the nations

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1. A character in the novel *Insatiability* (1930) by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz.  
2. For details see Giorgio Mariani’s article in this issue.

of the Third World are becoming increasingly aware of and ready to break with the legacy of intellectual captivity.

Most of the articles published in this issue of *Review of International American Studies* originated as keynote lectures and academic papers presented at the 2018 edition of the International Conference of the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures of the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. The conference was an invitation to identify aspects of mental captivity in literature and cultural practice and examine the various ways in which the oppressive norms and normativities delineating mental captivity can be and have been contested.

In the opening article, “Emerson’s Superhero,” Giorgio Mariani clarifies the various meanings of mental captivity to set the stage for the discussion of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s relatively unknown essay “War.” The author finds that essay helpful to understand the challenges we face when, equipped with an intellectual apparatus forged in the “old” world, we try to imagine a “new” one of peace and justice. Ultimately, what Mariani worries about is that an anti-war protest pursued to its utmost limits risks becoming another form of enslaving mentality. Beyond the uncompromising heroism of the hero, however, Mariani discovers the liberating perspective of the Emersonian superhero, who, renouncing heroic dogmatism, is willing to make violence stop with her/him.

“Mailer, Doctorow, Roth: A Cross-Generational Reading of the American Berserk” by John Matteson zeroes in on the idea of public protest as quintessentially paradoxical within the USAmerican<sup>3</sup> cultural and literary practice. A nation founded on dissent and the love of liberty, the U.S. exhibits intolerance towards those who expose its double standards, domestically and abroad. Protest is seen as indecent and unpatriotic, asserts Matteson. As a consequence, the scorned and criminalized protester falls into the trap of oppositional politics. Drawing his evidence from three novels shaped by the American military intervention in Vietnam: *Armies of the Night*, *The Book of Daniel*, and *American Pastoral*, Matteson examines the motives and contradictions of protest. To round up

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3. Since most of the essays gathered here deal with USAmerican perspectives, the terms American and America will be henceforward used as synonymous with USAmerican and the USA respectively, unless otherwise stated.

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the historical perspective, the author casts a self-conscious glance at Trump's America to find even the well-intentioned, law-abiding individuals complicit with the forces of destruction.

Equally critical of the narrative of liberty as supposedly foundational for America, North and South, Manuel Broncano Rodriguez identifies "allegories of the gestation of the *homo americanus*" in the early *captivity* narratives. The author provocatively declares the existence of an—as yet unwritten—history of mental captivity in the US, within which he situates his discussion of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. With one eye on contemporary U.S. politics and the other on literature, Broncano Rodriguez finds an "arcane association" between President Trump bowing to Russian President Putin during the 2018 Helsinki summit and Cormac McCarthy's Judge Holden attempting to master his "ludicrous disciple" the Kid. Bold and sparkling with wit, the article takes us on a rollercoaster ride along the associative paths of the author's questioning, dissenting mind.

Protest contextualized as an alternative lifestyle is theorized by Monica Kocot in her "A Celebration of the Wild: on Earth Democracy and the Ethics of Civil Disobedience in Gary Snyder's Writing." In times of unprecedented ecological crisis, we would be well-advised to seek life-saving wisdoms wherever they can be found. Gary Snyder's integration of Taoist and Buddhist wisdom traditions with resistance to harmful Western normativities provides guidelines for liberation: freeing ourselves from captivity to the ego, we may open ourselves to the inner and outer wildness that co-constitutes us and return to living in communion with all earth beings, animate and inanimate alike, like our premodern ancestors did.

Place-based sense of interconnectedness of all earth beings is also crucial for the indigenous wisdoms of North America. Reading Louise Erdrich through the lens of critical animal and critical decolonial studies, Małgorzata Poks, in her article "'Where Butchers Sing Like Angels': Of Captive Bodies and Colonized Minds," argues that normativities are most harmful when they are no longer visible. Human mastery over the animal(ized) other is, arguably, the most invisible of them all, because it is foundational to the maintenance of all other dichotomies of the Western world.

The ubiquitous—and invisibilized—violence against the animal, argues Poks, the result of an undeclared species war, is directly related to the constitution of the “human” as an elitist concept. As a corollary, building the “world of the you” requires the dismantling of speciesism and a return to pre-modern cosmologies of interconnectedness. We will never be fully human without the ability to relate to the nonhuman as part of ourselves.

Within the cultural context of the West, and most specifically in the US, the naturalization of prejudices against people of African origin is a practice of long standing. Still, a (tragic) protest against racial discrimination risks replacing one set of cultural stereotypes with a different one and thus ending up as another form of mental captivity. The paradoxes of essentializing the racial experience are foregrounded in Sonia Caputa’s article “Resistance and Protest in Percival Everett’s *Erasure*.” The novel, argues the author, demonstrates the collusion of the publishing industry, the media, and the academy in the construction of canonical, unitary, politically-correct “blackness,” while it attempts to ironize and subvert this collusion.

Cultural stereotyping is also the focal point of Eric Starnes’s “Black Flag under a Grey Sky: Forms of Protest in Current Neo-Confederate Prose and Song.” Starnes reverses the politically-correct paradigm and attempts to re-read the “civic religion” of white nationalism as a form of protest against normative historiographies about the American South written by “liberals.” Subjecting to scrutiny popular cultural expressions of the neo-Confederate sentiment, Starnes finds “an undercurrent of tragedy” there. Contestatory of the hard-won neo-liberal narrative (in the singular), this article challenges some of the cherished contemporary beliefs. As an imaginative exercise involving switching perspectives, it would probably be of interest to Olga Tokarczuk’s *Heterotopians*. They would learn something from it. But what would that lesson be readers need to determine for themselves.

Michał Kisiel’s article “Violence Hates Games? Revolting (Against) Violence in Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games U.S.*,” dwells on the subject of protest against the norms of the mainstream cinema. Haneke’s film, asserts Kisiel, resists reading violence as retributive or cathartic. By overloading violence, *Funny Games*

U.S. foregrounds the concept of *acting* violence in order to destabilize the positions of perpetrators and victims. Haneke's film "manifests a dramatic protest against the disturbed norms of violence in the contemporary cinema and the growing apathy that intoxicates the spectators."

Norms and normativities governing the production of the "natural" human body are under scrutiny in Murat Göç-Bilgin's "Posthumanity and the Prison-house of Gender in Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs*." Enlisting the help of posthumanist theories, Göç reads Coupland's 1995 novel in terms of protest against essentialist definitions of the human body. Donna Haraway's cyborg haunts the pages of *Microserfs*, which promises the body's liberation from restrictive norms of humanity. Göç believes the novel sketches the coordinates of a new being, "more human than human."

Finally, Monika Kołtun returns us to the concept of tragic protest in her attempt to define the perimeters of the protester's impossible choice between "a life of constant suppression of conscience" on the one hand and conscientious action which shakes the very foundations of his or her life on the other. "The Tragedy of a Whistleblower: Adamczewski's *Tragic Protest* and the Case of Chelsea Manning" aptly demonstrates the stakes involved in blowing the whistle on criminal systemic practices. Yet, democracy, perhaps life itself, depend on people who can repeat after Manning: "i want people to see the truth... because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public."

This issue of *Review of International American Studies* is rounded up by two articles in the Varia section: Federica Perazzini's "Paradigms of Otherness: the American Savage in British Eighteenth-Century Popular and Scholarly Literature" and Antonio Barrenechea's "Dracula as Inter-American Film Icon: Universal Pictures and Cinematográfica ABSA." Perazzini examines the changing cultural representations of the indigenous peoples of North America as reflective of the successive stages of the construction of British imperial hegemony. The chief merits of this article are a meticulous analysis of literary and cultural sources which illustrate the thesis and an engaging discussion of the cultural and philosophical context of the colonial encounter, all thrown against a broad historical canvas. In turn, Antonio Barrenechea's

essay explores the vampire cinema of Hollywood and Mexico as a phenomenon of “hemispheric provenance, and proportion.” Following an intriguing cultural analysis, this article concludes with the vision of the vampire as an inter-American specter of modernity.

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