



Perspectives on the Pandemic: Contemporary Personal Essays as a Space of Resistance

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ABSTRACT: It may be argued that writing about contemporaneity risks being a mere description of what Braudel would term 'episodic time'—the short-term perspective of newspapers and chronicles. However, when political and social events spread into literature, there is a nuanced language of presence (Barthes). By not being bound to a specific mode of narration, the essay's brevity and incisiveness seems particularly suitable to decipher the contemporary. This paper presents a comparative reading of personal essays published between April and July 2020 by Olive Senior, Deborah Levy, and Zadie Smith, and it argues that there are two main ways of resisting: the choice of writing in itself, and the choice of topics and issues. The immediate response of writers in the form of essays published in book form, in online magazines, or special sections of the websites of publishing houses is a clear example of how literature—and indeed the literary mind—can be a space for thinking about the present and putting things into perspective. By overcoming the possible limitations represented by the thematization of the pandemic, the writers open towards what may appear as a different, but still very close, temporality: that of physical and discourse-based violence on female bodies, on black bodies, and on the Earth. This paper will then come to the conclusion that writing is an act of resistance and that literature has the power to narrate the real "interpret[ing] the world [...] one word at a time" (Senior, "Cross Words").

KEY WORDS: personal essay; contemporaneity; pandemic; writing as an act of resistance



INTRODUCTION

Global crises such as Covid-19 force us to recognize the vulnerability of human nature. Such vulnerability translates into a sharpened attention towards the social, political, and environmental circumstances amplified by the pandemic. The immediate response of writers, such as those analysed in this paper, is a clear example of how literature—and indeed the literary mind—can be a space for thinking about the present and putting things into perspective. Therefore, this paper will first provide some information on the personal essay as a form in relation to Zadie Smith’s “Peonies”, Deborah Levy’s “Eating Cherries in the Park”, and Olive Senior’s “Cross Words in Lockdown”. The essays presented here were all published between April and August 2020, thus written in the midst of what has been called “the first lockdown”. The closeness between the long-term, still ongoing, event of the pandemic and the moments when the writers wrote and published, as well as the closeness with the moment the texts were first researched and read, may lead to questioning the critical perspective toward the texts. The very choice of dealing with texts that are more than extremely contemporary could be contested. However, by reading both the pandemic and the events described in the essays in the light of Braudel’s definitions of event, it is possible to broaden the temporal perspective and overcome this issue. This allows to situate extremely contemporary literary forms which are able, in accordance with Ernst Bloch and Giorgio Agamben’s notions of contemporary, to create the necessary distance and perspective by foregrounding the writer’s thought process which becomes resistance. The paper will indeed conclude that the essays create spaces of resistance in two main ways: through the act of writing in itself and through the authors’ choice of discussing issues which may have been backgrounded but are likewise urgent.

PERSONAL ESSAYS

When discussing the essay, a common starting point is often the difficulty in approaching a textual object that has a protean nature (Hardison 614). It seems that the looseness in Johnson’s classic definition of the essay¹ is the feature which has stuck the most over time in studies on the essay, consolidating “in an agreement on the uncircumventable indeterminacy of the genre. In fact, the one commonly accepted fact about the essay is that indeterminacy is germane to its essence” (Obaldia 2). In the context of this paper the essays written by Smith, Levy, and Senior are what could be defined personal essays. This definition may seem tautological if we take into consideration the fact that Montaigne’s *Essais* (1580) were in the first place about himself, and therefore ‘personal’.² However, ‘personal’ does not necessarily entail the “public display of one’s innermost self” (Harris 935). The way the essay creates intimacy

¹ “A loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition”. This is the definition available on Johnson’s Dictionary Online, in the entry “Essay”.

² See “To the Reader” in Montaigne.



with the reader is through a “conversational element” (Lopate, *Art* xxiv; Atkins 6) possible via the use of an essayistic first person (Gallerani 191).

It must be said that the essay as intended here is all but the scholarly text the word also defines. What should be noted, in fact, is that both the essay in general, and the essays here in particular, do not aim at uncovering one universal truth, as would be the case of logical-mathematical or philosophical enquiries. As we shall see, the essay welcomes the writer’s personal position on the topic, without the pretension of reaching a definitive conclusion. As Graham Good acutely observes, “the essay’s claim to truth is not through its consistency in method and result with an established body of writing. [...] Instead of imposing a discursive order on experience, the essay lets its discourse take the shape of experience” (Good 7). One of the key features of the essay is, in fact, the connection between experience—be it emotional, mental, or physical—and its expression. Therefore, it is in the artistry and craft of the writing—in its *literary* quality—that the specificity of the essay lies. In an essay there is no plot but there is a light veil of narrativity which moves the text forward through the “purposive movement” (Atkins 68) of sentences and words, and the foregrounding of the thought process. The emphasis here is on the concept of process: the ideas, or rather, the questions, that the writer raises as she develops the text do not necessarily find a direct answer but are planted in the reader’s mind.

The non-fixity of the form which, at a first glance, could hinder theoretical classifications and definitions, is, though, its strength. The essay is infinitely adaptable (Hardison 610). As Virginia Woolf observed in “The Modern Essay”: “[a]s the conditions change so the essayist, most sensitive of all plants to public opinion, adapts himself, and if he is good makes best of the change, and if he is bad the worst” (Woolf 216). Woolf’s statement, echoed much later by Lopate (Lopate, “Disguise”) shows how the essay, as a genre, resists over time. Traditionally, the essay has always had a strong relationship with its own present. Good essayists of the past, those who wrote in the periodicals which consolidated the essay’s tradition in England, had the ability to quickly “access their blood reactions” (Lopate, “Disguise”) especially when it came to commenting social and political events. As we shall see, this quality is preserved in the essays analysed in this paper, since each author has her own personal way of touching political, thus social, issues.

THE TEXTS

“Peonies” is the opening essay in a collection by Zadie Smith titled *Intimations*, published by Penguin in April 2020 and concomitantly translated in different languages.³ In the foreword, dated 31 May 2020, she states:

There will be many books written about the year 2020: historical, analytical, political as well as comprehensive accounts. This is not any of those – the year isn’t halfway done. What I’ve tried

³ In Spanish *Contemplaciones*, Salamandra, November 2020; in French *Indices*, Gallimard, June 2021; in Italian *Questa strana e incontenibile stagione*, minimum fax, July 2020.



to do is organize some of the feelings and thoughts that events, so far, have provoked in me, in those scraps of time the year itself has allowed. These are above all personal essays: small by definition, short by necessity. (Smith xi)

Despite being a prized novelist and having published two collections of essays, *Changing My Mind* (2009) and *Feel Free* (2018), Smith still feels the need to say something about the form she chose. A personal essay is not as contractual or committed as an autobiography, as Genette explains drawing from Lejeune's study on autobiography (Genette 11); it is a freer form, where feelings and thoughts provoked by the events are put into words. For this reason, it is interesting to notice how the declaration of genre shows her authorial intention of signalling her choice to the reader.

The second essay is Deborah Levy's "We need an end to male authoritarian ignorance" which is included in *Perspectives* (2020), an initiative by Penguin published on their website during the first lockdown. At the end of each piece, the editors state that the project includes "a series of essays from Penguin authors offering their response to the Covid-19 crisis" and that "[a] donation of £10,000 has been made on behalf of the participants."⁴ In this initiative, each writer was called to provide their point of view and reflect on one aspect of the pandemic. The publisher has then collected all twenty contributions in a free ebook, and Levy's essay was retitled "Eating Cherries in the Park". In the introduction, the editor in chief Tom Weldon expressed the relevance literature has in the public sphere: "it felt like there was more we might do to play our part, both in documenting this extraordinary moment in time and shaping a vision for what might come next" (Weldon). This is a signal of the engagement of literary culture in political and social matters, showing another of the many possible intersections of literature and life. Moreover, this editorial operation testifies a relation of continuity with the English eighteenth-century periodicals. Interestingly, what has contributed to the reception of *The Spectator* was the repackaging of the daily issues into bound collections on the part of some publishers of the time (Ellis 109-11). Even though the Penguin website cannot be considered a periodical *per se*, twenty essays were regularly published for a month between April and May 2020, and were then digitally bound. Naturally, the digital media and the bound eighteenth-century miscellany have significant differences in terms of reach. However, even if apparently small, this choice reveals a connection with the past and reinforces the idea that the essay's protean nature allows it to persist as a genre in the vastness of today's literary-landscape.

The third and last essay this paper will focus on is Olive Senior's "CROSS WORDS IN LOCKDOWN #WhatIAmDoingWithMyTime" written on 15 June and published on 6 August 2020. It is part of one of the "Collections" in *adda*, a literary magazine which hosts writing from Commonwealth writers and which commissioned "a series of creative responses to COVID-19" (addastories.org). Senior is a prized Jamaican novelist and poet and during lockdown she decided to write a series of poems. Initially posted on her Twitter and Facebook accounts, she then published the collection in February 2021 with the title *Pandemic Poems*.

⁴ This is the definition found at the bottom of each contribution on the website of the publishing house Penguin. Also in this case, there has been an economic contribution on behalf of the publisher.



Between the moment when these texts were first researched and the date they were published, only some months had passed⁵. This led to a key question: how can one deal with the contemporaneity of these essays while maintaining a certain critical perspective?

DEALING WITH THE CONTEMPORARY

For francophone critical theory, the term *extrême contemporain* refers to texts published within the last ten or twenty years. Being published respectively in April 2020 and August 2020, "Peonies", "Eating Cherries in the Park", and "Cross Words in Lockdown", are certainly more than extremely contemporary. Since then, the contextual difference is that the Covid-19 pandemic is very slowly receding in some parts of the world, but still ongoing relentlessly in others. This closeness may be problematic in terms of stance for the critical eye. For this reason, this issue requires, if only briefly and certainly non exhaustively, to be addressed. Dealing with these texts in terms of a framework such as Fernand Braudel's, which accounts for an awareness of the dialectic of continuities and of the "infinitely repeated opposition between the instantaneous and the time that flows slowly" (Braudel 173), would evidently be challenging for two reasons. The first, as observed above, is the timing of the texts. The second is the proximity between the context of the events which triggered the writing and the writing itself.

With respect to the timing, it would be challenging to situate the pandemic, as well as the texts, correctly and not consider them part of the *événementiel* as opposed to the *longue durée*. However, a way of overcoming the trap of the lack of distance, and therefore being able to work on these texts, is considering Braudel's twofold definition of "event". On one hand, an event has the force of "an explosion, something that ha[s] 'the sound of newness' (*nouvelle sonante*)" that "fills the conscious domain of today's people, but it doesn't last long, disappearing almost as soon as one sees its flame" (Braudel and Wallerstein 174). And on the other,

an event [...] can include a period for longer than its own occurrence. Infinitely stretchable, the event becomes linked, by design or by chance, to a whole chain of events, of underlying realities that then become impossible, it seems, to disentangle, one from the other. (Braudel and Wallerstein 174)

This second aspect of the definition can be a way of reading the temporality of events like the pandemic, but also, more importantly, of 'events' that should not be relegated to the episodic: the different acts of violence described in the three essays and against which the texts resist.

⁵ This article stems from a paper presented at the online doctoral conference titled "Vulnerability and resilience: Voices and practices from the margins" held online in March 2021 at the Università degli Studi di Milano. The deadline for the proposals was 15 December 2020. Only nine and five months respectively had passed. This seemingly trivial piece of information is what made me interrogate on how to work on these extremely contemporary nonfictional texts.



When an event is transmuted into literature—no matter how close in time to the moment of writing and to the time of the readers—it acquires a different temporality. It is not a mythical temporality, because the essays here do not have features of archetypal narratives or circular historicity, but rather, it is a more suspended and abstract “time of literature”, to echo Maurice Blanchot’s seminal book *The Space of Literature*. Such time of literature, as expressed by the essayistic form, is what allows us to read contemporary texts considering the moment—the very date—when the text was issued as a signifier, since it bears a strong connection to the historical event we are living in. At the same time, this different way of perceiving literary texts allows us to put the realia—the date—aside and consider the fact that these texts are the outputs of three literary minds.

With regard to the closeness between the context of events and the moment of writing, it should be noted that the relationship between time and writing is a rather complex one. In fact, in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* (1988), Ernst Bloch dedicated an essay to this relationship. In the introductory paragraphs of “On the Present in Literature” (1956) he observed how without distance

you cannot even experience something; not to speak of representing it, to present it in a right way which simultaneously has to provide a general view. In general it is like this: all nearness makes matters difficult, and if it is too close, then one is blinded, at least made mute. (Bloch 1-2)

He argues that the impossibility of grasping what is happening is only true for the very immediate “right-now” which is in the dark, but not for the “more mediated right-now, which is of a different kind and which is a specific experience called ‘present’, be it at home, in public, in the political arena and so on” (Bloch 2). Bloch discusses how great novels such as *Anna Karenina* (1878) can draw on contemporary events. However, there is a difficulty in portraying such nearness and it “varie[s] according to the writer’s intensity, according to the power and the transparency of the social material” (Bloch 3). Nonetheless, artistically mature writers such as Smith, Levy, and Senior are able to perceive what Bloch defines as the “shadow due to the lack of distance” (Bloch 2) which may be interpreted as the awareness of a different way of perceiving the present. This particular modality of relating to the contemporary is another way of avoiding falling into the trap of the lack of perspective and it will be discussed in the following section.

Bloch’s examples draw on the novel which can portray aspects of the contemporary, and, one could add, the analysis of contemporary novels is always possible by virtue of the filter of fiction. The key question here, though, is how can we attempt reading literary nonfiction which is so close in time?

The way the essay proceeds in blending the personal experience of a consciousness with the nonfictional aspect of writing renders it a genre which very well expresses *being-in-culture*. In an influential paper published in 1988, O.B. Hardison draws a parallel between the sixteenth century and his time, and expresses how both are times of



immense destructive and constructive change [...] [times] when the world looks like an unweeded garden and doubt is a condition of consciousness. The essay is as uniquely suited to expressing this contemporary mode of being-in-culture as it was when Montaigne began writing the *Apology for Raimond Sebond*. (Hardison 631)

According to Bloch, novelistic portrayal of the present is possible, although challenging, through satire and utopia which enable a broader view of “that which is close” (Bloch 3). The essays by Smith, Levy, and Senior that will shortly be discussed more closely, however, are not satirical in tone nor do they describe utopian alternative realities. Nonetheless, the combination of what can be termed as a light veil of narrativity and the essayistic posture of questioning and openness contribute to the literary quality allowing for these texts to gain that distance and their peculiar perspective on the events. The specific way the essay is able to deal with the contemporary is by foregrounding the thinking process and opening the ‘discussion’ to events whose temporality is much more extended.

BEING CONTEMPORARY

Essays are representative of the peculiar relationship an artist has with their time, as the openings of Smith, Levy, and Senior respectively suggest.

Just before I left New York, I found myself in an unexpected position: clinging to the bars of the Jefferson Market Garden, looking in. A moment before I’d been on the run as usual, intending to exploit two minutes of time I’d carved out of the forty-five minute increments into which, back then, I divided my days. Each block of time packed tight and levelled off precisely, like a child prepping a sandcastle. Two ‘free’ minutes meant a macchiato. (In an ideal, cashless world, if nobody spoke to me.) In those days, the sharp end of my spade was primed against chatty baristas, overly friendly mothers, needy students, curious readers – anyone I considered a threat to the programme. Oh, I was very well defended. (Smith 1)

As I write this in the midst of the Pandemic in April 2020, my concentration is shattered. The sun is shining in London. Birdsong is louder, the air is cleaner. I have enough food and the love of many people. Yet my focus is not even fifty percent. In this regard, I don’t believe I am alone, nor do I consider lack of attention and focus a small matter. We rely on the alert attention of our ambulance drivers, our health workers and our scientists. I am also grateful to those teachers, artists, writers, composers and philosophers who gave their best attention to the ideas that have made my life more interesting. (Levy)

It’s gone. The time. Some three months of it in self-isolation so far. Not spent learning something useful like half the world it seems, not baking bread, not listening to symphonies nor strolling through virtual museums and art galleries. Not playing games. The whole world offered up on a screen and I’m in rejection mode. Rigorously avoiding it all. Avoiding overload. I don’t know how useful or useless I’ve been. Writing and crossing out words is how I’ve been spending my time. How I always spend time. My pandemic (bad puns no doubt a sign that I desperately need company). (Senior, “Cross Words”)

In all three there is a sense of the slipperiness of time which has gone without knowing exactly how and a manifestation of a need for stillness. Smith’s “unexpected



position” reveals her sense of surprise at the realization that she had stopped, in the midst of her tightly organised schedule, to look at a flower in a city garden. Olive Senior intensely focuses on this feeling, gradually leading to more detail, and her fragmented opening reveals the need to pause: “It’s gone. The time. Some three months of it in self-isolation so far”. With the exception of Zadie Smith, who overtly refers to the time of pandemic—without speaking of it—at the end of her piece, there are clear time references which signal the closeness of the time of writing to the extra-literary context. The sense of uneasiness that comes from a lack of concentration, the surprise of having stopped when you should be moving on towards the next item on the schedule, or simply choosing not to do what the rest of the world seems to be doing, reveal how Smith, Levy, and Senior may be considered, to use Agamben’s terms, “truly contemporary”. They are

[...] those who neither perfectly coincide with [contemporary time] nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant (*inattuale*). But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time. (Agamben 40)

(Appartiene veramente al suo tempo, è veramente contemporaneo colui che non coincide perfettamente con esso né si adegua alle sue pretese ed è perciò, in questo senso, *inattuale*; ma, proprio per questo, proprio attraverso questo scarto e questo anacronismo, egli è capace più degli altri di percepire e afferrare il suo tempo. (Agamben, *Dispositivo* 19))⁶

This closeness, which, as seen before, may hinder observation and reflection, is overcome through the act of writing which creates the gap and the distance, and becomes the disconnected connection between a writer and their time. Paradoxically, being contemporary is an effect of a disconnection with the time one lives in.

RESISTANCES

Questioning the state of things, investigating oneself and the world, and, in a way, resisting, are among the prerogatives of the essay as a genre. In the essays by Smith, Levy, and Senior, the concept of ‘writing as a space of resistance’ is presented differently in each text and it is possible to observe two types, as it were, of resistance. The first is an external resistance, given by the very fact of writing something and exercising an intellectual, therefore political, stance. As Roland Barthes explains when describing the implications of the passage from speech to writing, the act of writing entails a new role for the text: it becomes social and thus available to a wider public, “the message

⁶ A comment must be made on the English translator’s choice of irrelevant for the word *inattuale*, which he left in brackets in the text. Agamben reports Roland Barthes’s notes on Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* in the series of lectures titled *La Préparation du Roman*. In the English translation, Agamben comments: “the contemporary is the untimely”. Interestingly, the Italian for untimely both in Agamben and in Nietzsche’s title is *intempestive*. Whereas the English translator chose irrelevant to serve for *inattuale*, which is much closer to untimely than to irrelevant. The challenge in translating these terms reveals the difficulty of dealing with the topic.



recovers a structure of order; 'ideas', entities so difficult to delineate through interlocution, where they are constantly overwhelmed by the body, are put here in the foreground, there in the background, yet elsewhere in contrast" (Barthes, *Grain* 5). However, "[...] in the written word a new image-repertoire appears, that of 'thought'. Wherever there is a concurrence of spoken and written words, to write means in a certain manner: I think better, more firmly" (Barthes, *Grain* 6).

Writing therefore, is a way of thinking better, and the essay epitomizes this mechanism. It offers and creates space for discussion. Indeed, the entire process of writing and the fact that these writers took advantage of their social role is what could be read as an act of resistance. In the moment of a global crisis, the way writers tried to counter the effects of the ever-accelerating inundation of information is through regaining contact with the pace of thinking, through writing.⁷

The second type of resistance, instead, is what could be called an internal, thematic resistance. The essay and its writer are able to connect with the world and with otherness in several ways (Atkins 50). One of these is the choice of confronting topics, in the etymological sense of places, that have an extended, more mediated presence. In the three texts, such resistance may be read, respectively, in the time of the violence of internalized misogyny that forces a woman to succumb to her cyclical nature which Zadie Smith tried to resist by deciding that her emotions were her own and that she wanted to have control over herself; in the time of the violence of man over women and over the Earth, which is a time of non-care that must be resisted by claiming strongly that care and attention must no longer be gender-related as Deborah Levy reminds us; and lastly, the time of violence over black bodies—deeply rooted in history, as it is known—which Olive Senior refers to in her text.

As Ned Stuckey-French, one of the experts on the genre, explains, it is nearly impossible to summarize an essay (Stuckey-French). This is because in an essay "[...] event and reflection, object and idea, are interwoven and limit each other's development" (Good 7). This limitation is not to be intended as a blockage, but rather as a gear that shifts and moves the piece of writing, giving it direction. For these reasons, in order to show the different ways in which these essays resist internally, the following sections will attempt following some possible chains of thought by providing examples of how the images and concepts unfold.

I THOUGHT THEY WERE PEONIES... A WRITERLY RESISTANCE TO PATRIARCHAL NORMS

Let us take into consideration the opening lines of Zadie Smith's "Peonies" once again. In a city garden in New York, Smith sees tulips but wants them to be peonies. This

⁷ An observation in terms of practical resistance must be made on Zadie Smith's collection *Intimations*. A notice in the first paperback edition (2020), the one in my possession, states that the author's royalties for that edition will go to charity, namely The Equal Justice Initiative and The Covid-19 Emergency Relief Fund for New York. This simple act is a way of contributing practically to 'resist' the pandemic.



intrusion of what may be defined as a friction thought, an element which starts the piece of prose, is a clear example of a writer's mind at work testifying for the literary quality of the essay. There is nothing impeding her from introducing a disruption in order to move ahead in the narration.

What is strange is that she is clinging to those bars, as if some power had attracted her there. She notices she isn't alone: there are other women staring through the bars. This reminds her of an anecdote Nabokov used to tell about what inspired him to write *Lolita*—a news story of an ape in the Jardin des Plantes (the botanical garden in Paris) who, given a piece charcoal by a scientist, drew what it had been seeing: cage bars. As Smith writes, analysing her own actions, the tulip is "a gaudy symbol of fertility and renewal in the middle of a barren concrete metropolis" (Smith 3). Here, she is introducing her topic, her perception and relationship with gender norms. As she continues by picking up the trail of Nabokov's *Lolita*, she writes that when she was younger, she did not feel the pulling force of the ingrained idea of maternity and of the pressure of time-bound fertility:

At that time, the cage of my circumstance, in my mind, was my gender. [...] What I didn't like, was what I thought it signified: that I was tied to my 'nature', to my animal body—to the whole simian realm of instinct—and far more elementally so than, say, my brothers. I had 'cycles'. They did not. (Smith 3)

However, this does not mean she has to succumb. In fact, she then writes: "My moods were my own. They had no reflection in nature" (Smith 4). This may be considered as a first instance of Smith's thematic resistance. Her way of evading the control of a discourse on herself through controlling her own self-narrative was her resistance to the "internalized misogyny" she was strongly aware of when she was in her twenties: "'Internalized misogyny'. I suppose they'd call all of the above now. I have no better term. But at the hot core of it there was an obsession with control, common amongst my people (writers)" (Smith 4). With this turn of phrase, at the end of a paragraph, Smith shifts her argument towards writing. As she does so, she counterposes creativity—which is also semantically related to feminine creation—to control. Saying that writing is not a creative activity is certainly provocative, suffice it to think about the plethora of graduate degrees in creative writing. Creativity is "to participate in some small way in the cyclic miracle of creation" (Smith 5). That is, to plant a tulip. Writing, instead, is control: "Writing is *all* resistance" (Smith 5).

To her, writing is a way of resisting the experience of life. People adapt, accommodate, sometimes submit, but writing and life are two separate things: "Even more befuddling, to a writer like me, is that the values normally associated with those words on a page—submission, negative; resistance, positive—cannot be relied upon out in the field" (Smith 5).

However, she concludes:

I'm a novelist. Who can admit, late in the day, during this strange and overwhelming season of death that collides, outside my window with the emergence of dandelions, that spring sometimes rises in me, too, and the moon may occasionally tug at my moods, and if I hear a



strange baby cry some part of me still leaps to attention—to submission. And once in a while a vulgar strain of spring flower will circumvent a long-trained and self-consciously strict downtown aesthetic. Just before an unprecedented April arrives and makes a nonsense of every line. (Smith 8)

In Zadie Smith's "Peonies", the explicit reference to the time of the pandemic is in the very last, closing sentence: "Just before an unprecedented April arrives and makes a nonsense of every line" (Smith 8). This closing line may be considered as a homodiegetic narrator's metanarrative intervention in marginal position, as Ansgar Nünning points out drawing on Werner Wolf's work on metafictionality (Nünning). It is, however, a specific type of first person that can be defined as the essayistic 'I', which is the only certain non-fictional marker of the discourse (Gallerani 191). This self-reflexive comment closes the circle pointing to the textuality of what has been read. It is a metanarrative intervention which destroys aesthetic illusion.

In "Peonies", therefore, we may read resistance in several ways. The first is not explicitly referring to the pandemic. Not engaging with the overwhelming news discourse that was taking place in those days and choosing, instead, to touch on the topic of patriarchal misogyny whose internalisation on the part of women is only a stratum of a broader issue. Smith then adds a layer of complexity: on the one hand, we read resistance in the form of a rebellion to societal norms in the story she is telling about her thoughts on patriarchy when she was younger. On the other, the initial moment of wanting to be in control of her own narrative is symptomatic of what has then become a way of considering the profession of writing: an act of control over words on a page, because writers

take this largely shapeless bewilderment and pour it into a mould of their own devising. Writing is all resistance. Which can be handsome, and sometimes even a useful, activity—on the page. But, in my experience, turns out to be a pretty hopeless practice for real life. In real life, submission and resistance have no predetermined shape. (Smith 5)

The shift towards the idea of writing serves as a reminder of the fact that a writer may bend reality turning a tulip into a peony, but then, certain "seasons", as Smith terms them, may render us more inclined and open, as it were, to submit to the external force of life. This stepping back shows how the essay allows the freedom to reconsider and explore opinions and thoughts without having to adhere to a unique point of view from beginning to end.

The peculiar aspect of "Peonies" is that it shows resistance in multiple and complex ways. There is, as discussed above, Smith's personal decision of not overtly writing about the pandemic and its effects on her. And there is her story about resisting the way the patriarchal society has set specific times for women by controlling the way she spoke about herself. The latter is directly related to Smith's own way of considering writing as a controlling and bending reality, thus having the freedom to choose what to say and what to think. This way of considering writing as resistance, to conclude, closes the circle pointing back to what was identified as external resistance.



SHATTERED ATTENTION AND CARE

"We Need an End to Male Authoritarian Ignorance" is the first title of Deborah Levy's essay, dated 27 April 2020, which was then changed to "Eating Cherries in the Park". A very strong, self-sufficient, political declaration that is further explained by the subheading: "the novelist on domestic violence, gender bias and the power structures that still need to be broken down after the Covid-19 crisis" (penguin.co.uk).

The text opens with a self-reflexive observation of herself writing and saying that her "concentration is shattered". To her, lack of attention and focus are things to account for; as a writer they are not "a small matter". The semantic thread throughout the text, one may argue, is that of attention. She shifts from her attention to the importance of the attention of ambulance drivers on whom lives often depend, to being grateful to those whose attention has generated the "best ideas". She momentarily interrupts this first thread to observe that:

[...] the coronavirus is often compared to fighting a war. People are dying, our mortality is threatened, borders are closed, we are not free to travel, we are unable to work, our children are missing school. If this is like war, it is no way to live. Perhaps we are now better equipped to understand that people fighting and fleeing wars are shattered in every way. Yet, the mainstream populist narrative for millions of distressed people fleeing from war zones was hostile in the extreme. Many of the right-wing political leaders who were complicit with this populism are now tasked with looking after our collective well-being and survival. We are in the care of men (and a few of their female consorts) who are ideologically opposed to this kind of caring and much more skilled at the politics of hostility. What's the point of being skilled at hostility?

We have to change the way we coexist with each other. (Levy)

Her tone is strong and her sentences are sharp. A few lines below she resumes the thread of attention:

There was already an emergency before the emergency. There was already a lack of attention before our attention was shattered. If we don't want to better understand the ways in which pandemics are linked to climate change and loss of biodiversity, we will have to give up our lives for the current global male authoritarian passion for ignorance. (Levy)

In this short piece semantic cohesion is built through the repetition of certain words such as "attention", "shattered" and "ignorance", creating a clear chain of thoughts. In closing her essay Levy states her perspective:

I believe our main project is to educate ourselves out of this ignorance. When the pandemic is over and we can shout in the streets again, it would be hopeful if men everywhere were to organise a global, male-only demonstration against domestic violence, which has been rampant during lockdown. The challenge would be to give your attention to finding ways to present the idea that it is un-manly to attack women in their homes, or anywhere else for that matter. This is connected to the ways in which it is also un-manly to attack the planet and the habitats and bodies of animals, or to believe that caring for others is a feminine preoccupation.



After all, women have had to give their attention to these matters for most of our lives. We would have much preferred to eat cherries in the park. (Levy)

The theme of the pandemic is expanded upon by referring to how domestic violence has increased in numbers, and Levy associates that violence to a broader, more endemic violence. She questions the sense of humanity. The word “un-manly” has indeed a gendered connotation, but it is always possible to question, instead, whether it is un-humanly to avoid considering caring as a core value of one’s life. She touches on the issue of care; a topic the humanities have recently been engaging with. Interestingly, there is a relation between care and attention, which in a pandemic begins to shatter, as Levy and Senior both observe. The pandemic has intensified a phenomenon which has been in place for some time and which Nancy Fraser defined as the “crisis of care” (Fraser 2016). Fraser sheds light on the current situation by outlining how the history of capitalism has subjugated social reproduction to market production, and how over the centuries, care—intended as all the activities of child rearing, caring for the elderly, what has been defined as the sphere of domesticity—has become commodified, and “relocated” to lower class workers. Her systemic and general analysis, which dialogues with feminist leftist thinking, aims at starting to reconsider the current social order. Simply put, the sphere of care has historically been relegated to women, with the added negative value of subjection and inferiority of care work compared to production work. And in the twenty-first century, when women have been assimilated in the paid workforce, care has become a privilege of those who can afford outsourcing those tasks in order to be the second of a two-earner family.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated this division; it highlighted how those who had class privilege could be the ones able to manage their kids at home. If care, as a notion, has been feminized, and within a patriarchal society as ours still it is associated with weakness, no wonder that masculine behaviours are associated with hostility. Levy’s plea is to stop considering caring for the planet and for others as a sign of weakness. On the contrary, one could add, it should be regarded as a strength. Caring for our social and physical environment ensures its survival in a better state, and as a consequence, our very own survival. When Levy writes: “We have to educate ourselves out of this ignorance”, she is making a claim as to rewrite the gender narratives we have so long been exposed to. Despite the brevity, her essay is imbued with feminist thinking. Her references and influences are not overtly quoted, but may be easily retraced by looking at her other works such as *Things I Don’t Want to Know* (2013) or *The Cost of Living* (2018) where she quotes Virginia Woolf, Marguerite Duras, and Simone De Beauvoir. Altogether, the individual feeling of loss and disorientation that being in lockdown created, has led to reflection on the concept of attention itself. Attention and care are as inevitably related: it takes attention and focus in order to take care of the sick; it takes attention and focus in order to feel caring of one’s own writing. Without caring, writing cannot take place.

In “Eating Cherries in The Park”, Levy was able to create a space of resistance by bringing to the fore concepts such as attention and care, by overtly calling readers to action, all with the literary quality of her imagery and style.



INTERPRETING THE WORLD ONE WORD AT A TIME

For Olive Senior writing has become a “pandemic”. She realises that she spent her time during lockdown writing and crossing out words. The reference to crossing out words is also a play on actually doing crossword puzzles that are scattered all over her house, as well as a clear indication of the two main things that practically happen when writing: writing and erasing, going back. Interestingly, the act of crossing out refers to the materiality of striking a word with pen or pencil on paper, and therefore calls forward the materiality of this act, even though she does not mention whether as a writer she writes on paper or on screen. The focus here is on the relationship between the physical act of writing and the friction words on a page create—represented metaphorically, in a way, by the act of “crossing words out”, editing oneself, thinking over. It is the other hand, the one not writing, which is able to interrupt the work and is in a sense responsible for the editing phase of the writing process. In this activity lies the mastery of the writer (Blanchot 25).

As discussed previously, “Cross Words in Lockdown” begins with the perception of the time Senior spent, or rather, that she didn’t spend, because it was gone. Nonetheless, she filled this time doing crosswords: “I’m interested in the framing of the clues and my own challenge to correctly fill in the answer” (Senior, “Cross Words”). Framing the clues is reading the signs of the outside world in relation to which we challenge ourselves, and to which we relate. She writes of when she got stuck the moment she heard the news. Just like Levy, she was unable to concentrate; so she decided to give herself something to do. The title she chose plays with language punning on cross / words—to be read also as angry words, words that express irritation and discontent with what is happening. What is appealing is how Senior builds up the text leading into her main point, which is the acute observation of how language calls for poetry. To resume the thread provided by Levy, it is the attention to language that made Olive Senior start noticing the appearance of new words and the shifting meaning of others. She started to collect them and gave herself the assignment of writing a poem using a word for each letter of the alphabet:

I thought, what am I supposed to do with this? I decided that I would write a brief poem utilising these words, one for each letter of the alphabet. This gave me the focus I desired and in no time at all I had written quite a few, in no particular order, simply in response to whatever the word or phrase evoked. (Senior, “Cross Words”)

Barthes’s observation of a writer’s will to write—which implies the presence of an object that he terms as the phantom form (Barthes, *Préparation*)—may be extended beyond the novel. Senior is showing her will to write, and the objects in her case are both the poems she decided to write and the essay where we read about them. There is a necessity of writing, a tension towards an absoluteness of the essence of writing. “I felt a sense of urgency, that this was something that would be here and gone in a moment, so I needed to post a poem a day [...]”. The working of a writer’s mind, as it



comes across Senior's words, is deeply rooted in the desire to write—what Blanchot calls "tyrannical prehension" (Blanchot 25).

Further down in her text, Senior exposes the tension drawing her towards the act of writing:

The first poems were obvious ones, reflecting the words then current—'F for Flattening (the Curve)' was the first, followed by 'Mask', 'Social Distancing', 'Hand', 'Quarantine'. I wanted not simply to record but to interrogate what was happening and my response to it, to use poetry the way it can function at its utilitarian best: offering ways of seeing, of examining, of challenging complacency, and of contextualising the current situation within broader life considerations. (Senior, "Cross Words")

She has a feeling of urgency and wants to interrogate and memorialise what was happening. What she wants to do is "interpret the world [...] one word at the time" (Senior, "Cross Words") and try to put things into perspective. Strikingly, this word seems to be central to what is happening right now. The function of writing is to try to make sense of the world. The literary mind, though, does not do it through the soundness of a logical argument, but with the purposive movement of sentences (Atkins 67-68) and the interweaving of themes through the emotion that a literary text conveys without putting the other function of an essay—tackling an argument or topic—aside. Olive Senior's essay, as well as the other two, are an example of how literature can be political. In a 2013 keynote speech at the Edinburgh's World Writers' Conference, Senior addressed this question with clarity: "[t]he writer is someone who has no choice but to be engaged with society, which means political engagement" (Senior, "Political"). And she cannot but insist on wanting to resist the shock of the assassination of George Floyd, an event which had a strong media resonance, as many may remember. It is worth reporting the entire passage:

I thought this was simply going to be an exercise about COVID-19 and its impact. That once I had covered all the letters of the alphabet I would end it. But, I was to discover, one never runs out of words though one can run out of breath. For suddenly in the midst of a pandemic, there is this irruption into the narrative, a panic, if you will, a shortness of breath.

With three words 'I can't breathe' spoken over and over by a man held down by a policeman kneeling on his neck, the tone of everything changed. George Floyd's last words were more than an ominous conjunction of a disease that took one's breath away and the end game of a breath-taking sickness—racial hatred—deeply rooted in history. It could be viewed as synchronicity, as Jung described it, 'the unexpected parallelism between psychic and physical events'. (Senior, "Cross Words")

Here too, the chain of thought becomes visible through the repetition and different collocations of the word "breath", which is telling of a viral pandemic which mainly affects the respiratory system. A writer like her "never runs out of words", and the massive exposure to such an abundance of new and repurposed lexicon is almost asphyxiating. However, one can "run out of breath", and Floyd's assassination interrupted the narrative creating a suspension, a "shortness of breath". His words, as Olive Senior interprets, are a manifestation of the connection between a "disease that



takes one's breath away" and a "breath-taking sickness". Senior's choice of dealing with the theme of racial hatred and violence intertwined with reflections on the pandemic is, as suggested by these passages, her way of resisting.

The way a writer can contribute is by creating a counter narrative or drawing attention towards events and highlighting the fact that such acts of violence are not episodic, but that any moment is connected in time. An artist feels that "more mediated right now", she perceives the distance of time, allowing her to put things into perspective and overcome the lack of distance of the extremely contemporary:

The poems forced me to think about consequences; the demonstrations have made me focus on the moment, reinforcing the notion that I am living in history. This has always been my approach anyway, seeing history not simply as a record of the past but as an infolding into the continuous present. (Senior, "Cross Words")

In a 2015 interview, Judith Butler explained the relevance of the expression "Black Lives Matter". The idea that a Black Life should matter is only apparently obvious, as it "has not yet been historically realized" (Yancy and Butler). It demands equality, and creates a connection with the history of slavery and of a police system which can too easily "take away a black life in a flash all because some officer perceives a threat" (Yancy and Butler). Because for historical reasons Black Lives have been devalued, when "Black Lives Matter" is uttered, Butler explains, there is a will to "initiate a set of consequences" (Butler). When a Black Life makes this claim, "[t]he performative act of the self—the speech act—is also a way of asserting that self and its value" (Butler). Thus, speech acts are ways of re-signifying the perception of a people, a reminder, once more, of the relevance of words. However, as Olive Senior explains, literature is different from propaganda or journalism: "[t]he difference lies not in what we write but in the how" (Senior, "Political").

Senior's essay is also a metatextual reflection on her own work as a poet, and she asks herself:

What I can contribute to the discourse is lived experience filtered through a poet's perspective. Language is my only tool. Perhaps saying this diminishes me in some people's eyes. Yet the deeds we perform are often shaped by words. Some not fully conscious but rising subliminally from the depths of our being to be expressed, for instance, in the punishment of the black body. Cross words leading to gross actions. The unsaid is silence. Black Lives Matter is something said that shouldn't need to be said. But it has opened a world of action in its saying. Who knew that words could unleash so much power? (Senior, "Cross Words")

This rhetorical question, which is exemplary of her awareness of the power of language and of the power of making people aware—of what is happening around them—is an additional indicator of resistance.

For Olive Senior the act of writing serves both as external, extratextual resistance and as internal resistance. In one way, memorialising a moment as the pandemic by foregrounding the power of words, and in another, drawing the attention to the fact that acts of violence over Black Bodies are obscure areas of the present that are well-rooted in history on which literature can shed some light.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

The essays presented in this paper exemplify how, when political and social events spread into literature, there is a nuanced language of presence (Barthes, *Degree Zero* 26) and writing becomes an act of resistance. This phrase has become a *leitmotif* to express, in a sense, political engagement. That is to say, the moment one decides to present their thought to the public, “each subject is led to situate, to mark, to position itself intellectually, which means: politically” (Barthes, *Grain* 6). Being active in the social debate means, for example, donating royalties to charity, as signalled in the paratexts in Zadie Smith’s volume *Intimations* and on the Penguin website: both being material examples of what literature can do in times of crisis. Literature is not only solace, diversion, or escape; it is also deep thinking, brain-picking of themes and motives, *mise-en-page* of collective obsessions and collective traumas.

Therefore, these essays, as literary forms, enact resistance in two main ways. The first, is by being the products of three literary, artistically mature minds, who are able to create a connected disjunction with their time through writing. As seen, writing in itself is the first type of resistance, and it is also the way in which Smith, Levy, and Senior are able to create the perspective needed to overcome the trap of the lack of distance discussed previously. Resistance, though, is also an intrinsic feature of the essayistic mode of thought which forces the reader to slow down and follow the chain of thoughts that creates the internal or thematic resistance. “Peonies”, “Eating Cherries in the Park”, and “Cross Words in Lockdown” overtly resist the hegemonizing discourse of fighting a war against this virus by reminding us of other ‘viruses’: misogyny and “male authoritarian ignorance”—to use Levy’s strong title—which are modes of thinking, being and behaving, that have only led to violence, as Olive Senior also has shown. It is in the choice of exploring these other topics, these other spaces, that we can see resistance.

To conclude, through the essay form which exposes the thinking process, the writers chose to touch upon obscure but present issues of our contemporary society, and Zadie Smith, Deborah Levy, and Olive Senior are examples of contemporary thinkers who hold their gaze on their own time and are “able to write by dipping [their] pen in the obscurity of the present” (Agamben 44).

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