RSAJournal 33/2022

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The Provisional Utopia and the State of Exception: On *Ceremony* and *The Stand*[1]

No sword, no gun, no warlike drum {…}
For we know too well, these are keys to hell
And we march with empty hands.
(John Brunner, "The Easter Marchers")

This essay arises from some affinities in the plot and in the ending of two late-1970s US novels, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978). In *Ceremony*, a sign that the healing process may have been successful for Tayo, the protagonist, is his refusal to assault a fellow veteran and friend, just as PTSD-stricken as he is, even though the latter is about to commit murder:

> It had been a close call. The witchery had almost ended the story according to its plan; Tayo had almost jammed the screwdriver into Emo's skull the way the witchery had wanted, savoring the yielding bone and membrane as the steel ruptured the brain. Their deadly ritual for the autumn solstice would have been completed by him. He would have been another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud; and the Army doctors would say that the indications had been there all along […]. At home the people would blame liquor, the Army, and the war, but the blame on the whites would never match the vehemence the people would keep in their own bellies, reserving the greatest bitterness and blame for themselves, for one of them they could not save. (253)

Tayo's and his community's healing will be predicated on the rejection of violence, even when confronting a direct threat. After the mythical and metaphorical "witchery" that was troubling the Pueblos has been defeated,

a meaningful life can be envisaged, although no one can say for how long. The final line of the novel's conclusive poem/chant is, "It is dead for now" (261).

Two thirds of the way into King's post-apocalyptic *The Stand*, we are presented with a town-meeting of the Boulder Free Zone, a group of plague survivors from all corners of the country who have gathered in Colorado and are trying to oppose another group apparently bent on completing the world's destruction. Facing the emergence of acts of violence, and aware that the forces of evil and war have infiltrated the Free Zone, they opt for establishing a judiciary system. Only the rule of law can bring about meaningful community-building, as two of the characters argue:

> We've got a melting-pot society, a real hodge-podge, and there are going to be all kinds of conflicts and abrasions. I don't think any of us want a frontier society here in Boulder." (507)

> *But law enforcement without a court system isn't justice*. It's just vigilantism, rule by the fist. [...] it behooves us to make safety and constitutionality synonymous as quickly as we can. We need to think about a courts system. (508)

Here as well, after thwarting the forces of nuclear and supernatural evil, survivors can begin the work of reconstruction, without guarantees about the possible reappearance of "the devil in men's brain," whether it be ecodisaster or war. Still, a "season of rest" is awaiting the characters and the planet (817).

What I would like to do is follow some implications of this rhetorical pairing in both novels. On the one hand, the rejection of counter-violence is *the* premise for the act of rebuilding; on the other hand, the rebuilding itself is not taken as definitive, but rather as a hope for a better chance should they be confronted once again with a similar challenge.

Both novels stage precisely a refusal to address critical situations and sites of emergency through extraordinary measures that would, once and for all, disrupt both personal selfhood and collective bonds. No matter how provisionally and tentatively, some degree of unexpected innovation in coping strategies is needed. At a time in which US society and culture were exploring utopian longings, in different formal frameworks, these

novels are strongly engaging with the metaphors of the mythical and the supernatural in ways that challenge commonplace assumptions about these metaphors as forms of regretful yearning for a lost Gemeinschaft. It is in an alliance between the metaphysical and the historical that the promise of utopia may lie.

Exceptions?

As I write in Italy in 2022, uses of the notion of the state of exception are becoming increasingly problematic, and perhaps it is time we asked ourselves whether Giorgio Agamben is really to be considered the best advocate of his own notion as stated in his book *State of Exception*. This is why the focus of this essay will be less on discussing Agamben's work than on the novels under consideration.

In recent times in Italy, state-of-exception rhetoric has been voiced by climate-change deniers and later by anti-vaxxers, Agamben himself engaging in a sympathetic dialogue with the latter, granting them a visibility on the Left that is unknown elsewhere. In statements that appeared in the blogosphere, his current view foregrounds what may have appeared implicit in his book, that is, far more than a simple blurring of the distinction between the rule of law and the state of exception. Rather, it would seem that the rule of law is a suspension – ultimately fictitious and delusional – of the inherently unchecked work of sovereignty.

Nevertheless, this paper will assume that accepting the notion of the state of exception as a suspension of the rule of law does not entail such a blurring. If we are troubled by breaches in the *état de droit*, even systemic ones, our (self-)interrogation need not necessarily be followed by the conclusion that there is no such thing as democracy, and never can be.

Originally published in 2003, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Patriot Act, Agamben's *State of Exception* was a guide that showed many of his readers the deep roots of what was leading the US government and (his) its allies towards blatant violations of civil liberties and deprivations of citizenship at home and abroad. Its predecessors were *Homo Sacer*'s investigation into collective rituals of salvific scapegoating (expanding

on René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*) and *Remnants of Auschwitz*'s heart-wrenching reading of what was at stake in the attempt at erasing the existence itself of Nazi camps (building on the accounts of Primo Levi and other survivors).

Rather than emphasizing the Nazi history of Carl Schmitt, Agamben's overall source of inspiration in *State of Exception*, I would note that his only specific reference to US political philosophy is Clinton Rossiter's 1948 *Constitutional Dictatorship*, a fairly extreme text in Cold War conservative thought, that had just been reprinted in 2002, precisely as a legitimation of post-9/11 legislation. Rossiter was arguing for the *necessity* of willful straining in the texture of the nation's legality, and grounding this necessity in his interpretation of Presidential actions, not only in the World Wars but also in the Civil War and in Roosevelt's New Deal. In other words, Rossiter construed American history as a series of showdowns of the executive's powers, an updated Burkeanism which left no space for politics, especially not for opposition to Southern racial supremacy and anti-welfare interests. Above all, Rossiter was presenting a highly exceptionalist inevitable, unchangingly self-identical view of Americanness.

In *State of Exception*, this "America" becomes a synecdoche for the modern democratic nation-state through some glosses on Derrida's "Force of Law" (ch. 2). Derrida's argument is that the rule of law's coming into existence must acknowledge (and usually denies) that it originally needed to exclude something from its own perimeter (democracy needed to establish a "divide" from the *ancien régime*), that there must have been something irreducible to institutionalized dialogue prior to the beginning of the dialogue itself (13, 24).[2] Agamben's reading (very much informed by Schmitt) is instead that the foundational bootstrapping "force" shows that pure violence (with Nazi rule a limit-case and nothing more) is the truth lurking underneath each and every democratic claim, turning Derrida's aporias into full and terminal invalidation. Through Rossiter's America, Agamben is presenting an inevitable, unchangingly self-identical view of modern history.

There is something circular in an analysis in which "the sovereign," defined as that which can bring about the state of exception, is *in principle* the only figure granted agency. As a result, the state of exception has

become the opposite of an exception. Are there alternatives? Have there been historical alternatives in America (or elsewhere)? To historicize Agamben falls beyond the scope of this essay: a starting point would be the analyses of the discourse of defeat and hopelessness in the mainstream Italian Left, what David Forgacs's 2011 essay "The End of Political Futures?" calls an "anti-utopian retrenchment" that took place especially from the 1970s on, but that could be included within the tradition surveyed in Enzo Traverso's *Left-Wing Melancholia* (ranging from politics and philosophy to film and art). In Italian literary theory, a crucial early mention of Schmitt's rhetoric of "exception" occurs in the 1980s, in Franco Moretti's *Signs Taken for Wonders* (253), in a discussion of the Left's fascination for revelations of crisis and disruption over everything else; this fascination ends up belittling "the weight and memories of the past, the open-ended conflicts of the present, the projects and hopes of the future" (260), and only manages to imagine history as leading to tragic endings (261). This is why the appeal to "the power of mourning" and grief in Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004) reads like both a supplement and a retort to Agamben's work, building on his notions and at the same time envisaging, through affect and empathy, a counter-agency to his fatalistic detachment.

The essay's epigraph comes from a folk song recorded by Pete Seeger in 1961, one of two Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament anthems written in 1958 for the first Aldermaston-London Easter-day march by John Brunner, a young UK writer who in the 1960s would author some landmark works in the dystopian genre. Even more than a plea for nonviolence, his lines (in a verse framing the song) were voicing the need for an oppositional agency capable of avoiding the trap of authority as violence.

In different ways Silko's and King's novels, strongly shaped by post-1960s political awareness (from pacifism to counterculture), are a refusal to accept solutions akin to Schmitt's and Agamben's state of exception, that are shown as inadequate to the task of rebuilding a sense of community in the aftermath of radical crises. Or, in other words, they include utopia within the picture.

Ends

Among multitudinous definitions, British sociologist Ruth Levitas has described the "method" of utopia as an "imaginary reconstitution of society" ("Imaginary"). Her use of this phrase has obvious reverberations with these novels. In both, the world has metaphorically and/or literally come to its end.

In *Ceremony* the sense of history is conveyed through a continuing mutual echoing between different timeframes, narrated nonsequentially, concerning the individual, the collective, and the mythological levels. In the first pages, we see the protagonist Tayo, of mixed Laguna Pueblo and white origins, move from the endless rain of the Philippine jungle during World War Two (11-12) to the "no more rain" of the "mythical" drought (13) and of the actual drought occurring in New Mexico. Both his sense of self and his community must find a way out of a waste land.

After he comes back from the war, American military authorities try to cure him of his "battle fatigue" in the total institution of the veterans' hospital by medically wiping out his personality. Agamben's "bare life" is indeed the best interpretive tool for a program of annihilation of his selfhood: "visions and memories of the past did not penetrate there, and he had drifted in colors of smoke, where there was no pain, only pale, pale gray of the north wall by his bed. Their medicine drained memory out of his thin arms and replaced it with a twilight cloud between his eyes" (15).

A promise of full citizenship was part of Tayo's and his fellow Native veterans' enrolment. "Anyone can fight for America", the Army recruiter told him and his buddies (64), and he had believed "he was one of them" (62), but now all the old racist prejudices are hitting him hard: America has betrayed the promise (41-42), and all of them opt for the desperate self-cure of alcohol abuse. When Tayo dances with the Mexican woman called Night Swan, who will become his lover, he feels like "a living dead man" (85) – his only feeling is alienation.

In *The Stand*, the very political landscape of nation-wide deindustrialization that opens the novel soon gives way to the worldwide decimation of humanity caused by a plague spawned by military research, a "superflu" everyone has nicknamed "Captain Trips."

As the novel mixes or juxtaposes genres, moving from realism to science fiction and then to metaphysical-religious fantasy, it gathers together a polyphony of viewpoints and a sophisticated encyclopedia of cultural allusions, from literature to rock music, in order to approach and challenge many faces of national self-confidence, from expansionist rhetoric to racial conflicts. King's America is sharply divided, and racism is foregrounded throughout the book. "

Here too, the end of American civilization is a betrayal of its promises: "most of them were crying, crying for what was lost and bitter, the runaway American dream, chrome-wheeled, fuel-injected, and stepping out over the line" (486). In the allusion to the iconic opening of Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run," the American dream has run away for good, jettisoned together with the world. The awareness that there will be no more stepping over the line of ecodisaster will guide the Boulder group and its projects for rebuilding a community.

We are caught between the "pull of [...] two opposing dreams" (395), one of them says, and so the Boulder survivors plan a social organization that might provide cohesion and permanence. Numbers are small, and the first thought is the colonial township model. Still, when they discuss the possibility to ""re-create America. Little America" (397), or at least "ratify the *spirit* of the old society" (398), this group of lower-class survivors (the loftiest member is probably a sociology professor with some Frankfurt-school influence) acknowledges that the two opposing dreams come from the minds of two characters who embody very different versions of the national history. On the one hand, Mother Abagail comes from a desolate part of Southern Nebraska, which nevertheless "was *America*, lying here like a huge discarded tin can with a few forgotten peas rolling around in the bottom" (272), a very old woman (309) whose proud biography recapitulates a century of history of African Americans, from the early decades of segregation through the Depression, telling what may amount to a neo-slave narrative; her biography begins after the Civil War, in a self-presentation that at least on two occasion echoes Sojourner Truth (319, 338), the story of a singer and farmer, whose family farm ("No small trick for a black man," 343) is gradually eroded by the Depression, and she remains with the very small plot of land she has been living on for decades:

"I have always dreamed, and sometimes my dreams have come true" (337). In line with the horror genre, her dreams have a supernatural content, and now mostly concern the need to organize against a man called Randall Flagg, whose elusive identity plays manipulatively with race ("In New York [...] his claim that he was a black man had never been disputed, although his skin was very light"; 121), the latest incarnation of a long series of evil presences, endlessly seeking for violence-mongering chances (including the KKK; 119), who instead has been rallying in Las Vegas a group of misfits with the purpose of completing the work of destruction by getting hold of atomic weapons.

Bomb

Just as the Pueblo legend and rituals presented in *Ceremony*'s "poetry" interludes provide mythical interpretations to the events in everyday history – with witches, deities, and supernatural beings bestowing usable and sharable wisdom to the community – Tayo is aware that his experience is something the community has never met, from the massacres he has witnessed to the Bomb. The alienation is not only individual but collective, and the community's old medicine man Ku'oosh can no longer help people cope:

> In the old way of warfare, you couldn't kill another human being in battle without knowing it, without seeing the result [...]. But the old man would not have believed white warfare—killing across great distances without knowing who or how many had died. It was all too alien to comprehends, the mortars and big guns [...], the old man would not have believed anything so monstrous. Ku'oosh would have looked at the dismembered corpses and the heat-flash outlines, where human beings had evaporated, and the old man whould have said something close and terrible had killed those people. Not even oldtime witches killed like that. (36-37)

All through, we have the lure of mindless violence, to the point of imagining a search for redress by raping white women (55).

Later on, during one of the veterans' drunken wanderings across New

Mexico, Tayo realizes he is not far from the spot of the Trinity Site nuclear experiments at White Sands, and from Los Alamos:

> he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid. From the jungles of his dreaming he recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices [...]; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From then on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter. (246).

In *Ceremony*, the death brought about by war and violence cannot be limited to single individuals or groups, all times and places joined together in the nuclear doom (from *homo sacer* to *humanitas sacra?*).[3]

In *The Stand*, the ideology of the Las Vegas gang of destruction also builds on a shared humanity, but without any feeling of concern or empathy. Final destruction is a necessary act of cleansing in the speech imagined by one of Flagg's fifth columnists in the Boulder community:

> *Ladies and gentlemen,* [...] *I am here to tell you that, in the words of the old song, the fundamental things apply as time go by. Like Darwin.* [...] *America is dead, dead as a doornail, dead as Jacob Marley and Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper and Henry S Truman, but the principles first propounded by Mr. Darwin are still very much alive. While you are meditating on the beauties of constitutional rule, spare a little time to meditate on Randall Flagg* [...]. *I doubt very much if he has any time to spare for such fripperies as public meetings and ratifications and discussions* [...] *in the best liberal mode. Instead he has been concentrating on the basics, on his Darwin, preparing to wipe the great Formica counter of the universe with your dead bodies* [...]*, he may be searching eagerly for someone with a pilot's credentials so he can start overflights of Boulder in the best Francis Gary Powers tradition. While we debate the burning question of who will be on the Street Cleaning Committee, he has probably already seen to the creation of the Gun Cleaning Committee, not to mention mortars, missile sites, and possibly even germ warfare centers.* (540-41; italics in the original)

Here, King may have had in mind the burgeoning tradition of right-wing survivalist fiction which, in science fiction, would produce works such as Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *Lucifer's Hammer* (1977) and Martin Caidin's *Exit Earth* (1987), using scenarios of global apocalypse to fantasize about the inevitable end of democracy.

Definitiveness and inevitability appear to be among the main components of the lure of witchery and warlike dreams – sovereignty fulfilling its mandate, free of mourning.

Textualities

In different ways, it is in their approaches to textuality that the novels challenge discourses of ineluctability and conclusiveness. In *Ceremony*, the relation between the orality of the Native "tradition" and the written dimension of "contemporary" Euro-American culture is neither opposition nor supercession. At least some, if not all, of the poetry sections are clearly new; above all, as Alessandro Portelli ("Unfinished") argues, the oral culture's strength lies in its ability to turn the impalpable vulnerability of the voice, always apparently bound to disappear, into an ever-changing presence capable of affecting the apparently unchangeable force of domination and oppression.[4]

For the pre-war Tayo, everything was made up of "stories," capable of overcoming "barriers" (19). These are the stories told and recited by the traditional medicine man Ku'oosh, who tries to help him after his release from the hospital: "He spoke softly, using the old dialect full of sentences that were involuted with explanations of their own origins, as if nothing the old man said were his own but all had been said before and he was only there to repeat it" (34).

Ku'oosh is aware that "this world is fragile," as he tells Tayo. Just like death in Tayo's epiphany, in his world no life can exist in a vacuum, not even in myth, always dialogically and ecocritically connected to all other lives, nonhuman lives included:

> The word he chose to express "fragile" was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process [...]. It took a long time to explain the fragility and

> intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. This was the responsibility that went with being human [...], the story behind each word must be told so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; and this demanded great patience and love. (35-36)

Eventually, in Gallup, NM, Tayo meets Old Betonie, an innovative, synchretic medicine man, who has hoarded books and newspapers, almanacs and phone books, Coke cans and other apparently useless gadgets, "[k]eeping track of things" (121) and the modern world:

> The people nowadays have an idea about the ceremonies. They think the ceremonies must be performed exactly as they always been done [...]. But long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only [...] in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants. You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing.
>
> [...] after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong.
>
> [...] things which don't shift and grow are dead things. [...] Otherwise we won't make it. We won't survive. That's what the witchery is counting on: that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph, and the people will be no more. (126)

Betonie does not reject Ku'oosh's sense of responsibility and love; what he rejects is the commonplace expectation of the ceremony as mindless repetition. In his innovative approach, he grasps for strength and agency *within*, not against, historical change. Even though (as Tayo says) the war is the white folks' war, old Betonie stresses a *shared* responsibility. Once again, the relentless monologue of Agamben's sovereign is supplemented – perhaps even stopped – by the counter-voice of Butler's mourners:

> "That is the trickery of the witchcraft [...]. They want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be

> ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place." (132)

Once recited and assimilated within the existing corpus of myths, all stories, including the witches' stories, are impossible to "call back." Later on, Tayo has an insight: "The destroyers had tricked the white people as completely as they had fooled the Indians" (204). This is why he, as representative of his community and (through the Bomb's witchery) all humanity, will not be fooled into further violence and will not embrace the state of exception.

The notion of textual instability applies in the most literal way to *The Stand*, beyond its cross-genre form and its own *roman-fleuve* length, itself a hint at inconclusiveness. After all, an important part of its acclaim lies in the accumulation of versions of a text that keeps changing over time. In this essay I refer to the first version, the one that made it famous. But there is as well a 1990 "complete and uncut" edition, that updated cultural allusions and reworked numerous scenes and characters. More alterations are to be found in the 1994 TV series, in the 1998-2002 comics adaptation, and most recently in a 2020 TV version (notably featuring Whoopi Goldberg as Mother Abagail), to all of which King collaborated in different authorial and supervisory capacities. Throughout, the reworking never ceases – and one sign is that the Wikipedia entry "List of *The Stand* Characters" often mixes storylines, falling for the "retconning" fallacy, privileging most recent versions and interpreting all the novel's events in the light of those rewrites.

Textual boundaries are blurred in the citationist reveling as well, a musical and literary repertory underlying almost every passage, an encyclopedia that sometimes complicates interpretation, starting with the book's title (cf. Proietti "*The Stand*", which also mentions some of the existing, and fairly scant, scholarship). Unless, of course, someone belongs to the party of destruction: the character who invoked Darwin as a legitimation of unchecked force reads books differently from everyone else. Rather than sources of inspiration in dialogue with countless other texts, he treats all his readings (from popular fiction to classics such as

Milton, Melville, Hawthorne, and Thomas Wolfe) as doctrine and purely utilitarian tools: "The bricks of language. […] Worlds. Magic. Life and immortality. *Power*" (660-61).

The Provisional Utopia

Power (and the search for power, and the exercise of power) building on irrevocable stability vs. powerlessness (and the quest for agency against all odds) turning precariousness into hopeful open-endedness: across philosophies and literary genres, these are the poles of the tension that allows utopia into the picture.

If war and violence are not to be taken as the only solution, some other conclusion must be envisaged. As Tom Moylan writes, the utopian genre made a comeback in connection with the utopianism of the Sixties' movements, both of them rejecting all dogmatism and embracing, as an earlier book by Levitas summarizes, Ernst Bloch's famous formula of utopia as the "not yet," assuming "the material world is essentially unfinished, the future is indeterminate," present and future "in a constant state of process" in which "there are always many possible futures," none of which constitutes a "necessary development from potentiality to actuality" (Levitas, *Concept* 87). In its new version, utopia is the opposite of inevitability, always open to further change, for Fredric Jameson a form of desire that, according to Darko Suvin, presents not unimprovable perfection but a "more perfect world" than our own (*Metamorphoses* 49) – a world that "operates deictically" (37), an ever-shifting "horizon" rather than a clear-cut and accomplished site ("Locus").

In *Ceremony*, Tayo had something to build on: at the beginning of the novel, he remembers "the first time" he watched an enemy and saw "the man's skin was not much different from his own," this realization repeating itself before "corpses again and again" (7), until at some point he refused to execute Japanese prisoners, even after a direct order – hardly a moment of *ius in bello*. Tayo's notion of humanity as worth mourning for had all the time been opposing the idea of the state of exception within him.

The proof that old Betonie's "revised" ceremony has been successful is

the fact that Tayo, as I mentioned above, does not take part in yet another series of violent, murderous acts, and refuses to murder his old friend Emo even though the latter is breaking any social obligation. As he can start disseminating and integrating his own story within the reconstituted community, the final lines are poetry again, about "the whirling darkness" that "has come on itself. It keeps the witchery for itself". The final chant, repeated four times, is: "It is dead for now" (261).

In *The Stand*, plot complications lead to a climactic "holy fire," the "mushroom cloud" of an atom bomb, which only kills the Las Vegas group, after which the survivors can go home (760-69). This may of course be taken as a cop-out, with radiations and the supernatural fast disappearing from the picture. Or, on the other hand, it might also be said to play a meta-narrative role. The first sign of hope is the birth of a baby whose new abilities allow him to be free of the plague.

The community is now facing uncontrollable development, with the arrival of newcomers. With a larger population, the rebirth of weapons technology and eventually the apocalypse could someday become an option once again. The world will be "safe for a while" (807), although they all know that Flagg and what he stands for can still make a comeback.

In the final dialogue between the newborn baby's parents, the only option is "to postpone" dangerous decisions as long as possible (816). For a generation or two, the situation will not run the risk of becoming critical again, and the community's reconstruction is inseparable from the ecosphere's healing: "*Time enough for poor old mother earth to recycle itself a little. A season of rest*" (817; italics in the original). The allusion to the utopian genre is direct: the subtitle of William Morris's 1890s classic *News of Nowhere* was "an epoch of rest." The possible utopia of this ending won't be in the name of static certainty, nor will it be a return to the past. Improvement is now an obligation, but the season of rest will be a second opportunity: "Please… please learn the lesson. Let this empty world be your copybook," says the mother to her child. In the final lines, the father asks her "Do you think… do you think people ever learn anything?", and she keeps repeating "I don't know" (817).

Both novels include a *pars construens*, in which survivors (to) of literal and cultural world-shattering catastrophes try to imagine their future as *novum*. In contrast to scenarios of extraordinary measures that breach

rules of law and human dignity, these survivors envisage a reconstruction presented as inseparable from the ecosphere's healing, and above all as provisional – its self-doubt the evidence of a lasting awareness and grounds for utopian hope.

Notes

[1] An early version of this essay was presented in 2019 at the Utopian Studies Society conference, in Prato, Italy. I wish to thank Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan for the conversations.

[2] For an overall attempt to map the many discursive aporias in the early republic, cf. Proietti *Storie* (27 ff.).

[3] In this sense, I refer to Giorgio Mariani's notion of native American "post-tribal epic" (on Silko, cf. 81 ff.).

[4] For a general discussion of the implications in the interplay between oral and written discourses in US culture, I refer to Portelli's *The Text and the Voice*.

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