Annali di Ca' Foscari

Serie orientale

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Vol. 61 Supplemento, novembre 2025

Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Annali di Ca' Foscari
Serie orientale

Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Venice University Press
Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari
Dorsoduro 3246, 30123 Venezia
URL http://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/it/edizioni/riviste/annali-di-ca-foscari-serie-orientale/

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale

Rivista annuale

Redazione | Head office Università Ca' Foscari Venezia | Dipartimento di Studi sull'Asia e sull'Africa Mediterranea | Palazzo Vendramin dei Carmini | Dorsoduro 3462 - 30123 Venezia | Italia | annali.orientali@unive.it

Editore Edizioni Ca' Foscari | Dorsoduro 3246, 30123 Venezia, Italia | ecf@unive.it

Acknowledgments This special issue is the reflection and outcome of a three-year trilateral project *Sinology Networks: Interdisciplinary Spaces for China Studies at Villa Vigoni* (https://sinonet.hypotheses.org/, 2021-23) in which sixteen international sinologists from Italy, France, Germany, and Japan took part. We hereby want to thank the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and the Fondation maison des sciences de l'homme (FMSH) for their generous funding, as well as the numerous reviewers that have carefully read and commented the submitted papers. Finally, we are grateful for the financial support of the publication, which has been funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Professorship (Andrea Bréard) and the Goethe Universität Frankfurt (Iwo Amelung).

Certificazione scientifica delle Opere pubblicate da Edizioni Ca' Foscari: tutti i saggi pubblicati hanno ottenuto il parere favorevole da parte di valutatori esperti della materia, attraverso un processo di revisione anonima sotto la responsabilità del Comitato scientifico della rivista. La valutazione è stata condotta in aderenza ai criteri scientifici ed editoriali di Edizioni Ca' Foscari.
Scientific certification of the works published by Edizioni Ca' Foscari: all essays published in this volume have received a favourable opinion by subject-matter experts, through an anonymous peer review process under the responsibility of the Advisory board of the journal. The evaluations were conducted in adherence to the scientific and editorial criteria established by Edizioni Ca' Foscari.

Annali di Ca' Foscari
Serie orientale
Vol. 61 – Supplement – November 2025

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Table of Contents

URL https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/it/edizioni4/riviste/annali-di-ca-foscari-serie-orientale/2025/3/
DOI http://doi.org/10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2025/03

Metaphors:
Conceptualising Horizons of Meaning

edited by
Rebecca Ciattini, Wenxin Jin, Laura Locatelli,
Michele Pulini, Kesang Thakur, Claudia Zancan

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
Vol. 61 – Supplement – November 2025

Editors' Preface

Rebecca Ciattini
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Wenxin Jin
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia; Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, France

Laura Locatelli
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Michele Pulini
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia; The University of Passau, Germany

Kesang Thakur
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Claudia Zancan
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

At the core of human thought and expression lies the profound capacity of metaphor – the act of understanding one concept in terms of another. However, over the last decade, in response to the socio-political and ecological realities of the 'Anthropocene', disciplines like anthropology have also pointed at the limitations of human thought, highlighting its fundamental role in large scale planetary destruction. These critical enquiries into modes of thought beyond the human such as in Eduardo Kohn's path breaking work with indigenous communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon forests, challenged our perceptions about the 'field' of thinking and communication as the sole domain of humans.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2025/03/000

It is with such a renewed orientation of metaphors that we organised our PhD symposium, *Metaphors: Conceptualising Horizons of Meaning*, held from the 26th to the 28th of February 2024 at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. The present volume aims at exploring some of these perspectives. The symposium was the result of a collective endeavour by the doctoral candidates of the PhD in Asian and African Studies, XXXVIII cycle, at Ca' Foscari University of Venice: Rebecca Ciattini, Wenxin Jin, Cien Liang, Laura Locatelli, Michele Pulini, Michele Scarlassara, Kesang Thakur, and Claudia Zancan.

The intellectual premise of the symposium was to explore how the concept of "metaphor" is approached across a diverse spectrum of research fields. Building on the paradigm shift initiated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, which established metaphor not as a mere linguistic flourish but as a fundamental cognitive device, our intent was to map both its conceptual and material potentials. The call for papers invited scholars to investigate metaphors as a dynamic force: a tool for challenging dominant narratives, and shaping decolonial practices; an interpretive key to the material and visual cultures of the past; a political instrument that shapes identities and power relations; a lens through which reading the spaces we live in; and even a foundational component of the methodologies that disciplines use to understand themselves. The overarching goal, which this volume seeks to carry forward, was thus to foster an interdisciplinary dialogue exploring not only what metaphors are, but what they do—how they actively construct, contest, and define our conceptual horizons.

Hosted in the prestigious Aula Baratto at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, the organisational journey began in April 2023, with a call for papers that garnered an overwhelming response of over 100 abstracts from scholars worldwide. Guided by the core criteria of originality and thematic pertinence, the selection process aimed to cultivate a comprehensive overview that included contributions on China, Japan, the Indian Subcontinent, Iran, North Africa, South America, and Europe, among other regions. Moreover, alongside a broad, large-scale perspective and a mosaic of viewpoints on different regions of the world, one section of the conference was dedicated to the city of Venice. This part offered insight into how major themes related to the symposium's host city — including its representation in literature and cinema, its archaeology, and the impacts of climate change, among others — intertwine with metaphors and figurative language. The result was a rich and dynamic programme structured around eight thematic panels: *Metaphors We Live In: Entanglements of Spaces, Literature, and Art; Venice's Metaphorical Tapestry: Weaving Symbols and Stories from Stone to Sea; Rethinking Dominant Metaphors: The Politics and Poetics of*

Resistance; Unearthing Metaphors: Materialization of the Intangible in Archaeology, Art, and Museum Studies; Talking Magic and Religion Through the Power of Metaphors: Textuality, Materiality, and Gesture; More than Human Metaphors: Unravelling Nature, Narratives and Futurity; World Philology; and *Interpreting the World, Delving into the Self: Perception, Self-Perception, and Metaphors*. These were complemented by an introductory session, *Building the Linguistic Groundwork: Metaphors as a Lens to Understand Reality*. Each organiser also served as chair for the panel most aligned with their academic expertise, overseeing a total of 33 presentations. The three-day event was enriched by keynote lectures from four distinguished scholars: Mieke Bal (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands), Ernst van Alphen (Leiden University, Netherlands), James St. André (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, China), and Andrea Molesini (Writer, Italy). Their contributions provided not only a focused lens on the symposium's central theme but also a personal and cultural enrichment, demonstrating the diverse ways in which metaphors can be understood and articulated.

From the rich array of papers presented, this volume brings together a curated selection. In doing so, we have sought to feature contributions from across the thematic panels and to maintain a balanced representation of the diverse area studies showcased at the symposium. Our aim is to provide a collection that is not only a faithful reflection of the symposium, but also a cohesive and multifaceted exploration of metaphor.

We are honoured, therefore, that this collection opens with 'Inter-ships: Metaphors as encounters', an essay by our esteemed keynote speaker, Professor Mieke Bal. In it, she offers a compelling reconceptualisation of metaphor, returning to its etymological roots as an act of 'moving'. Proposing the active verb 'metaphoring' to describe the socially crucial activity of creating neologisms, Bal demonstrates how coining terms such as 'refugee-dom' can serve as a potent metaphor for changing our outlook on urgent social issues. Her chapter sets a powerful tone, immediately illustrating the real-world implications of how we conceptualise and deploy metaphors.

The act of 'metaphoring' that Professor Bal so powerfully articulates is a guiding thread for the contributions that follow. The chapters gathered here, introduced below in alphabetical order for the sake of clarity in this preface, take up this challenge across a diverse range of disciplines.

Alice Casalini's contribution, "The Art of Crossing Over: Aquatic Metaphors in Gandhāra", provides a compelling case study of metaphor extending beyond the textual into the visual and spatial realms. Seeking to bridge a gap between literary analysis and archaeology, Casalini investigates how the central Buddhist concept of liberation is articulated through aquatic visual metaphors in Gandhāran art.

Her argument is that the deliberate placement of such imagery within the transitive spaces of stūpas serves a distinct didactic and spiritual purpose. The chapter ultimately reveals how architecture itself can become a metaphorical medium, shaping a space that is not merely a background for devotion but an active participant in the religious experience of traversing towards enlightenment.

The volume also features Claudio Gebbia's "Chinese Neologisms and Metaphorical Potential in Pedagogy", which explores metaphor as the cognitive force behind linguistic innovation in contemporary China. Moving beyond mere classification, Gebbia provides an overview of how metaphorical structures drive the formation and diffusion of neologisms, especially those emerging from the digital sphere. He contends that these expressions do more than fill lexical gaps; they serve as concrete manifestations of conceptual metaphors and cognitive blends. Drawing on the foundational theories of Lakoff, Johnson, and Fauconnier, the chapter ultimately highlights the pedagogical relevance of neologisms. By unpacking their metaphorical origins, educators can offer students a powerful lens into the cognitive and cultural dimensions, reframing language acquisition not as rote memorisation but as an active engagement with the conceptual patterns that shape meaning.

Elsa Gios and Nabila Tavolieri's chapter interrogates three key concepts within postcolonial theory—'margin', 'centre', and 'resistance'. Drawing from critical interpretations of these concepts within Black feminist theory and decolonial theory, the authors challenge their dominant understandings as mere abstractions, instead, reframing the concepts as capable of driving concrete socio-political outcomes. Further, resistance is rendered tangible in the very act of writing specific 'field' encounters in two seemingly distinct research contexts—popular education in Bogotá, Colombia and antiracism in Switzerland—as poetic interjections. ConversA(c)tion is proposed as both a method and a form of resistance against hierarchical modes of knowledge production, and towards the collective affirming of knowledge as relational, situated and processual.

Sarah Puetzer's chapter offers a compelling example of how metaphors and figurative language serve as key tools for understanding space, and how, at the same time, physical space, particularly urban space, interacts with literature. She explores the work of contemporary Japanese poet Saihate Tahi, focusing especially on her immersive poetic spaces and the installation Shi no kasoku, which dynamically engages with the urban environment and reshapes readers' perceptions of the surrounding city. Drawing on the works of theorists of space such as Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and Herbert Marcuse, among others, Puetzer analyzes literary practices related to space by imagining a walk through

Saihate Tahi's installation. The author, then, explores Shi no kasoku as a site of resistance and highlights its political implications within an urban environment that is never neutral.

Tonio Savina's chapter provides a timely analysis of metaphor as a deliberate instrument of statecraft and diplomatic narrative. He focuses on one of the core tenets of the PRC's current foreign policy: the metaphor of a "community of common destiny for humankind". Savina's contribution sheds light on how this powerful framing device is being extended to a new frontier—outer space. His analysis reveals the strategic ambition behind this metaphorical expansion, showing how it is used to contest existing power structures and to project China's vision for a new global order, both on Earth and beyond.

Lukas Seidler's chapter critically explores the term "sea-level rise" beyond its oceanographic meaning, as, according to the author, it relies on a colonial approach to the ocean and is characterised by a lack of affective resonance in neoliberal contexts, as noted in the figure of the climate refugee. Seidler reconceptualises, then, the term "sea-level rise", and suggests "swelling horizons" as an alternative to highlight how it materialises across a multiplicity of times and spaces, thus departing from the terrestrial understandings of the former. By exploring a wide theoretical framework, drawing, in particular, on the critical theories of Édouard Glissant, the author critiques the existing dominant discourses surrounding the idea of "sea-level rise", highlighting its embeddedness in power structures, both colonial and contemporary, re-orienting the concept by reading it from a de-colonial angle and offering a more complex and layered conceptual response.

Xiaoyu Zhang's paper explores how cave metaphors shape Daoist perception of cosmogony, sacred geography and the human body. Her work pictures the Daoist three-tiered vision of the world—hollow cave, grotto-heaven and grotto-chamber, revealing the interconnectivity between the universe and human beings. Apart from it, this chapter also represents the transformations and applications of Daoist cave metaphors in Chinese literature and gardening art. It not only helps us re-understand the interactivity and relationality among the universe, Earth and human beings through the Daoist lens of cave, but also suggests how metaphor functions in reshaping nature and the world.

To conclude, we would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to all those who contributed to the success of the symposium and the publication of this volume. From its inception, the project has been guided by the invaluable supervision of Professor Nicoletta Pesaro, our PhD coordinator, who fostered an intellectually stimulating environment for the development of groundbreaking ideas. We are also deeply grateful for the generous financial support of the Department of Asian and North African Studies at Ca' Foscari

University and our PhD programme. Our sincere appreciation goes to all the participants, whose insights enriched the discussions, and particularly to the authors whose work is featured in these pages. It is our hope that this collection will not only serve as a record of a vibrant academic exchange but will also inspire further inquiry into the conceptual horizons that metaphors continually invite us to explore.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
Vol. 61 – Supplement – November 2025

Inter-Ships: Metaphors as Encounters

Mieke Bal
University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

The word-concept 'metaphor' imposes itself in that in-between space where 'image' is the meeting-place between language and vision. I am very committed to movement; to do it and to recognize it. To begin with, to the moving image – not only or simply as in cinema or video, but to the conviction that all images 'are moving'. Whether the image itself moves or the viewer who cannot, ever, see an entire image in one look, as 'still', images move in all kinds of ways, including emotionally and politically, by impressing us or soliciting us as witnesses. This indispensable presence of movement in art and literature, as in all cultural practices, has a solid background in the concept of metaphor, which sets meanings in movement through a fundamental ambiguity. In Latin, the equivalent would be 'translation', to carry beyond; in Greek, 'metaphor' is the word written on moving vans. Hence, 'moving' as in changing locations would be an important aspect. This is why, instead of opposing linguistic to visual, abstract to figurative or concrete to abstract 'representations', I want to propose a different, aberrant terminology, with invented words that in my view come closer to all the ambiguities the concept of metaphor harbours. This moves away from habitual, classical usages of the word. Instead, I will allege some neologisms: invented, non-existing words, that can be considered metaphors, because they do what our conference and this resulting publication sets out to do: 'conceptualizing horizons of meaning', so that 'diverse disciplines can dialogue with each other'. The special contribution of metaphors is ambiguity, which entices readers, listeners, or viewers, to develop the possible associations more widely and in more depth. Hence, no word or image stays still.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Check for updates

Citation Bal, M. (2025). "Inter-Ships: Metaphors as Encounters". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 61, Supplement, November, 13-22.

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2025/03/001

This widening serves goals of the order of the political, ethical, aesthetic and, of course, theoretical, within my continuous search to improve and expand the conceptual tool-kit of cultural analysis.

Let me start with an example from an intensely interdisciplinary writer, Walter Benjamin, one of the prominent philosophers of modern thinking. Reflecting on translation, which is the Latinate term for metaphoring, he wrote:

> While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds. (Benjamin 1968, 75)[1]

Benjamin is not speaking here about art but about language (Benjamin 1968; Buci-Glucksmann 1994). Clearly, he is not speaking in ordinary, straightforward language – if such a thing exists – but in that special use of words meant to bridge gaps between practices we tend to oppose, such as literal and figurative, or the visual and the verbal imagination. Comparing the task of the translator with that of the poet – since he is writing about the poet Charles Baudelaire – he creates a powerful image of the translator's product as both rich (royal) and encompassing (ample); expansive yet enveloping. His image is a theoretical metaphor. The metaphors he is proposing, the fruit and its skin, which he contrasts with the robe with its folds, merge the two domains of cultural activity. One sees forms and texture, even if seeing, here, in turn, solicits other senses, like smell and touch. The metaphorical quality deployed here enables mixing and merging, what we could call 'con-fusion', if we bring in the hyphen between the preposition 'con-', meaning 'with', and the verb become noun of 'fusion', merging (Lee 2013).

In cultural analysis today, few predecessors are more frequently quoted, alleged, discussed, or 'applied' than this figure. Inspired by Benjamin's con-fusing metaphors I want to propose a few theoretical, conceptual metaphors that are non-existing words with powerful contents for understanding in the widening horizons of the current intellectual climate and social world. The primary neologisms, or non-existing words I propose here as theoretical metaphors, are 'Refugeedom', 'Visibilisation', and 'Inter-ship'. Since none of these words exist, I propose them as metaphors in the best, most inspiring sense: as dialogic, expanding the horizon of understanding. Given the current political tensions around the welcoming of refugees, especially in Europe, I selected the refugee as my topic. Refugees

1 This essay – "The Task of the Translator"–, central to my argument as my primary 'philosophical object,' will henceforth be referred to by page numbers only. See also the discussion in Derrida 1984, 93-161.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

are on the move, in search for a safe place to live; a social problem for the world of today. What is their state, existence, life – their 'refugee-dom'? With its anchoring in poetics, fictionality, imagination and above all, 'imaging', art can contribute more usefully than ever to the social world by (re-)connecting disconnected people (living in 'refugeedom') with a culture where they must be noticed ('visibilisation'), and this is only possible through reciprocity and contact ('inter-ship'). It seems 'preposterous' (to invoke another of my made-up words as theoretical metaphors: pre-posterous as con-fusing pre- and post-, hence, to replace chronology with a mutuality of time) to just come up with non-existing, new words. Preposterous! In other words: how dare you! Ridiculous! For, the new / old word also, as is the enriching effect of metaphors, resonates with the ordinary sense of 'preposterous'.[2]

In more acceptable terms: the problem of the conjunction 'and' at the heart of metaphor, is vital in the examination of art, representation, and social reality; in particular, as my primary focus here, of the life of refugees as members of our social world. My vision concerns an issue that is both strongly socio-political, and raises artistic, educational and intellectual questions; an issue that invokes some serious concerns about social life, and art; and the helping hand they can give each other in the attempt to make both 'better': more relevant, meaningful, mutual, and compassionate. This will assist me in making the case for learning through/from/with art, literature, and other dialogically oriented fields, such as urban sociology. I wish to consider such learning as, necessarily, an educational 'internship' in looking. The *n* in that better-known term that indicates 'learning through practice', connects this learning with the interconnectivity, reciprocity, and mutuality I call 'inter-ship'.

I seek to understand the skill of looking we take too easily for granted. Looking-seeing is not obvious. How did this idea of a theoretical metaphor that is social, ethical, and visual, come to me? Once, when in the street, I heard a man, of obviously foreign background, murmur to himself: 'they don't even look at me'. That was the moment when the seed of the short film I was commissioned to make was sown, and the theoretical metaphor of 'visibilisation' came up. The consequence of this not looking and not talking in some sort of engagement with him, is that he radically does not belong, is not part of, the group within which he exists physically – the crowd. Loneliness is not a choice. He is doomed to it. He just *is* in solitude, without connections. But he is not alone, on the contrary. The crowds that surround him seem the more oppressive because of the lack of engagement. The cause of his solitude is his underlying

2 For an extensive theorization of "preposterous", see Bal 1999.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

state of refugee – his refugee-dom, of a person without state, without nation – which in our film is not articulated in language but 'figured', 'imaged', with more and more insistence by the indirect takes at varying rhythms. The verb *imaging* is another theoretical metaphor, away from normal words. Our point was that the man, unseen, lonely, in the busy street, has the right to be seen. The film is, therefore, an exercise (intern-ship) in 'visibilisation' – making visible, and teach looking. It solicits viewers to become engaged witnesses, making an effort to visibilise the hitherto unseen refugee.[3]

Before you watch the film, just read the few words here about how the film begins its 'lesson in looking' through metaphorizing our traditional binaries and turning them, through the conjunction 'and', into metaphorical ambiguities; con-fusions. with the invented metaphor-word of Korean-American philosopher, curator and art historian Kyoo Lee, con-fusing them. Lee proposed that word (in a personal communication) as 'con-', togetherness or what I call, with my own invented word, inter-ship, and 'fusing' as merging, cancelling the boundaries between disciplines. This con-fusing invokes interdisciplinarity as encounter. This seemed to me a useful mode of 'essaying' as figuring. Author of a brilliant critical book on Descartes that strongly undermines the hyper-rationalistic reputation of that philosopher, currently considered negatively, Lee (2013) never stops her critical inquiries (to allude to the best journal in the Humanities, *Critical Inquiry*) until she can come up with a new idea that fits. She is editor of the very relevant feminist journal *PhiloSOPHIA: A Journal of Transcontinental Feminism*, established in 2008.

The film has no dialogue; it *is* dialogic in itself. While a voice-over reads from the story of Joseph in the biblical book of Genesis, who passes for one of the very first refugees, the film begins with a manifold figuration. This is a fragment of the engraving by Rembrandt from 1634, made to move metaphorically. After half a minute or so, the image becomes blurred and merges, 'con-fuses' into a 'real' scene. That beginning is an exercise in the 'reading' of the fine line between the still and the moving image, the image drawn and the image enacted; abstraction and narrative. The camera enters the figured scene from the bottom right and brings the viewer close to the voyeuristic position. This closeness to a position that is ethically problematic, figures a moment of choice for the viewer. That moment is itself a metaphor. It triggers a hesitation: if and how we can look at the 'bed-scene' that follows. Its goal is to make the viewer responsible, and looking itself, an ethical act. When the slowly

3 The short film *Refugeedom* can be watched on this link: `https://vimeo.com/836809823` and for some information about it, `https://www.miekebal.org/films/refugeedom`.

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, Supplement, November 2025, 13-22
e-ISSN 2385-3042

moving camera meets the face of the woman who is lying in bed, the camera almost seems to stutter, enacting a theoretical metaphor, in con-fusion, when the lines and dots become a face, this one not drawn but 'real', enacted indeed. The camera is metaphoring here, moving between still and moving, etching and acting. It then moves more and the image changes drastically when a servant appears, bringing breakfast to the woman who is still in bed. The bedding, the curtains, preserve in their physical reality the ambiguity of the artwork and the 'real' enactments as metaphors. The woman begins to touch the man, desiring him. He withdraws slowly from the woman's grip, and then his state of refugee becomes substantial – let's say, 'visible'. He flees; he feels no longer safe in the house of the master. So, let's practice the new words as metaphors by showing the refugee in his refugee-dom, and offer him inter-ship: connection, through the theoretical metaphor of visibilisation.

On everyday television, we see images of people walking with luggage, small children and exhausted faces. This tends to fill most of us with compassion; perhaps some with irritation, for the repetitiveness of such imagery. Repetition triggers boredom. But also, that viewing situation is limited to the Western viewer – 'us' – who look at the people in the television images as 'others'. Is it possible to make the focalization – another theoretical metaphor – 'double', two-sided, mutual, so that the refugees can also shed light on the environment they enter and the people therein? This is what the brilliant cultural analyst Esther Peeren, who has been academic director of ASCA (Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis) for several years now, proposed in a book in which refugees are central – as specters, according to her book's topic–: "a re-focalization that looks *with* rather than *at* the specter and recognizes that this specter is always also a self as I am always also an other" (Peeren 2014, 29).[4]

The phrase "lonely but not alone" we used as the subtitle of the film, comes from a very unusual, indeed, opposite context: an autobiography of former Dutch queen Wilhelmina, published in 1959. There, she used the phrase to describe her life as always surrounded by a dense crowd of people at court but still, always feeling lonely. For, the workers at court served her, but did not personally communicate with her. The status difference between the queen and her servants precluded that possibility. The two qualifiers, lonely and alone, which seem to be synonymous, but… are here, through the oppositional conjunction 'but', rather presented as an opposition; an opposition metaphorically qualifying a non-existing noun.

The metaphorical language with its focus on opposition helped, for, 'contradiction' is key to the life of refugees. So, we took that

4 See also her earlier book on Bakhtin's impact on popular culture (Peeren 2007).

e-ISSN 2385-3042

contradiction as our guideline, for the political tenor but also to invent a mode of filming and editing. 'But' does not produce an opposition but a complementary, even causal-logical continuation. What it says is that the bond between political thinking and audio-visual art-making is tight, and not at all contradictory. In consequence, espousing the contradictory situation of the refugee, the aesthetic verging towards abstraction is also steeped in contradiction. On the one hand, the viewer is compelled to keep looking for the main figure to which the film is devoted, the lonely refugee; on the other hand, the man constantly seems to vanish, blur, or fade into indirection; or, when the topic is more or less concretely figured, it takes some effort to discern him as distinct from the surrounding crowd. This tension, or if you like, contradiction between visibility and invisibility became the central mode of 'imaging', enticing a practice of looking where things stay in tension while coming together; a 'con-fusion' of refugees and older, earlier residents. Hence, we also toyed with a somewhat didactic subtitle that accompanied us during the filming: 'a lesson in looking'.

The idea of contradiction stayed with us when I was asked by Palestinian-Dutch professor Ihab Saloul to make a film on refugees on behalf of an event he was planning to organize, *Encountering Absence*. This two-weeks-long event – with a starkly contradictory and idealistic title – was organized by the international organization SPEME, of scholars and artists and others from Italy, the Netherlands, Argentina and Colombia. The project emanated from the Umberto Eco chair in Bologna, where Saloul is a permanent visiting professor. The contradiction in the everyday life of refugees stuck with us: having left behind their emotional ties, they are lonely; but being surrounded by a dense crowd of unknown people, they are never alone. Just like Queen Wilhelmina and the likes of her: people in power positions that isolate them. The powerful and the powerless share that contradiction. I enlisted the young artist Lena Verhoeff to make the film together. Her creativity and skills did miracles.[5]

The institutions collaborating SPEME were keen on opening up the silence around this situation, this fate of refugees, in order to activate the social consciousness of what, in fact, we are doing when we continue to let this situation endure. To awaken that social consciousness, Lena and I thought, we must make that situation 'visible'. For, visibility is bound both to the present tense and to the public sphere. But how do you do that – showing, making visible, without falling into the trap of the usual voyeuristic look that philosopher Theodor Adorno worried about in relation to the

5 For more information about SPEME, see `https://www.speme.eu/`.

suffering in concentration camps, the inner, emotional state of people we don't know? (Adorno [1974] 2003).

'Visibilisation' was the metaphorical word, invoking an activity to help better the fate of refugees. I will point out a few elements of the way we did this, to bring up a few of the aesthetic strategies that help visibilisation along. Visibilisation, or making visible, is thus the neologistic metaphor I am proposing. In order to stay within the Adornian modesty, avoiding voyeurism, the set-up was fictional. Apart from the short narrative beginning and end, the images are all video takes we imagined, according to what we knew and imagined of the life of refugees. Let me begin with the end, to stay with the metaphoric contradiction.

Towards the end of the film, as a transition to the credits, a photograph from the collection of historical photos of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, made over a century ago, by American artist Clarence Sinclair Bull in 1916 titled *Refugees*, slowly 'moves' through the screen. A historical still image was set in movement. The historical status of the photograph works as a reminder that refugeedom has a long history that won't end any time soon. Migration, exile, and refugeedom as the saddest of those movements, are of all times. But we are responsible for our now-time, our contemporary world. And in this now-world we aimed to make a statement of recognition of the long-duration of refugeedom.[6]

The early picture as an inter-temporal metaphor gives an adequate impression of the conception of our film. The shadow of a view, the emotional torment, the danger, the visual allusion to the turbulent sea, enhanced by turning the still image into a moving one – the sea that so frequently throws the refugee onto the coast, alive or drowned: all this is 'visibilised'. As a metaphor, it can serve as a summary, derived from this photograph from over a century ago. We placed this most abstract image of the film at the end of it, because the elements I just mentioned are more visible after having seen the metaphorical integration of abstract and figurative images that constitute the body of the film. During the watching of the film, viewers will have acquired some skill in practicing visibilisation.

The loneliness felt emotionally and sensuously by refugees when they are stuck in foreign places, is very painful because, as the Indian artist Nalini Malani says so poignantly, simply, and clearly, in one of her works on paper from 2020-21, quoting a poem by Somali-British poet Warsan Shire: "You only leave home if HOME won't let you

6 On the tension between the contemporary and the burden of its historical roots, see the very powerful article by Mitchell (2021). The occasion for his article was the cruel murder of George Floyd. My short book from 2020, *Exhibition-ism: Temporal Togetherness*, further theorizes the concept of the contemporary.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

stay". Malani made that work when she was herself in a kind of exile. Due to the corona crisis lockdown she was stuck in Amsterdam on her way back from Barcelona, where she had just celebrated, with a solo exhibition, the Miró prize that was awarded to her. It took a year and a half before she could return to Bombay. So, although her situation was not at all tragic, not comparable to that of refugees at all, it made her feel a strong emotion of what she expressed in that artwork; a solidarity through double focalisation, foregrounded by the ambiguity of 'you'. YOU, as inter-ship: the central theoretical metaphor.

The loneliness of the refugee surrounded by people is so strongly felt, emotionally and sensuously, because the contrast between the lonely person recently arrived in an unknown place, unable to speak the local language, and then, on the other hand, the busy multitude around him, is so intense and imposing. The contrast is what 'makes' their emotions. The refugee feels it, experiences it, without having the opportunity to express or share it. That contrast was, in fact, the central metaphor of the film – the thematic, semantic word 'topic' would have been totally misplaced. That contrast is the main point of our aesthetic 'visibilisation'; making that emotionally 'feelable' through the sense of vision was our goal.

Making the contrast itself visible takes a variety of forms, all metaphorical. Some takes present reflections in shop and restaurant windows; there are blurry takes of people walking fast in the streets; there is a tiny reflection of the man in a reflecting globe in a shop display. We can also see or sense the temporal contrast between the movements of the crowd and the stagnation of the man standing still in the street, alone. All these formal 'takes' convey metaphorically a sense of loneliness. At some point, we see the man's hesitation to steal a piece of fruit in a shop display outside. He must be starving. Then he decides to not fall into that stereotype of the foreigner as a thief. At another moment, we see him intensely looking at a canal boat full of tourists, probably hoping to greet them and be greeted by them. But no; nothing communicative happens. These are just some examples of visibilisation.

The confused lines of the opening image of the etching by Rembrandt are filmed in both slow movement and blown-up details; the one metaphoring the other. Bringing in a famous artwork is a way to allude, not only to the very long history of refugeedom, but also to the status of 'high', canonical art in relation to the issues that great artists like Rembrandt broach in their work, through figurations of canonical stories. This is what artists often do, and Rembrandt in particular. The slow movement and the blown-up details in the filmic image in *Refugee-dom* that make the etching almost illegible, can be seen to, in the literal sense, *make sense*. Due to that intervention, it

becomes abstract, generate a sense of alienation. And that alienation is the point of the depiction of a famous story of refugeedom.

Estrangement is the metaphor of the consequence of distancing, hostility, suspicion, indifference: all general features of the social attitudes towards refugees. The foreigner/stranger is estranged, as that metaphor has it, from the local inhabitants who refuse to engage with him. They don't speak to him, they don't look at him. If and when they do, it is in the sense of the hostility, such as of the young men who bully him, just after he escapes from the grip of the woman who wants him in her bed. The bullies punch him, and blame him for not speaking English; they mock him, and when the refugee takes to the street outside, they follow him for their own amusement. This is the moment that the body of this non-narrative film begins, in all its abstraction that is a metaphor in itself. It focuses exclusively on this man, who is never alone, yet never in contact. After a short hard-cut he finds himself in a busy city street, and a bit later, close to a mirroring globe, which is the outside wall of the new depot of the museum Boymans van Beuningen in Rotterdam. In the utmost metaphor, thanks to Lena Verhoeff's creative interventions in the editing, we see the reflections of the passers-by walking through the refugee's face. This almost violent-seeming imaging enhances the strong, close presence of the crowd that the refugee does not manage to connect with. They are not so many, not a dense crowd; but their walking on his face says enough of what it feels like for him. This is a visual intervention that displays the paradoxical contrast between the man whose face is all we see, and the people walking on it, not looking at him at all. This is a poignantly cruel metaphor.

This is also a moment that the body of this non-narrative film shows its metaphoricity in all its abstraction. Reading the fragment from the Coran, and thus, including the narrative and the sacred text from that 'other' culture, seemed the best solution. In making this film, Lena Verhoeff and I have been searching for means, modes, and media capable of encouraging viewers to *see* the foreigner, refugee and immigrant, from a perspective that is positive, receptive, and empathic, wishing them welcome. For this to be possible, making him visible was the primary requirement. The visibilisation, with all the ambiguities in the forms, was the permanent guideline in making the film. Metaphors, with their ambiguities and multiple meanings, can do this. This is how metaphors keep us in movement, and how their polysemic emanation impresses us with the fundamental multiplicity of meaning.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Bibliography

Adorno, W.T. [1974] (2003). *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*. Edited by R. Tiedemann. Transl. by R. Livingstone et al. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bal, M. (1999). *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Bal, M. (2020). *Exhibition-ism: Temporal Togetherness*. Berlin: Sternberg Press. The Contemporary Condition.

Benjamin, W. (1968). "The Task of the Translator". *Illuminations*. Edited and with and introduction by H. Arendt. New York: Schocken, 69-82.

Buci-Glucksmann, C. (1994). *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*. Transl. by P. Camiller, with an introduction by B.S. Turner. London;Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Or. Ed.: *La raison baroque: de Baudelaire à Benjamin*. Paris: Editions Galilée, 1984.

Derrida, J. (1984). *Margins of Philosophy.* Transl. by A. Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lee, K. (2013). *Reading Descartes Otherwise: Blind, Mad, Dreamy, and Bad*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Mitchell, W.J.T. (2021). "Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of the Epoch". *Critical Inquiry*, 47(2), Winter, 370-406.

Peeren, E. (2007). *Intersubjectivities and Popular Culture: Bakhtin and Beyond*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Peeren, E. (2014). *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
Vol. 61 – Supplement – November 2025

Chinese Neologisms and Metaphorical Potential in Pedagogy

Claudio Gebbia
Sapienza Università di Roma, Italia

Abstract Neologisms are a group of words that have undergone a significant transformation from top-down dissemination to a more horizontal, grassroots-driven spread, particularly fuelled by the rise of the Internet and computer-mediated communication. In this paper, I examine the intersection of linguistic and cultural phenomena, focussing on the Chinese context, guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Conceptual Blending Theory. The study seeks to unravel the cognitive and cultural mechanisms underpinning their formation and propagation. Furthermore, the exploration extends into the pedagogical potential of these linguistic phenomena, particularly their role in enhancing learners' cultural awareness, motivation, and metaphoric competence.

Keywords Chinese neologisms. Metaphor. Pedagogy. Chinese. Foreign language.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-02-18
Accepted 2025-07-30
Published 2025-11-14

Open access

Citation Gebbia, C. (2025). "Chinese Neologisms and Metaphorical Potential in Pedagogy". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 61, Supplement, November, 23-58.

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2025/03/002

1 Introduction

> "Metaphor is also used to fill terminological gaps"
> (Black 1962; Ortony 1975)

In recent years, Chinese neologisms have drawn increasing scholarly attention for their rich cognitive, social, and cultural implications. As Quemada (2009) and Adamo and Della Valle (2017) have highlighted, neology reflects a language's ability to adapt to historical and sociocultural shifts, ensuring its vibrancy and relevance. These lexical innovations often emerge through metaphorical and metonymic processes that not only expand the expressive potential of the Chinese language, but also reflect evolving conceptualisations within society. While several studies have examined neologisms from linguistic and sociological perspectives (Zhou 2014; Hou 2023), fewer have explored them through the combined lens of metaphor theory and pedagogical reflection.

The aim of this article is to offer a critical review of the literature on Chinese neologisms, with a particular focus on their metaphorical formation and cognitive structure, as interpreted through Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff, Johnson 1980; Kövecses 2010) and Blending Theory (Fauconnier, Turner 2002). In doing so, the paper seeks to lay the foundations to inspire the following question: How can the metaphorical nature of Chinese neologisms be interpreted, and what potential, if any, do these features hold for foreign language teaching? This is not an empirical study, but a theoretically grounded synthesis of existing research, which also reflects on possible pedagogical implications – especially in terms of fostering intercultural competence and learner motivation.

By mapping key metaphorical mechanisms in neologism formation and considering how these may support educational aims, the article invites further empirical inquiry into how contemporary lexis might be integrated into teaching practices for learners of Chinese as a foreign language.

2 Why Neologisms?

Although most laypeople may be less familiar with the word 'neologism' and more used to say its actual meaning, i.e. 'new word', upon hearing it, the mind naturally looks for some examples that fit this category. That itself is a sign of how interesting neologisms are. If on the one hand, most scholars and non-scholars alike may find neologisms interesting and can intuitively make out a definition, on the other, maybe only a restricted circle of people know exactly what they really entail. In fact, definitions of this linguistic phenomenon not only have undergone some changes in the history of language

(Li, Chen 2021, 881), but also move from a more general one to more specifics and specialised others.[1] Regardless, whatever the nature of the definition describing neologisms, the substrate is a need–the need to evolve and therefore to name objects, concepts, even identities brought about by these evolutions advocated for by neologisms.

2.1 The Past of Chinese Neologisms

According to the linguist and lexicologist Quemada (2009, 23), neology attends to innovations in all areas of the social, economic, cultural, and scientific life, thus allowing each language to be, in the true sense, a living language.[2] Likewise, Adamo and Della Valle (2017, 7) define neology as the ability of the lexicon to adapt to historical, sociocultural changes, as well as to scientific and technological innovations. As for Chinese neologisms, in their inspiring essay, Jing-Schmidt and Hsieh (2019) expound how important they are to lexicon and communication (514), and how, in the past, neologisms manifested as lexical innovation produced from knowledge transmission and exchange in all fields (518). Historically, the importance and relevance of neologisms as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon has already been stated by scholars since the middle of the twentieth century, and in the history of Chinese language, their importance was also strongly established by one of the most influential Chinese linguists (Lü 1984).[3] Neologisms may have played a significant role in encouraging the gradual shift towards polysyllabism in Chinese language (Masini 1993, 122), and with the intensification of the relationships between China and abroad, Chinese neologisms have started increasingly to find their way into academic circles. In the past, diffusion of neologisms occurred only vertically top-down from the more educated members of society to divulge a controlled and selected knowledgeable vocabulary. In modern times, with the development of technology combined with the power of the Internet, neoformations are also horizontally spread and are even able to influence institutions via a bottom-up movement (Jing-Schmidt, Hsieh 2019, 518). Many studies have

1 For an overview of different definitions of neologisms given in the past, cf. Bian 2021; Li, Chen 2021; Che 2015; Guo, Kang 2008.

2 For a more comprehensive view on the different categories of neology, cf. Quemada 2009; Pruvost, Sablayrolles 2016, and for those in Chinese (at times definitions may slightly vary) cf. Gao, Liu 1958; Shi 1991; Yu 1992; Chen 1999; Yu 2001; Bulfoni 2005; Luo 2013; Jing-Schmidt, Hsieh 2019; Zhang 2020 *inter alia*.

3 Jing-Schmidt, Hsieh 2019, 514. The first systematic studies on the subject can be found in Gao, Liu 1958 and Novotná 1969; 1967, although these mainly concern loanwords and hybrids.

been undertaken on the subject of neologisms, both in China and worldwide, dealing with their definition and classification;[4] their structure and morphological composition,[5] as well as historical and etymological studies,[6] but also investigations concerning neologisms, new media and the internet.[7] One influential academic publication that consolidates the importance of neologisms is in the *Zhongguo Yuyan Shenghuo Zhuangkuang Baogao* 中国语言生活状况报告 (The Language Situation in China), issued by the State Language Commission (Guojia Yuyan Ziyuan Jiance yu Yanjiu Zhongxin 国家语言资源检测与研究中心), established in 2005 (Chen, Liu, Zhang 2022, 283; Pellin 2014, 322). Since 2006, this yearly publication provides a chapter and an appendix with the buzzwords and neologisms of the previous year. Buzzwords are also featured in one of the first periodicals in English in continental China since 1999, the *Shanghai Daily*, also limitedly available online.[8] Besides these publications, several non-academic, reference books and other websites and blogs are also available for the public.

2.2 Chinese Neologisms Today

Although neoformations' morphological processes still remain unvaried, it goes without saying that Neologisms nowadays spread greatly via the Chinese Internet Language (Li 2023; Chen, Liu, Zhang 2022; Basciano, Bareato2020; Jing-Schmidt, Hsieh 2019; cf. also Yu 2001), which pertains to the scope of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), and is currently widely addressed to as Netspeak (Crystal 2006, 33; 2018, 56).[9] The proliferation of neologisms within the netizens' speech and virally invading the media in the last three decades has definitely boosted more publications and studies within academic circles in order for researchers to further the debate as well as to have a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.[10] Additionally, it compelled experts to compile

4 Cf. Wang 1992; Bulfoni 2005; Guo, Kang 2008, among others.

5 Yu, Wang, Sun 2003; Liu 2010; Wang 2012; Ceccagno 2016; Glushkova, Voronina 2017, among others.

6 Masini 1993b; Huang 2012; Lackner, Amelung, Kurtz 2014; Jing-Schmidt, Hsieh 2019.

7 Chang 2007; Liu, Tao 2012; Lung Lai, Ty Ng 2014; Song 2020; Li, Chen 2021.

8 According to Basciano, Bareato 2020, the column is no longer available from 2017, even though some more recent buzzwords from 2020 on can be found. .

9 In this work for 'neologisms' it is meant those neoformations mediated via CMC, also Chinese Internet Language (cf. Bulfoni 2010; Chen, Liu, Zhang 2022) i.e. 'netspeak neologisms' rather than those coming from other sources.

10 Bian 2021; Chen, Liu, Zhang 2022, 278; Kang 2008, 1-3; Wang 2016; 2022.

specialised lexicographical works, such as dictionaries and compendia, in order to provide systematic and ready-to-use databases to aid all users. Together with many yearbooks and dictionaries published in the decade between 1988 and 1998, which even doubled in the following decade (Pellin 2014, 321), Kang (2008, 1), states that between 1980-2007 more than 60 dictionaries were published,[11] whereas according to Wang (2016, 50), 16 compendia were published on the Internet Language in the period from 2006 to 2015.[12] More recently, two important specialised dictionaries were also published: the *Xinciyu Dacidian* 新词语大词典 (The Neologisms Compendium) (1978-2018) and the *Hanyu Xinciyu Cidian* 汉语新词语词典 (The Chinese Neologisms Dictionary) (2000-18).

Related to lexicography is one last factor that played a major role in establishing the value and relevance of netspeak neologisms; that is, many have entered authoritative dictionaries such as the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* 现代汉语词典 (Dictionary of Modern Chinese).[13] This is the final victory for many of these new words that lose their neological statute by officially becoming part of the lexicon (Adamo, Della Valle 2017, 16).

Related to the rapid advances of computer technology crossed with linguistic research is the advent of corpus linguistics and corpora research, which also have impacted upon Chinese linguistics investigation.[14] This shed a new light on the linguistic analysis of neologisms as

> corpora allow qualitative and quantitative, synchronic and diachronic investigations of the language, providing factual, frequency, and interaction evidence for linguistic analyses. (Wallis 2019 quoted in Basciano, Bareato 2020, 8)

Simply put, this means that quantitatively, corpus queries are valuable to provide statistical relevance about neologisms, providing data about their frequency, whereas qualitatively, it provides

11 Duan 2010 declares instead that until the time of his writing, neologisms dictionaries surpass 40 volumes.

12 For a more comprehensive historical view, cf. Chen et al. 2022.

13 To know more about neologisms entering the dictionary cf. Xia, Zhang 2016; "Xiandai Hanyu Cidian Di6ban Shoulu Beidaibiao Leiren Deng Xinci" 现代汉语词典第6版收录被代表雷人等新词 (The Sixth Edition of the Modern Chinese Dictionary Includes New Words Such as 'Shocking'). *Sina Mobile* (2012/07/16). news.sina.cn/sa/2012-07-16/detail-ikmxzfmk1169020.d.html; "Xinban 'Xiandai Hanyu Cidian' Xinci Dahuizong" 新版《现代汉语词典》新词大汇总 (A Collection of New Words in the New Edition of the Modern Chinese Dictionary). *Sohu* (2019). www.sohu.com/a/332295525_312708.

14 For a deeper understanding of the subject, cf. Basciano et al. (2020). Studies that investigate on neologisms and corpora are Gong, Hong 2019; Ma 2018.

precious evidence about its use, informing us about collocations and concordances, and telling us about their development.

Additionally, it seems to be widely concurred upon that neologisms improve comprehension of socio-cultural phenomena and written comprehension of particular written materials (blogs, reviews, websites).[15] This, in turn, contributes to developing the written production and interaction skills when faced with writing correspondence like short messages and texts, and creative writing (Masini et al. 2016).

Finally, among several studies found in mainland China, many authors also seem to agree that neologisms improve interest in the study of Chinese,[16] an important premise to consider neologisms from the perspective of motivation studies to investigate their role in impacting students' motivation in learning Chinese as a foreign language (cf. Gebbia 2025).

After stating the reasons from the existing literature for such an impactful linguistic and cultural phenomenon, the following sections shall explore the salience of neologisms within metaphor studies and in relation to pedagogy.

3 Neologisms Metaphorical Power and Potential

In the previous section, it was mentioned that many studies and investigations, largely conducted in mainland China, have been carried out on the topic of Chinese neologisms. Some of these also link them with what is one of the very acts of neology itself–metaphor. Here, Chinese neologisms will be addressed in light of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the Conceptual Blending Theory, which will be briefly expounded together with a general overview of the studies on metaphor in Chinese.

3.1 Linguistic and Conceptual Metaphor

Just the same as was stated for neologisms, metaphor can also be a powerful trope for communication. In the past, but also nowadays in the popular mind, metaphor was and is, literally, mostly judged by its cover–its linguistic appearance. As Kövecses and Benczes (2010, ix) point out, metaphor was mainly defined in three ways: "(1) metaphor is a property of words; it is a linguistic phenomenon […]. (2) [it] is

15 Cai 2005; Gao, He 2008; Gong, Hong 2019; Xing, Bai 2012; Yang 2017; Yu 2011; Zheng 2022 *inter alia*.

16 Cf. Bai 2007; Chen 2012; Wu, Song 2019; Yang 2017; Zheng 2022 *inter alia*.

used for some artistic and rhetorical purpose, […] (3) [it] is based on a resemblance between the two entities that are compared and identified". Next, they go on explaining that since metaphor was seen merely as a figure of speech, it was thought to be totally dispensable, both from communication as from thought (Kövecses, Benczes 2010, x). In 1980, with the seminal work by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), it was shown that metaphor, from a cognitive linguistic perspective, could not be dispensed of at all, yet it indeed permeates our thought as it does our conventional, everyday language. Their claim was that:

i. It's not a property of words, per se, but of concepts;
ii. Its function is to better understand certain concepts, and not just for the sake of arts or aesthetics;
iii. It is often not based on similarity;
iv. Ordinary people as well, not just artists or talents use it effortlessly in everyday life;
v. It is not a mere linguistic ornament, but it is an inevitable process of human thought and reasoning (Kövecses,Benczes 2010, x).

Metaphor, albeit with some cultural variations (see § 3.3), it is entrenched in our concepts, it can shape the way with think – like in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (1939) –[17] and also relates deeply with, as it is shaped by, our bodily experiences, otherwise defined as embodiment.[18] This is called the contemporary theory of metaphor. In our mind, we create mental domains, which we then cross onto one another, outlining cross-domain mappings (from a source domain – corresponding to a concrete experience, to a target domain – a more abstract concept).[19] Therefore, conceptual metaphors are at the core of the metaphorisation process; language is their outer expression and realisation (Ortony 1993, 209).[20] While this paper will not go into details about the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, another concept related to it will be addressed–that of image schema – for the sake of the examples presented later on. Image-schema, much like some sort of archetypes, "are primitives that structure rich images. [Their] structure of the source domain is used in reasoning about

17 As also observed by Link 2013, 128.

18 The use of the term is quite idiosyncratic, as objected by Link 2013, 129, as the way it is used by Lakoff and Johnson does not correspond to what 'to embody' truly stands for. Nevertheless, the term is now fully used by the specialists of the field.

19 The source-target mappings happen in reverse order, as in LOVE IS A JOURNEY or LOVE AS JOURNEY. To know more cf. Lakoff, Johnson 1980; Kövecses, Benczes 2010a; Ortony 1993; Semino, Demjén 2017. As Link 2013, 118 pointed out, funny how the terms 'source', 'target' and 'mapping' are also conceived metaphorically.

20 For a definition of linguistic metaphor, cf. Littlemore, Low 2006; Philip 2016 *inter alia*.

the target domain" (Lakoff, Johnson 1980, 212).[21] In other words, "[t]hese are abstract, preconceptual structures that emerge from our recurrent experiences of the world" (Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987 quoted in Kövecses 2016, 18).[22]

3.2 The Blending Theory of Metaphor

A further advance in the modern theory of metaphor was supplied by the Blending Theory, theorised by Fauconnier and Turner (2002). Their theory is in turn grounded in the works of Grady and Johnson (1997), with their notion of primary metaphor and conflation, as well as in the Neural Theory of Metaphor of Narayanan (1997).[23] Altogether, they form the Integrated Theory of Primary Metaphor.

Primary metaphors are in a sense to be understood as produced in association with image-schema, which simply put, are essential and basic schematic concepts; they constitute cause-effect correspondences (like AFFECTION IS WARMTH) dictated by our subjective experience of the world (Lakoff, Johnson 1980, 213). Each of these 'atomic' metaphorical parts "has a minimal structure and arises naturally, automatically, and unconsciously through everyday experience by means of conflation, during which cross-domain associations are formed" giving rise to more 'molecular' complex metaphors (Lakoff, Johnson 1999, 46, 49). 'Conflation' is a cognitive phenomenon happening at the very early stages of child development during learning: young children's subjective non-sensorimotor and sensorimotor experiences are involuntarily merged, undifferentiated from one another as they cannot distinguish between the two domains.[24] It is during this period that the cross-domain associations mentioned above establish; only later in life are children then able to differentiate between the two,[25] even though still preserving the established associations, which in the form of mappings, underlie conceptual (more complex) metaphors – e.g. "A *warm* smile" (Lakoff, Johnson 1999, 46, 49; emphasis added).

21 One of the examples given by the authors is that of 'physical traps' that are mapped onto 'metaphorical traps' (Lakoff, Johnson 1980, 212). Other examples are container, source-path-goal, degree of closeness, direction, and amount of force (Lakoff 2008, 30).

22 For the criticism made to this view of metaphor, cf. the literature available, some of which are listed in Yu 1998, 33. Cf. also Kövecses 2016, 24-5.

23 Cf. Lakoff, Johnson 1980, 213. This also includes the neural models constructed by Regier 1996 and Bailey 1997. Cf. Lakoff 2008, 28.

24 For the experiment details documenting all the stages of conflation, cf. Johnson's dissertation (1997).

25 This is defined as 'the period of differentiation' (Lakoff, Johnson 1999, 46).

e-ISSN 2385-3042

These two notions are substantiated by the Neural Theory of Metaphor (NTM), which finds its cognitive scientific base in the Neural Theory of Language (NTL), advocated by Lakoff and Feldman (Lakoff 2008, 17), highlighting the importance of neural cluster co-activation and the principle that "neurons that fire together, wire together";[26] that means that neurons or neuronal clusters – nodes – that have been originally activated together due to a specific experiential or learning event, form a sort of mirroring link, connecting premotor/SMA (Supplementary Motor Area) cortex (responsible for performing actions) with the parietal cortex (integrating perception). This means that the mirror neurons are 'multimodal': they simulate both when acting and when 'receiving', or even imagining the action (Lakoff 2008, 19). The link will be strengthened whenever the same event occurrence startles spread activation, reinforcing the synapses.[27] Eventually, "[t]he meaning of concrete concepts is directly embodied in this manner" (Lakoff 2008, 19). That is why we would 'experience' warmth (for instance, of a smile), even though no warmth may actually be happening. In other words, we would 'feel' metaphorical warmth (that is, entailment of node C in the network characterizing another conceptual domain – affection), as it had previously been linked to feeling literal warmth (entailment of neuronal cluster B – temperature), caused by a sequence of neural activations A when being hugged or held. Therefore, NTL served to explain NTM, and how metaphors are subconsciously created in the mind, with the formation of mappings and the creation of image-schema and primary metaphors. This mechanism of metaphorical inferences can be modelled precisely (Narayanan 1997) using neural computational modelling (Lakoff 2008, 28).[28]

The Integrating/Blending Theory of Metaphor (BTM) brings cross-domain mappings created with metaphors to another level. As stated above, conceptual (more complex) metaphors are mappings created from a source to target domain, in other words, understanding a target in terms of the source (Lakoff 2008, 31). The focus of BTM is not just the superficial mapping but also the underlying networks that are really responsible for these metaphors (Fauconnier 2018). In BTM, domains are referred to as 'inputs' (and can also be more than two) and conceptual blends create further neural bindings

26 For this, cf. Hebb's neuropsychological theory (1949).

27 This process of neural strengthening is called 'neural recruitment' (Lakoff, Johnson 1980, 214; 1999, 55). For a more thorough explanation of the theory, cf. Feldman, Narayanan 2004; Feldman 2008; Lakoff 2008.

28 Regier 1997 has constructed a neural computational model for how a range of spatial relations concepts could be computed by the brain. Narayanan 1997 has constructed a neural computational model of the structure of events, that is, X-schemas (Lakoff 2008, 24).

between the source input entities and the target input entities of that metaphor, resulting in the emergence of a new entity or inference (Lakoff 2008, 32). Moreover, the inputs relate to a more general domain, called 'generic space' and created independently from the inputs, containing the starting general characteristics applicable to the input spaces. Selected material from the inputs involved (unlike regular conceptual metaphor, where strictly elements from the source are mapped onto the target), which may or may not constitute a conceptual metaphor, project into another structure, called 'the blend' "where the new emergent structure is set up, allowing for further inferences or new expressions" (Dancygier 2008, 32).[29] In the words of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 218) "A blended space is a mental space that imaginatively combines elements of at least two other mental spaces that are structured by our ordinary long-term conceptual system".

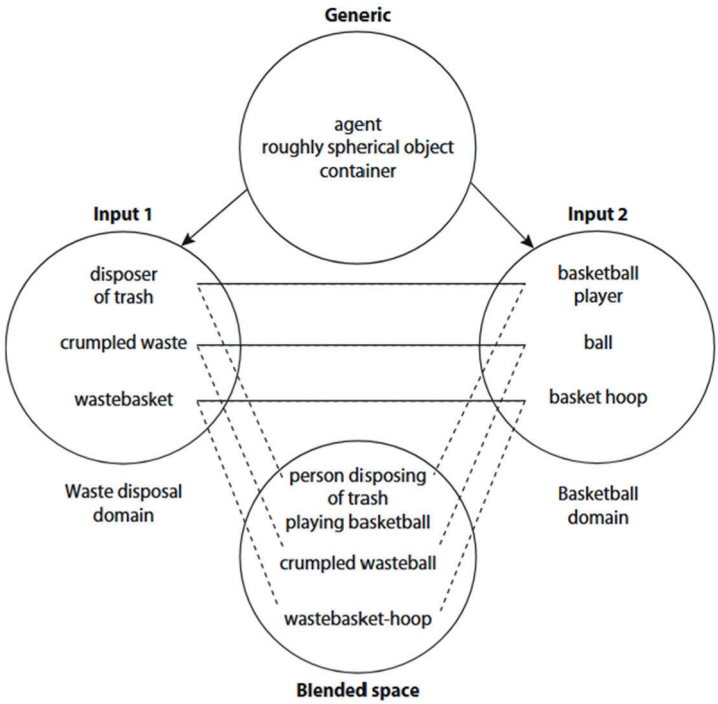


Figure 1 Playing trashcan basketball (Kövecses, Benczes 2010, 281)

29 Kövecses and Benczes (2010a, 269) mention the case of 'the grim reaper'.

An example of this process is provided in Figure 1. Several typologies of blends are distinguished in Fauconnier and Turner (2002), although these will not be addressed here due to space constraints.[30] The essential aspect of blending is that the perspective constructed is solely context-dependent of a specific blend and not as an overarching shift in meaning (Dancygier 2008, 31). In fact,

> Blending theory is centrally concerned with the use of[…] conceptual structure in particular examples. That is, […] conceptual integration: how conceptual structures are combined for use in particular cases, especially in imaginative cases. (Lakoff, Johnson 1980, 218)

Finally,

> CBT is less interested in the effect of one mapping, and centres its attention on the online spontaneous communicative effects of giving a tight and unique form to a complex set of various issues and attitudes. (Dancygier 2008, 33)

3.3 Cultural Variation

It seems now clearer how the modern theory of metaphor can help interpret linguistic neoformations, offering a fresh perspective on the functioning of specific linguistic phenomena, like polysemy and the evolution of meaning (Kövecses, Benczes 2010, xii). Before addressing the topic of metaphor and neologisms, it is worth mentioning that since subjective experiences may slightly vary among people, while many primary metaphors, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 215) pointed out, can be found to be (near)universal, as we do share common bodily and brain experiences, complex metaphor arising from those can indeed be culture-specific (Yu 2008, 259), much like painting similar or different pictures on similar canvases. Therefore, as "they [metaphors] make use of cultural information, they may differ significantly from culture to culture" (Yu 2008, 259). Cultural information entails that the embodied metaphorical inferences are not just subjected to the individual mental structure, but are influenced by different cultural models, which are "intersubjectively shared cultural schemas that function to interpret experience and guide

30 An introduction on these is provided in Kövecses, Benczes 2010, 277-8 and Kövecses 2006, § 11. Cf. also Fauconnier, Turner 2008. Another stage of the blending process can also occur, a *backwards projection* (blend → input) described in the blend example 'silver tsunami' in Dancygier 2008, 31.

action in a wide variety of domains including events, institutions, and physical and mental objects" (Gibbs Jr 1999, 153). A cultural model could also simply be defined as "any coherent organizations of human experience shared by people" (Kövecses 2005, 193). It characterises not only abstract concepts,[31] but also more concrete physical objects, which only require a literal understanding (Kövecses 2005, 193). For example, a cognitive model like 'anger', when applied to Chinese culture, it is culturally modelled and mapped also as *qi* 气 (Kövecses, Benczes 2010, 200) reflecting the "widespread model of cognition distributed across members of a speech community" (Gibbs Jr 1999, 154). When talking about cultural variation in metaphor, two kinds can be distinguished: cross-cultural (or intercultural) and intracultural (Kövecses, Benczes 2010, 215). In this paper, only the former will be addressed briefly and in relation to the Chinese culture. Among the causes of intercultural variation, Kövecses and Benczes (2010, 218) mention i) a broader sociocultural context, defined as "the governing principles and the key concepts in a given culture" influencing social but also personal concerns and interests; this point explains why the Chinese anger model is still not so far from ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER, even though, as it is related to Traditional Chinese Medicine, it can be present in different parts of the body, and most importantly, it does not need to have a specific temperature (Kövecses, Benczes 2010, 201, 219; Yu 1998, § 3.3, § 3.6). Variations can also depend on ii) natural, physical and historical environment, which goes without saying, shapes people's embodied experiences, memory, and consequently, vocabulary as well. An example that may come to mind for Chinese can be found in the saying *he xibeifeng* 喝西北风 (lit. 'Drink the northwest wind' = 'to be in dire straits'). Finally, iii) different cognitive preferences and style, impacting on what Kövecses (2006, 246) calls the 'differential experiential focus', suggesting a different attuning of people to their embodied experiences in relation to the target domain, also in the form of life choices.[32] Overall, Kövecses (2005, § 4) points out that the metaphorical variations that can occur outside of the 'congruent metaphors' – metaphors that follow congruently the generic schema – are respectively in a) range of source domains to conceptualise target domains (Kövecses 2005, 70). One example the author mentions for Chinese and also cited in Yu (1998) is the combination HAPPINESS IS FLOWERS IN THE HEART. Conversely, b) scope of the source refers to "the set of target domains

31 Even though scholarly opinions vary; some claim that cultural models for abstract concepts exist without prior metaphorical understanding, and others believe that they are inherently metaphorical Kövecses 2005, 193. To follow this discussion in relation to cultural models and metaphor, cf. Kövecses 2005, § 9.

32 For a more comprehensive explanation about the causes of variation in metaphor, cf. Kövecses (2006, § 10).

to which a particular source domain can apply" (Kövecses 2005, 72). For instance, for many western languages, the target BUILDINGS can be paired with THEORIES, RELATIONSHIPS, CAREER, COMPANY etc., while it may not be the case for other languages. In addition, c) preferential conceptualisation, a gradient of the first category, means that the conceptualisation methods of the metaphors are roughly the same, but speakers of the language may have a preference for specific ones (Kövecses 2005, 82); this is the case of the anger metaphor, which for Chinese can happen either congruently following ANGER IS HEAT (ex. *ta fahuole* 他发火了 'he emitted fire') or ANGER IS *qi* (ex. *buyao shengqi* 不要生气! 'don't produce *qi*'). Finally, some conceptual metaphors may also uniquely belong to that specific culture (Kövecses 2005, 86). I will show that this is also the case for Chinese neologisms.

According to some scholars, metaphor therefore should not be conceived only cognitively as a substrate which formed along our embodied experiences as humans and diachronically and as an inner phenomenon. It should also be considered in its outer dimension, taking into account the fact that there are synchronic factors playing a role in the continuous shape of metaphorical thinking. Gibbs Jr (1999) advocates a more 'distributed' perspective of what it is considered conceptual, to "extend the cognitive model beyond the individual" (Gibbs Jr 1999, 162), moving metaphor from our heads into the world:

> When I talk of moving metaphor 'out into the world' I am thinking of metaphor as a kind of tool, available as a 'public representation' for all to use when needed, without having to explicitly encode all conceptual metaphors as part of our internal mental representations. (Gibbs Jr 1999, 157)

In his view, metaphorical structuring of concepts is deeply influenced by situations conceptualised culturally, and by our continuous interactions with sociocultural artefacts around us.

3.4 Metaphor in Chinese

In China, the study of metaphor has always been attributed to the field of rhetorics.[33] This is sustained in Wang (2003, 102) reported in Jing-Schmidt (2016, 630) who states that metaphor "In ancient Chinese philosophy, metaphor […] is seen as a central tool of persuasion" (Jing-Schmidt 2016, 630). In the same page, the author also reminisces Mencius's good rule of speaking: "*yan jin er zhi yuan*

33 For an excursus on Chinese rhetoric, cf. Huang et al. 2019, § 45.

zhe, shan yan ye" 言近而指远者,善言也 (Those who can speak far in terms of near are good at speaking; Author's transl.). Shu (2000, 9), like Wang (2003, 103) claim that even though China lacked systematic research on metaphor, the Chinese millennial literary work were rife with metaphors, and advocated that only contrastive studies between western countries and China could bring about a further understanding of metaphor (10). Concerning the word 'metaphor' in Chinese, *yinyu* 隐喻 (lit. a hidden analogy), is reported by Wang (2003, 105) to originally fall within the scope of the many definitions of metaphor held by the word *biyu* 比喻 (metaphor).[34] The author also declares that the best Chinese notion of conceptual metaphor, which is not conceived as two separate identities – source and target–but as one, is embodied in the thought *tianrenheyi* 天人合一 ('Heaven and man as one' = 'Man is an integral part of nature'; Wang 2003, 106). According to Hao (2020, 134), this seems to support a Chinese notion of embodiment.

Since the pioneering work by Lakoff and Johnson was published in 1980, Shu (2000, 8-9) warned about the scarcity of studies in the field of metaphor in relation to Chinese, encouraging scholars to produce more work on the matter. Since then, much work has been done on the subject of conceptual metaphor. Some of the most representative studies include those carried out by Yu between 1995 and 2022[35] where Chinese ways of expressing conceptual metaphor according to various image-schema and degree of cultural variation are addressed and analysed also cross-culturally. Other mention-worthy research was carried out by Ahrens between 2002 and 2010 exploring the field of psycholinguistics and metaphorical meaning (cf. Jing-Schmidt 2016, 633; Chung, Ahrens 2019, 365). Lastly, Jing-Schmidt (2014a; 2014b; Peng, Jing-Schmidt 2014) worked on examining the social function of metaphor in Chinese discourse, highlighting that this type of investigation has received scant attention (Jing-Schmidt 2016, 633).

Based on the literature seen above, I would like to propose a little overview of some shared and non-shared image-schema between English and Chinese:

Table 1 Shared image-schema 1

	ENGLISH	CHINESE
EMBARRASSMENT/RAGE IS RED	Her faced turned all red	他的脸都红了
HAPPY IS UP*	I need something to bring my spirits up	高兴, 忐忑

34 Intended as a figure of speech and also with the meaning of 'analogy'.

35 These are only some of the works by this author. For a comprehensive view, cf. the Google Scholar page of the author. For other works, cf. also Link 2013.

Table 2 Shared image-schema 2

	ENGLISH	CHINESE
SUSTAINABILITY IS GREEN	We're trying to be as green as possible	绿化
POPULARITY IS FIRE	That spread like wildfire	这个产品突然火了

Table 3 Non-shared image-schema 1

	JOY/POPULARITY IS RED	DANGER/CRIME/POVERTY IS RED
CHINESE	她一下子成为网红 公司开业就来了开门红	
ENGLISH		• To be in the red • To be caught red-handed • Red light/flag

Table 4 Non-shared image-schema 2

	ADULTERY IS GREEN	JEALOUSY/ENVY IS GREEN
CHINESE	戴绿帽子	
ENGLISH		Green with envy

As it can be noticed, the image-schemas chosen are mostly related to colours.[36] In Table 1 and 2, there seems to be near-universality when primary metaphors are formed. I say near- as for in English, the pair POPULARITY IS FIRE can also convey a negative sense, whereas it is not the case for Chinese.[37] Conversely, for Table 3 and 4, the image-schemas seem to be more culture-sensitive. In the case of Table 4, the colour green is culturally related to the fact that in the past in China adulterous men would be publicly shamed by walking around wearing a green hat to signal that they were cuckolds (funnily enough, in the west this would be similar to the 'scarlet letter'). The examples for Chinese for POPULARITY IS FIRE in Table 2 and POPULARITY IS RED in Table 3 can be regarded as cases of neologisms. There have been several studies in mainland China and some carried out internationally on Chinese neologisms and metaphors that have mainly analysed the cognitive characteristics and interpretation of certain formations (see below). Despite the scholarly interest in metaphor teaching and the role of metaphor in education, to the writer's knowledge, there still is a shortage of investigations regarding the importance of metaphor and neologisms applied in pedagogy. The potential pedagogical importance of metaphor and neologisms will be addressed in § 4.

36 To know more about metaphors shared by English and Chinese, cf. also Link 2013.

37 To know more about this primary metaphor, cf. Han 2012, 34, 45.

3.5 Novel Metaphors

When creating novel metaphors, we make use, mostly subconsciously, of that huge system of thousands of cross-domain mappings which characterises everyday metaphor (Lakoff 1993, 203). According to the theory of conceptual metaphor, we can also distinguish 'conventional' metaphors, that is, those which are formed subconsciously and automatically due to some precedent or preexistent internal mapping (Lakoff, Turner 1989, xi), otherwise defined as 'basic metaphors' (Lakoff, Turner 1989, 80). Conventional metaphors can be of two types: 'generic-level' and 'specific-level'.[38] The former is more 'skeletal' a category than the latter, in the sense that there are no fixed source and target domains, nor are the entities of their mappings clearly specified. True is the contrary for the latter type. In a sense, the specific-level metaphor, which is conventionalised, is also conceived as basic (Lakoff, Turner 1989, 81). Another type of metaphor are 'image metaphors': these do not map concepts, but rather superimpose images; that means, the structure of a mental image source can either be mapped metonymically onto the structure of the target domain containing an image (e.g. "Time stopped when he saw her hourglass flowing slowly") or can create an image in the target domain (e.g. "thoughts are summer lightning") (Lakoff, Turner 1989, 90-4). They are considered as one-shot, i.e. limited to specific cases. Moreover, "Image-metaphors can trigger and reinforce metaphors that map conceptual knowledge and inferential structure" (Lakoff, Turner 1989, 92). Finally, they are to be understood as separate to 'image-schema metaphors', which as we already acknowledged, are general structures – like paths, containers etc. – that provide the frame for mental images and are related to spatial reasoning (Lakoff, Turner 1989, 99). Novel metaphors can be interpreted as extensions of conventional metaphors, generic-level metaphors (as they are quite free due to lack of specificity in source, target, and mappings) and image-metaphors or as superimpositions of one onto another, which is what poetic metaphor does (Yu 1998, 29).

One of the great characteristics of human being is creativity, and poets in their creative afflatus are able to mesmerise us and, by shaping up new metaphors, provide beautiful reflections into and about life. This is what Kövecses (2005, 259) calls 'figurative creativity'. Of course, this creativity still needs to respect the conventions of our language (Philip 2016, 220)[39] and ordinarily, we

38 Events are actions would pertain to the former, while life is a journey to the latter. For more details on this, cf. Lakoff, Turner 1989.

39 Philip, contrarily to authors like Kövecses, Lakoff and Turner argues that not only conceptual level, but also lexical level and context-determined lexical creativity should

would assume the production of wondrous, powerful metaphor to be the sole prerogative of literary experts, i.e. poets. Yet, according to Lakoff and Turner (1989, xi) "Great poets […] use basically the same tools we use [and] can speak to us because they use the modes of thought we all possess". In other words, everyone can create novel metaphors, and we know we do. If we consider Lakoff's (1989) assertion valid that poetic metaphor is fundamentally a similar phenomenon to ordinary language metaphor, "an extension of our everyday, conventional system of metaphorical thought" (Lakoff 1993, 246), then neologisms, created by the online grassroot 'poets' who extend, elaborate, question, and combine on preexisting conventional metaphors, [40] composing enchanting images, are also part of that ordinary language. In addition, Kövecses (2005, 52) points out that "accumulating evidence suggests that 'creative' people make heavy use of conventional, everyday metaphors and that their creativity and originality actually derive from them". Philip (2016, 226) seems to agree with both: "The need for novelty arises when the existing expressive repertoire fails us, and this can happen equally well in spontaneous speech as in pondered literary creation, by expert users of language and by novices, including children and non-native speakers". Furthermore, the writer believes what Philip wrote below could expand the definition of neologism:

> Metaphor drives innovation in language. New meanings are not necessarily metaphorical, but metaphor provides the grounds for new referents to be identified using old words. Speakers 'stretch' the meanings of the words they know when they need to communicate something that they have no existing word for. If that stretched meaning fills a vocabulary gap in the language, making it possible for speakers to talk about an object or concept that had no previously established wording, it gets absorbed into the language system where it becomes available for further exploitation, and the process starts all over again. (Philip 2016, 219)

be considered when producing and understanding metaphors. An example that comes to mind is 'I don't want to *burst your bubble*'. Here, to understand the metaphor we need to know its contextual reference.

40 These are poetic thought modes for creating novel metaphors reported in Lakoff, Turner 1989. Respectively, extension is attributing some qualities of a target to the source (e.g. DEATH IS SLEEP). Elaboration involves the detailed development of a basic metaphor and adding layers of meaning or complexity to enhance its effect (e.g. eternal exile of the raft=death). Metaphorical questioning challenges the limits of an existing metaphor, pushing its boundaries to explore new perspectives or meanings. (e.g. 'what if love is not journey?'). Composing refers to the way in which metaphors are creatively combined to form more complex meanings or expressions (e.g. 'in the twilight of my days' combines both LIFE IS LIGHT and a LIFETIME IS A DAY).

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, Supplement, November 2025, 23-58
e-ISSN 2385-3042

Even though at first novel metaphors in their gradations of novelty may sound unfamiliar, strange and cognitively daunting, they could potentially enrich the interlocutors both at the language level, and at the conceptual one, possibly providing an extra layer of culturality. Despite the lack of salience due to how infrequent and unfamiliar they can be (Philip 2016, 224),[41] we still cannot but admit that "the brain is pre-programmed to notice the unusual, so novel metaphors – once encountered – stick in our mind"; and our mind

> is poetic not only because of the possibility that thought is intrinsically metaphoric, […] but also because it is constantly in search of novelty, regardless of whether it is figurative or literal. (Giora 2003, 179)

3.6 Metaphorical Chinese Neologisms

In § 3.4 two cases of neologisms within the shared image-schemas of English and Chinese were introduced. If we want to support the stance that our thinking is subconsciously metaphorical, metaphorical thinking is also what drives the linguistic realisations of many neologisms (Wang 2012, 262). They are constantly sought after in the world of entertainment news for language play (Han 2011); moreover, the impact of the internet has made it possible for everyone nowadays to write a piece of news which "provides great potential for the emergence and stabilization of metaphors in people's linguistic and cognitive repertoires" (Han 2012, 35). Without a doubt, many neologisms are also not metaphorical, like many technical terms;[42] here, we take a look at some neoformations taking into account the conceptual and integrative theories of metaphor.

As already shown above, classification of Chinese neologisms has already been attempted in many other studies.[43] Regardless of the category of belonging, many neologisms can form as a result of a metaphorical process (He 2014, 33; Li 2021, 124), especially those that Wang (2012, 265) defines with what is originally a Christian metaphor *jiuping zhuang xinjiu* 旧瓶装新酒 'old bottles with new wine'.[44] This is easy to see as neosemanticised conventional words can become

41 On salience, cf. Giora 2003.

42 For some examples, cf. Arcodia, Basciano 2021, 197. Nevertheless, it can also not be always the case, as the many examples reported in Jiang 2004 show.

43 Cf. § 2.1 and Arcodia, Basciano 2021, 200; Bulfoni 2009; 2010b; Zong 2007; Masini 1993; Gao 2012 *inter alia*.

44 Matt 9,17, NIV. In He 2014, 33 and many others these are referred to as *jiuci xinyi* 旧词新意/义 'old words with new meaning'.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

polysemous (yet some also homonymous or near-homonymous) with another (or more) related sense(s) suggesting an underlying metaphorical relationship (Kövecses, Benczes 2010, 251). In other words, polysemies can also be explained as extended lexicalised senses of conventional lexical items in a source domain that may have been conventionalised also in the target domain, depending on whether it made use of the static mapping pattern (Lakoff 1993, 211). According to Li and Feng (2011, 14), a Metaphorical Neologism can be defined as a word of "two or three syllables, which not only illustrates the concise linguistic features, but also gives a vivid mirror of novelty chasing and jokes of social changes".

When viewed from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory, it is useful to first consider Fang,Peng (2013, 81) who analysed metaphoricity of neological compounds based on four levels of semantic transparency of the constituents. Respectively, 1) completely transparent; 2) first constituent transparent, second opaque;[45] 3) first-opaque, second-transparent; 4) completely opaque. As the results of the survey they carried out revealed that the majority belonged to category no. 2, the neologisms from this category were further analysed on their metaphoric and metonymic levels and grouped into three categories:

i. First constituent created via metaphor (ex. *jijian+dian* 旗舰店 'flagship store').
ii. First constituent created via metonymy (ex. *muzhi+zu* 拇指族 [thumb+clan] 'heavy texters').
iii. Whole compound is either metaphoric or metonymic (ex. *fang+nu* 房奴 [house+slave] 'mortgage slave').

Similarly, Wang (2012, 262) states that conceptual metaphor can appear in compound neologisms in five main categories. For the sake of brevity, I have adapted some of the examples to fit the categories:

1. Former constituent is understood metaphorically (ex. *muzhi+zu* 拇指族 above).
2. Latter constituent is the metaphorical head paired with a non-metaphorical constituent (ex. *chitu* 吃土 [eat-dirt] 'to live off dirt'. Here 'dirt' is understood as 'whatever food is available' or 'almost no food' for having spent all one's money).[46]

45 Author's translation. In the original text the word is *huise* 晦涩 'obscure', 'cryptic'. I preferred 'opaque' in juxtaposition with 'transparent' (also used by the author).

46 Interesting to notice, compared with *hexibeifeng* 喝西北风 (see *infra*) which was culturally more elevated and abstract a metaphor, *chitu* 吃土 is much more 'down-to-earth' and related to our embodied experience.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

3. Both constituents of the compound are two symbolic units (ex. *boli*+*xin* 玻璃心 [glass-heart] 'oversensitive person').
4. The compound as a whole for a new metaphorical meaning (ex. *shanzhai* 山寨 'fortified mountain village' → 'counterfeit').
5. Shown on the relation between the two constituents of the compound (ex. *xiatan* 侠贪 [knight errant+corruption] → 'A corrupt Robin Hood'; Author's transl.). Here both the domains are mapping onto each other (Wang 2012, 263).

Another study that focuses on neologisms using conceptual metaphor theory can be found in Yu (2021). Resonating what stated above in Kövecses (2005, cf. § 3.3) about cross-cultural variation of metaphor, Yu analyses the culture-specific and sociological representation of leftover women (*shengnü* 剩女) as deriving from the conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE FOOD, showing from a range of news media that women are represented as dehumanised objects, therefore as commodities and food, as they are past the time decided by society for marriage and for giving birth. The very same conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE FOOD appears to be elicited also in another (former) neologism *fensi* 粉丝 [dry noodles] 'fans' originated in 2005 from the Chinese TV show called *Super Girl*. Here the characteristics of dry noodles of tenderness, flexibility, smoothness and being interlaced with each other are mapped onto the fans swooning around their idols (Han 2011, 3484; Xu 2006).[47]

Li (2019) interprets the recent coinage of *foxi* 佛系 using both conceptual and blending theories.[48] Viewed from the conceptual metaphor theory, *foxi* 佛系 the author seems to suggest the pervasiveness of a Buddhist moral, embodied in the character *fo* (Buddha; Buddhist; Buddhism) brought about by the realisation of the primary metaphor HAPPINESS IS DETACHMENT. The character *xi*, which here refers to 'being related' but also 'linked' (or paradoxically 'attached to'). The neologism is now used to refer to people who are 'chill' about anything, and who adopt a devil-may-care attitude to life, not feeling societal pressure and "standing aloof from worldly gain and success" (Li 2019, 35; 2021, 125). Similarly, always according to Li (2019), the word could also be construed as a blended space, with

47 Standard Modern Chinese, as also confirmed in Xu, had the suffix *-mi* 迷 [confused, lost] to express 'devoted to' but only used in certain registers and only as a bound form. The less popular *fanshi* 番士 of cantonese origin is now obsolete. This may explain the adoption of a new word. Interestingly enough, *fensi* 粉丝 has then also split to develop quasi-suffixes with the meaning of 'fan of'. Finally, *fen* seems also to be a denominal verb with the meaning 'to support someone' like in *fenqi* 粉起 [rise as a noodle] (Han 2011, 3485).

48 The expression *foxi* 佛系 was coined in 2017 in a WeChat article (Li 2019, 34).

a generic space of 'characteristics of Buddha', *fo* as input 1 and *xi* as input 2.

Finally, according to Fang and Peng (2013), a neologism like *yizu* 蚁族 [ant-clan] 'college graduates with low income enduring cramped living conditions' can also be interpreted via conceptual blending **[fig. 2]**. The generic space containing the 'biological living being', 'ants' (*mayi* 蚂蚁) constitutes input 1; wherein are characteristics belonging to ants, i.e. 'fragility' and 'smartness'. 'College students' constitute input 2, always characterised by being weaker but with a good education.

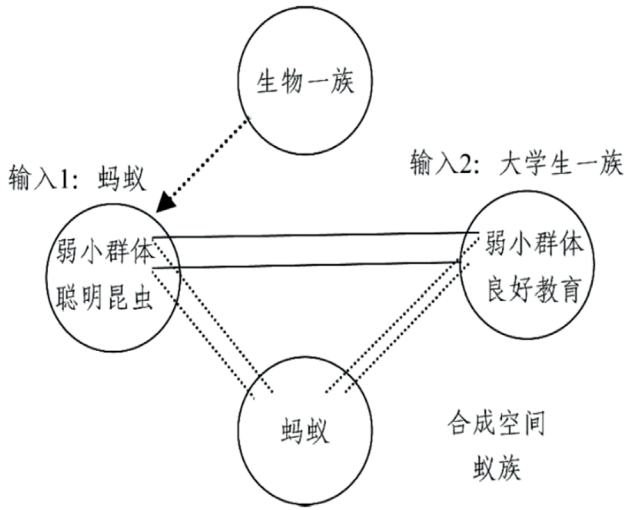


Figure 2 Conceptual blending of yizu 蚁族 (Fang, Peng 2013)

Similarly to Fang and Peng, Bai and Chen (2011, 37) interpret another neologism born out of derivation from the affixoid *-ke* 客 in terms of the blending theory **[fig. 3]**, *heike* 黑客 'hacker'. The authors believe it to be more than a mere phonetic calque, but rather a blended space. Input 1 and 2 are provided respectively by the English word 'hacker' and by one of the generic meaning of *heike*, i.e. a 'person who is involved in an illegal activity'.[49] It is not clear why the authors do not provide the generic space as well, but they seem to suggest that the word *heike*, with meaning related to the domain of technology as we know it, came into being only after being influenced by the English equivalent, and therefore acquired a new meaning. This seems in line

49 Cf. also Bai, Chen 2010.

with the fact that the affixoid *-ke* also conveys the agentive meaning of 'person' to the compound it is part of (Basciano, Bareato 2020, 253), that in Classical Chinese it was used to indicate 'person specialising in a certain activity' (Arcodia, Basciano 2021, 202), and finally that *heike* is itself a hybrid form, with both characters contributing phonetically and semantically (Arcodia, Basciano 2021, 203).[50]

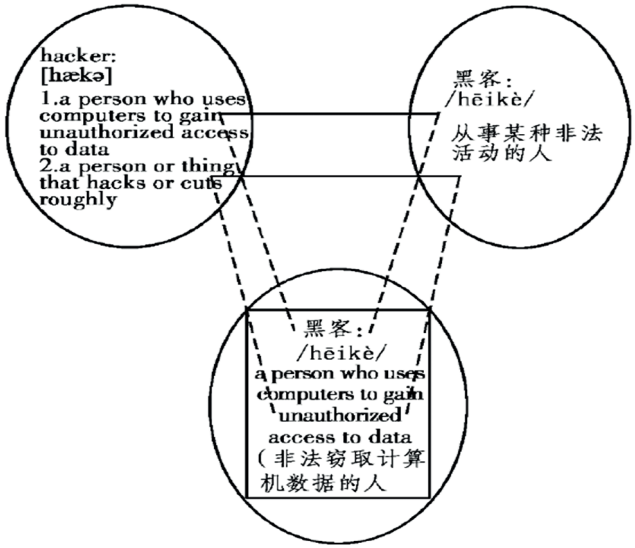


Figure 3 Conceptual blending of heike 黑客 (Bai, Chen 2011)

One final thought should go to homophonic neologisms, created exploiting the similarity or the quasi-similarity in pronunciation of other characters or symbols to replace the original language (You, Wang 2012, 136).[51] Zheng (2015, 1382) believes these kinds of words to be "also the result of metaphorical thinking of human beings" and uses two examples worth mentioning, which can be seen in Figure 4.

50 Which resonates with the case of *fensi* 粉丝 [dry noodles] 'fans' *supra*.

51 For the categories belonging to this definition, cf. You, Wang 2012 and Gao, Liu 1958.

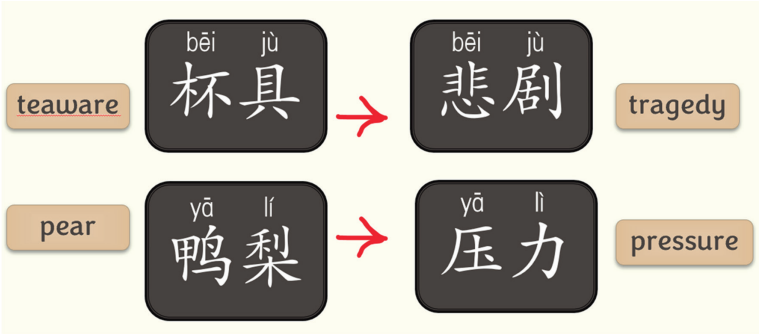


Figure 4 Metaphorical homophonic neologisms

The top pair seem to allude to the existence of the primary metaphor life is a tea table, which in turn seems to be a variation of the near-universal LIFE IS A POSSIBILITY, or even LIFE IS A BOX CHOCOLATES (Kövecses 2005, 266). As we know it, life is full of tragedy, comedy etc. just as on a tea table there could be teaware (tragedy) or washing tools, *xiju* 洗具 (*xiju* 喜剧 'comedy'). This is what seems to be a case of metaphor "'off-loaded' into the cultural world to enable people to better solve problems, make decisions and perform skilled actions" as mentioned in § 3.3 by Gibbs Jr (1997, 157). The same author reports that also for the Japanese culture these "external symbols […] serve as a kind of tool or scaffolding for culturally appropriate behaviour" (Gibbs Jr 1997, 157).

The bottom pair, associated by quasi-similar pronunciation, can be seen as a metaphorical process of mapping the abstract onto the more concrete, to make pressure more endurable and manageable, just like biting off a pear (Zheng 2015, 1382). I would also add that the fact of reifying 'pressure' as a duck-shaped pear, which can also be disposed of, calls to mind the process of dumbing down fear, aware of the fact that the symbol of the 'pear' (*li*) is generally associated with its homophonous word *-li* 离 'to depart' (therefore it is taboo to give pears as presents), then it may also be alluding to 'departing from the stress' as a means to fight it.

In the previous section, we saw how the conceptual metaphorical frameworks can show within Chinese neologisms as novel metaphors either in line with embodiment or cultural experience, or as predominantly produced by human imaginative processes, unrestrained by the embodied and sociocultural experience (Kövecses 2005, 264). Finally, Philip (2006, 65) reminds us that

> In vocabulary acquisition in particular, it seems that language items are more successfully learned when a specific focus is directed on

the relation of figurative meanings to their corresponding literal meaning. (Boers 2000; Charteris-Black 2000 quoted in Philip 2006)

4 Pedagogical Importance of Metaphor and Neologisms

As metaphors and figurative language are acknowledged as spread in and via our everyday language, especially since netspeak has made it so that the novel metaphors created are diffused more widely, giving rise to even new entailments, then language learners will be inevitably exposed to such metaphorical products and figurative language throughout different phases of their learning. Thus, this raises the question of the importance of metaphor in teaching and learning. Neologisms may be a vessel that could aid in such enterprise. As we saw, Chinese neologisms can bring to light underlying metaphorical processes specific to the culture, making it not only a means necessary for successful communication (Jing-Schmidt, Hsieh 2019, 514) but also a lens for a deeper understanding of how, sometimes different, conceptual thinking works. For reasons of space, this section will focus mostly on the importance of metaphor in pedagogy and learning and how it can be utilised in education. Many of the benefits also indirectly apply to teaching neologisms. [52]

Although metaphors in education have generally been seen as sometimes practically helpful, yet fundamentally decorative, even harmful at times, they are essential to learning in a number of ways (Petrie, Oshlag 1993, 608). In providing that passage from unknown to known (584) metaphors play a unique educational role in the acquisition of new knowledge in the most memorable way. When students employ a deeper cognitive effort (Roche 2014, 340) in understanding why 'cow' would be synonymous of 'cool', especially when the same metaphor in their own culture relates to the exact opposite, that metaphor will make it possible for them to certainly fixate the (predicative) adjective, and at the same time, learn a more culturally centred metaphor.[53] The author, echoing Littlemore (2017, 286) also mentions unwanted consequences for metaphors misused or misleading, which is something reflected in some students when a conventional word acquires a new meaning (like the very same example of 'cool' which not only means 'cow' but it is also the Chinese zodiac sign for 'ox') making it all more confusing. When metaphors are introduced in the classroom, with the due amount of direction from the teacher to encourage the student to suspend the notions

52 A more comprehensive account on the importance of Chinese Neologisms in pedagogy is given in Gebbia 2025.

53 Cf. Cortazzi, Jin 2019, 140; Cortazzi et al. 2009.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

of literal truth and falsity (Petrie, Oshlag 1993, 586), in thinking and discussing the metaphors (601), they can restructure the student's cognitive apparatus and promote changes in their affective characteristics when learning something unfamiliar or abstract (600). Research in Boers (2000) shows that by systematically guiding language learners to focus on the source domains of linguistic metaphors and metaphorical vocabulary, teachers can significantly enhance learners' depth of understanding and long-term retention of the target language (Littlemore, Low 2006, 272).

Metaphorical content can function as a motivator in helping stimulate student interest when presented with more challenging content to learn (Petrie, Oshlag 1993, 602), especially in the case of more able students. In fact, the authors propose that metaphors can serve as an effective method to re-engage students who have become uninterested, as they enable learners to relate the subject matter to their personal experiences. This motivating effect is also shared by the Self-Determination Theory of Motivation (cf. Ryan, Deci 2012) which pertains to both the fields of social psychology and cognitive linguistics. The claims of the motivating and efficient role of metaphor in teaching are also supported by Littlemore (2017), who in her overview of studies on metaphor applied in several educational contexts, highlights the role of metaphor not only in fostering understanding, either of abstract concepts and for memorising key concepts (Littlemore 2017, 286), but in raising critical thinking. In particular, in Littlemore (2004), a quasi-experimental study focused on metaphor in an English for Academic Purposes context and having experimental and control groups participating in 'critical thinking' session, the students of the experimental group, who also received a 'metaphoric awareness-raising' session, showed to make more explicit references to metaphor in their critical analyses. In another study on metaphor to promote critical thinking, Wan (2014 cited in Littlemore 2017, 288) administered a series of metaphor elicitation tasks to a group of Chinese students to explore their conceptualisations of academic writing, and found that it had a beneficial effect, noting how new metaphors emerged from the group discussion. Over time, participants changed their conceptualisations of the essay writing process and developed their levels of metaphoric awareness over the course of the year.

To expand on the notion of cultural variation of metaphor (Kövecses 2005), and that effective second language learning is greatly motivated by cultural awareness, which in turn plays a significant role in the learners' cognitive processes (Kövecses 2006), it is important to say that metaphor can also cultivate the acquisition of the intercultural competence (cf. Neuner 2003). In fact, "metaphors also enable teachers and students to share meaning" (Petrie, Oshlag 1993, 603); for instance, when talking in the classroom about the

meaning of *chitu* 吃土 'to live off almost nothing to eat', students also shared their slang term 'to eat dirt' in use among them. Being asked to engage on metaphorical content allowed the teaching and learning experience to be more memorable and meaningful, both for the student and the teacher.[54] In a study by Cortazzi and Jin (2019) about elicited metaphor analysis of Chinese cultures of learning, which draws attention to the cultural features of how students learn (Cortazzi, Jin 2019, 131), students have shared their ways of seeing the teachers, learning, language, dynamics and patterns of thinking, which in turn unearthed entailments underlying conceptual metaphors and provided cross-cultural insights into particular concepts learn (Cortazzi, Jin 2019, 142). From this perspective, introducing students to these metaphorical processes can be beneficial and can not only increase the size of their vocabulary but also their intercultural communicative competence, which CEFR (the Common European Framework of Reference) considers as the most important competence to develop in L2 teaching (Niemeier 2017, 268). It is worth noting that the CEFR makes no mention of the concept of metaphor and metaphorical competence, nor it contains descriptors for metaphor use (MacArthur 2017, 418; Nacey 2017, 509-10).

Table 5 Components of language competence (Littlemore, Low 2006). Source: Bachman (1990)

Table 1: The components of language competence

Organizational competence		Pragmatic competence	
Grammatical competence	Textual competence	Illocutionary competence	Sociolinguistic competence
Vocabulary or variety	Cohesion	Ideational functions	Sensitivity to dialect
Morphology	Rhetorical organization	Manipulative functions	Sensitivity to register
Syntax		Heuristic functions	Sensitivity to naturalness
Phonology/ graphology		Imaginative functions	Ability to interpret cultural references and figures of speech

A final important competence promoted by metaphor teaching and learning, which also encompasses other types, is the more inherent metaphoric competence. Metaphoric competence is broadly defined by Littlemore and Low (2006, 269) "to include both knowledge of, and ability to use, metaphor, as well as Low's (1988) 'skills needed to work

54 For metaphors revolving the verb 'to eat', cf. Link 2013.

effectively with metaphor'". Repricing the model of communicative competence proposed in Bachman (1990),[55] widely used in language teaching and testing and composed of four types of competences **[tab. 5]**, Littlemore and Low (2006, 268) intend to prove the pivotal role of metaphoric competence in all areas of communicative competence.

As we can see from the model, Bachman (1990) refers to metaphor in the 'sociolinguistic competence' with the phrase 'ability to interpret cultural references and figures of speech' which echoes Kövecses' view on metaphor and culture, and as we also said, culture can be the home of many original conceptual metaphors. 'Illocutionary competence' "refers to a person's ability to understand not simply the words one is using, but the message that one is trying to convey through those words". Metaphor expresses in 'ideational functions' in the sense that it is used via language to exchange information and feelings about it. Conceptual entailments show in utterances with 'manipulative functions' to affect the world around us (e.g. 'calm down' etc.) (Littlemore, Low 2006, 276). The analogies created by teachers are taken as an example of 'heuristic functions' that refer to our use of trial and error, or *ad hoc* devices, and teach the world around us. Another heuristic aspect of metaphor is "the recognition that individual metaphors (whether linguistic or conceptual) give but a partial view of any given topic and that it is therefore quite understandable and 'natural' that multiple metaphors arise" (Littlemore, Low 2006, 279). 'Imaginative functions', per se rather self-explanatory when related to metaphor, refer to the ability to create humour out of our environment for aesthetic purposes (Littlemore, Low 2006, 280). Indeed, being able to master a language in metaphorical terms and being creative can be seen as being equipped with the "tools for producing and understanding the target language in a more native-like and thus more successful way" (Niemeier 2017, 267). Littlemore and Low are also keen on reminding us that since metaphor seems to perform in all the functions of the illocutionary competence, it is probably worth for students to notice, or also to learn, when metaphors are being used in an unfamiliar way to them (Littlemore, Low 2006, 281).

For all the reasons stated above for the other functions, metaphor can therefore become a key component in 'textual competence', both written and spoken, in order to structure a cohesive, rhetorically organised text, "to use figurative language to interpret and control hedges" (Low 1988 quoted in Littlemore, Low 2006, 282). It goes without saying what 'grammatical competence' refers to, but as

55 In the Bachman's broad sense, 'competence' includes also the ability to deal with knowledge-based components of language that have been isolated as theoretical areas, such as 'syntax' or 'cohesion' (Littlemore, Low 2006, 274).

proved by the Conceptual Theory of Metaphor, our own everyday language, think of phrasal verbs for one, is imbued with conceptual metaphors, as the notion of 'grammatical metaphor' also claims (Halliday 1985; Halliday, Kirkwood 1999 cited in Littlemore, Low 2006, 283).

Littlemore and Low (2006, 286) also mention a later addition to the model where metaphoric thinking may be involved–'Strategic Competence', which deals with communication strategies analysed by two approaches. The psycholinguistic approach defines these in terms of 'compensation strategies', such as the speakers' abilities to compensate for their gaps, in order to continue the conversation (Tarone 1983, 62 cited in Littlemore, Low 2006. Cf. also Poulisse 1990). The interactive approach focuses more on the manipulation carried out by two interlocutors on the conversation to negotiate shared meaning (McNamara 1995 cited in Littlemore, Low 2006), or a change of topic with the use of figurative expressions (Drew, Holt 1998 cited in Littlemore, Low 2006). Very interestingly, among the compensation strategies, for what strictly concerns neologisms, the authors also mention word coinage:

> The strategy of word coinage involves making up new words or expressions to get one's meaning across. In order to do this, speakers often use or adapt words that are available to them in original or innovative ways in order to express the concepts they want. This process often relies on metaphorical thought, as it involves the ability to stretch the conventional boundaries of word meaning. The use of metaphorical thought to fill lexical gaps created by the emergence of new semantic fields has been central to change and development in language. (Littlemore, Low 2006, 287)

Ultimately, "language use follows the zeitgeist of society. So does metaphor." (Jing-Schmidt 2016, 635) and the fact that students are able to produce metaphors in their speech and writing is considered one of the measures of advanced proficiency in a foreign language (Philip 2006, 65).

5 Concluding Remarks

This article has reviewed key scholarship at the intersection of Chinese neologisms and metaphor theory, highlighting how figurative mechanisms – particularly conceptual metaphors and blending processes – underlie much of the creativity observed in contemporary Chinese lexis. Chung and Ahrens (2019, 367) believe metaphor "to be an important way to develop and interpret lexis in Chinese", and that "familiarising, understanding and learning neologisms can cultivate

students' 'linguistic sense' and increase their linguistic insights, leading to an improved communication". Hou (2023, 775) reports that among 271 words with a new meaning acquired, up to the year 2020, 198 are neoformations created metaphorically, as one of the most fundamental ways to neosemantise conventional meanings. Neologisms, often encapsulate cultural attitudes, generational values, and collective experiences, making them rich sources for cognitive and sociolinguistic analysis.

While the principal aim of this work has been to synthesise theoretical insights from the literature, some pedagogical implications may be inferred. The metaphorical dimension of neologisms could enhance learners' engagement, support cultural awareness, and serve as an entry point into the cognitive patterns that shape Chinese linguistic expression. Therefore, it could have valuable practical uses, such as in the teaching of foreign languages (Kövecses, Benczes 2010, xii). However, these educational suggestions remain exploratory, and future empirical research will be needed to validate their actual impact in classroom settings.

Ultimately, by offering a metaphorically informed reading of Chinese neologisms, this review contributes to broader discussions on how evolving language forms intersect with cognition and culture– and how these intersections might be harnessed, cautiously and critically, in language education (cf. Gebbia 2025).

By placing Chinese neologisms at the intersection of language, culture, and pedagogy, this study paves the way for further exploration of their potential as tools for linguistic and educational innovation. In an era of rapid global communication and cultural exchange, such inquiries hold profound implications for the teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language.

Bibliography

Adamo, G.; Della Valle, V. (2017). *Che cos'è un neologismo*. Roma: Carocci.

Arcodia, G.F.; Basciano, B. (2021). *Chinese Linguistics: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bachman, L.F. (1990). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bai Jiehong 白解红; Chen Minzhe 陈敏哲 (2010). "Hanyu wangluo ciyu de zaixian yiyi jiangou yanjiu — yi 'X ke' wei li" 汉语网络词语的在线意义建构研究——以"X客"为例 (Online Semantic Construction of Chinese Internet Words: A Case Study of 'X Ke'). *Waiyu Xuekan*, 2, 25-30.

Bai Jiehong; Chen Zhongping 陈忠平 (2011). "Ershi shiji zhongqi yilai Ying-Han xinciyu de laiyuan ji qi yuyi renzhi jizhi" 二十世纪中期以来英汉新词语的来源及其语义认知机制 (Origin of English and Chinese Neologisms Since the Mid-Twentieth Century and Their Semantic Cognitive Mechanisms). *Waiguo Yuwen*, 27(5), 34-8.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Bai Zhaoxia 白朝霞 (2007). "Shilun duiwai Hanyu jiaoxue zhong de xinci xinyu wenti" 试论对外汉语教学中的新词新语问题 (On the Issue of Neologisms and New Expressions in the Teaching of Chinese as a Foreign Language). *Dezhou Xueyuan Xuebao*, 23(1), 101-4.

Basciano, B.; Bareato, S. (2020). "Chinese Affixes in the Internet Era: A Corpus-Based Study of X-族 zú, X-党 dǎng and X-客 kè Neologisms". Basciano, B.; Gatti, F.; Morbiato, A. (eds), *Corpus-Based Research on Chinese Language and Linguistics*. Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 237-80. Sinica Venetiana 6.

Bian Jing 边境 (2021). "Lvpishu suo fanying de niandu xinciyu yanjiu wenxian zongshu" 绿皮书所反映的年度新词语研究文献综述 (Annual Review of Research Literature on New Words Reflected in the Green Book). *Sanwen Baijia (Lilun)*, 8, 140-1, 144.

Boers, F. (2000). "Metaphor Awareness and Vocabulary Retention". *Applied Linguistics*, 21(4), 553-71.

Bulfoni, C. (2005). "La lingua cinese nell'era dell'informatica: alcune considerazioni preliminari". *Rivista degli studi orientali*, 78, 1000-9.

Bulfoni, C. (2009). "Lexical Borrowing of English in the Internet Era: How to Preserve Chinese Identity?". Catenaccio, P.; Garzone, G.E. (eds), *Identities Across Media and Modes: Discursive Perspectives*. Bern: Peter Lang, 215-34.

Bulfoni, C. (2010). "Il cinese della Computer-Mediated Communication". *Media in Cina oggi: Testimonianze e orientamenti = Atti del convegno Polo di Mediazione Interculturale e Comunicazione* (Università degli Studi di Milano, 29 aprile 2009). Milano: Franco Angeli, 93-107.

Cai Lü 蔡绿 (2005). "Shilun duiwai Hanyu baokan yuedu ke zhong de xinciyu jiaoxue" 试论对外汉语报刊阅读课中的新词语教学 (A Discussion on the Teaching of New Vocabulary in Chinese Language Newspaper and Magazine Reading Courses for Foreigners). *Taiyuan Shifan Xueyuan Xuebao: Shehui Kexueban*, 4(1), 147-8.

Ceccagno, A. (2016). "Chinese Neologisms: Word Formation Strategies in Chinese". Sin-Wai, C. (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Chinese Language*. London: Routledge, 265-79.

Chang Zhibin 常志斌 (2007). "Liuxuesheng Hanyu xinciyu ke de jianshe wenti chutan" 留学生汉语新词语课的建设问题初探 (An Initial Approach to the Course Construction of the New Chinese Word Teaching for Overseas Students). *School of International Exchange, Shanghai University*, 14(3), 129-33.

Che Fei 车飞 (2015). "Jin shiyu nian lai Hanyu wangluo xinciyu yanjiu shulue" 近十余年来汉语网络新词语研究述略 (A Brief Review of the Research on New Chinese Internet Words in the Past Decade). *Chongqing Gongshang Daxue Xuebao: Shehui Kexueban*, 32(3), 102-13.

Chen Chen 陈晨 (2012). "Xiandai Hanyu xincihui yu duiwai Hanyu jiaoxue" 现代汉语新词汇与对外汉语教学 (New Vocabulary of Modern Chinese and Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language). *Qingchun Suiyue*, 23, 129.

Chen, M.; Liu, S.; Zhang, S. (2022). "Internet Language Study in China". Ye, Z. (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Chinese Language Studies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 275-96.

Chen, P. (1999). *Modern Chinese: History and Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chung, S.-F.; Ahrens, K. (2019). "Metaphor in Chinese". Huang, C.-R.; Jing-Schmidt, Z.; Meisterernst, B. (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Applied Linguistics*. London: Routledge, 364-78.

Cortazzi, M.; Jin Lixian; Wang Zhiru (2009). "Cultivators, Cows and Computers: Chinese Learners' Metaphors of Teachers". Coverdale-Jones, T.; Rastall, P. (Eds.), *Internationalising the University*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 107–129.

Cortazzi, M.; Jin, L. (2019). "Chinese Cultures of Learning: Elicited Metaphor Research". Huang, C.-R.; Jing-Schmidt, Z.; Meisterernst, B. (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Applied Linguistics*. London: Routledge, 131-48.

Crystal, D. (2006). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (2018). *The Language Revolution*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Dancygier, B. (2008). "Figurativeness, Conceptual Metaphor, and Blending". Gibbs, R.W. (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 28-41.

Duan Xingzhen 段兴臻 (2010). "Shìlùn duìwài Hànyǔ xīncíyǔ jiàoxué de kěxíngxìng" 试论对外汉语新词语教学的可行性 (A Discussion on the Feasibility of Teaching New Vocabulary in Chinese as a Foreign Language). *Dazhong Wenyi, Xueshuban*, 20, 287.

Fang Qingming 方清明; Peng Xiaochuan 彭小川 (2013). "Cóng rènzhī–xīnlǐ shìjiǎo yánjiū xīncíyǔ" 从认知—心理视角研究新词语 (Neologism Study from the Cognitive-Psychological Perspective). *Yuyan Wenzi Yingyong*, 8(3), 79-87.

Fauconnier, G. (2018). *Ten Lectures on Cognitive Construction of Meaning*. Vol. 5, *Distinguished Lectures in Cognitive Linguistics*. Leiden: Brill.

Fauconnier, G.; Turner, M. (2008). "Rethinking Metaphor". Gibbs, R.W. (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 53-66.

Feldman, J.; Narayanan, S. (2004). 'Embodied meaning in a neural theory of language'. *Brain and language*, 89(2), 385392.

Feldman, J. (2008). *From Molecule to Metaphor: A Neural theory of language*. MIT press.

Gao Bing 高兵; He Yanjie 何彦杰 (2008). "Lùn duìwài Hànyǔ jiàoxué zhōng zhùzhòng xīncíyǔ de bìyàoxìng" 论对外汉语教学中注重新词新语的必要性 (The Necessity of Incorporating Neologisms in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language). *Hanzi Wenhua*, 2, 57-60.

Gao, L. (2012). "Synchronic Variation or Diachronic Change: A Sociolinguistic Study of Chinese Internet Language". Liu, J.; Tao, H. (ed.), *Chinese Under Globalization*. Singapore: World Scientific, 7-28.

Gao, Mingkai 高名凯; Liu, Zhentan 刘正谈. (1958) (1958). *Xiàndài Hànyǔ wàiláicí yánjiū* 现代汉语外来词研究 (A Study of Loan Words in Modern Chinese). Beijing: Wenzi Gaige Chubanshe.

Gebbia, C. (2025). "Chinese Neologisms 20 Years Later: Motivation and Pedagogy". Casari, M. (a cura di), *Percorsi in Civiltà dell'Asia e dell'Africa IV: Quaderni di studi dottorali alla Sapienza*, vol. 142. Roma: Sapienza Università Editrice, 75-101.

Gibbs Jr, R.W. (1999). "Taking Metaphor Out of Our Heads and Putting It into the Cultural World". Gibbs, R.W.; Steen, G.J. (eds), *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics: Selected Papers from the Fifth International Cognitive Linguistics Conference*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 145-66.

Gibbs Jr, R.W. (1997). "Taking Metaphor Out of Our Heads and Putting It into the Cultural World". Gibbs, R.W.; Steen, G.J. (eds), *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics: Selected Papers from the Fifth International Cognitive Linguistics Conference*, Amsterdam, July 1997. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 145-66.

Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 145-66.

Giora, R. (2003). *On Our Mind: Salience, Context, and Figurative Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Glushkova, S.Y.; Voronina, M.K. (2017). "Structural and Semantic Analysis of Neologism in Chinese Language". *The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication (TOJDAC)*, 846-53.

Gong, W.; Hong, H. (2019). "Using Corpus-Based Analysis of Neologisms on China's New Media for Teaching Chinese as a Second or Foreign Language". Chen, H.; Lu,

X.; Huang, B. (eds), *Computational and Corpus Approaches to Chinese Language Learning*. Singapore: Springer, 173-94.

Grady, J. (1997). *Foundations of Meaning: Primary Metaphors and Primary Scenes* [PhD Dissertation]. Berkeley: University of California.

Guo Jiawei 郭嘉伟; Kang Shiyong 亢世勇 (2008). "Xīncíyǔ yánjiū de xiànzhuàng" 新词语研究的现状 (The State of the Art in the Study of Neologisms). *Dìsìjiè Quánguó Xuéshēng Jìsuàn Yǔyánxué Yántǎohuì Huìyì Lùnwénjí*, 7, 422-32.

Han, C. (2011). "Reading Chinese Online Entertainment News: Metaphor and Language Play". *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43(14), 3473-88.

Han, C. (2012). "The Metaphorical World of Chinese Online Entertainment News". Liu, J.; Tao, H. (eds), *Chinese Under Globalization*. Singapore: World Scientific, 29-57.

Hao, Z. (2020). "The Application of Metaphor Theory in the Teaching of Polysemy Content Words in Chinese as a Foreign Language". *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 490, 129-34.

He Ning 贺宁 (2014). "Rènzhī yǔyánxué shìjiǎo xià de yǐnyùxíng xīncíyǔ" 认知语言学视角下的隐喻型新词语 (Metaphorical New Words from the Perspective of Cognitive Linguistics). *Yuwen Jianshe*, 1(3), 33-4.

Hebb, D. O. (1949). *The Organization of Behavior; A Neuropsychological Theory*. New York: Wiley.

Heřmanová-Novotná, Z. (1969). *Affix-Like Word-Formation Patterns in Modern Chinese*. Prague: Oriental Institute in Academia.

Hou Min 侯敏 (2023). *Hànyǔ xīncíyǔ cídiǎn (2000-2020)* 汉语新词语词典(2000-2020) (Dictionary of Chinese Neologisms, 2000-2020). Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan.

Huang, M.-k. (2012). "The War of Neologisms: The Competition Between the Newly Translated Terms Invented by Yan Fu and by the Japanese in the Late Qing". St. André, J.; Peng, H. (eds), *China and Its Others*. Leiden: Brill, 51-70.

Jiang Aoshuang 江傲霜 (2004). "Xīncíyǔ yǐnyùhuà de tèzhēng jí fāngshì" 新词语隐喻化的特征及方式 (The Features and Patterns of New Metaphoric Words). *Honghe Xueyuan Xuebao*, 2(06), 53-7.

Jing-Schmidt, Z. (2016). "Metaphor in Chinese: Cognition, Culture, and Society". Shei, C.; Chan, W. (eds), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of the Chinese Language*. London: Routledge, 667-82.

Jing-Schmidt, Z.; Hsieh, S. (2019). "Chinese Neologisms". Huang, C.-R.; Jing-Schmidt, Z.; Meisterernst, B. (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Applied Linguistics*. London: Routledge, 514-34.

Johnson, C. (1999). "Metaphor vs. Conflation in the Acquisition of Polysemy: The Case of SEE". Hiraga, M.K.; Sinha, C.; Wilcox, S. (eds), *Cultural, Psychological and Typological Issues in Cognitive Linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 155-69. Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 152.

Kang Shiyong 亢世勇 (2008). *Xiàndài Hànyǔ xīncíyǔ jìliàng yánjiū yǔ yìngyòng* 现代汉语新词语计量研究与应用 (Quantitative Study and Application of New Words in Modern Chinese). Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe.

Kövecses, Z. (2016). "Conceptual Metaphor Theory". Semino, E.; Demjén, Z. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*. London: Routledge, 31-45.

Kövecses, Z. (2005). *Metaphor in Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kövecses, Z.; Benczes, R. (2010). *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lackner, M.; Amelung, I.; Kurtz, J. (2014). *New Terms for New Ideas: Western Knowledge and Lexical Change in Late Imperial China*. Leiden: Brill.

Lakoff, G. (1993). "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor". Ortony, A. (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 202-51.

Lakoff, G. (2008). "The Neural Theory of Metaphor". Gibbs, R.W. (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 17-38.

Lakoff, G.; Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, G.; Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.

Lakoff, G.; Turner, M. (1989). *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Li, H.; Chen, F. (2021). "Research on Contemporary Neologisms from the Perspective of Multimedia". *Network and Information Systems for Computers (ICNISC) = 7th Annual International Conference*. Guiyang, China, 2021: IEEE, 881-5.

Li, H.; Feng, M. (2011). "Recognition of the Metaphoric Neologisms". *International Journal of Knowledge and Language Processing*, 2(3), 14-20.

Li, P. (2019). "A Cognitive Interpretation of Chinese Neologism 'Fóxì'". *Journal of Arts & Humanities Studies*, 1, 34-7.

Li, W. (2023). *The Integration of Chinese Internet Neologisms into Everyday* [Master's Degree Thesis]. Lund: Lund University. https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/9130939/file/9130940.pdf.

Li Xiangling 李香玲 (2021). "Wǎngluò xīncíqún wénhuà rènzhīlùn" 网络新词群文化认知论 (Cultural Cognition of Network Neologism Cluster). *Henan Daxue Xuebao (Shehui Kexueban)*, 61(03), 120-5.

Link, P. (2013). *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Littlemore, J. (2017). "Metaphor Use in Educational Contexts". Semino, E.; Demjén, Z. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*. London: Routledge, 301-13.

Littlemore, J.; Low, G. (2006). "Metaphoric Competence, Second Language Learning, and Communicative Language Ability". *Applied Linguistics*, 27(2), 268-94.

Liu, J.; Tao, H. (eds) (2012). *Chinese Under Globalization: Emerging Trends in Language Use in China*. Singapore: World Scientific.

Liu Jiyan 刘吉艳 (2010). *Hanyu xinciqun yanjiu* 汉语新词群研究 (Research on Chinese Neologism Clusters). Liaoning: Xuelin chubanshe.

Lü Shuxiang 吕叔湘 (1984). "Dajia lai guanxin xinci xinyi" 大家来关心新词新义 (Let Us All Consider Neologisms). *Cishu Yanjiu*, 1, 8-14.

Lung Lai, S.; Ng, T.T. (2014). "Collaborative Discovery of Chinese Neologisms in Social Media". *Systems, Man, and Cybernetics (SMC) = IEEE International Conference* (San Diego, CA, USA). Piscataway, NJ: IEEE, 4107-12.

Luo Guoqiang 罗国强 (2013). *Ming dai Hanyu xinciyu yanjiu* 明代汉语新词语研究 (Research on New Chinese Words in the Ming Dynasty). Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe.

Ma, T. (2018). "A Corpus-Based Approach to the Quantitative Criterion for the Lexicographic Listing of Neologisms". *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics*, 45, 52-6.

MacArthur, F. (2017). "Using Metaphor in the Teaching of Second/Foreign Languages". Semino, E.; Demjén, Z. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*. London: Routledge, 413-24.

Masini, F. (ed.) (1993). "The Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon and Its Evolution Toward a National Language: The Period from 1840 to 1898". Monogr. no., *Journal of Chinese Linguistics Monograph Series*, 6(1), i–295.

Masini, F.; Langé, G.; Brezzi, A.; Buchetti, C.; Bulfoni, C.; Di Muzio, T.; Formica, A.; Gabbianelli, G.; Lioi, T.; Paternicò, L.M.; Pedone, V.; Regis, V.; Romagnoli, C.;

Scibetta, A.; Varriano, V. (2016). *Il sillabo della lingua cinese: Quadro di riferimento unitario per l'insegnamento della lingua cinese nella scuola secondaria di secondo grado*. Roma: Ministero dell'Istruzione dell'Università e della Ricerca.

Nacey, S. (2017). "Metaphor Comprehension and Production in a Second Language". Semino, E.; Demjén, Z. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*. London: Routledge, 521-34.

Narayanan, S. (1997). *Embodiment in Language Understanding: Sensory-Motor Representations for Metaphoric Reasoning About Event Descriptions* [PhD Dissertation]. Berkeley: University of California.

Niemeier, S. (2017). "Teaching (in) Metaphors". Ervas, F.; Gola, E.; Rossi, M-G. (eds), *Metaphor in Communication, Science and Education*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 267-82.

Novotná, Z. (1967). "Linguistic Factors of the Low Adaptability of Loan-Words to the Lexical System of Modern Chinese". *Monumenta Serica*, 26, 103-18.

Ortony, A. (1993). *Metaphor and Thought*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/samples/cam034/92037625.html.

Pellin, T. (2014). "Pazzi per i neologismi... freddi verso le *wailaici*? La prospettiva cinese sulle interferenze lessicali". Bulfoni, C.; Pozzi, S. (eds), *Associazione Italiana Studi Cinesi = Atti del XIII Convegno* (Milano, 22-24 settembre 2011). Milano: Franco Angeli, 320-30.

Petrie, H.G.; Oshlag, R.S. (1993). "Metaphor and Learning". Ortony, A. (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 579-609.

Philip, G. (2006). "Drugs, Traffic, and Many Other Dirty Interests. Metaphor and the Language Learner". Low, G.; Todd, Z.; Deignan, A.; Cameron, L. (eds), *Researching and Applying Metaphor in the Real World*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 26, 63-79.

Philip, G. (2016). "Conventional and Novel Metaphors in Language". Semino, E.; Demjén, Z. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*. London: Routledge, 237-50.

Pruvost, J.; Sablayrolles, J.-F. (2016). *Les néologismes*. 3e éd. mise à jour. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Quemada, B. (2009). s.v. "La Neologia". *Treccani.it*. https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-neologia_(XXI-Secolo).

Regier, T. (1997). "Constraints on the Learning of Spatial Terms: A Computational Investigation". *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, 36, 171-217.

Roche, J. (2014). "Language Acquisition and Language Pedagogy". Littlemore, J.; Taylor, J.R. (eds), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Cognitive Linguistics*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 325-51.

Shi Youwei 史有为 (1991). *Yi wenhua de shizhe: wailaici* 异文化的使者 : 外来词 (Emissaries from the Other Culture: Foreignisms). Changchun: Jilin jiaoyu chubanshe.

Shu Dingfang 束定芳 (2000). *Yinyuxue yanjiu* 隐喻学研究 (Studies in Metaphor). Shanghai: Shanghai Waiyu Jiaoyu Chubanshe.

Song, Z. (2020). "'Tuhaos' with 'Hongbaos' Are Going to the English World: Study on the Features of Chinese English Neologisms Based on Web". *English Language Teaching*, 13(8), 152-9.

Wang Lei 汪磊 (2016). "Wangluo yuyan yanjiu shinian" 网络语言研究十年 (A Decade of Chinese Internet Language Studies). *Yuyan Zhanglue Yanjiu*, 3, 43-51.

Wang Lihui 王丽会 (2022). "Jin shinian duiwai Hanyu jiaoxue xinciyu yanjiu zongshu" 近十年对外汉语教学新词语研究综述 (A Summary of Research on New Words in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language in the Past Decade). *Chuanmei yu Yishu Yanjiu*, 1, 114-19.

Wang Lixia 王李霞 (2003). "Yinyu tanyuan—jianlun woguo lishishang de yinyu yanjiu" 隐喻探源——兼论我国历史上的隐喻研究 (Exploring the Source of Metaphor – On the Study of Metaphor in Our History). *Hubei Minzu Xueyuanbao: Zhexue Shehui Kexueban*, 21(2), 102-6.

Wang Tiekun 王铁琨 (1992). "Xinciyu de panding biaozhun yu xinci xinyu cidian bianzuan de yuanze" 新词语的判定标准与新词新语词典编纂的原则 (Selection Standards for Neologisms and Principles for Compiling Neologism Dictionaries). *Yuyan Wenzi Yingyong*, 4, 14-20.

Wang, X. (2012). "A Cognitive Study of Word-Formation of Chinese New Metaphorical Compounds". *Overseas English*, 3, 262-3.

Wu Zhifeng 吴志峰; Song Wenjing 宋文静 (2019). "Wangluo yuyan jinru duiwai Hanyu jiaocai de kenengxing fenxi" 网络语言进入对外汉语教材的可能性分析 (Analysis of the Possibility of Internet Language Entering Chinese as a Foreign Language Textbooks). *Beifang Wenxue*, 15, 118-19, 122.

Xia Li 夏历; Zhang Bingyu 张冰玉 (2016). "Duiwai hanyu jiaoxue zhong de xinciyu jiaoxue zai sikao — jiyu liuxuesheng dui xinciyu de renzhi he xuqiu qingkuang diaocha" 对外汉语教学中的新词语教学再思考——基于留学生对新词语的认知和需求情况调查 (Rethinking the Teaching of New Words in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language: A Survey Based on the Understanding and Needs of International Students on New Words). *Neimenggu Shifandaxue Xuebao: Zhexue Shehui Kexueban*, 45(6), 123-7.

Xing Yuhua 行玉华; Bai Didi 白迪迪 (2012). "Qiantan duiwai hanyu jiaoxue zhong wangluo xinci de jiaoxue celue" 浅谈对外汉语教学中网络新词的教学策略 (Brief Discussion on Teaching Strategy of New Internet Words from Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language). *Tianjin Dianda Xuebao*, 16(2), 45-7.

Xu Fukun 徐福坤 (2006). "Qianyi 'fensi'" 浅议"粉丝" (An Analysis of 'Fans'). *Xiuci Xuexi*, 2, 74-5.

Yang Liuqing 杨柳青 (2017). "Hanyu zuowei di er yuyan zhong de xinciyu jiaoxue tanjiu" 汉语作为第二语言中的新词语教学探究 (A Pedagogical Inquiry into the Teaching of Chinese as a Second Language). *Wenxue Jiaoyu (xia)*, 12, 52-3.

You Yuxiang 游玉祥; Wang Dechun 王德春 (2012). *Xinciyu de tedian fenxi ji qi renzhi jieshi — jiyu 2006-2009 nian Hanyu xinciyu de yanjiu* 新词语的特点分析及其认知解释——基于2006至2009年汉语新词语的研究 (Characteristics of Neologism and Its Cognitive Motivations – A Study of Chinese Neologisms from 2006 to 2009) [PhD Dissertation]. Shanghai: Shanghai Waiguoyu Daxue.

Yu Genyuan 于根元 (1992). *Hanyu xinciyu, 1991* 汉语新词语·1991 (Chinese Neologisms, 1991). Beijing: Beijing Yuyan Xueyuan Chubanshe.

Yu Genyuan (2001). *Wangluo yuyan gaishuo* 网络语言概说 (An Overview of Internet Language). Beijing: Zhongguo Jingji Chubanshe.

Yu Genyuan; Wang Tiekun; Sun Shuxue 孙述学 (2003). "Xinci xinyu guifan jiben yuanze" 新词新语规范基本原则 (Basic Principles of Standardization of New Words). *Yuyan Wenzi Yingyong*, 2(1), 89-95.

Yu Jingyang 于婧阳 (2011). "Duiwai hanyu jiaoxue de xinciyu xuanci yuanze yu jiaoshou fangfa" 对外汉语教学的新词语选词原则与教授方法 (Principles and Methods of New Vocabulary Selection and Teaching for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language). *Shenyang Shifan Daxue Xuebao: Shehui Kexueban*, 35(6), 180-2.

Yu, N. (1998). *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor: A Perspective from Chinese*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Yu, N. (2008). "Metaphor from Body and Culture". Gibbs, R.W. (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 247-61.

Yu, Y. (2021). "Metaphorical Representations of 'Leftover Women': Between Traditional Patriarchy and Modern Egalitarianism". *Social Semiotics*, 31(2), 248-65.

Zheng Jinzhi 郑金芝 (2022). "Duiwai hanyu wangluo xinci xinyu jiaoxue celue yanjiu" 对外汉语网络新词新语教学策略研究 (Research on the Teaching Strategies of Online Neologisms in Chinese as a Foreign Language). *Yangzhou Jiaoyu Xueyuan Xuebao*, 40(1), 86-90.

Zheng, Y. (2015). "A Metaphorical Study on Chinese Neologisms". *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 6(6), 1379-83.

Zong Shouyun 宗守云 (2007). *Xinciyu de liti toushi* 新词语的立体透视 (A Three-Dimensional Perspective on Neologisms). Guilin: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
Vol. 61 – Supplement – November 2025

Re-Reading the Cityscape. How Saihate Tahi's Poetry Installation *Shi no kasoku* Opens Up New Urban Imaginaries

Sarah Puetzer
University of Oxford, UK

Abstract In recent years, contemporary Japanese poet Saihate Tahi has expanded poetry beyond the page, creating immersive poetic spaces. One such work, *Shi no kasoku*, is a one-line poetry installation in a back alley, where text and urban space merge. This paper examines how a site-specific poetry installation has the potential to transform reading into an embodied experience, reshaping perceptions of urban space. Drawing on Miryam Sas' notion of encounter (*deai*) and spatial theorists like Lefebvre and Massey, I argue that *Shi no kasoku* serves as both a site of encounter and resistance, prompting readers to reimagine the everyday space of the city.

Keywords Japanese literature. Contemporary poetry. Site-specific art. Urban space. Urban art. Avant-garde. Encounter.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-02-13
Accepted 2025-07-29
Published 2025-11-14

Citation Puetzer, S. (2025). "Re-Reading the Cityscape. How Saihate Tahi's Poetry Installation *Shi no kasoku* Opens Up New Urban Imaginaries". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 61, Supplement, November, 59-82.

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2025/03/003

1 Introduction

In early 2020, Saihate Tahi (1986-) was commissioned to create a piece for the Saitama Triennale of that year. After experimenting with exhibiting poetry in three-dimensional space in her first solo exhibition simply called *Shi no tenji* 詩の展示 (Poetry Exhibition) the previous year, she planned to transfer this experience to the city, where people would encounter her poetry unexpectedly.[1] She composed two short poems consisting of a single line each, asked designers Sasaki Shun and Nakanishi Yoko to come up with a design for them and eventually painted both poems in big white unmissable characters on the ground in early March 2020: *Shi no kasoku* 詩の加速 (The Acceleration of Poetry) in a small back alley in the nightlife district Minami Ginza and *Shi no teishi* 詩の停止 (The Suspension of Poetry) at the Daimon Underpass. Both locations are close to Ōmiya Station – the busiest station in Saitama Prefecture – which serves as a major commuter hub for travel into Tokyo and as an intercity terminal connected to destinations across Japan via the Shinkansen network.[2] Then, just ten days before the art festival was scheduled to open on 28 March 2020, the opening was postponed indefinitely due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. However, the poems were already painted, so Saihate decided to leave the installation as it was. There was no prior announcement or info text accompanying her installation, so people in Ōmiya encountered Saihate's words of poetry *truly* unexpectedly. Only a few months later in June, Saihate Tahi revealed the origin of the installation in a tweet, stating, "There was all this talk about mysterious back-alley poems in spring… it was me … sorry for the trouble!".[3] The postponed Saitama Triennale finally took place from 17 October to 15 November of that year and Saihate's poems were removed on 6 January 2021, ten months after their initial appearance.

1 *Shi no tenji* was exhibited at the Yokohama Museum of Art from 23 February to 24 March 2019.

2 According to statistics published by JR East, Ōmiya Station was the busiest station in Saitama in terms of daily commuter traffic with 244,393 passengers in 2023. It ranks seventh overall, surpassed only by stations located within Tokyo – Shinjuku (650,602), Ikebukuro (489,933), Tokyo (403,831), Shibuya (314,059), and Shinagawa (274,221) – as well as Yokohama Station (362,348). In terms of Shinkansen passengers, Ōmiya Station ranked second within the JR East network with 30,291 daily passengers. The highest number was recorded at Tokyo Station with 65,056. Passenger statistics by year are available at the East Japan Railway Company website: `https://www.jreast.co.jp/passenger/`).

3 Tweet by Saihate dated 25 June 2020, available at `https://twitter.com/tt_ss/status/1275950260381028352`. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, Supplement, November 2025, 59-82 | e-ISSN 2385-3042

Exhibiting art in an urban space, compared to presenting an art object in a gallery, a studio or a museum, comes with its own set of aesthetic categories and critical discourses, as the ongoing discussion on art's relationship and engagement with site in form of phenomena such as site-specific installations has shown (Kaye 2000; Suderburg 2000; Kwon 2002; Hawkins 2013). Adding now poetry as an element into the mix, untangling the individual components as well as the dynamics and interplays between them seems to become even more complicated. How can we productively analyze the construct of a site-specific poetry installation in urban space as presented by *Shi no kasoku* to find out in what ways encountering a poetic space in the landscape of a city can transform our ways of reading the poem and reading our surroundings? What happens when we encounter poetry unexpectedly in urban space and which political or aesthetic implications might come with this encounter?

To make sense of the sometimes more or less subtle effects of poetic spaces in the cityscape, I aim to use Saihate Tahi's *Shi no kasoku* as an example and examine her poetry installation by combining a close reading of the poem with an imaginary walk through the installation. This approach seeks to honor the embodied reading experience that a poetry installation such as *Shi no kasoku* requires. Since Japan's border measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 made it impossible for me to experience *Shi no kasoku* in person, my analysis relies on photos, videos, blog posts, tweets, and a virtual exploration of the relevant site using Google Street View. Following this analysis, I use the notion of encounter in postwar Japanese art, as assessed by Miryam Sas in her book *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return* (2011), to argue that *Shi no kasoku* can be read as a site of encounter. Drawing on essays written by Mono-ha painter Lee Ufan (1936-) and avant-garde writer and director Terayama Shūji (1935-1983), Sas states the idea of *deai* 出会い (encounter) was the driving force behind many works of postwar artists, as they aimed to create sites of encounter between the subject, the art object, and the surrounding space through their art, which hold the potential to bring about transformation for all involved parties, while also breaking down the boundaries between them. Using the idea of *deai* and combining this with a discussion on the political potential of art when exhibited in urban space postulated by Cecilie Sachs Olsen, Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and Herbert Marcuse, I will also argue that *Shi no kasoku* can be perceived as a site of resistance to established spatial orderings and clear categorizations. I will conclude my paper by suggesting that Saihate Tahi's *Shi no kasoku* crafts an aesthetic experience that prompts readers to *re-read* their surroundings and embrace a more open-minded perspective towards alternative urban imaginaries in their everyday spaces. However,

I plan to begin this chapter by defining what we talk about when we talk about urban space and urban imaginaries to clarify the terminology I intend to use.

2 Defining Urban Space and Urban Imaginaries

Urban space is usually characterized as a space of change and dynamism (Olsen 2019; Rácz 2018; Oshima 2016). This holds true for space in general, as Doreen Massey states in the first of her three propositions for space, "we recognise space as always under construction. […] it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed" (Massey 2005, 32). However, this dynamism can be said to get accelerated in an urban environment where "something is always pulled down, and something is always constructed" (Rácz 2018, 214).

In post-war Japan, there was a significant emphasis on rational urban planning to quickly rebuild cities devastated by the war from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. As awareness grew regarding the increasing urban issues and limitations associated with functional city planning, left-leaning, capitalism-critical groups like the *Toshi dezain kenkyūtai*, which included architect Isozaki Arata (1931-2022) among others, emerged in Tokyo in 1956 as "a movement to critique contemporary architecture and cities" and to advocate for the preservation of traditional structures within urban environments (Oshima 2016, 624). In 1961, the group published a special issue of the magazine *Kenchiku bunka* 建築文化 (The Architectural Culture) focused on urban design. Drawing inspiration from sources such as Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin de Paris*, they present the city as "physical, social, dynamic, symbolic, and visionary" (626). In the same issue, they argued that 'Western' urban planning typologies – such as the grid, linear, cluster, ring, satellite models – are not adequate to analyze Japanese urban space, developing their own typologies for the spatial principles and types particular to Japan, including the *Go* pattern, which is based on the layouts of many Japanese castle plans that resemble the character for the number five (626). These principles were based on the idea that the Japanese city is "never fixed; it is always in a state of transition" (Isozaki 2009, 203), mirroring Massey's proposition that space is always in the process of becoming. However, given the backdrop of recurrent natural disasters, such as the Great Kantō earthquake in 1923 or the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, as well as the destruction caused during WWII, including the Tokyo Air Raid in March 1945 and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagaski that August, Japanese cities have gone through cycles of devastation and reconstruction. In

this context, the conceptualization of the city as a dynamic process "has particular relevance" in Japan (Oshima 2016, 631).

The other two propositions by Massey – namely, recognizing "space as the product of interrelations", and understanding space as "the sphere […] of coexisting heterogeneity" (Massey 2005, 31) – also seem to gain another quality in an urban environment which is usually marked by a dense population residing in close proximity. In their edited volume *Urban Imaginaries* Alev Cinar and Thomas Bender claim that it is precisely our combined individual imaginations in combination with our daily urban practices and interactions that produce the city as an "at once indefinite and a singular space" (Bender, Cinar 2007, xi). By using the term "urban imaginaries", they emphasize that the city is not a "unified and contained thing" but must always be seen in context of its networks, boundaries, and the many and diverse subjective experiences of a city (xvii). Looking at the production process of urban space and the city from a Neo-Marxist point of view, Cecilie Sachs Olsen also claims that the city is not merely a passive setting in which social actions unfold, but rather it is shaped by these actions. However, she notes that simultaneously, the city – or how we perceive it – shapes our actions, normalizing particular behaviors and spatial practices within it (Olsen 2019, 986). Put differently, the city's process of becoming can be seen as a two-way-street, as it is not only the people who shape the space of the city but they are also shaped by the space itself, as it is precisely "[t]he happenstance, liveliness and risk of these encounters […] what make the urban a site in which the boundaries of the 'givens' and what is normal are constantly negotiated" (989).

Olsen grounds her theoretical framework in Henri Lefebvre's influential concept of the "triad of space", which posits that urban space – like any other form of space – is shaped through a three-part dialectic: the conceived space (*conçu*), defined by city authorities and urban planners, and the perceived space (*perçu*), which reflects society's collective understanding of the city and its spatial norms. The third spatial mode that Lefebvre introduces directs attention to the individual sphere and the daily subjective choices made while inhabiting and navigating through urban space (*vécu*) (Lefebvre 1991, 38-9). This third mode, also referred to as spaces as lived, underscores a shift towards the individual, asserting that through subjective urban imaginaries, to use Çinar and Bender's term, these spatial practices and norms can be perpetuated or contested.

In his writings, Lefebvre expresses a strong critique of capitalism, the driving force behind what dictates spatial practices in modern society. This is especially true for urban space, as "cities have increasingly become part of the machinery of commodified dreams and desires" (Olsen 2019, 992). Moving through a city is scarcely feasible without allowing one's gaze to wander across posters,

billboards, screens displaying advertisements, or other promotional materials. In his work *Le Droit à la Ville* (1968), Lefebvre asked who has the right to the city, examining the social and anthropological needs that human beings aspire to fulfil within their spatial surroundings. In his view, these needs include creativity and play, interaction, and exchange, and they cannot be addressed within the structures of consumption (Lefebvre 1968 quoted in Hologa 2018, 201).

This brief discussion on urban space and urban imaginaries highlighted three key points that are crucial for the subsequent analysis of poetic spaces in the city in general and Saihate Tahi's works in particular, namely (1) the city is a dynamic space that is constantly evolving and (2) urban space is not a singular, universal entity but is composed of various coexisting urban imaginaries; (3) while these imaginaries are influenced by modern day capitalist structures, they also possess the potential to contest them.

3 *Shi no kasoku*: The Poem and the Location

As described in the beginning of this paper, *Shi no kasoku* was part of Saihate Tahi's artwork for the Saitama Triennale 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the art festival was postponed, and the installation lost its institutional context, transforming from a commissioned piece into a new entity, resembling urban art forms such as a happening or street art.[4] The installation was painted on the ground in a back alley (*roji* 路地) that is located south of the East Exit of Ōmiya station in a district called Minami Ginza, which is renowned for its vibrant nightlife scene. The work was completed under the supervision of designer Sasaki Shun, just a few days before the first of two postponement announcements, issued on 6 March 2020.[5] This district is home to various establishments, including restaurants,

4 The Saitama Triennale is a major cultural event in the city of Saitama that receives extensive promotion and attracts a substantial number of visitors. In 2023, the festival recorded 490,820 visitors – an impressive figure when considered against the city's population of approximately 1.3 million. The 2020 edition, which was ultimately held in a hybrid format due to the COVID-19 pandemic, drew 403,641 attendees, including online participants. Detailed figures are available at `https://www.saitama-np.co.jp/index.php/articles/79667`. Even in the absence of a plate or explanatory text at the site of *Shi no kasoku*, it is reasonable to assume that many visitors would have recognized the installation as part of the festival, had the event unfolded as originally planned. When the Saitama Triennale 2020 eventually opened in October 2020, the installation was listed on the festival's official website, along with detailed information about its location, available at `https://art-sightama.jp/project/uFoQn`.

5 The Saitama Triennale was initially scheduled to open on 14 March 2020. On 6 March, the opening was postponed to 28 March, but by 19 March, the event was officially postponed indefinitely. The revised schedule was announced on 23 September 2020, stating that the online program would run from 3 October to 15 November and

izakaya, karaoke bars, pachinko parlors, and what are commonly known as *gāruzubā* ガールズバー (girls bars) and snack bars. The latter are typically staffed by female bartenders and primarily cater to male white-collar workers seeking companionship and relaxation after their workday.

The typical Japanese *roji* holds a significant place in every Japanese city, serving as a favored subject for poets and researchers alike. In his poetry collection *Shinkokyū no hitsuyō* 深呼吸の必要 (The Need for Deep Breathing, 1991), Osada Hiroshi describes the *roji* as "a pathway that winds through the spaces between houses in the heart of the city", highlighting especially the sight of flowerpots placed along the walls that are hinting at the presence of other people, even if no one else is in sight, making "you suddenly feel as though the thoughts of your daily life have been refreshed" (Osada 2015, 162). In his article "The Space-Time Compression of Tokyo Street Drinking", James Farrer emphasizes the social importance of the *roji* within Japan's nightlife and drinking culture, using the term "spaces of play" among others to describe them (Farrer 2021, 50). He argues that the narrow *roji*, defined by closely positioned small-scale shops, leads to a compression of space, mirroring the atmosphere of Asian night markets. This spatial compression facilitates a sense of intimacy and familiarity among the people frequenting these places (49). However, he also highlights the gendering and male-centric nature of these urban nightlife spaces, a trend he suggests is gradually waning. He attributes this shift to the targeting of working women by these establishments, a change prompted by the demographic transformation in the workforce following the burst of the Japanese economic bubble in the 90s (51). Heide Imai describes the *roji* as a multisensory environment, where the boundaries between private and public are blurred (Imai 2008, 335), leading to the impression of a "visual chaos" consisting of alleys "cluttered with bicycles, flowerpots and little knick-knacks" (336). Osada, Farrer, and Imai all highlight the distinctive character inherent in each back alley within a Japanese city. Whether located in a vibrant nightlife district with small-scale bars and *izakaya* or situated within a tranquil residential area adorned with flowerpots, each *roji* possesses a unique charm. Their narrowness and confined space compel people to slow down, barely accommodating a motorbike, let alone a car. At the same time, these alleys cultivate an intimate atmosphere that blurs the lines between inhabitants and customers.

The small *roji* of *Shi no kasoku* leads away from the main road of Minami Ginza and is roughly 70 meters long and only one and a

the on-site program from 17 October to 15 November 2020. See the news section of the official website for a full timeline of events: `https://art-sightama.jp/en/news`.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

half meter wide. Interestingly, the ground in this specific *roji* has a distinct appearance compared to the other alleys and roads in that district. It features irregularly shaped yellow-brown street tiles, bordered on each side by white rectangular tiles, lending an almost frame-like quality to the poem presented in the installation. The poem of *Shi no kasoku* starts in said back alley at the opposite end from Minami Ginza's main road and concludes where the back alley meets the main road. It consists of one single line written in a vertical reading direction, with the words saying:

> 私の加速に一番ふさわしい季節。春って。あなたとあなたとあなたのことを忘れたぶんだけ愛しているとうそぶく春は乱視です。今日だけは、あなたが信じたものが真実かもね。
>
> *Watashi no kasoku ni ichiban fusawashii kisetsu. Harutte. Anata to anata to anata no koto wo wasureta bundake aishiteiru to usobuku haru wa ranshi desu. Kyō dake wa, anata ga shinjita mono ga shinjitsu kamo ne.*
>
> The season that suits my acceleration the best – that's spring. Spring is an astigmatism, forgetting you and you and you as much as it pretends to love. Only for today, what you believed in might be true.

Each character of the poem is roughly 60 cm tall, 40 cm wide and painted in white on the ground. Its dimension is a crucial element of the installation, as due to the length of the poem and the size of the characters, it cannot be viewed in its entirety at a single glance. Viewers must move along the characters and walk through the whole back alley to read the full poem. As the alley is hardly visible from the side facing away from Minami Ginza, most people would discover the installation from the main road and initially see or read the last words of the poem. To view the beginning of the poem, readers would technically need to first walk through the entire alley, and to read it, they would have to move backward along the line of poetry while facing the opposite direction.

As it is typical for poems by Saihate Tahi, *Shi no kasoku* follows a free verse structure with no rhyme pattern. It consists of four short sentences, written in one vertical line. The poem starts with the kanji for *watashi* 私 (I), introducing a personal tone and potentially identifying its speaker as female.[6] This sense is heightened by

6 The word "potentially" is used here because *watashi* can technically be used by both men and women. However, as noted, the poem has a conversational, personal tone. While women often use *watashi* in such contexts, men typically prefer other first-person

e-ISSN 2385-3042

incorporating an unnamed *anata* あなた (you), evoking the atmosphere of an inner monologue or an intimate conversation between two people, and further intensified by a syntax reminiscent of spoken Japanese, with sentences left incomplete or shifting between different levels of politeness. Following *watashi* and the possessive particle *no* の, the second noun is *kasoku* 加速 (acceleration), the same word as in the installation's title, this time describing the speaker's acceleration. The use of *kasoku* conveys a sense of movement – a movement which becomes faster and faster, creating a restless, rushed, and agitated atmosphere to which, as the speaker claims, the season spring fits the best.

Highlighting a season prominently in a poem, particularly by a poet like Saihate Tahi, who is well-versed in traditional Japanese *waka* as evidenced by her translation of the famous classical Japanese anthology *Hyakunin isshu* 百人一首 (One Hundred People, One Poem Each) into modern Japanese, seems to be more than a coincidence. The use of seasons to establish a poem's atmosphere and scenery is a central tenet of Japanese traditional poetry, dating back to the late seventh century (Shirane 2012, 27). In classical Japanese poetry, spring is associated with many things, among them the growth of plants and flowers, symbolizing new life (34). The dawn of a new day is also intricately tied to the spring season, echoing the famous exclamation from Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no Sōshi* 枕草子 (The Pillow Book, ca. 1002), "*Haru wa akebono*" 春はあけぼの (Spring is dawn) (Kubota, Baba 1999, 719). Within the context of *Shi no kasoku*, the term "spring" may encapsulate a similar concept of new beginnings, aligning with the restlessness and agitation implied by the term *kasoku*.

In the original Japanese, it remains unclear in the second sentence whether the subject is again "I" (*watashi*) or if it is spring itself that forgets the addressee while equally loving them. Spring could also be personified as a stand-in for the lyrical subject, especially since a connection between spring and the speaker is established in the first sentence. The grammatical structure of that sentence places emphasis on the final noun: *ranshi* 乱視 (astigmatism). Referring to a visual condition in which an irregular curvature of the cornea causes distorted or blurred vision, *ranshi* resonates with the poem on multiple levels.

For one, blurred vision is often associated with movement, as an object that moves fast usually appears blurred in our vision, relating to the word *kasoku* (acceleration) at the beginning of the poem. Blurred or distorted vision could also be connected to feelings of

pronouns like *boku* 僕 or *ore* 俺 in informal situations. That said, the use of first-person pronouns in Japanese is flexible, which contributes to the poem's overall ambiguity.

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, Supplement, November 2025, 59-82
e-ISSN 2385-3042

fatigue and tiredness. A famous example of this appears in Miyazawa Kenji's (1896-1933) poem *Higashi iwate kazan* 東岩手火山, where he uses the expression *ranshi* to describe his mental exhaustion, writing:

> 月はいま二つに見える
> やつぱり疲れからの乱視なのだ
>
> *Tsuki wa ima futatsu ni mieru*
> *yatsupari tsukarekara no ranshi na no da*
>
> The moon now appears as two
> indeed astigmatism caused by exhaustion (Miyazawa 1924)

Similar to Miyazawa suddenly seeing more than one moon, the speaker in Saihate's poem also seems to perceive more than one "you", repeating the word *anata* three times.

Additionally, astigmatism, with its resulting double vision, can be linked to the poem's juxtaposition of forgetting and pretending to love – two actions that would normally be mutually exclusive but are presented as being carried out with equal intensity through the grammatical construction *bun dake* ぶんだけ. Both of these images, double vision and emotional contradiction, can be associated with a distorted perception, one visual and the other emotional. Just as double vision prevents the observer from distinguishing a single, true image, the juxtaposition of forgetting and pretending to love suggests an emotional state in which the boundaries between these contradictory emotional actions blur, hinting at the unreliable nature of human emotions – especially considering the speaker only *pretends* to love.

Whether due to exhaustion and fatigue or the speaker's prior establishment of emotions as unreliable, in the final sentence, the speaker allows what *anata* believes in – the love the speaker pretends to offer – to be perceived as genuine, if only for today.

Despite its shortness, the poem includes all the typical elements for Saihate Tahi's poetry, consisting of a free verse structure, writing the poem from the perspective of a non-descriptive "I", addressed to a nameless "you" as well as dealing with "themes of isolation, depression, and downright bewilderment about love of all kinds" (Smith 2017, 109). As mentioned before, it creates the intimate atmosphere of reading someone's inner monologue – which is why it is even more striking that Saihate Tahi chose to write this particular poem on the ground of a back alley in Ōmiya's nightlife district in big, unmissable characters for her installation.

4 Text, Space and Movement: Reading *Shi no kasoku*

Through its spatial dimensions, *Shi no kasoku* enables the readers to *be* in the poetic work, standing right in the middle of its words while reading them. As a site-specific installation, it also establishes a relationship between the art object, in this case the poem painted on the ground, and the location where it was placed, namely the back alley in Minami Ginza, Ōmiya.

Presenting poetry in the form of a site-specific installation turns reading *Shi no kasoku* into a simultaneously cognitive and corporeal act that presupposes "the literal presence of the viewer" (Bishop 2005, 6). As Claire Bishop writes in her monograph *Installation Art: A Critical History* (2005),

> [r]ather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision. (6)

This means that the experience of being in that specific location *Shi no kasoku* is presented in is as much part of the poetic work as the written characters themselves. Readers not only physically engage their entire bodies to read the poem, but they also find themselves immersed in a multitude of stimuli, ranging from other written words like shop signs or commercial posters to the typical bustling sounds of a city and the scents of flowerpots, restaurants and perhaps garbage cans. Readers become fully aware of their own physicality with all their senses during the reading process, merging the ambiance of the back alley with the words of the poem.

In the following section, I intend to use an imaginary stroll through *Shi no kasoku* as a tool to weave the poem with its surrounding space, conducting an analysis of the interplay between these elements. The notion of an imaginary stroll, as introduced by Karen van den Berg in her article *The Unconditional Museum: The Fragile Logic of the Ensemble* (2008), serves as a methodological inspiration. In her analysis, she employs this imaginative walk through an exhibition to blend her subjective impressions as a viewer with a conceptual examination of the "aesthetic space of experience" (van den Berg 2008, 11).

It is sometime in the afternoon, and the nightlife district of Minami Ginza has not yet fully come to life. The doors to the small upstairs bars remain closed, while the restaurants and pachinko parlors are already bustling. Seen from the main street of Minami Ginza, the entrance to the alleyway *Shi no kasoku* is presented in is framed by a ramen restaurant and a Chinese restaurant specializing in Tanmen. Both signs are in a vibrant red, signaling, through their

advertisements, that affordable, quickly prepared food is available there. A typical street bollard on the left side of the entrance is covered in brightly designed advertising stickers and tags from various street art groups. Gazing down the alley, one encounters the characteristic "visual chaos" of a *roji*, as described by Heide Imai. The scene unfolds with long cables spanning the passage, ventilation ducts, vending machines, garbage bags, bicycles, potted plants – and most notably, overlapping brightly colored signs that are affixed to the outer walls of various restaurants and bars. On the ground, there is the poem spreading from the other end towards the readers. They encounter the poem in reverse, reading its last words "*shinjitsu kamo ne*" (maybe it is true) first. In a blog post discussing Saihate's installation, blogger Ribu described their encounter with reading the poem in reverse, stating "I was overwhelmed by the power of the words that emerged when reading it in reverse". When they read "*shinjitsu kamo ne*", they wondered, "what might possibly be true?" and then continued walking through the alley, while reading.[7] When reaching the second to last sentence of the poem, "*Anata to anata to anata no koto wo wasureta bundake aishiteiru to usobuku haru wa ranshi desu*" (Spring is an astigmatism, forgetting you and you and you as much as it pretends to love), the landscape of the alleyway has slightly changed. The further away from the main street of Minami Ginza, the more the signs of Chinese restaurants, soba restaurants or yakitori bars get replaced by signs of the local snack bars and girls bars with names like Silk, Major AAA, Big Sister, Members Lucia, or Clown. As mentioned before, these markers designate the alley as a gendered space – one intended for male customers and female service providers. At the same time, the signs hint at a business that, to some extent, specializes in simulating affection for their customers. Could the middle sequence of the poem, where the speaker pretends to love "you and you and you", be read as a reference to these establishments? And if that is the case, could the *ranshi* caused by fatigue and the emotional exhaustion potentially belong to one of the women employed in one of the bars – tired from feigning affection for a multitude of male customers, as emphasized by the enumeration? In this sense, *Shi no kasoku* could also be read as a testament to a loveless yet love-craving city, where feigning affection has evolved into a lucrative business.

As the readers progress along the alley, they eventually encounter the first two sentences of the poem, situating it temporally in spring – the season originally intended for the Saitama Triennale 2020. This temporal alignment has the potential to deepen the

7 See the full blog article at the following link: `https://note.com/rib3/n/n3625f165991f`.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

readers' immersion into the poetic space, asking them to be attentive to the distinct array of sights, scents, and sounds associated with spring. Furthermore, the conciseness of these two elliptical sentences imparts a sense of speed, mirrored in the term *kasoku*, as well as in the movement of the readers themselves. The poem commences where the alley concludes – and as the readers step beyond the poetry installation, they find themselves at a small T-shaped junction, with a narrow back alley to both their left and right. Here, they decide whether to embark on a re-read of *Shi no kasoku*, this time from start to finish, or to follow one of the other alleys. However, in the afternoon, this tiny *roji* is almost empty. How would the experience of reading the poem change if it were nighttime, with groups of people gathered in front of the bars, obstructing one's path and line of sight? What if the poem were read from a second-floor window, offering a vantage point over the entire scene – remaining still while watching others move below? And considering that the installation appeared during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when public life had already slowed down, how might the contrast between a once-bustling pre-pandemic nightlife and the present moment reshape the perception and interpretation of the poetry installation? How does the reading experience change across different seasons?

Reading *Shi no kasoku* as a poetic space means directing one's senses outward while reading, incorporating all sensory experiences as well as one's own perception of and associations with that specific space into the poem. A space is never just its physical dimensions. In his *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard says "[i]nhabited space transcends geometrical space" (Bachelard 2014, 67), meaning, when we *are* in a space our memories, associations, and imaginations overlay it, infusing the space with a poetic quality. As previously mentioned, the space in which *Shi no kasoku* is situated is far from a neutral backdrop for its words; rather, it adds layers of meaning that unfold differently depending on the individual reader, as well as the time and surrounding conditions. Imagining a walk through the poetry installation illustrates this dynamic interplay among space, movement, and text, highlighting the potential meanings that can emerge. However, this represents only one example among countless possible ways of perceiving and reading *Shi no kasoku*.

5 Conceptualizing *Shi no kasoku* as a Site of Encounter – and Resistance

Employing *Shi no kasoku* as an example, this section delves into the examination of the question what happens when poetry is embedded within urban space, going beyond the impact on the content and potential readings of it as illustrated above, and, more generally,

examine the intrinsic socio-cultural implications of integrating poetry into the urban environment. This section draws parallels with other instances of incorporating art in experimental forms within urban spaces, particularly examining postwar avant-garde movements in 1960s and 70s Tokyo and Paris, such as Hi-Red Center, the Situationists, or the Mono-ha. Employing Japanese avant-garde concepts of encounter (*deai*), alongside Henri Lefebvre's notion of lived space as a theoretical foundation, I posit that Saihate Tahi's *Shi no kasoku* can be interpreted as a site of *deai*, presenting an encounter where the subject, object, and space intricately shape and are shaped by one another. Moreover, I contend that it can also be construed as a site of resistance by negotiating established spatial practices and by blurring dichotomies such as public and private, familiarity and unfamiliarity.

5.1 Encountering *Shi no kasoku* Unexpectedly

The idea of an "unexpected encounter" (*fui na deai* 不意な出会い) with poetry in an everyday urban space was the driving force behind Saihate Tahi's site-specific installation *Shi no kasoku*, as she revealed in a tweet:

> I think that when we suddenly see a poem in the city or in an everyday scene, these words that we encounter unexpectedly flow more vividly into the reader's mind. We read words in books and magazines with the awareness that we are reading, but I believe that words that catch us off guard can transcend this awareness. This work was born from that thought.[8]

Encountering a work of art in a public space by chance – whether it is an installation, a performance, or a happening – comes with an element of unpredictability and surprise. It encapsulates a disruption from the everyday, challenging the overly familiar sights of the urban spaces people encounter in their daily routines. Avant-garde art collectives like Hi-Red Center sought to use this moment of surprise in their artistic practice during 1960s Japan. They orchestrated events like the *Yamanotesen jiken* 山手線事件 (Yamanote Line Incident), where members, faces painted in white, boarded a Yamanote line train, each holding portable egg-shaped objects crafted from everyday items like wristwatches, bottle tops, and human hair. This direct engagement with the public aimed to

8 Tweet by Saihate dated 25 June 2020, available at `https://twitter.com/tt_ss/status/1275950260381028352`.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

defamiliarize "the everyday, communal, enclosed spaces of train cars" and "awaken their consciousness" (Mitsuda 2023, 111).

Many of these practices revolve around the concept of encounter (*deai*), a key term for Japanese postwar artists that envisions the direct interaction between a subject and an object or another subject, such as between audience and performer, viewer and painting, or reader and poetry (Sas 2011, 97). One of the artists to draw on theories of encounter or *deai* is Lee Ufan, member of the artist group Mono-ha that was active from the late sixties to early seventies. Critical of an artistic approach that relies on mimesis and the idea of representing the world, the Mono-ha's aim was to create an encounter between the viewer and the world "as it is" (*ari no mama* ありのまま) or the object "left alone" (*mono o hōtteoku* 物を放っておく), rather than expressing their own subjectivity or intention through the object (105). According to Lee, the Mono-ha regarded their artwork as a beginning or provocation, rather than a representation or completed work, which leads to an encounter that they themselves cannot foresee (108).

In writer and director Terayama Shūji's dramatic theories, *deai* is conceptualized as an artistic practice in which the stage and audience seats are eliminated to reject the hierarchical distinction between audience and actor, building a collaborative connection instead (109). At the same time, *deai* marks an interruption of the everyday and "the entrance into another world, another space" – a space which is always already there but concealed beneath social norms and conventional thinking (111). In other words, the notion of *deai* encompasses mediations on one side and interruptions and distortions on the other, representing an interaction between two or more unstable and unfixed terms, each ideally undergoing irreversible change through the encounter (126).

While the conceptualization of *deai* as described above is tied to the artistic practices of postwar Japanese artists, particularly the Mono-ha and Terayama Shūji, I argue that Saihate Tahi's *Shi no kasoku* employs similar mechanisms to evoke a response from its readers. As evident from Saihate's tweet, the unexpected encounter with poetry in an urban setting aims to "transcend the awareness that we are reading", echoing the avant-garde ideal of a direct encounter between the subject and the object that is unmediated by being aware of the author or artist behind that work.

One way of transcending this "awareness of reading" lies in the font design of *Shi no kasoku*, which strikingly resembles the typical *tomare* 止まれ (stop) writing on streets throughout Japan, serving the same function as a stop sign. The installation uses a common placement and design of text in Japanese urban space but alters it to a degree that renders the familiar as unfamiliar. This ambivalent realm between familiarity and unfamiliarity is the element that

captures the reader's initial attention. By blending this well-known style and font with the unexpected presence of poetry, individuals encountering *Shi no kasoku* instinctively begin reading the words, if only to discern what is written there instead of the usual *tomare* – and start to read poetry without even initially realizing it.

The placement of the poem also echoes Terayama's idea of breaking down the distinction between stage and audience, or object and subject, as there is no barrier between the two in *Shi no kasoku*. The painted characters are neither behind glass nor placed within a setting where the spatial norm is to refrain from touching the artwork like a museum or gallery. Instead, readers have no choice but walk over it to read the poem. The consequences from this placement are evident in photographs captured by viewers at various points during the installation's runtime, revealing the visible impact of hundreds of footsteps on the paint.

Another facet of *Shi no kasoku* that appears to resonate to some extent with the notion of *deai* is the uncertain authorship during the initial months when the installation appeared in Minami Ginza. As previously discussed, according to Lee, the optimal encounter between a subject and an object can only be realized when the art object exists in a state of "left alone" (*mono o hōtteoku*). In the context of Mono-ha, this entails unveiling the world as it is through using materials with "minimal artistic interference" in their works (Mitsuda 2023, 144). Saihate's approach does not center around materiality in the same manner as the Mono-ha's work did. However, adopting a more expansive interpretation of an object in a "left alone" state to mean concentrating on the object itself and its perception rather than interpreting it solely as an expression representing the artist, it can also be applied to *Shi no kasoku*.

Saihate Tahi is very vocal about having no desire to be the authoritative voice when it comes to her own poetic work, as she has stated in an interview with *Asahi Shimbun*, calling her poems "*yomite no mono*" 読み手のもの (possessions of the reader).[9] By withholding the contextual details of *Shi no kasoku* for the initial months, residents of Ōmiya experienced the poetic space Saihate had crafted in a literal "left alone" state, prompting speculation about the origin and purpose of the "mysterious back-alley poem".[10] This absence of context also enhanced the element of surprise during this unexpected encounter, transforming *Shi no kasoku* into a

9 The full interview is available at https://digital.asahi.com/articles/ASP6R01ZVP50UCVL01L.html.

10 See the discussion below Saihate Tahi's tweet on 25 June 2020, where she disclosed her authorship of the installation at https://twitter.com/tt_ss/status/1275950260381028352.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

puzzle-like entity that motivated viewers to share photographs of their findings online and engage in discussions about their theories. This contextless publishing approach bears a striking resemblance to graffiti or what Marie Hologa defines as "contemporary practices of urban do-it-yourself inscription" (Hologa 2018, 200). Many street artists opt for anonymity and adopt pseudonyms due to the illicit nature of unauthorized street art. While applying terms like street art or graffiti to *Shi no kasoku* may seem a stretch, given its official authorization by the local government and Saihate identifying herself as the author a few months later, its legal status remained somewhat ambiguous to outsiders.

However, conceptualizing *Shi no kasoku* as a graffiti-like entity, an inscription in urban space, can prove productive in more than one way. The installation shares a characteristic with graffiti, that was pointed out by István Rácz: the creation of palimpsests in the form of "texts written on top of another text" (Rácz 2018, 214). Much like a graffito engages in a continual interaction with the surface it is written on, altering the meaning of the wall while simultaneously being influenced by the wall's impact on its interpretation, *Shi no kasoku* shapes its surrounding space – and in turn, the installation's surroundings exert their influence on the way we perceive and read *Shi no kasoku*. Returning to the concept of *deai*, Lee asserts that the encounter he envisions is not just between the subject and the object. It also extends to the world beyond it, establishing a "resonance space" that transcends the confines of the artwork (Sas 2011, 107-8). As Lee describes it, "what is painted may 'breathe life into' what is not painted, and what is not painted penetrates and reveals, and thus becomes part of, what is painted" (108).

The essence of *deai* lies in this interplay – an encounter not confined to the subject and object alone, but also extending to the space surrounding the other two terms. In *Shi no kasoku*, these three inherently unstable and non-fixed components – subject, object, and space – converge, mutually influencing and being influenced by one another, resulting in a transformative process that leaves none of the components in its pre-encounter state. This is the reason, in accordance with Terayama's perspective, why an encounter or *deai* in this sense is "full of mediations, reiterations, interruptions; it enacts various kinds of distortions, slippages, divergences (*zure*), and leaps" (124). These very elements also happen to be what qualifies *Shi no kasoku* not only as a site of encounter but also as a site of resistance – a concept that will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

5.2 *Shi no kasoku* as a Site of Resistance and New Emerging Urban Imaginaries

The notion of *deai* as conceptualized by Lee and Terayama, viewed as a transformative force capable of dissolving boundaries and binaries, has a similar potential as what Henri Lefebvre calls spaces as lived. Drawing on this third term from Lefebvre's triad of space, the geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja formulates his concept of Thirdspace, which he describes as a transgressive concept, functioning as "a third term that disrupts, disorders, and begins to reconstitute" (Soja 1996, 31). And in its otherness and difference, it is also "the terrain for the generation of 'counterspaces', spaces of resistance to the dominant order" (67). Both Lefebvre and Soja consider lived spaces or Thirdspace to function as a "strategic location" (68), from which alternative urban imaginaries can emerge. Influenced by his friend, Guy Debord, a prominent figure in the Situationist art movement in 1950s- and 1960s-Paris, Lefebvre specifically associates art with the concept of lived spaces. Within this framework, he considers art as a crucial instrument for negotiating normative spatial practices while simultaneously generating and broadening the scope of possible urban imaginaries (Dünne 2006, 298-9; Olsen 2019, 986).

Written from a Neo-Marxist standpoint and influenced by the tumultuous events of the 1968 uprisings in Paris, the political dimension is crucial for Lefebvre's spatial imagination (Soja 1996, 68), mirroring the Situationists' belief in the inseparability of art and politics (Trier 2019, 227). He views the city as a realm of limitless possibilities, a "virtual object", where "the past, the present, the possible" are intricately intertwined (Lefebvre 1996, 148, 156).

Lefebvre's ideas continue to resonate in discussions surrounding contemporary art in urban spaces such as street art (Hologa 2018) or socially engaged art (Olsen 2019). However, as Marie Hologa points out, while Lefebvre perceived the transformation of urban space from below within the context of class conflict, street art around the turn of the millennium tends to be viewed more as a conflict between generations or a cultural issue, originating from "urban, creative twenty-somethings: art students or designers, bloggers, skaters and photographers", who, through artistic expression, try to appropriate the city space and advocate for the right to visually shape their surroundings (Hologa 2018, 202). Furthermore, she asserts that street art has taken on a novel commercialist facet, as more and more successful street artists started selling their aesthetic style, engaging in collaborations with advertisers or fashion designers (203). However, even if an expression of street art may not inherently convey an explicit political message, the "performative act of creating

a city within a city" itself can nevertheless be regarded as a political act, according to Hologa (202).

Based on the discussion above, in what ways does *Shi no kasoku* create a poetic space within an urban environment that can be considered political to some extent, serving as a site of resistance? To further address this question, it is also essential to contemplate the connotations embedded within the term "resistance" and identify the specific elements against which *Shi no kasoku* offers resistance.

In the 1960s in Paris as well as Tokyo, the target or entity contested by avant-garde artworks such as the *Yamanotesen jiken* appears to be easily identifiable, as they are intertwined with (Neo-)Marxist ideologies advocating for an uprising against a capitalist, exploitative system. In contrast, contemporary street art, also thriving as a vibrant scene in Japan, as evidenced by numerous publications on street art in Tokyo and other Japanese cities (Camerota 2011; Pan 2015; Sanada 2007), may exhibit less explicit political motivations or association with a specific movement. Nevertheless, given the quasi-illegal nature of street art, it inherently embodies a political impetus which can be labelled as a "valid territorial claim", aiming to "transform urban space through acts of individual creativity in one way or the other" – and as a form of resistance against an "increasingly bland, commodified, and homogenized urban realm" (Hologa 2018, 201-2). However, simply using this framework to apply the label "resistance" to *Shi no kasoku* seems hardly justifiable, despite its almost guerrilla-style existence for outsiders, as, after all, it was still a commissioned piece for one of Japan's major art festivals.

This is why I believe it is helpful to reassess the implications associated with the resistance, using Doreen Massey's critique of a binary thinking of resistance versus power, where the central power is separated from the everyday, framing the streets as "the margins", "the interstitial space", and a "site of deviance" (Massey 2005, 103-5). This conceptualization, which she calls a form of "spatial fetishism", rejects any acknowledgement of implication in power and any responsibility for it (215). Building on Massey's framework, Cecilie Sachs Olsen points out a flaw in viewing art as originating from an outside that is inherently liberating or communal, as she emphasizes the necessity of avoiding a simple binary between a homogenized and controlled urban space versus an open and liberatory urban space. Instead, she advocates for a closer examination of "the often-suppressed contradictions within artistic as well as urban processes" and proposes analyzing artworks in urban space in a dialectic manner (Olsen 2019, 990-1). This contradiction appears to find a perfect embodiment in *Shi no kasoku*. It fluctuates between being contextless street art and a commissioned work for the Saitama Triennale. It takes the form of a dematerialized, site-specific installation, devoid of direct resale value, yet intricately woven into

an institutional context which aims at the promotion of Saitama as a city of contemporary art. While it proves to be difficult to see *Shi no kasoku* through the same lens of resistance Lefebvre or Soja applied to the Situationists' work, the label "resistance" still applies in a more subtle form that, in accordance with Massey and Olsen, also acknowledges the contradictions of artistic expression in a capitalist system.

Rather than conceiving art as resistance through a Marxist lens that accentuates the class character of artistic expression, philosopher and Frankfurt School member Herbert Marcuse suggests that art's political potential lies inherently within the art itself, embedded in its aesthetic form (Marcuse 1979). Furthermore, Marcuse argues that the autonomy derived from its aesthetic form enables art to challenge and transcend existing social relations, thereby "subvert[ing] the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience" (ix). This perspective implies that art has the potential to distance individuals from their "functional existence and societal roles", while simultaneously emancipating "sensibility, imagination, and reason across all spheres of subjectivity and objectivity" (9).

Applied to *Shi no kasoku*, one way the installation challenges and transcends existing social relations and orderings is through its placement within a back alley or *roji* in a dense nightlife area combined with the act of reading poetry. When people stop to read the poem, moving slowly along its line of poetry or even moving backwards in order to read it from the beginning, this potentially creates a disturbance for other people within the narrow confines of a back alley, therefore estranging the people passing by or through the back alley from their ordinary experience within this urban space. In doing so, the poetry installation temporarily removes individuals from their daily routines and offers an aesthetic encounter, that prompts to stimulate their sensibility and imagination, perceiving the back alley in a new light. One of these new re-readings of the space emerges from the tension between the presumably female speaker of the poem juxtaposed with the bars that typically cater to male workers – making it a subtle territorial claim not unsimilar to that of graffiti, negotiating the nightlife back alley's taken-for-granted gendered dimension.

Another way *Shi no kasoku* negotiates established categorizations and orderings involves the deliberate blurring of the private and public spheres. Similar to the *roji*, which oscillates between these realms, this blurring of lines is evident in the combination of an intimate poem delving into a personal monologue or conversation about love with the public street serving as its canvas, presenting a tension between content and form. By transplanting the act of reading into the public sphere, the installation also prompts an awareness of the numerous texts and writings encountered in urban spaces – such

as shop signs, billboards, and the like – which hold the potential to become integral components of the poetic space embodied by *Shi no kasoku*, alongside the poem itself.

Shi no kasoku's potential as a site of resistance does not hinge on delivering a clear-cut political message or statement against capitalism. Rather, its resistance manifests in the creation of an aesthetic experience woven into the fabric of daily life, yet subtly deviating from it, transforming the familiar into the ever-so-slightly unfamiliar. This aesthetic moment, or encounter, distances readers from their societal roles and functional existence, to echo Marcuse's words. It gives rise to a moment of disruption and playfulness, prompting individuals to adopt a more receptive stance towards alternative urban imaginaries and re-readings of their everyday surroundings.

6 Conclusion

This paper began by asking in what ways encountering a poetic space in the landscape of a city can transform our ways of reading a poem and perceiving our surroundings. The ensuing discussion has unveiled the intricate layers comprising a poetry installation like *Shi no kasoku* within an urban environment, perceiving it not as self-contained art piece, but an open, multi-layered network of interactions, intertwining readers, poetry, and space, as well as movement, temporality, and embodiment. By integrating poetry into real, tangible urban spaces, *Shi no kasoku* not only enables unexpected encounters with its poem but also transforms reading into a cognitive *and* physical act involving movement and the senses, opening up the poem and its words to endless potential interpretations.

Furthermore, conceptualizing *Shi no kasoku* as both a site of encounter and resistance helped to understand its socio-cultural potential within the dynamic cityscape. As stated above, the city is not a stable, neutral backdrop to *Shi no kasoku*, it is a dynamic space that shapes its inhabitants while it is also shaped by them and their individual urban imaginaries – which means that the spatial practices and the boundaries of the givens within it are not fixed but negotiable. Although *Shi no kasoku* refrains from giving a clear political statement, by providing an aesthetic moment of disruption that detaches individuals from their usual routines and functional roles within society, it prompts a new awareness for this flexibility and room for negotiation within the city, challenging its seemingly stable ordering.

Bibliography

Bachelard, G. (2014). *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by M. Jolas. New York: Penguin Books.

Bender, T.; Cinar, A. (2007). "Introduction. The City: Experience, Imagination, and Place". Bender, T.; Cinar, A. (eds), *Urban Imaginaries. Locating the Modern City*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, xi-xxvi.

Berg, K. van den (2008). "Das unbedingte Museum. Die fragile Logik des Ensembles". Von Berswordt Wallrabe, S.; Wappler, F. (Hrsgg), *Situation (für Max Imdahl). Die Erweiterung 2006*. Düsseldorf: Richter, 9-29.

Bishop, C. (2005). *Installation Art: A Critical History*. London: Tate.

Camerota, R. (2011). *Graffiti Japan*. New York: Mark Batty Publisher.

Dünne, J. (2006). "Teil IV – Soziale Räume: Einleitung". Günzel, S.; Doetsch, H.; Lüdeke, R.; Dünne, J. (Hrsgg), *Raumtheorie. Grundlagentexte aus Philosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 289-303.

Farrer, J. (2021). "The Space-Time Compression of Tokyo Street Drinking". *Food, Culture & Society*, 24(1), 49-65. https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2020.1859902.

Hawkins, H. (2013). "Geography and Art. An Expanding Field: Site, the Body and Practice". *Progress in Human Geography*, 37(1), 52-71. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512442865.

Hologa, M. (2018). "Street Art as Reclaiming the Streets". Ehland, C.; Fischer, P. (eds), *Resistance and the City. Challenging Urban Space*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 199-212.

Imai, H. (2008). "Senses on the Move. Multisensory Encounters with Street Vendors in the Japanese Urban Alleyway *Roji*". *The Senses and Society*, 3(3), 329-39. https://doi.org/10.2752/174589308X331350.

Isozaki, A. (2009). "'City' by Arata Isozaki". Oshima, K.T. (ed.), *Arata Isozaki. Process, Genesis, Atlas, Trans, Isle Flux*. London: Phaidon, 198-210.

Kaye, N. (2000). *Site-Specific Art. Performance, Place and Documentation*. London: Routledge.

Kubota Jun 久保田淳; Baba Akiko 馬場あき子 (1999). *Utakotoba Utamakura Daijiten* 歌ことば歌枕大辞典 (Great Dictionary of Poetic Terms and Utamakura). Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten.

Kwon, M. (2002). *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*. Oxford; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Lefebvre, H. (1996). *Writings on Cities*. Edited by E. Kofman; E. Lebas. Oxford: Blackwell.

Marcuse, H. (1979). *The Aesthetic Dimension. Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Translated by E. Sherover. London: Macmillan.

Massey, D.B. (2005). *For Space*. London: SAGE.

Mitsuda, Y. (2023). "The Formation and Evolution of Japanese Contemporary Art [*Gendai Bijutsu*]: 1945 to the Early 1970s". Kitazawa, N.; Kuresawa, T.; Kajiya, K.; Mitsuda, Y. (eds), *History of Japanese Art After 1945. Institutions, Discourse, Practice*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 37-150.

Miyazawa Kenji 宮沢賢治 (1924). *Haru to shura* 春と修羅 (Spring and Shura). *Aozora.gr.jp*. https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/files/1058_15403.html.

Olsen, C.S. (2019). "Urban Space and the Politics of Socially Engaged Art". *Progress in Human Geography*, 43(6), 985-1000. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132518807756.

Osada Hiroshi 長田弘 (2015). "Shinkokyū no hitsuyō" 深呼吸の必要 (The Need for Deep Breathing). *Osada Hiroshi Zenshishū* 長田弘全詩集 (The Complete Poems of Osada Hiroshi). Tokyo: Misuzu Shobō, 141-74.

Oshima, K.T. (2016). "Rediscovering Japanese Urban Space in a World Context". *Journal of Urban History*, 42(3), 623-33. https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144216635165.

Pan, L. (2015). *Aestheticizing Public Space. Street Visual Politics in East Asian Cities*. Bristol: Intellect Ltd.

Rácz, I. (2018). "Graffiti as a Place of Resistance in British Poetry". Ehland, C.; Fischer, P. (eds), *Resistance and the City. Challenging Urban Space*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 213-22.

Sanada, R. (2007). *RackGaki. Japanese Graffiti*. London: Laurence King.

Sas, M. (2011). *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan. Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return*. Boston: Harvard University Asia Center.

Shirane, H. (2012). *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons. Nature, Literature, and the Arts*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Smith, J.A.Y. (2017). "Heisei Murasaki. What Women Poets Have Found During Japan's Lost Decades". *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, 51(1), 102-26. https://doi.org/10.1353/jwj.2017.0008.

Soja, E.W. (1996). *Thirdspace. Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Cambridge, MA; Oxford: Blackwell.

Suderburg, E. (2000). *Space, Site, Intervention. Situating Installation Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Trier, J. (2019). *Guy Debord, the Situationist International, and the Revolutionary Spirit*. Leiden; Boston: Brill. Breakthroughs in the Sociology of Education 10.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
Vol. 61 – Supplement – Aprile 2025

Swelling Horizons: Coloniality, Sea-Level Rise, and their Otherwise

Lukas H. Seidler
Maastricht University, Netherlands

Abstract 'Sea-level rise' is widely used to denote the severity of climate change. This article argues that the concept is also shaped by a colonial grammar of relating to the ocean while its use may affectively standardise frontline communities. To reorient such ways of relating to aqueous catastrophe, the article dwells on the concept of 'swelling horizons'. Noticing the swells of late-liberal horizons generates an *otherwise* which prompts reorientations; in-between terrestrial horizons and submersive thought, attentive to multiple times and spaces, prepositionally resourceful, and attuned to the racialised heaviness of climate coloniality.

Keywords Sea-level rise. Horizon. Coloniality. Climate change. Climate Im/Mobility Studies. Édouard Glissant. Critical Ocean Studies. Environmental Humanities.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-02-13
Accepted 2025-08-06
Published 2025-11-14

Open access

Citation Seidler, L.H. (2025). "Swelling Horizons: Coloniality, Sea-Level Rise, and their Otherwise". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 61, Supplement, November, 83-120.

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2025/03/004

1 Introduction

Horizons circumscribe, ground, and materialise the contexts for matter to coalesce in various ways. Horizons circumscribe by setting the limits of what can be seen, by marking the point where distant objects either become too small to be legible as objects – thus collapsing into the horizonal line – or where they literally 'fall below' the horizon due to the planet's spherical nature. There is a sense of epistemological loss at play since the line marks the point where the objects 'fall below' or 'collapse into', and this loss thickens the horizon's line. Furthermore, in forming a background, horizons also ground objects as objects to be foregrounded. The same objects, however, are simultaneously woven into the horizon and tacitly shape the contexts in which we live. Horizons thus both circumscribe how matter becomes meaningful and how matter comes to materialise. For some, horizons are 'out there', dividing blue oceans from blue skies. Today, these oceans are expanding and with them, their horizonal lines swell too. So, what happens when a horizon changes and moves forward into houses, submerges bodies, creates depth, swamps the ground? What swelling, swollen patterns and bodies might these horizons create? How does such patterning emerge out of the woundedness of a planet marred by coloniality?[1]

These questions arise in the so-called Anthropocene, the epoch where anthropogenic climate change is pushing the watery horizons of the seas upwards.[2] This complex, expanding, affective, often-violent process is frequently subsumed under the heading of 'sea-level rise'. However, in their chapter "When Above" in *Oceans Rising*, architects John Palmesino and Ann-Sofi Rönnskog interpret it differently. They write that "the horizon is swelled by sea level rise" and that this moving horizon is crucial by shaping how we come to realise the planetary impacts of our actions (Palmesino, Rönnskog 2021, 10). The swelling horizon constitutes an opening to think sea-level rise differently. Inspired by this, I wish to contribute a sustained engagement with the idea of a swelling horizon and how it shapes the realisations Palmesino and Rönnskog speak of. Hence, in this paper, I explore the implications of thinking with swelling horizons.

However, why be concerned with the predominance of 'sea-level rise' in understanding the changing oceans? I believe that an answer

1 In this article, I draw on Aníbal Quijano's (2007, 171) use of coloniality as the racialising, enduring power structures of particular, Eurocentric colonialisms: "coloniality of power is based upon 'racial' social classification of the world population under Eurocentered world power".

2 When I use 'climate change', I follow Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey (2019, 7) in characterising it as "a world-changing rupture in a social and ecological system that might be read as colonization in one context or sea-level rise in another".

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, Supplement, November 2025, 83-120
e-ISSN 2385-3042

to this can be found at the intersection of climate im/mobility studies and environmental humanities. Rising sea-levels are often used to facilitate an understanding of the future through narratives about people who are set in motion, trapped, submerged, or defend themselves against rising sea-levels (Farbotko, Lazrus 2012; see also Gilroy 2014; Baucom 2020). Examples are apocalyptic headlines such as "There could be 1.2 billion climate refugees by 2050".[3] More place-specific ones could be the ongoing fortification of the Netherlands' system of dikes;[4] or the imagery of disappearing islands in Oceania, islands reduced to signs of what is to come (Farbotko 2010). Additionally, climate mobilities are politically, historically, and colonially saturated in their dramatically unequal means of responding to such swelling horizons. Can the concept of sea-level rise contain all these movements, these swells? And what does the concept do to how these swells are figured? Accordingly, this paper centres on 1) a critique of the concept sea-level rise and 2) a sustained engagement with swelling horizons as an alternative way of figuring the places made to matter through the concept of sea-level rise.

Regarding 1), I will argue that 'sea-level rise' is embedded within a colonial grammar of territorialisation and is used to affectively standardise those in positions vulnerable to swelling oceans. 'Sea-level rise' works through a process of abstraction away from the affectivity of the littoral, the intensely and immediately felt shore; mud under feet, sand emptying itself through fingers, an expansive horizon sensed in its magnitude. As such, 'sea-level rise' works in an affectively vacuous way by figuring changing oceans in terms of idealised altitudinal planes, that is, levels. To make sea-level rise felt – to, in a neoliberal, humanitarian context, sell the idea of climate change – such affective vacuity calls for affective filling-in. This work is often done by the figure of the climate refugee.[5] Such affective work, coupled with the mechanisms of sea-level rise, culminates as the 'sea-level refugee', a "root identity" (Glissant 1997, 143). I argue that the sea-level refugee demonstrates one way that 'sea-level rise' affectively standardises those in positions vulnerable to climate

3 See McAllister's (23 October 2024) article in Zurich Insurance's magazine at the following link https://www.zurich.com/en/media/magazine/2022/there-could-be-1-2-billion-climate-refugees-by-2050-here-s-what-you-need-to-know.

4 For example, see the Dutch government's initiative called "Delta Programme 2023: Speed Up, Connect and Reconstruct" (September 2022) at the following link https://english.deltaprogramma.nl/site/binaries/site-content/collections/documents/2022/09/20/delta-programme-2023-english---print-version/8397+Interactieve+DP+2023_DEF+ENG.pdf.

5 Unless specified otherwise, I do not use 'climate refugee' to refer to specific persons. Rather, I employ this term to signify a discursive move by which 'the other' is reduced to a climate refugee (see Boas et al. 2022; Bettini 2019).

e-ISSN 2385-3042

change by reducing vulnerabilities to an altitudinal level. Drawing on the work of Édouard Glissant, such reductions are, despite the sense of novelty often associated with climate change, shaped by coloniality. To disrupt such continuities, new ways of figuring the spaces occupied by 'sea-level rise' are needed.

Concerning 2), I venture that 'swelling horizons' provides one such way by layering, infusing, and circumscribing late-liberal horizons 'out-there' with an otherwise. To demonstrate this, I propose that noticing swelling horizons occasion, at least, four different (re) orientations to how places, worlds, histories, and peoples are problematised through the concept of sea-level rise. First, as a concept that helps thinking between terrestriality and submersion. Second, by how the swells have a capacity to ripple across space and time, carrying stories and materials with them. Third, by how they gesture to ways of being not only 'on' the horizon, but also as, in, or of their swells, a gesture which also indicates the power dynamics conditioning such differing prepositional relations. Fourth, I argue that horizons swell heavily, both in the unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality experienced by many today, and in the waters that are materially heavy from processes of racialisation and exploits of colonialism. As becomes clear, swelling horizons are not 'good'. Rather, they should encourage a critical sensibility to how horizons are deeply historicised, paradoxically material, and energetic while generating uneasy, peculiar in-betweens.

To make these arguments, I think with various theorisers as a praxis of conceptual analysis. I understand this as exploring and critiquing what concepts do, a methodology that acknowledges the political nature of "concepts understood as action" (Povinelli 2021, 1). Accordingly, siting the argument becomes particularly important by developing and demonstrating the argument further at specific places and times.[6] Throughout this paper, a recurring place is Oceania. I have chosen this focus since it is a place where colonial and nuclear histories meet swelling oceans, alongside long-standing histories of mobility erased and told anew by the Global North through climate refugee narratives.[7] Such themes also resound in Oceanians' ongoing conversations about the region's history and future (for instance Bordner, Ferguson, Ortolano 2020; PIFS 2017; Freestone, Schofield 2016; Farbotko 2010; Hau'ofa 1994; Wendt 1976).

6 I prefer the verb 'to site' over 'case-study', since the idea of a case implies too singular an idea about the complex, ever-evolving sites in which climate change takes place.

7 However simplistic the North/South binary may be, it still usefully registers structuring forces of history all the while these are "geographical spaces marked by heterogeneity and historical differences" (Sultana 2022, 4). Furthermore, when using 'the West', I take this term to refer to the West in its colonising powers, past and present.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

The structure of the paper is as follows: First, I analyse Glissant's use of root identity, *chaos-monde*, and affective standardisation. Siting my argument at Oceania, I then develop a critique of how 'sea-level rise' is shaped by coloniality while affectively standardising precarities through the root identity of the sea-level refugee. As a short intermezzo, I consider Glissant's reflections on how root identities might be renewed and disrupted. Next, I analyse horizons starting from what Elizabeth A. Povinelli (2021) calls the toxicity of late-liberalism. Noticing horizons' multiple swells, I then explore how swelling horizons occasion, at least, four reorientations after a critique of sea-level rise.

2 Colonialism and 'Sea-Level Rise': Root Identity and Affective Standardisations

On Runit Island, in the Enewetak atoll, there is The Tomb, a concrete dome covering the radioactive waste of numerous nuclear bombs, detonated by the US at this and a neighbouring atoll in the name of 'peace' (Bordner, Ferguson, Ortolano 2020). The Tomb is also barely above water. Today, rising tides have started eroding The Tomb's concrete, causing it to leak radioactive waste into waters already affected by colonial histories and nuclear impacts. Nuclear horizons of colonial experimentation meet horizons of changing oceans, in my case mediated through satellite imagery offered by the US military and corporations, and such imagery's inherent "terrestrial bias" (Jue 2020, 83). Considering current pan-Pacific movements to regenerate aqueous cultures and decolonise in the wake of colonial devastation (D'Arcy 2018, 121; Wendt 1976), these waters are historically, worldly, and politically integral to many Marshall Islanders.

Now, these nuclear, watery horizons are swelling, threatening the existence of the Marshall Islands (Bordner, Ferguson, Ortolano 2020). Consequently, some Marshall Islanders are moving to new places such as Orange County, California (see Hess, Nero, Burton 2001), a place also precariously exposed to a swelling horizon. Simultaneously, the islands are being reappropriated as climate disaster's ground zero, living proof of anthropogenic climate change (Farbotko 2010), hereby swelling the horizons of the Global North with narratives of 'it could be us'. All the above are problems of sea-level rise, but they also seem to exceed such modelled horizonal lines in their existential thrust, intermingling cultures, and dynamics steeped in imperialism. How are we to understand these transforming oceans, and what happens when the term 'sea-level rise' is made to represent situations like the above?

I argue that the use of 'sea-level rise' frames relations to transforming oceans through the colonial grammar of root identity.[8] Discourses surrounding sea-level rise hinge on powers of territorialisation, often those of the West, while they render historical continuities of socio-environmental violence invisible. To make this argument, I will be drawing on the work of Édouard Glissant (1928-2011), a (post)colonial[9] thinker and poet from Martinique. In particular, I explore his concepts of Root identity and affective standardisation. Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* clarifies the colonial historicity of the above two arguments concerning the colonial grammar and affectivity of the concept sea-level rise.

2.1 Édouard Glissant and Caribbean Theorising

Glissant's work can be characterised as part of a tradition of decolonial, Caribbean thought alongside, among many others, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Kamau Brathwaite, and Sylvia Wynter. To Glissant's fellow thinker Manthia Diawara (2015), Glissant was "a theorizer of the concept of relation". According to Diawara (2015), Glissant re-created himself in this theorising role "to reveal the fluidity of relation". In this paper, writing that Glissant may be characterised as part of a Caribbean tradition becomes important since Glissant explicitly engages with the ecologies, politics, and histories of the Caribbean. I cover each of these themes in turn.

Ecologically, Glissant observes that the geographical openness of the Caribbean inspires forms of theorising that open up towards complexity without trying to enclose and determine such complexity as knowledge. To Glissant (1997, 33-4), this contrasts with the enclosure of the Mediterranean by the lands that surround it. Politically, Glissant is the main theoriser of the *créolité* movement (Buchanan 2018) which has defined itself in opposition to the *négritude* movement. Négritude arose as a revolt against French colonial oppression and white universalism while self-affirmatively proclaiming the values of a "Black World" (Diagne 2023). To the *créolité* movement, *négritude* places too much emphasis on a common African heritage, instead of acknowledging the composite, multiply cultural nature of Caribbean identity (Diagne 2023). Moreover, to Glissant, the historicity of this identity is inextricably tied to the deaths and innumerable crimes

8 For an adjacent argument concerning the grammar of geology and the racial blindness of the Anthropocene, see Kathryn Yusoff's (2018) *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.

9 Following Ann Laura Stoler, I use the parentheses around 'post' to emphasise that we cannot assume any straightforward before and after when it comes to acts of colonisation (Stoler 2016, ix).

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, Supplement, November 2025, 83-120
e-ISSN 2385-3042

committed in the "womb abyss" of the enslavers' ships (Glissant 1997, 7). Instead of being rooted relative to a specific mix of African ancestries, and thus essentialising them as fixed relations (Glissant 1997, 135), Glissant shows how Caribbean identity is born on the journey itself as the very process of cultural relating.

Today, Glissant's approach to thinking seems aptly poised to address the environmental humanities' attempts at prying open various concepts of nature to new interpretations (Neimanis, Åsberg, Hedrén 2015, 71). Not least because these attempts to relate differently to a Blue Planet should avoid producing further harmful reductions in the process of reimagining it. Moreover, Glissant does not assume the position of a distant theoriser, but instead demonstrates how ecologies and histories inflect theorising. While acknowledging the political and geographical context of Glissant's writings, I explore the conceptual vocabulary of *Poetics of Relation*, its method, and take it somewhere else, specifically to critique discourses and practices surrounding 'sea-level rise'. Specifically, I read *Poetics of Relation* as holding key insights for understanding the ontological impetus, epistemology, and coloniality of 'sea-level rise'. By these I mean, respectively, what senses of reality 'sea-level rise' prefigures and is embedded within; how 'sea-level rise' facilitates certain modes of understanding and not others; and how this onto-epistemological impetus is affected by enduring power structures produced on a planetary scale during Western Europe's violent colonisation of the world.

In what follows, I interpret key passages in *Poetics of Relation*. Here it is important to note that, to Glissant, some theorising may constitute a poetics. This is the case when theorising aims to better imagine the world we are in instead of theorising as if the totality of the world is an object to be determined and known (Glissant 1997, 154). Moreover, theorising becomes active by enacting its poetics and moving the reader's imagination, something Glissant does by for instance introducing neologisms and rearranging words in unconventional ways (Wing 1997, xii). Such an imaginative, political, and active potential of theorising will be a recurring theme throughout this paper. I first analyse what Glissant means by root and root identity, and how the latter constitutes a colonially founded grammar. Thereafter, I analyse *chaos-monde* (which may roughly be translated as chaos-world)[10] as a way the world of root identities also 'is'. Finally, I analyse the idea of 'affective standardisation' and discuss how it connects with the production of root identities in *chaos-monde*.

10 However, a lot is lost in this act of translation since *chaos-monde* is a neologism that plays with ordinary French use of *le chaos* and *monde*. To emphasise the act of creating a neologism, I follow the translator, Betsy Wing, in using the French terminology (Wing 1997, xv).

e-ISSN 2385-3042

2.2 Root and Territory: A Colonial Grammar of Identification

In Glissant's work *Poetics of Relation*, the term 'root' figures prominently as a way of relating to places. Because of today's transforming oceans, places erode, ebb and flow, withstand, wash away; their matters both filter into and sediment other places while being laboriously kept together and reassembled.[11] Since 'sea-level rise' is fundamentally connected to changing places, the concept of 'root' seems a good place to begin an analysis. I interpret 'root' in the sense of 'finding your roots' or 'going back to your roots' but also 'taking root' or 'growing roots'. Referring to Deleuze and Guattari, Glissant contrasts rootedness with nomadism, a term that Deleuze and Guattari favour over rootedness (Glissant 1997, 11). However, Glissant is critical of nomadism and brings up various examples to show its sometimes brutally violent role (for instance the invading nomadism of the Huns). This is important because it points to how rootedness is not bad in itself,[12] but that the violence today implied by root identity specifically relates to the West's way of rooting itself in preparation for its colonisation of the world (Glissant 1997, 14). That is, the West's violent colonisation is pre-empted by fixing and declaring its land as nations, by implanting its roots so that they can spread and take hold across the planet. In doing so, rootedness becomes connected to 'violent filiation' and 'territoriality' by virtue of its historicity. Such a colonial grammar of identification is clustered through "[*r*]*oot identity*" (Glissant 1997, 143).

Violent filiation starts from and is defined through a legitimating origin story, often of how 'the world' is created. What follows is a linear chain of filiation wherein places and people are rooted insofar as they descend from this origin story (Glissant 1997, 47). Hereby, the person, place, or community's root identity is produced by being legitimated and identified as a link in this chain (Glissant 1997, 143). This is a 'violent' process of filiation since it consists in "the absolute exclusion of the other" (Glissant 1997, 52). By absolute exclusion, Glissant means that there is no space for the other to be opaquely ungraspable. Instead of existing on their own terms, the other can only be 'included' by assimilating and making themselves transparently understandable on the terms dictated by the filiating line, in its violent grasp. Yet, the other is also opaque. Therefore, they

11 For more on how such 'placekeeping' unfolds across the planet, see Summer Gray's (2023) *In the Shadow of the Seawall: Coastal Injustice and the Dilemma of Placekeeping*. The roots of mangroves play a key role when negotiating forms of placekeeping, highlighting one of the many ways that places are deeply connected to their literal roots.

12 Indeed, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, a performance poet from the Marshall Islands, recites that "We will choose | to be rooted in this reef | forever" (Jetñil-Kijiner, Niviâna s.d.).

e-ISSN 2385-3042

are effectively erased, at least partially, from the world produced on the terms of a specific creation story (Glissant 1997, 49).[13]

Besides maintaining the production of root identity through the exclusion or assimilation of the other, root identity also perseveres by projecting its filiating line onto further lands and possessing those as territories (Glissant 1997, 143). Land is turned into territory by conceiving it as something to be (dis)possessed. Conversely, root identity is endangered in the loss of land 'as' territory, in losing that which it constructed as its possession. For this paper, root identity usefully registers how its violent production is inextricable from its colonial beginnings while also connecting with a colonial grammar of (dis)possession of territory and violent filiation. Here, although historicised by the West's colonisation, it is important to note that root identity works across power formations. I do not assume there to be a pre-given set of positionalities which may be produced as rooted identities. Furthermore, the root identity brings with it a view of the other where they must be rooted in a line of filiation, that is where they are assimilated and/or erased: root identities aim to produce rooted identities.

2.3 *Chaos-Monde* of Root Identity and its Affective Standardisation

To Glissant, the terms of root identity do not properly express the world. It is not made up of pre-given territories, ancestries, and nations. Rather, (the) world 'is' chaos and wildly accelerating (Glissant 1997, 141). Moreover, it is chaos in a way that elicits an "unconscious and desperate rage at not 'grasping'" it as chaos (Glissant 1997, 141). However, in *Poetics of Relation* 'chaos' attains a special meaning in how it is often hyphenated with *monde* (the French term for 'world') to create the neologism *chaos-monde*. To say that the world 'is' chaos is a statement concerning the world's being. However, such ontological impetus does not necessarily consist in disorder for "[c]haos is not 'chaotic'" (Glissant 1997, 94). Given the ordinary meaning of chaos as disorder (*Collins English Dictionary* s.d.), this seems counterintuitive, which Glissant (1997, 133) readily acknowledges. So, why use the term 'chaos'?

To answer this question, it is important to consider what it means to hyphenate 'chaos' and 'world'. With *chaos-monde*, Glissant (1997,

13 To Glissant, in the West, this pattern of legitimating, assimilating, or excluding the other became particularly pernicious because of the story of Christ and its paradigmatic filiation of Father and Son, not least in the very naming scheme of historical, linear time: "*before and after Christ*" (Glissant 1997, 48; emphasis in the original).

e-ISSN 2385-3042

94) refers to how the world is also realised through relations with no pregiven norms and hierarchies. This suggests a reading of *chaos-monde* as 'world that *is*' in a non-deterministic and relational way, irreducible to any singular totality, especially given how Glissant criticises cultural reductions and exclusions of the other. Such a reading is also reflected by the extent to which Glissant often entirely avoids using any article, both definite and indefinite, in writing about *chaos-monde* (see, for instance, Glissant 1997, 139), a practice I loosely follow here. Nevertheless, *chaos-monde* still names 'world', however non-determinately so. In this naming act, some sense of order is hyphenated with chaos. This then also implies that the being of 'world' is inflected with the indeterminacy and irreducibility of chaos, but which can nonetheless be imagined and inquired after 'as' world. The ontological impetus and relationality of *chaos-monde* sits at its core since its neologistic character is produced and maintained by the hyphenating, relating line.

Elaborating on the *chaos-monde* leads Glissant to affirm the necessity of a poetics of Relation as an aesthetic moment that helps better imagine how the world 'is' in its chaos. This is because such a poetics, according to Glissant, does not seek to determine, fix, or reduce the world. Rather, a poetics of Relation "senses, assumes, opens, gathers, scatters, continues and transforms" the ways we think the *chaos-monde* (Glissant 1997, 94-5). Consequently, I read the choice of chaos in *chaos-monde* as a commitment to irreducibility and non-determinacy, and a simultaneous affirmation of ways of imagining 'world' through the hyphenating act. For this paper, *chaos-monde* usefully proclaims 'world' and simultaneously commits to its non-determinacy. Because of the planetary scope of the precarity of today's ecologies, such a relational approach which affirmatively names 'world' becomes necessary. It provides a framework for imagining beyond, across, underneath, and in the worldly interstices of specific contexts. Simultaneously, *chaos-monde* also affirms a non-determinacy important to such projects and names them 'poetics'. Hereby, (poetic) inquiry must open and transform rather than fix or determine. Regarding rising sea-levels, while both 'sea level' and 'sea-level' are often used, I have chosen to use the hyphenated form to integrate the hyphenating act and indicate that the words affect each other.

Finally, in today's *chaos-monde*, Glissant writes that there is a "disturbing affective standardisation of peoples, whose affect has been diverted by the processes and products of international exchange, either consented to or imposed" (Glissant 1997, 148). Glissant argues that goods such as Coca-Cola crowd out so-called local products, making people accustomed to the taste of the international product. Hereby, those in power standardise others' affective relations. These standardisations end up holding their own power and legitimacy,

and thus take root, similarly to the workings of root identity. Adding to Glissant, I understand consumption goods to also include the consumption of news media, documentaries, and the circulation of these throughout societies. Of course, concepts are also embedded in such discourse, providing one medium through which they, in the words of Povinelli come to "*matter-forth*" (Povinelli, Gandorfer, Ayub 2021, 305). Consequently, I take the above as inspiration to argue that 'sea-level rise' affectively standardises peoples' ways of relating to transforming oceans, an argument I will develop further by siting it in Oceania.

3 Sea-Level Refugees

In discourses about climate change, 'the climate refugee' is often called upon to stress the dire reality of planetary catastrophe. The World Economic Forum names climate refugees "the world's forgotten victims".[14] To UN Secretary-General António Guterres, the climate refugee appears in the millions, billions, as "a mass exodus of entire populations on a biblical scale" that forms a swelling "tide of insecurity".[15] This statement has been reproduced by multiple media-outlets such as the Washington Post and the Guardian, often followed by Guterres' (2023) reference to the nearly 900 million (often reported as one billion) "people who live in coastal zones at low elevations".[16] These discourses turn into a numbers game: 1.2 billion, 2 billion, 3 billion.[17] In the headline of one article, climate change is

14 See the article by Ida "Climate Refugees – The World's Forgotten Victims" (18 June 2021) at the following link https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/06/climate-refugees-the-world-s-forgotten-victims/.

15 See Guterres' full statement "Secretary-General's Remarks to the Security Council Debate on 'Sea-level Rise: Implications for International Peace and Security'" (14 February 2023) at the following link https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2023-02-14/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-debate-sea-level-rise-implications-for-international-peace-and-security.

16 For the Washington Post article by Pannett (15 February 2023), see the following link https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/02/15/un-sea-levels-rising-climate-migration/. For the Guardian article by Carrington (14 February 2023), see the following link https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/feb/14/rising-seas-threaten-mass-exodus-on-a-biblical-scale-un-chief-warns.

17 For example, see the article by McAllister "There Could be 1.2 billion Climate Refugees by 2050. Here's What You Need to Know" at the following link https://www.zurich.com/media/magazine/2022/there-could-be-1-2-billion-climate-refugees-by-2050-here-s-what-you-need-to-know, the article by Friedlander "Rising Seas Could Result in 2 Billion Refugees by 2100" (19 June 2017), at the following link https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2017/06/rising-seas-could-result-2-billion-refugees-2100, and the article by Vince "Is the World Ready for Mass Migration Due to Climate Change?" (18 November 2022) at the following link https://www.bbc.com/

e-ISSN 2385-3042

even made fuel, thus taking the backseat to the migration it ignites.[18] Both biblical and swelling, the vulnerable are ripe for headlining. The racialised other of the shore, of the root, of the nation is split, flattened by the line of the sea-level and swell 'our' horizons: "The climate refugee crisis is landing on Europe's shores" (Özdemir 2023).[19] Those precariously exposed to the violences of climate change are made sea-level refugees.

There is no consensus regarding the effects of climate change on mobility (Zickgraf 2018, 72). Moreover, news media rarely give a voice to those choosing voluntary immobility (Farbotko et al. 2020, 703) and those who are (and will be) trapped by climate change (Ayeb-Karlsson, Smith, Kniveton 2018, 570). Moreover, much of the displacement caused by climate change is local and largely contradicts Global North narratives about the swelling numbers of people arriving at its shores (Boas et al. 2019). The figure of the climate refugee is extensively critiqued, yet continuously invoked. Climate im/mobilities do not follow linear, transnational patterns, yet they are often evoked as such. I believe that the concept of sea-level rise performs an important role in perpetuating the rootedness of such paradoxes. Indeed, what happens when the figure of the climate refugee is introduced, specifically within discourses surrounding sea-level rise? To attempt an answer, I first describe how material littorals become indexed as sea-levels, and the political nature of how this takes place. This is important to understand what the discourse of sea-level rise does to the figure of the climate refugee. Afterwards, I discuss the affectivity of sea-level rise and how the affectively standardising figure of the sea-level refugee is produced in portrayals of Oceania.

3.1 Becoming Sea-Level in Oceania

According to political geographer Katherine G. Sammler (2020, 606), the sea-level is a "technical and political construction of the sea's surface as a horizontal plane". The act of measuring a sea-level is political. This is because the measured sea-level creates a baseline against which national territory is established (Sammler 2020, 617).

future/article/20221117-how-borders-might-change-to-cope-with-climate-migration.

18 See the article by Prange "Climate Change Is Fueling Migration. Do Climate Migrants Have Legal Protections?" (19 December 2022) at the following link https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/climate-change-fueling-migration-do-climate-migrants-have-legal-protections.

19 See the article by Özdemir (20 February 2023) at the following link https://www.politico.eu/article/climate-refugee-crisis-europe-policy/.

For instance, territorial claims can be expanded by measuring the sea-level at low tide and pointing to the coastal features that appear (Sammler 2020, 614). Thus, an important site for the measurement and political construction of sea-levels is the littoral, the places where the planet ebbs and flows. Furthermore, it is a site that, when turned into a series of idealised coast*lines*, functions as the precondition for baselines (Sammler 2020, 607). That is, in Glissantian terms, the littoral's non-determinacy as chaos, is rendered transparent and acted upon through political idealisations of it as coastlines.

Nevertheless, the construction of sea-levels does not only take place at the littoral. While locally, the sea-level is measured using tide stations, globally it is assembled from satellite data as a mean sea-level in relation to the location of the Earth's centre of mass, thereby constructing a reference sphere of the Earth (Sammler 2020, 612). When turned into a global mean sea-level, the ocean provides a reference against which the altitudes of mountains and terrestrial borders are produced and negotiated. As an example, Sammler (2020, 613) notes the border disputes between Nepal and Tibet which hinge on Mt Everest's 'official' height that is measured in relation to the mean sea-level.

However, the material and unruly elemental interfaces of the littorals challenge these processes of territorialisation, and they are especially put under pressure today due to anthropogenic climate change (Sammler 2020, 617). This has led to "extreme legal uncertainty" where the legitimacy of various borders, both maritime and terrestrial, is questioned (Houghton et al. 2010, 816). Given how processes of territorialisation are implicated in the creation of a sea-level, 'sea-level rise' is thus inextricable from root identities, since such identities are reproduced by legitimating land as territory. To avoid being put at the forefront of yet another climate injustice and to affirm their agency, the Marshall Islands has leapfrogged this legal stalemate and declared its maritime borders to the UN (Freestone, Schofield 2016). Thereby, the Marshall Islands attempts to determine its borders in an ocean swelling and transfiguring the littorals which had been providing the country's baselines. Such a temporal fixity in the face of planetary time goes to show how 'sea-level rise' is woven into complex geopolitical questions, thus exerting pressure on the idealisations through which territorialisation has so far taken place.

The Marshall Islands is also part of the Pacific Islands Forum, which is the primary political and economic organisation of the Pacific region and comprises 18 member states. In 2017, Oceanian leaders chose to name this region "THE BLUE PACIFIC – OUR SEA OF ISLANDS" (PIFS 2017, 2). 'The Blue Pacific' also figures prominently in their *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (PIFS

2022).[20] According to the Pacific Islands Forum (2017, 3), this act of identification was intended to further regionalisation and reinforce the connections between Pacific peoples, their cultures and ecologies, alongside a commitment to their stewardship of Oceania. This last point is no small feat, given they "are the custodians of nearly 20 percent of the earth's surface" (PIFS 2022, 8) while comprising less than 40 million of the planet's stewards. These terms of stewardship and custodianship help parse relations to Oceania differently from relations of territoriality and possessiveness.

Moreover, the renaming act turns from the terrestrial towards the sea in the formation of a political identity. I interpret this as the creation of an elemental poetics of 'the Blue' with which identities are formed starting from water, not from a sense of earth often associated with territorialisation.[21] The inextricability of root identity from 'sea-level rise' cannot account for such aqueous relations of stewardship given its emphasis on land and territorialisation. Thus, the naming of a Blue Pacific demonstrates certain limits of root identity in addition to a perspective that can be afforded when one goes beyond the sea-level and its territorial focus. Other names have also been offered. In § 6.2, I discuss Epeli Hau'ofa's (1994) seminal article "Our Sea of Islands" and his choice of Oceania, a term allying itself with local indigenous practices, histories, and decolonial commitments (see Wendt 1976; Hanlon 2017), and which I have chosen to follow in this paper.

The above analysis nuances what root identities associated with sea-level rise can mean in the wake of colonialisms and imperialism. When it comes to asserting one's (legal) agency amidst coloniality and sea-level rise, a colonial grammar of root identity is often all there is: to safeguard the conditions of liveability undergirding the very possibility of a Sea of Islands, the Marshall Islands attempt to maintain existing baselines despite the changing littorals of the island 'territories'. However, here such a colonially founded grammar of territorialisation is counteracted by the naming the Blue Pacific and its commitments to custodianship and an elemental poetics of the Blue. Because of this counteracting motion, the grammar of root identity seems strategically mobilised without fully realising its identification with territorialising and possessive forms of relating. In this context, the very necessity of having to reclaim the name of the Blue Pacific also points to the colonially founded dominance of territory and terrestriality over stewardship and 'the Blue'.

20 'Our Sea of Islands' is also a reference to the influential essay by Epeli Hau'ofa (1994). I return to this in § 6.2.

21 Although, as DeLoughrey (2019, 109) emphasises, it is important not to overlook the extensive military territorialisation of the oceans.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Nevertheless, the latter are parsed through the coloniser's language, English. Of course, in the ideal world, such a renaming would never be necessary since the original colonial naming, and its "massive earth-destroying Death Star ripping and gutting a million worlds" (Povinelli 2021, 56) would never have taken place.

The possibility for analysing the naming act of the Blue Pacific is thus only possible against the backdrop of a world of coloniality. Here, Oceania demonstrates a way of relating to the oceans different from those made legible through sea-level rise's grammar of terrestrial (dis)possession all the while the region contours such a grammar. It also demonstrates limits and complexities of root identity as it is lived out amidst concrete geographies, politics, and times, and, by extension, 'sea-level rise'. These reflections resonate with Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey's (2019, 7) reading of climate change as, among many other ways, "colonization in one context or sea-level in another". The political character of sea-level constructions demonstrates that the two contexts affect one another. Consequently, insofar as 'sea-level rise' relies on the colonially loaded notions of territory, terrestriality, and relations of (dis)possession, then the changing oceans are parsed through a colonial mode of understanding. I have pointed out multiple ways in which this is the case. In the following, I turn to the affective dimension of 'sea-level rise' and how the figure of the climate refugee is often produced in relation to contexts where 'sea-level rise' is mobilised.

3.2 Affective Vacuity: Enter, 'Climate Refugee'

In the field of environmental humanities, some aim to make climate change more tangible (Neimanis, Åsberg, Hedrén 2015, 74). However, in doing so, Claire Colebrook (2011) argues a divide appears between an 'extensive' consumption of affective input and a simultaneous lack of 'intensive' affectivity: while climate change may be rendered affectively tangible such affects do not necessarily mobilise action (Colebrook 2011, 53). In this paper, I define the affective as that which is felt. Accordingly, extensive affect is that which is 'merely' felt, and intensive affect is that which is felt and mobilises some intentional action. Concerning sea-level rise, there is a lack of affectivity in how 'sea-level rise' functions as a way of fixing the varying, complex oceans through a "practical, world-spanning abstraction" (Helmreich 2023, 11). Moreover, a lack of affectivity stems from the difference between the immediately felt sea at the littoral zone and the calculation of a mean sea-level that is done across a longer span of time (e.g. across varying tides). Establishing a sea-level is exactly done by abstracting away from the littoral's specific felt moments of floods, tides, and swells. This process of abstracting from the sea's affectivity and

working across time to create a stable concept of the sea-level is also part of the concept's historical development by scholars in the West (von Hardenberg 2021, 140). I understand this to mean that, to some extent, 'sea-level rise' operates in an affectively vacuous way, meaning that it calls for affective filling-in to be felt.

The figure of the climate refugee is often procured to provide a way for consuming the idea of 'sea-level rise', thus responding to its affective vacuity. One example particularly illustrates such an affective filling-in. The Institute for Economics and Peace wrote a report estimating that the number of people displaced by climate change will reach 1.2 billion in 2050.[22] The World Economic Forum and Zurich Insurance then reported this as 1.2 billion 'climate refugees'.[23] This part of my critique of 'sea-level rise' aims at these types of discursive changes, here from the abstract notion of 'displaced people' to the affectively standardising imagery of 'climate refugees'. In this case, the conceptual imagery of the term does not lead to an intense affectivity but rather an extensive affectivity in how people are made ready for consumption in the headlines of various media outlets around the world.

According to Giovanni Bettini (2019, 339), the affectivity of discourses surrounding climate migration is in general "immobilized in the insistence on vacuous, evanescent, non-actionable narratives on climate refugees". This relates to the predominance of extensive rather than intensive affectivity. Furthermore, the notion of climate refugee has already been widely criticised by many for how it erases the agency of those affected by promoting environmental determinism while drawing attention away from intersectional concerns (Bettini 2019, 337). However, as the above examples show and Bettini notes, the identity of the climate refugee continues to be reproduced. Bettini (2019, 339) argues that reading the discourses on migration and climate change as symptomatic helps explain the reproduction of the climate refugee identity. Here, Bettini argues that the climate refugee is symptomatic of three repressions of the (non-Western, non-affluent, non-white) vulnerable other. These are repressions that continuously reproduce the figure of the climate refugee. First, as 'bare life' and objects of humanitarianism or securitisation; second,

22 See the report "Ecological Threat Register 2020: Understanding Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace" at the following link https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ETR_2020_web-1.pdf.

23 The World Economic Forum article by Ida (18 June 2021) can be found here https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/06/climate-refugees-the-world-s-forgotten-victims/. The Zurich Insurance article by McAllister (23 October 2024) can be found here https://www.zurich.com/media/magazine/2022/there-could-be-1-2-billion-climate-refugees-by-2050-here-s-what-you-need-to-know.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

as vehicles for mobilising action and claims concerning climate justice; and third, as living proof of what is to come.

To this mechanism of symptom and repression, I contend that the figure of the climate refugee functions differently when produced in relation to the colonial grammar of 'sea-level rise'. The sea-level refugee is more than a symptom since it is also called forth because of the affective vacuity of 'sea-level rise', its terrestriality, and its possessively territorialising grammar. The way Oceania is mobilised internationally as climate change's ground zero helps illustrate this argument.

3.3 Altitudinal Laboratories in Oceania

In the article "Wishful Sinking: Disappearing Islands, Climate Refugees and Cosmopolitan Experimentation", Carol Farbotko (2010) outlines and critiques discourses about how Tuvalu will be affected by sea-level rise (see also Farbotko, Lazrus 2012, 383). Farbotko critiques how Tuvaluans' long-standing practices of mobility are reduced to those of the climate refugee. They are made into something "to fear and/or control, even if empathically" (Farbotko 2010, 53). Furthermore, the West's news surrounding Tuvaluans tends to sustain the figure of the climate refugee as a "victim-commodity, providing news value, political point-scoring, and a human embodiment of climate change 'evidence'" (Farbotko, Lazrus 2012, 386).

More specifically, Farbotko (2010, 53) is critical of how Tuvalu is "imagined as an island laboratory" to construct the impacts of climate change as observable and prove the global urgency of climate change. The islands of Oceania have historically been construed as 'ideal' laboratories because of how they were imagined to be "isolated in space and frozen in time, simpler", denying them their own cultural identities (Farbotko 2010, 54). This is reflected both by their appearance in early twentieth century anthropology as 'ideal' case-studies, and the fact that many islands, such as the Enewetak atoll, have been used as nuclear testing grounds. On such an island laboratory, the main parameters of climate change can supposedly be isolated and tested by the privileged bystanders, often the Global North. Hereby, islanders are reduced to test subjects in service of evidencing the planet's fate and "enforcing an eco-colonial gaze" (Farbotko 2010, 58). This again demonstrates DeLoughrey's (2019, 7) point that sea-level rise can elide into coloniality. The way the West relates to climate change tends to perpetuate many same-old patterns of colonialism. The violence experienced in the Anthropocene is not necessarily novel but rather historically continuous with the "disaster caused by empire" (DeLoughrey 2019, 2).

I wish to add to Farbotko's analysis by focusing on what 'sea-level' does to the imaginary of the island laboratory. Here, I read her analysis through the lens of Glissant's concept of root identity and violent filiation. Because the island laboratory works by conceiving the island as simple and isolated, it makes the effects of specific parameters transparent. By reducing Oceania to island laboratories, the precarious situation of the islands is thus also parametrised. Since many Oceanians' vulnerabilities are often expressed in terms of their relation to a sea-level, the idealised plane of the altitude and its distance to the sea-level is one of the main parametrisations. Here, the vulnerabilities of the other are reduced to their home nation's mean-level altitude, serving the purpose of making the affective charge of climate change legible to the world's privileged. The complex, swelling littoral horizons that transfigure Oceanians' existences are turned into something that can be mapped and modelled on various online maps where you can turn the expected sea-level up and down with a slider.[24]

The violent line of filiation is an index of altitudes projecting out into the future; the creation story is a narrative of a mostly consistent sea-level 'before the climate changes'; and the climate refugee is the root identity that is produced in relation to an altitude marker. The other is erased in Global North attempts to assimilate them to the transparency of a system of altitudes determined by past, present, and future sea-levels. This construction of a climate refugee through the parametrisation of changing oceans is what I mean by 'sea-level refugee'. The problem here is not that vulnerability can be partly expressed by how the changing oceans are modelled as sea-levels – this is a very real and all too urgent problem. Rather, it is an ontological and ethical problem insofar as they are made to matter primarily in relation to a sea-level, and an epistemological and political problem insofar as the 'sea-level' limits modes of inquiry instead of opening us up towards each other and the unknowable.

It is important to note that the problem is not that there necessarily is a lack of awareness surrounding sea-level rise. Rather, it concerns the 'kinds' of attention given and the way that this attention is made legible all the while intersecting with territorial concerns and material devastation. In these specific ways, 'we' are 'too' aware of sea-level rise and not conscious enough of the othering erasures, which are made to matter by it as a socio-politically assembled concept. In the next sections, I explore how affective standardisations may be disrupted and the 'sea-level' pried open to other modes of understanding, to its swells, erosions, and immediately intensive materiality.

24 For instance, see https://coastal.climatecentral.org/.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

4 Intermezzo: Renewing the Aesthetics of Sea-Level Rise

Glissant (1997, 148) argues that affective standardisations can root certain aesthetic sensibilities. A renewed aesthetics of relating to the Earth could be one response when countering this (Glissant 1997, 150). While maintaining that there might be a sense of (however wicked it may be) style to either the sea-level refugee, a rising sea-level, or climate catastrophe, I also take Glissant to mean aesthetics in the sense of an aesthetic sensibility, meaning the potential ways that the aesthetic 'object' may be rendered perceptible and affective. Moreover, in renewing such an aesthetics, Glissant writes that we must risk "passion for the land where one lives" even, and especially, in

> the half-starved dust of Africas […] the mud of flooded Asias […] the frozen silence of the Andes […] the rains uprooting favelas and shantytowns […] the scrub and scree of Bantu lands […] mud huts crowning goldmines […] haggard aboriginal wind. (Glissant 1997, 151)

Based on the elemental vocabulary (dust, mud, flooding, frozen silence, uprooting rains, scrub and scree, mud huts that crown goldmines, aboriginal winds) at play here, I interpret this as a politically laden elemental aesthetics that works with and in the face of violences experienced around the planet. In this paper, the elemental dimension is located at the intersection of water, air, and earth while emphasising the watery depths of the oceans' swellings. To Glissant (1997, 151), an elemental aesthetic is an aesthetic of "disruption and intrusion", and "rupture and connection". I interpret these as aesthetic moves that provide ways of acting upon the world through the multiple registers of connection, rupture, disruption, and intrusion. Such aesthetics are crucial to upending root identities and their violent transformations of land into territory (Glissant 1997, 151). This is an initial argument concerning what a concept ought to do, echoing Povinelli's (2021, 1) claim that concepts are "action in the world". Perhaps swelling horizons could be mobilised as this kind of action.

So, the use of sea-level rise orients people towards specific stories and shapes how such orientations come to matter, territorially and affectively. It does not always orient us in the right way. There is a need for multiple reorientations. I suggest the concept of swelling horizons is one way to produce reorientations which open, scatter, sense, and transform relations with the elements of the spaces made to matter through the lens of 'sea-level rise'. This is what I hope to demonstrate in the following.

5 'Out There': Topological, Late Liberal Horizons

'Horizon' has multiple meanings. It stems from the Ancient Greek *horízein* which means 'to divide' or 'to bound' (Hinske et al. s.d.) and, as such, it is a concept concerned with limits, particularly the limits to knowledge. Topologically, a horizon is also a dividing line 'in the distance' given by one's bodily positioning in relation to a landscape and its sky. Moreover, horizons are often politicised through a temporal focus on 'the new' (just take *Horizon Europe* for instance, EU's premier funding programme). [25] However, these different meanings quickly merge. To show this, I offer a personal vignette from my trip to Katwijk, the Netherlands:

> I stand at the top of a coastal dune. When circling around, I see everything becoming indeterminate at the horizon. To my sight, objects vanish at the horizon. They either drop below the horizon's edge due to the spherical nature of the Earth or they become so miniscule that they all collapse into a vanishing point or a line (see Macauley 2010, 64). When I move towards the horizon, it stays at a distance while it renders new objects visible on the horizon, among them a gas tanker. On the horizon, I see it as a sign of what is to come. The horizon provides the backdrop against which the gas that might be burned on my stove, that keeps me warm, is foregrounded. Instead of being an object or purely subjective, the horizon is part of my experience in terms of how I move and how I will move my body in the world, and I 'see' it in terms of the role it plays in revealing the tanker to me.

As David Macauley (2010, 65) writes, "it [the horizon] reveals the reciprocity of an observer with his or her environment". In the vignette, such reciprocity seems crystallised in a relation of 'gazing at', an individualised, visual relation with *topos*, with place. Embodied experience, knowledge, and being all tangle up in the reciprocal nature of topological horizons. However, the way I narrated my trip also relies on a passive, visual, and distanced way of understanding knowledge as something 'I possess' of 'stuff out there'. As has been argued by many, perhaps most prominently by Donna Haraway (1988), construing knowledge as the relation between a detached observer's eyes and the epistemic object leads to distancing the knowing subject as disembodied and non-situated all the while implicitly presupposing (and thus privileging) the gaze of human,

25 The concept of the horizon has also been extensively explored in phenomenology. See, for instance, Edmund Husserl ([1936] 1970), Martin Heidegger ([1927] 2010), and, for a critique, Emmanuel Levinas ([1961] 1969).

e-ISSN 2385-3042

male, able-bodied, heterosexual, and white bodies. A *topos* is then structured to make knowledge something 'out-there' 'on' the horizon, thereby supporting capitalist knowledge economies where horizons must be expanded, widened, and broadened. Consequently, such a topology of horizons also relies on embodied ways of inhabiting, dominating, and producing spaces of such political economies.

Moreover, this topology serves a(nother) political function. Povinelli (2021, 37) writes that horizons perform a key role in how contemporary liberal societies rely on and perpetuate toxic relations to the environment, key among them the current climate catastrophe. Povinelli's critique turns on the imagery of how the affluent middle-class of liberal societies merely stare at the horizon looking for the 'dark' catastrophes and 'white' saviours that might appear on it. In such a gaze, passivity is instilled in the observers toward the already unfolding catastrophic effects of liberalism (Povinelli 2021, 38). This resembles how I narrated the experience of looking at the tankship as a sign, out there, of what is to come. Such horizonal modes could be analysed as a way of experiencing, prospecting, and coming to realise climate catastrophe 'as' something 'on' the horizon. Moreover, such horizons constitute "liberalism's governmental imaginary, its means of bracketing all forms of violence as merely unintended, accidental, and unfortunate consequences of liberal democratic unfolding" (Povinelli 2021, 41). With this imaginary at hand, the late-liberal individual can continue to look at the horizon for guiding liberal ideals against which they understand climate catastrophe, instead of recognising that their very act of looking at the horizon is part of how these catastrophes unfold and have been unfolding.

I outline Povinelli's critique and the visual sense of horizons to distinguish a politically informed sensibility that might linger however horizons are theorised, redefined, and reimagined. I do not propose to erase the concept's inevitable late-liberal hauntedness. Instead, the task is to critically circumscribe and infuse horizons with 'an otherwise' (see also Povinelli 2011; Battaglia, Almeida 2014), that is to produce differing topologies of horizons better geared for "placekeeping" amidst unfolding planetary upheavals (Gray 2023, 3). I venture that when horizons 'swell', such an otherwise of differing topologies and accompanying (re)orientations starts to emerge. These go to show how swelling horizons as a concept productively answers to a critique of 'sea-level rise' by demonstrating what Daniela Gandorfer and Zulaikha Ayub (2021, 2) call a

> *matterphorics* […] an *aesth-ethics* of thought […] committed less to a theoretical program than to a heightened attentiveness to the violence(s) already inherent in representational modes of thought and sense-making.

Hereby, 'swelling horizons' resists tendencies for concepts to be understood as 'merely' metaphorical, at-a-distance from the world they "*matter-forth*" (Povinelli, Gandorfer, Ayub 2021, 305). At first, the concept of swelling horizons may indeed strike the reader as a metaphor for better understanding histories, places, and practices at-a-distance from the concept itself. However, I intend for each of the four reorientations to lay pressure on such an intuition, demonstrating the mattering of swelling horizons both in how they form part of a world but also within the layered connotations, structure and conjoining of the words themselves.

6 Oscillating Horizons: Four Reorientations

Imagine water gathering itself into a swell of waves out at sea which eventually crash onto shore, both embodying and cascading into relations reciprocated as swelling horizons. At four different places in this movement there are reorientations. Each place constitutes an argumentative step in demonstrating why it is productive to think with swelling horizons. Exploring these places in tandem also points to how the orientations linger with and inform each other. I gesture toward these potential (dis)harmonies in each heading with 'oscillator', a device producing wave frequencies. First, I start at the littoral zone with the swell that has travelled, the swell that swashes over the shore. Here, I discuss intersecting submersions and terrestrial horizons, against which the promise of a swelling one takes shape. Second, I trace the wave backwards in time, following how it collects itself into 'a swell'. At this juncture, I critically engage with various oceanographically informed ways with which swells come to matter. Third, I verbalise and stay with the swell as movement, as 'swelling'. While the swell materialises through entangling elements, its verbing amplifies a wateriness which I explore. Fourth, now on the ocean, I explore the voluminous, densely temporal depths of swelling horizons as those which have been swelling, heavily. These four steps constitute an ecologically informed argument. Combined, the (re) orientations demonstrate ways of noticing swelling horizons which counter the colonial grammar and affective vacuity of sea-level rise.

6.1 Oscillator 1: Terrestrial Horizons and Submersion

Oceans Rising (Zyman 2021a) brings an interdisciplinary cast of scholars, activists, artists, and scientists into dialogue on issues regarding the changing oceans. The book is an attempt to understand the rising oceans differently. Simultaneously, the 'rising' is also intended to articulate the agency "that flows from and feeds into the

oceans at this precarious moment" (Zyman 2021a, 7). Ontologically, it intervenes with numerous understandings of what the oceans 'are'. Instead of the ocean being treated as a blank space in between terrestrial territories, an *aqua nullius*, focus is shifted toward theorising the materiality of the ocean 'in itself'.[26] Epistemologically and politically, throughout the book I read a commitment that, to respond to the urgency of climate change, we must approach it from a variety of knowledge-making communities and that no one such system of knowledge is sufficient for the task at hand. These epistemological and political claims are shaped by the oceanic perspective that the ontological move lends itself to. Importantly, the political claim to pluralism entails there can be no singular ontology (in the classical sense of 'the' account of being) of the ocean.

While reading *Oceans Rising*, I encountered the idea that "the horizon is swelled" in the chapter "When Above" by John Palmesino and Ann-Sofi Rönnskog (2021, 10), architects and founders of Territorial Agency. They describe crucial differences between thinking above and below water. The former is a mode of thinking relying on horizons of grids, coordinates and territories (Palmesino, Rönnskog 2021, 10), horizons serving capitalism and coloniality (Palmesino, Rönnskog 2021, 13), fashioning the planetary as a 'globe' and marking it and its peoples in terms of appropriability, exclusion and inclusion (Palmesino, Rönnskog 2021, 10; see also Yusoff 2018). Here, I understand such horizons as terrestrial horizons. I argue that terrestrial horizons are horizons of root identity. This is the case since terrestrial horizons rely on much the same grammar of territorialisation, conquest, filiations of exclusion and inclusion, violent grids of transparency, and expansion that, going back to § 3, root identity is embedded in and reproduces. When one is rooted, in a Glissantian, colonially inflected sense, one orients oneself toward terrestrial horizons.

The terrestrial horizon makes it so that places, people, and their practices are parsed through the horizon's colonial grammar. On this horizon, they are made to matter as 'to-be-(dis)possessed'. Root identity is actively maintained by legitimating it through reduction of the (racialised, colonised, sea-levelled, and affectively standardised) other to its filiating lines and grids. With sea-level rise logics, such terrestrial horizons fold notions of altitude, elevation, territory-at-sea, sea-level refugees and laboratories into them. On terrestrial horizons, the opacities of others in their worlds, politics, practices, and histories never surface, never ripple across idealised planes forecasting a changing climate, since, seen exclusively

26 Such an ontological move is also in line with a general tendency of the field of Critical Ocean Studies (DeLoughrey 2017, 42).

e-ISSN 2385-3042

through the lens of a sea-level and its terrestrial horizons, the other is assimilated to a world of sea-level rise.

However, to Palmesino and Rönnskog, something happens when below water. Here, many of the assumptions of terrestrial horizons are questioned: "Who and what can own? Can a person own another? […] Can land truly be owned?" (Palmesino, Rönnskog 2021, 10) In one sense, this is a metaphorical move of 'diving in' to imagine oneself thinking from a different place. At the same time, the material state of submersion lends itself to a different sensibility where colours and light are literally refracted and shaped by how the water moves (DeLoughrey 2017, 37). Underwater, depending on the specific climate, time also moves differently (DeLoughrey 2017, 42). These are then horizons of submersion where one is sensibly and affectively enveloped by the horizon in a way that fundamentally alters how objects become meaningful. The submersion alters the very meaning-making process, and the watery worldliness related to this is fundamentally different from the world-to-be-possessed. A call for submersion is made and a different worldliness is posited.

To concretise these differences between terrestrial horizons and submersive thinking, take the example of where the so-called 'Great Wall' separating the US and Mexico continues many metres into the waters between San Diego and Tijuana. The construction of border infrastructure particularly intensified after 9/11 as a territorial, securitised, and material part of the US-Mexican border (Herzog, Sohn 2019, 184). Such infrastructure materialises an exclusionary, violent filiation depending on what side of the line you are born on. It is thus premised on a rooted sense of identity and its accompanying terrestrial horizons. However, how might such a wall be refracted and changed when below? What difference in meaning would such a move give to this site that has been instrumental to the deaths of so many who have ventured to cross it? As a start: submersion here means that it is not only (but also, and violently so) a wall made discernible on a terrestrial horizon.

Thus, when below, the grids and territorial lines undergirding terrestrial horizons are both metaphorically and literally disrupted. In such a way, submersive thinking seems to hold the potential for tackling the problems connected to root identity. Given that the colonial grammar of root identity is my main critique of 'sea-level rise', why not stay with submersive responses to terrestrial horizons and logics of sea-level rise? While submersion provides pause for a potent change in perspective and should also be explored,[27] the concept of sea-level rise may inflect this in ways that run counter to its disruptive potential. Specifically, submersion may still invoke

27 For example, see the book *Tidalectics* (Hessler 2018).

sea-level rise in positioning itself as below past/present/future sea-levels, which can perpetuate the colonial grammar outlined above and thus, paradoxically, be subsumed under terrestrial horizons. Submersive thought can therefore still be compatible with the reductions implied by sea-level rise and may, consequently, stabilise the grids of terrestriality which it was supposed to upend. Furthermore, plummeting into oceanic thinking, submersion may also not sufficiently address the material and affective specificities of staying with the littoral zone.

Adding to such politically inflected forms of submersion, with Palmesino and Rönnskog, a third source of topologies emerges: in between terrestrial horizons and submersive perspectives lies swelling horizons. Therefore, this first reorientation oscillates out of the promise of an in-between. While Palmesino and Rönnskog only use the verb 'swell' sparsely in conjunction with 'horizon', for the remainder of this article I dwell on this initial connection, a swelling horizon, as one way of refiguring sea-level rise.[28] First, it is important to note that I take sea-level rise, this modelling, territorial, and oceanographic concept, to be one out of many ways in which the horizons are (and have been) swelling. That is, I assume that horizons are swelled by many things, sea-level rise being one, and, for instance, the changing waters of *chaos-monde* a differently disorienting and poetically loaded one.

Straight away, there is a sense in which 'swell' seems apt for describing the changing oceans. One of the main mechanisms of transforming oceans is the thermal expansion of water (Oppenheimer et al. 2019, 26). Such expansion is part of what is modelled and narrated as rising global mean sea-levels. While 'rise' and 'swell' both track the changing levels of the hydrosphere, the latter foregrounds the voluminous changes of the ocean itself, how it clings to bodies, enters homes, transforms objects, and seeps into conversations between loved ones. 'To swell' is attributed to not-only human bodies (a swelling belly, sprained ankles, infected glands, a chest swelling with pride, the bruised bodies of anti-colonial protesters, or swelling numbers of populations), sound waves intensifying to fill spaces (a swelling string section), wood's changing moisture content (an untreated bench left in the rain), or different bodies of water, be they swelling tides, coastal waters, or rivers. In short, 'to swell' has voluminous, affective, and material connotations, it is often used in connection with enlarging

28 For an approach that starts from a similar in-between without using the term 'horizon', see Macarena Gómez-Barris' work on sea edges (Gómez-Barris 2018; 2019). See also Adriana Petryna (2022) who explores *horizoning* as a way of acting upon the complex futures engendered by climate change beyond and besides how they are predicted.

waves and waters, and it is regularly used to give affective and bodily impetus to calculi of peoples and their increasing numbers.[29]

Starting from such connotations, I am interested in what conjoining these swells with horizons 'does' to horizons, not least for horizons' function in the late-liberal tense of 'out there'. Horizons 'out there' are scanned or stared at. They broaden, narrow, restrict, or expand. Given these collocations, horizons are made distant by the very habit of which verbs are chosen for them. 'Horizons swell' seems to upset these collocations, perhaps simply being a 'new' verb, perhaps because of its fleshy, voluminous connotations at odds with the distancing, epistemic use of the regular verb collocations surrounding horizons. To some, the combination of the two words might sound peculiar. Indeed, many that I have mentioned 'swelling horizons' to have reacted that it as a 'funny' meeting of words.[30] I believe that the aesthetic sense of 'peculiarity' brought forth by their conjunction is disruptive and productive. I argue that just as climate change does something to horizons, the act of conjoining horizons with the verb swell 'does' something to them. The act produces a moment of both disorientation but also a changed awareness of its normal use. In the following, I explore the oceanographic registers of this conjunction by considering the swell as a noun. That is, drawing on anthropologist Stefan Helmreich's (2023) *Book of Waves*, what 'is' a horizonal swell? [31]

29 For example, on immigration and border control, see the article by Colvin and Long "Trump Struggles with a Growing Problem on the Border" (6 April 2019) at the following link `https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-struggles-with-a-growing-problem-on-the-border`. On food insecurity, see the article by Ntaryike "Three Million Trapped by Food Insecurity in Cameroon" (3 June 2023) at the following link `https://www.voaafrica.com/a/three-million-trapped-by-food-insecurity-in-cameroon/7118956.html`. On war refugees, see the article by Mishra "Sudan: Refugee Numbers Swell as War Continues to Drive Displacement" (11 October 2024) at the following link `https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/10/1155636`. On tourist hotspots, see the article by Skopeliti "Drunk Visitors, Rocketing Rents and Homogenised Cafes: Living in Europe's Tourist Hotspots" (13 August 2024) at the following link `https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/aug/13/drunk-visitors-rocketing-rents-homogenised-cafes-europe-tourist-hotspots`.

30 Translating 'swelling horizons' might lead to other forms of strangeness and peculiarity, thus changing how (far) the concept can be mobilised. For instance, explaining this article to people in Danish, my other main language, has raised many questions (and eyebrows) since the closest correlate is '*svulmende horisonter*', and '*svulmende*' has an erotic, bodily, and fleshy sense to it. However, in Danish it loses its demographic and oceanic connotations.

31 There are also many other places than oceanography to begin answering such a question. For instance, embodying identifying, and reacting to swells is important for surfing (see Anderson 2022; Helmreich 2023).

6.2 Oscillator 2: Swell Science

Waves are most often initiated by the transfer of energy from wind to the oceans (Helmreich 2023, 10). In oceanography, 'swell' refers to waves that are no longer influenced by the winds which created them (Helmreich 2022, 377). Thus, swells have airy origins – that elusive, often breathable element enveloping us with its varying moisture contents, "events and energy" (Horn 2018, 13). Yet, swells are not contingent on these airy spaces of creation, because the hydrosphere swells with the energies transferred to it by the wind. Waves are thus temporally and spatially extended whether "generated a month earlier on some faraway shore, by a hurricane a week earlier, and by fresh energy from wind-swept ripples" (Helmreich 2023, 12-13). This can surprise, for instance, as one of Helmreich's (2023, 229) interlocutors mention, when "swell systems […] were propagating from Greenland all the way down to the coast of Brazil […] suspending the sediment close to the beaches". Eventually, some of these swells arrive at the shore. They interact with the rising seafloor and start to break, finally swashing over the shore: "The story of waves is a tale about energy moving across space" (Helmreich 2023, 11).

Moreover, wave science operates by trying to predict various futures informed by hindcasting (Helmreich 2023, 15). In that sense, waves become media for future-telling, and wave science, while informed by its past calculations, is oriented 'forward', just as horizons often are. However, this predictive orientation presumes an abstract idea of space and time (Helmreich 2023, 15) instead of, for instance, the temporalities of the ocean embodied in multi-species interactions (DeLoughrey 2017, 40). When reading Helmreich's study of wave scientists, one story struck me from his time at a conference, talking to an oceanographer explaining the future wave climate:

> As I stood in front of Semedo's map […] an Australian wave scientist joined the conversation around the poster. He jumped up and down. Homo sapiens are driving the planet toward disaster: heat waves and fires in Australia, floods in South Asia, collapsing agricultural infrastructure in Africa, and waves, he said, of climate refugees. (Helmreich 2023, 17)

This story illustrates how oceanographers may also be immersed in swelling horizons, in this case, swelling horizons of future waves of climate refugees and an undifferentiated sense of 'Man' who is causing all this. Here again appears the figure of the climate refugee, this time affecting the body of the oceanographer in the prospected swells of their bodies.

Drawing on an elementally inflected reading of Helmreich's work, I notice kinds of horizons which are differently orienting from

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, Supplement, November 2025, 83-120
e-ISSN 2385-3042

the late-liberal, terrestrial horizon. I take away the energetically temporal and spatial sense that oceanography gives to swelling horizons: swelling horizons ripple across distances and times. Wave science also demonstrates a predictive, forward-looking way in which swellings are actively utilised to alter the expectation-horizons of the oceans. Importantly, the narration of climate refugees by the wave scientist, provides an important note of caution that such swelling horizons may well also orient us differently towards toxicities where demographics are given affect by indicating the fluidity of the racialised other, literally writing [*graphos*] people [*demos*] into swells. Finally, the elemental intersection of wind, water, and the littoral's muddle begs the question: What is the role of the elemental when noticing swelling horizons?

I do not believe there is any singular answer to this question. As Povinelli might respond, an answer would have to start within "the forces of history rather than with a claim about ontology" (Povinelli 2021, 2). In that spirit, an answer does emerge from Epeli Hau'ofa's article "Our Sea of Islands" (1994) in response to the reduction of Oceania to small terrestrial island states which I critiqued in § 3. The Pacific Islands Forum (2017) also referenced this article directly when they introduced the notion of the Blue Pacific. Hau'ofa (1994, 151) reacts against a deterministic view of the Pacific as "too small, too poor, and too isolated to develop any meaningful degree of autonomy". Instead, Hau'ofa (1994, 160) foregrounds the vast, expansive sea of islands to inspire new agencies and overturn deterministic terrestrial hegemonies. Hereby, Hau'ofa starts from the sea to create a different position for its peoples on those islands that are part of its vast expanse. This points to the importance of refusing a history of regarding the water of the oceans as a blank space to be traversed on the path to the next piece of land but instead acknowledge and think the oceans themselves in their intensities and affectivities.

Regardless of which element(s) take up attention when noticing swelling horizons, I do maintain that, when focusing on their waters, the coloniality which often permeates discourses surrounding 'sea-level rise' should be counteracted and critically circumscribed. As a technical heuristic, 'sea-level rise' performs an important role, but, following § 3, we should be wary of its presence in many Global North narratives surrounding the changing oceans and its frontline communities. In the following, I linger with these watery dependencies of swelling horizons and explore them in their wateriness. So, and this brings me to the next reorientation, what 'is' the water of swelling horizons? Here, instead of tracing the swells of horizons, I trace them 'as swelling', as watery movement.

6.3 Oscillator 3: Taking Body as, in, of (and on) Swelling Horizons

Because of the voluminous, bodily sense of 'to swell', the swelling horizon may bear a watery sense of embodiment. Nevertheless, since horizons emerge out of reciprocal relations between bodies and their environments, this embodiment also seems difficult to determine as particular bodies. As backdrop, boundary, and reciprocity, the horizon seems to be the condition of a *topos*, yet a swelling one also bears a sense of embodiment, the inhabiting of a *topos*. How might this paradox be unpacked and with it, the sense of peculiarity brought forth by conjoining backdrop and embodiment? I believe part of an answer may be found in Neimanis' (2017) idea of 'bodies of water'. Neimanis (2017, 5) theorises watery embodiment to address how we are unevenly implicated in the woundedness of planetary waters, the "[w]orsening droughts and floods, aquifer depletion, groundwater contamination and salination, ocean acidification, as well as commodification and privatization schemes that too narrowly seek to direct water's flows". I take from Neimanis' (2017, 95) figuration the idea that watery embodiment does not only mean that bodies need water to exist, but also that "water needs a body – it needs to take up expression as bodies of water that are specifically situated, even in all of their porous transits". Water never exists 'as such', independently of its surroundings, but must always take up a body depending on its situatedness. However, this does not lead to the situatedness 'determining' the water as a body, since water nourishes the new, the not-yet (Neimanis 2017, 103). Therefore, while bodies often need water, water also needs indeterminate bodies, always open to an otherwise.

This indeterminacy of bodies of water helps unpack the paradox between swell and horizon, between bodily becomings and their conditionings. As bodies of water, swelling horizons are inherently indeterminate, always open to an otherwise. Such an insight is in line with the sense of surprise and the peculiar character produced by the conjoining of swell and horizon. Furthermore, it resonates with this article's aim to infuse horizons with an otherwise. In their swells, the horizons' waters need to make themselves as bodies of water. This entails that swelling horizons (taken up in their watery facets) necessarily function through ongoing processes of materialisation and differentiation because of the varied bodies that their waters need to take shape as. It also means that swelling horizons lend themselves to prepositions differing from those normally used with horizons, further rupturing the collocations of horizons' common verb pairings. Instead of only being 'on' the horizon, various bodies of water can also be as, in, or of a horizon's swelling.

Theorising the oceans' water in a way that leads to changes in potential prepositions clarifies how the line of the swelling horizon wobbles with bodies that constantly materialise and differentiate within it. Being on the swell is premised on having, for instance, a (not deadly crammed) boat, a house that does not float away, a levee holding fast, or a history where colonisers have not exploited and overwritten one's long-standing ways of traversing the swells. In these ways, bodies as, in, or of swelling horizons tend to be submerged, often violently so, processes themselves subtended by differentiated power structures. Understanding swelling horizons as watery and as unfolding processes of embodiment, registers the fleshy, necropolitical, and material realities surrounding how numbers of people may also literally swell, for instance in and across the Mediterranean Sea as bloated, wounded bodies swollen from the immense, intentionally devastating warscape of Fortress Europe (see Walia 2021). The prepositional relation one bears with respect to swelling horizons is then suffused with, as a start; necropolitics, predatory exploitation, racial capitalism, and histories of intentional underdevelopment (Mbembe 2003; Hickel et al. 2022; Fraser 2018; Rodney 1981).

Therefore, this third reorientation starts from multiple prepositional engagements with the changing oceans and an acknowledgement that such prepositions are not neutral. I now turn to senses of 'swelling' that emphasise how oceans have already been swelling, heavily, for hundreds of years. In their swells, horizons are not only forward oriented but also swell of waste, both as "Heavy Waters" (DeLoughrey 2010) and in their "unbearable heaviness" (Sultana 2022).

6.4 Oscillator 4: Having Swelled, Heavily

With this fourth oscillator, I think with swelling horizons in the present perfect continuous tense: how they 'have been swelling'. This analytic move highlights that there is no pre-given, temporal cutoff point to when a swelling horizon begins (and ends, for that matter). It points to what I have, following Farhana Sultana (2022), analysing as 'climate coloniality' and, with DeLoughrey (2019), as how the violences of climate change are not necessarily new but also continuous with those of coloniality. Specifically, Sultana attempts to ground studies of climate coloniality in the lived experiences of those enduring its ongoing heaviness (Sultana 2022, 3). This embodiment anchors climate coloniality in the lived experiences expressed through a plethora of "theories, empirics, emotions, and storytelling" (Sultana 2022, 11). Thus, Sultana proposes a heaviness drawing together these experiences, a heaviness unbearable to those

already suffering from the multiple environmental devastations of colonialisms past and present and a heaviness which is integral to considering the dense depths of horizons in their swells.

With Glissant (1997, 6) and Sharpe (2016), a heaviness like this perhaps begins in and is reanimated through the enslaving (today also, yet not only, recurring as trafficking) ship's "womb abyss", its hold, and in the depths of the sea. Following Sultana, it is important to listen for and speak about the heaviness of climate coloniality to confront it (Sultana 2022, 10). In turn, I hope that if this heaviness is thought as part of horizonal swellings, such acts of listening and speaking are integrated from the very start instead of sea-level rise's risk of affectively standardising those vulnerable to climate coloniality. While such heaviness indicates an affective and experiential component, DeLoughrey's (2010) reference to heavy waters helps emphasise a material sense in which horizons have been swelling.

With 'heavy waters', DeLoughrey suggests that the oceans are both heavy with 'our' waste but also how they are heavy with the wasted lives of, among others, enslaved people and refugees. In the first sense, the oceans have been used as dumping grounds for nuclear waste, plastics, and heavy metals. This forms a cycle. The oceans are humanised by absorbing our waste which, in turn, moves the waste around and layers the heavy metals "in marine mammals and human beings" (DeLoughrey 2010, 707-8). The second sense points to the lives (still being) lost at sea during (enduring) colonialisms (DeLoughrey 2010, 708).[32] The connecting (literal and poetic, non-metaphorical) mark between the two senses is, to DeLoughrey, Glissant's (1997, 6) writing about "balls and chains gone green". While DeLoughrey has a focus on Caribbean literature, I find it important to underscore the materiality of these balls and chains; their durability and colour, the wrists they have touched, and how their presence now forms part of ecosystems on the sea floor, still there. That is, how the balls and chains contribute, in their voluminous presence on the seafloor, to a swelling horizon. The following examples register presences like this.

Take how the horizon swells in the wake of Atlantic chattel slavery, with "those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in Middle Passage; they are with us still […] in hydrogen, in oxygen; in carbon, in phosphorous, and iron; sodium and chlorine" (Sharpe 2016, 19). When writing about Black life in the enduring wake of enslaving ships, their residence time, Sharpe (2016, 40-1) reflects with geologist and oceanographer Anne Gardulski on how oceans

32 Note that in *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, DeLoughrey goes on to analyse "wasted life" more broadly as a way of "foreground[ing] the political and social systems that deem certain humans 'matter out of place' [as wasted life]" (DeLoughrey 2019, 103).

most likely still contain "the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard" since "human blood is salty and sodium, Gardulski tells me, has a residence time of 260 million years". In the Glissantian sense, Sharpe's 'wake work' enacts its own poetics by powerfully affecting the reader all the while better imagining modern reality's rootedness in the abyss of enslaving ships. Similarly, the very vastness of the Atlantic still lends itself to a thriving slave trade being concealed along the same middle passage (Zyman 2021b, 37). And, in geology, the Orbis spike in 1610 has been proposed to name the advent of the Anthropocene due to atmospheric changes and a mass cross-continental swapping of species (Lewis, Maslin 2015). To Neimanis (2017, 166), the onset of the current geologic era must therefore be considered in connection with the colonial violence that was inextricable from this time-period. These are oceans swelling with trauma which affects and materialises present conditions of (mal)nourishment and (lacking) liveability.

7 A Pause for Conclusions: Swelling Horizons as Lowly Thinking

Sociologist and cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy (2018, 4) has given a lecture arguing in favour of "sea level theory". We must do "lowly watery" thinking against the high-altitude theorising sometimes employed by scholars of the Anthropocene (Gilroy 2018, 10). I have followed Gilroy's lowly movement of staying at the littoral, at the interfacing of the elements. However, in staying with and at swelling horizons, I also refuse lowly thinking 'at the sea-level', at least when such orienting elicits affective standardisations, terrestrially biased modes of thought, logics of territoriality and (dis)possession, and violent reductions of others. Neither terrestrial, nor fully submerged, I propose reorientations, in lowly thinking, with and towards horizons that have been, are, and will be swelling.

In this article, I have argued that the reorientations entail infusing late-liberal horizons with an otherwise, here activated by noticing them for how they swell. The energy of swelling horizons ripple across varying distances and temporalities. They swell from both the energies of the wind, the rising temperatures of the oceans, the glaciers that melt, and heavy metals. They swell from balls and chains gone green on the seabed, thus expressing moments fundamentally entwined with the Anthropocene's possible beginnings. While such horizons in their swellings are voluminous, watery, and enveloping, the term 'horizon' give them a lingering sense of an 'out there'. Thus, swelling horizons maintain a tension between an 'out there' and how they, as watery, are always specifically situated by materialising as various bodies of water. One can be 'as, of and in' swelling horizons,

not only on them. Perhaps, a different decolonially inflected mode of the 'out there' is activated with swelling horizons. To be clear, I do not believe the above orientations are the only ones carried by swelling horizons. Nor do I claim that each orientation is limited to how this paper has described them. They are all necessarily open-ended. As swells, they oscillate and (dis)harmonise at various frequencies. Nonetheless, I do maintain that they each articulate and stay with the tensions of swelling horizons in new ways, a project vital for refiguring changing oceans which never quite conform to the all-too-simple logic of the sea-level.

I conclude by returning to *Oceans Rising* (2021a) and the exhibition that it accompanies called *Oceans in Transformation*. On the façade of the exhibition building, the church of San Lorenzo in Venice, was a line of light that depicted a projected sea rise of 4.5 m, halfway up the church gate. While the line is the product of models and their interpretations, when it materialised on the door, the entrant was faced with the uneasy feeling of being above when below. There, a present seemed actively (un)made by a future partly submerged. Territorial Agency (2021, 46) writes that this causes a "pivot from terrestrial to oceanic thinking". They describe a defined movement, a pivot, from one clearly named mode of thinking to another clearly named mode of thinking. Yet, I wager that the productive aspect of such an entrée is rather that it creates an ambiguous, peculiar space both for reorienting ourselves, but also for recontextualising and wobbling the lines surrounding us. At that place, the way the modelled sea-level rise materialised seems to embody the tensions and ambiguities of swelling horizons. Indeed, underneath that projected line, 'sea-level rise' as concept and socio-political construction also seems to swell horizons.

Bibliography

Anderson, J. (2022). "Surfing: The What, Where, How and Why of Wild Surfing". Peters, K.; Anderson, J.; Davies, A.; Steinberg, P. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Ocean Space*. London: Routledge, 376-87. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315111643-29.

Ayeb-Karlsson, S.; Smith, C.D.; Kniveton, D. (2018). "A Discursive Review of the Textual Use of 'Trapped' in Environmental Migration Studies: The Conceptual Birth and Troubled Teenage Years of Trapped Populations". *Ambio*, 47(5), 557-73. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-017-1007-6.

Battaglia, D.; Almeida, R.A. (2014). "'Otherwise Anthropology' Otherwise: The View from Technology". *Fieldsights*. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/otherwise-anthropology-otherwise-the-view-from-technology.

Baucom, I. (2020). *History 4° Celsius: Search for a Method in the Age of the Anthropocene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bettini, G. (2019). "And Yet It Moves! (Climate) Migration as a Symptom in the Anthropocene". *Mobilities*, 14(3), 336-50. https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2019.1612613.

Boas, I.; Farbotko, C.; Adams, H.; Sterly, H.; Bush, S.; van der Geest, K.; Wiegel, H.; Ashraf, H.; Baldwin, A.; Bettini, G.; Blondin, S.; de Bruijn, M.; Durand-Delacre, D.; Fröhlich, C.; Gioli, G.; Guaita, L.; Hut, E.; Jarawura, F. X.; Lamers, M.; Lietaer, S.; Nash, S. L.; Piguet, E.; Rothe, D.; Sakdapolrak, P.; Smith, L.; Tripathy Furlong, B.; Turhan, E.; Warner, J.; Zickgraf, C.; Black, R.; Hulme, M. (2019). "Climate Migration Myths". *Nature Climate Change*, 9(12), 901-3. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-019-0633-3.

Boas, I.; Wiegel, H.; Farbotko, C.; Warner, J.; Sheller, M. (2022). "Climate Mobilities: Migration, Im/Mobilities and Mobility Regimes in a Changing Climate". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(14), 3365-79. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2066264.

Bordner, A.S.; Ferguson, C.E.; Ortolano, L. (2020). "Colonial Dynamics Limit Climate Adaptation in Oceania: Perspectives from the Marshall Islands". *Global Environmental Change*, 61, 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2020.102054.

Buchanan, I. (2018). s.v. "Creoleness (créolité)". *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095647276.

Colebrook, C. (2011). "Earth Felt the Wound: The Affective Divide". *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, 8(1), 45-58. https://doi.org/10.51151/identities.v8i1.251.

Collins English Dictionary (s.d.). s.v. "chaos". https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/chaos.

D'Arcy, P. (2018). "Lessons for Humanity from the Ocean of Ancestors". Hessler, S. (ed.), *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceaninc Worldview Through Art and Science*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 117-26.

DeLoughrey, E.M. (2010). "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity". *PMLA*, 125(3), 703-12.

DeLoughrey, E.M. (2017). "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene". *Comparative Literature*, 69(1), 32-44.

DeLoughrey, E.M. (2019). *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Diagne, S.B. (2023). s.v. "Négritude". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2023 Edition)*. Edited by E.N. Zalta and U. Nodelman. Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/negritude/.

Diawara, M. (2015). "Édouard Glissant's Worldmentality: An Introduction to One World in Relation". *documenta 14*, 1. http://www.documenta14.de/en/south/34_edouard_glissant_s_worldmentality_an_introduction_to_one_world_in_relation.

Farbotko, C. (2010). "Wishful Sinking: Disappearing Islands, Climate Refugees and Cosmopolitan Experimentation". *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 51(1), 47-60. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8373.2010.001413.x.

Farbotko, C.; Dun, O.; Thornton, F.; McNamara, K.E.; McMichael, C. (2020). "Relocation Planning Must Address Voluntary Immobility". *Nature Climate Change*, 10(8), 702-4. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-020-0829-6.

Farbotko, C.; Lazrus, H. (2012). "The First Climate Refugees? Contesting Global Narratives of Climate Change in Tuvalu". *Global Environmental Change*, 22(2), 382-90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.11.014.

Fraser, N. (2018). "Roepke Lecture in Economic Geography – From Exploitation to Expropriation: Historic Geographies of Racialized Capitalism". *Economic Geography*, 94(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/00130095.2017.1398045.

Freestone, D.; Schofield, C. (2016). "Current Legal Developments: Republic of the Marshall Islands". *The International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law*, 31(4), 732-58. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718085-12341413.

Gandorfer, D.; Ayub, Z. (2021). "Introduction: Matterphorical". *Theory & Event*, 24(1), 2-13. https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2021.0001.

Gilroy, P. (2014). "Suffering and Infrahumanity" [Lecture delivered at Yale University]. *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. https://tannerlectures.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/105/2024/06/Gilroy-manuscript-PDF.pdf.

Gilroy, P. (2018). "'Where Every Breeze Speaks of Courage and Liberty': Offshore Humanism and Marine Xenology, or, Racism and the Problem of Critique at Sea Level". *Antipode*, 50(1), 3-22. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12333.

Glissant, É. (1997). *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by B. Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Gómez-Barris, M. (2018). "Colonialism at the Sea Edge of Extinction". Shaw, C.; Etienne, T. (eds), *The Work of Wind: Land*. Vol. 1, *The Work of Wind*. Berlin: K. Verlag, 233-42.

Gómez-Barris, M. (2019). "Life Otherwise at the Sea's Edge". *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, 13, 27-47.

Gray, S. (2023). *In the Shadow of the Seawall: Coastal Injustice and the Dilemma of Placekeeping*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Hanlon, D. (2017). "Losing Oceania to the Pacific and the World". *The Contemporary Pacific*, 29(2), 286-318. https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2017.0032.

Haraway, D. (1988). "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective". *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-99. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066.

von Hardenberg, W.G. (2021). "Making a Stable Sea: The Littorals of Eighteenth-Century Europe and the Origins of a Spatial Concept". *Isis*, 112(1), 130-40. https://doi.org/10.1086/713563.

Hau'ofa, E. (1994). "Our Sea of Islands". *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6(1), 148-61.

Heidegger, M. [1927] (2010). *Being and Time*. Edited by D.J. Schmidt. Translated by J. Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Helmreich, S. (2022). "Waves: The Measure of All Waves". Peters, K.; Anderson, J.; Davies, A.; Steinberg, P. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Ocean Space*. London: Routledge, 376-87. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315111643–35.

Helmreich, S. (2023). *A Book of Waves*. Durham: Duke University Press. The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures.

Herzog, L.A.; Sohn, C. (2019). "The Co-Mingling of Bordering Dynamics in the San Diego–Tijuana Cross-Border Metropolis". *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 7(2), 177-99. https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2017.1323003.

Hess, J.; Nero, K.L.; Burton, M.L. (2001). "Creating Options: Forming a Marshallese Community in Orange County, California". *The Contemporary Pacific*, 13(1), 89-121. https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2001.0012.

Hessler, S. (ed.) (2018). *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceanic Worldview Through Art and Science*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Hickel, J.; Dorninger, C.; Wieland, H.; Suwandi, I. (2022). "Imperialist Appropriation in the World Economy: Drain from the Global South Through Unequal Exchange, 1990-2015". *Global Environmental Change*, 73, 102467. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2022.102467.

Hinske, N.; Engfer, H.-J.; Redaktion; Janssen, P.; Scherner, M. (s.d.). s.v. "Horizont". *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie online*. Herausgegeben von J. Ritter, K. Gründer und G. Gabriel. Basel: Schwabe Verlag. https://doi.org/10.24894/HWPh.5175.

Horn, E. (2018). "Air as Medium". *Grey Room*, 73, 6-25. https://doi.org/10.1162/grey_a_00254.

Houghton, K.J.; Vafeidis, A.T.; Neumann, B.; Proelss, A. (2010). "Maritime Boundaries in a Rising Sea". *Nature Geoscience*, 3(12), 813-16. https://doi.org/10.1038/ngeo1029.

Husserl, E. [1936] (1970). *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Translated by D. Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Jetñil-Kijiner, K.; Niviâna, A. (s.d.). *Rise: From One Island to Another. 350*. https://350.org/rise-from-one-island-to-another/.

Jue, M. (2020). "Inscription: Vampire Squid Media". *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*. Durham: Duke University Press, 71-111. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478007548.

Levinas, E. [1961] (1969). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by A. Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Lewis, S.L.; Maslin, M.A. (2015). "Defining the Anthropocene". *Nature*, 519(7542), 171-80. https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14258.

Macauley, D. (2010). *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Elemental Ideas*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Mbembe, A. (2003). "Necropolitics". Translated by L. Meintjes. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11-40.

Neimanis, A. (2017). *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. Environmental Cultures.

Neimanis, A.; Åsberg, C.; Hedrén, J. (2015). "Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene". *Ethics and the Environment*, 20(1), 67-97. https://doi.org/10.2979/ethicsenviro.20.1.67.

Oppenheimer, M.; Glavovic, B. C.; Hinkel, J.; van de Wal, R.; Magnan, A. K.; Abd-Elgawad, A.; Cai, R.; Cifuentes-Jara, M.; DeConto, R. M.; Ghosh, T.; Hay, J.; Isla, F.; Marzeion, B.; Meyssignac, B.; Senesvari, Z. (2019). "Sea Level Rise and Implications

for Low-Lying Islands, Coasts and Communities". Pörtner, H.-O., Roberts, D. C., Masson-Delmotte, V., Zhai, P., Tignor, M., Poloczanska, E., Mintenbeck, K., Alegría, A., Nicolai, M., Okem, A., Petzold, J., Rama, B., Weyer, N. M. (eds),), *IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 321-445. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157964.006.

PIFS – Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (2017). "Forty-Eighth Pacific Islands Forum". *Pacific Islands Forum*. https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/2017-Forum%20Communique_-Apia%2C%20Samoa_5-8%20Sept.pdf.

PIFS – Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (2022). *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. Suva: PIFS. https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022-1.pdf.

Palmesino, J.; Rönnskog, A.-S. (2021). "When Above". Zyman, D. (ed.), *Oceans Rising*. London: Sternberg Press, 10-18.

Petryna, A. (2022). *Horizon Work: At the Edges of Knowledge in an Age of Runaway Climate Change*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Povinelli, E.A. (2011). "Routes/Worlds". *e-flux Journal*, 27. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/27/67991/routes-worlds/.

Povinelli, E.A. (2021). *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Povinelli, E.A.; Gandorfer, D.; Ayub, Z. (2021). "Mattering-Forth: Thinking-With Karrabing". *Theory & Event*, 24(1), 294-323.

Quijano, A. (2007). "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality". *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 168-78. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353.

Rodney, W. (1981). *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Revised edition. Washington: Howard University Press.

Sammler, K.G. (2020). "The Rising Politics of Sea Level: Demarcating Territory in a Vertically Relative World". *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 8(5), 604-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2019.1632219.

Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Stoler, A.L. (2016). *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Sultana, F. (2022). "The Unbearable Heaviness of Climate Coloniality". *Political Geography*, 99, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102638.

Territorial Agency (2021). "Oceans in Transformation". Zyman, D. (ed.), *Oceans Rising*. London: Sternberg Press, 46-61.

Walia, H. (2021). "Fortress Europe". *Border & Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 105-30.

Wendt, A. (1976). "Towards a New Oceania". *Mana Review*, 1(1), 49-60.

Wing, B. (1997). "Translator's Introduction". Glissant, É., *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by B. Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, xi-xx.

Yusoff, K. (2018). *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2458652&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Zickgraf, C. (2018). "Immobility". McLeman R.A.; Gemenne, F. (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Displacement and Migration*. London: Routledge. Routledge International Handbooks., 71-84.

Zyman, D. (ed.) (2021a). *Oceans Rising*. London: Sternberg Press.

Zyman, D. (2021b). "Unlearning the Anthropocene Oceans". Zyman, D. (ed.), *Oceans Rising*. London: Sternberg Press, 32-8.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
Vol. 61 – Supplement – November 2025

From Metaphors to Figurations: Experiencing 'Margin', 'Centre' and 'Resistance' in the Ethnographic Field and Beyond

Elsa Gios
Università degli Studi di Napoli «L'Orientale», Italia

Nabila Tavolieri
Università degli Studi di Napoli «L'Orientale», Italia

Abstract This paper examines 'margin', 'centre', and 'resistance' as metaphors that move beyond abstraction, becoming historical and political figurations that interrogate ethnographic methodologies. Through the analysis of their application in two different research contexts – antiracism in Switzerland and popular education in Bogotá – it explores the interplay between their contextual articulation and creative writing. Inspired by feminist writing, the paper advocates for an approach that bridges different levels of understanding through 'ConversA(c)tion', embracing multiple layers of meaning.

Keywords Metaphors. Figurations. Ethnography. Decolonization. Creative writing. Feminist writing.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Engaging with the Margin: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives. – 3 Interrogating Ethnography: Navigating Alternative Methodologies from the Margin, Bogotá, Colombia. – 4 Interrogating In-Betweenness: Defining Spaces of Margin from the Centre, Geneva – Switzerland. – 5 'ConversA(c)tion': From 'World-Sensing' to 'World-Making'.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-02-13
Accepted 2025-06-06
Published 2025-11-14

Check for updates

Open access

Citation Gios, E.; Tavolieri, N. (2025). "From Metaphors to Figurations: Experiencing 'Margin', 'Centre' and 'Resistance' in the Ethnographic Field and Beyond". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 61, Supplement, November, 121-164.

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2025/03/005

1 Introduction

> To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. (hooks 1984, 8)

This is how the renowned feminist thinker and writer bell hooks defines the concept of margin, a notion that holds particular significance for the discussion in this paper. Margin and resistance are key concepts in postcolonial theory. Yet, these terms are often employed in abstract or overly mainstream ways, which can dilute their meaning and reduce their capacity to illuminate the complexities of contemporary societies and dynamics.

Bell hooks' understanding of the margin, and the forms of resistance it enables, has profoundly shaped our theoretical perspective. Her insights remain central not only to academic discourse but also to broader reflections outside of institutional settings. As PhD researchers in cultural anthropology and sociology of cultural processes, we bring distinct perspectives to the study of specific contexts and historical moments. In doing so, we feel compelled to engage with her theoretical tools while critically examining how these ideas manifest in concrete and material terms.

Coming from two disciplines historically implicated in the colonial project, we are continually driven to question ourselves, our practices, and the ways we approach both theory and fieldwork. Our starting point has therefore been to acknowledge the inherent tensions within our work and our thinking as we navigate multiple shifts: from centre to margin, from academia to fieldwork, from institutional to non-institutional spaces, from the heart of Europe to the Global South, and from positions of privilege to experiences of oppression. These tensions resonate with Sandro Mezzadra's definition of postcolonial times, that is a time

> in which colonial experience appears, simultaneously, to be consigned to the past and, precisely due to the modalities with which its 'overcoming' comes about, to be installed at the centre of contemporary social experience – with the entire burden of domination, but also the capacity for insubordination, that distinguishes this experience. (Mezzadra, Rahola 2006)

The postcolonial time described by Mezzadra encapsulates both the system of domination –and the violence inherited from colonialism that continues to shape contemporary structures –and the persistent forms of insubordination, opposition, and resistance to it. These forms of resistance, though often marginalised or rendered invisible, remain vital to understand and contest the enduring legacies of colonialism.

By examining two distinct research contexts within postcolonial times – Switzerland and Colombia – we aim to interrogate the concepts of 'margin', 'centre', and 'resistance'. This exploration will ultimately lead us to reflect on methodological considerations and the ways in which our academic practices are shaped by these contexts. Although we come from different areas of human and social sciences, we share a common methodological approach – ethnography – and draw from a convergent theoretical framework, including Black feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and decolonial theory.

In this paper, we illustrate how the concepts mentioned above emerged in our respective fieldworks, as well as how our lived and shared experiences of ethnography have enabled us to conceptualise new horizons of meaning and expression. The practice of 'writing otherwise'[1] led us to interrogate the boundaries of academic writing but also to include voices, perspectives and spaces that often remain silent. As indicated by Braidotti:

> writing enacts the micro-political, self-reflexive analyses of the power at work in its own structures and practices. By exposing the compulsive and rather despotic inclinations of language, the writer thus forces upon the readers a critical reflection into the workings of power itself. This critique includes the institutions that uphold and sustain that power, notably the university structure of departments, institutes, faculties and the whole hierarchical disciplinary machinery that spreads to specialised journals, citation indexes and careers management. (Braidotti 2014, 165)

In order to critically examine the approaches and practices that have shaped our fieldwork over the past years, we will begin by presenting the theoretical framework that has guided our inquiry. To provide tangible examples, we will then present key aspects of our fieldwork, aiming to deepen the understanding of our questions and clarify our intellectual journey.

Specifically, we will illustrate how the concept of 'margin', together with the related notions of 'resistance' and 'centre,' has shaped our two distinct research projects: the first investigates the intersection of communitarian movements and popular education in Bogotá, Colombia, while the second examines antiracism in Switzerland

1 Decolonial thought sees 'otherwise' as an active alternative to modernity, coloniality, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy, creating new ways of being and knowing that resist colonial power (Mignolo, Walsh 2018). In *Writing Otherwise*, 'otherwise' challenges traditional academic writing by embracing experimental, open, and interdisciplinary forms that reject conventional authorial positions (Stacey, Wolff 2013). Across both perspectives, 'otherwise' represents resistance, transformation, and the pursuit of new possibilities beyond dominant structures.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

and the creation of specific spaces of resistance. By addressing the tensions and complexities of our field sites while acknowledging the inherent coloniality of our work, we aim to demonstrate how ethnography and creative writing, as shared methodologies, can serve as tools for both resistance and reimagination. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of the intricate relationship between theoretical frameworks, their application in day-to-day fieldwork, and their poetic and linguistic articulation on the page.

Indeed, we consider our approach to knowledge production – particularly through the integration of creative writing into ethnographic narrative – not simply as a stylistic choice, but as a collaborative and transformative practice. Over the past years, we have developed a dialogic method and shared space that emerged from the need to carve out a zone of potentiality – at the margins of academia – where we could reimagine our ethnographic experiences and elaborate our own modes of writing. This is not only a methodological gesture but an epistemological stance: an approach to knowledge as relational, situated, and processual. 'ConversA(c)tion' – the name we gave to this evolving practice – is both a method and a form of resistance, one that opens new pathways for understanding experience beyond dominant frameworks. It seeks to unsettle conventional research practices and affirm writing as a practice of world-making. This shared space has both shaped and been shaped by the way we render fieldwork on the page, giving us the opportunity to cultivate new ways of understanding experience.

2 Engaging with the Margin: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives

In their essay "Decolonization is not a Metaphor", Tuck and Yang begin by emphasizing that their reflection is meant "to remind readers what is unsettling about decolonization" (2012, 3). In the last decade, particularly following the Black Lives Matter movement in the Western world, the term 'decolonization' has gained prominence in mainstream discourse, but its widespread use has also revealed certain limitations. Tuck and Yang argue that by turning decolonization into a metaphor, settlers create opportunities for evasive "moves to innocence" (2012, 9) – strategies that deflect responsibility, ease guilt, and obscure ongoing colonial structures, all while safeguarding settler futurity. Their critique, which focuses on contexts marked by settler colonialism, such as in Australia or the United States, proves valuable for understanding the specific mechanisms that underpin public and institutional discourses on decolonization and their inherent limitations.

In recent years, particularly in the Western world, decolonial theory has gained significant traction in public debates, highlighting the intrinsic links between racism, colonialism and other forms of domination, and emphasizing the need to examine how they have been structurally embedded in the development of European modernity and its central matrix: capitalism. Understanding the interconnectedness of various forms of domination – including sexism, among others – is therefore essential.

Decolonial theory in Europe, while informed by the foundational work of Latin American thinkers, has at times been co-opted to reproduce superficial gestures that avoid grappling with the deeper implications of decolonial thought. In academia, efforts to expose the role of colonialism in shaping disciplines that perpetuated white and European superiority have been a critical step forward. As Mellino observes, in the European context, postcolonialism, before its overtaking by the decolonial narrative, has been a vital framework for rethinking

> western representations of the rest of the world and their 'ethnographic authority' in articulating global and imperial rule and domination. (Mellino 2012, 10)

According to Mellino (2012), postcolonial theory found concrete expression in struggles that revealed the centrality of capitalism and its tangible impact on global inequalities and hierarchies. This points to a condition where coloniality – understood through Aníbal Quijano's framework as the persistence of power dynamics and hierarchies inherited from colonialism – and resistance to it coexist in a state of tension. In his analysis of postmodernist thinking, the author urges for a new approach to cultural studies that refuses apolitical and dematerialised visions of cultural processes, thus advocating for a deeper engagement with processes of cultural dislocation. In other words, this approach calls for the recognition of how our understanding is overdetermined by what happens outside the walls of universities and beyond the institutional boundaries of knowledge. This acknowledgment challenges the insularity of academic discourse and emphasises the importance of engaging with the broader sociopolitical realities shaping decolonial thought.

Many Black, postcolonial, and feminist critics have highlighted and critiqued the paradoxes embedded within these processes. They have drawn attention to the often –problematic division of intellectual labour that has emerged, where thinkers situated in the centres of past or present empires take the lead in deconstructing the very power structures that uphold these centres. This dynamic not only risks perpetuating asymmetries in the production of knowledge

but also transforms formerly marginalised identities into objects of discursive consumption, further reinforcing the dominance of those at the centre. In fact, it is there that metaphorization of decolonization becomes a both theoretical and concrete problem. As Tuck and Yang assert:

> When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it re-centres whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonise (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym. (Tuck, Yang 2012, 3)

This critique underscores the risks of reducing decolonization to a metaphor or abstract concept, which ultimately undermines its transformative potential. Instead, decolonization must remain grounded in material and epistemic practices that dismantle colonial structures, refusing to be co-opted or diluted by existing frameworks that merely reproduce the status quo. In this sense, and considering Tuck and Yang reflection on decolonization, concepts such as 'margin', 'centre', and 'resistance' – can operate as metaphors and contemporarily when applied to specific analytical contexts, transcend mere abstraction. Metaphors are indeed intended here as hermeneutic, historical, and political "figurations", functioning as

> a politically updated cognitive map that reads the present through the lens of individual radical situation. (Braidotti 1998, 51)

Authors such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde and Rosi Braidotti have been essential in theorizing language and the articulation of spaces of openness that enable expressions outside dominant structures. These spaces, which – considering how racism, sexism, and colonialism have historically shaped urban landscapes – are often geographically located in the peripheries, not only challenge the dominance of hegemonic power but also foster new forms of solidarity and alliances, among women and beyond, as Lorde poignantly articulates, revealing how the

> Interdependency between women is the only way to the freedom which allows the 'I' to 'be', not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. (Lorde 1984, 99)

Their approach to writing – particularly feminist writing and thinking – has led us to discover transformative forms of writing, such as poetry, memoir, and other creative modes that resist linearity and closure. These forms, through a continuous process of writing, sharing, and collective re-writing, invite a dual movement of 'dislocation' and 'location' – as intended by Hall (Hall quoted in Mellino 2012, 58-9). Dislocation here can be understood as the recognition of individual fragmentation, an acknowledgment of the ways in which identity is fractured by systems of oppression, histories, and personal struggles. Conversely, location refers to the process of integration: the weaving together of the multiplicity that constitutes the self and its relations, grounding it within an informed context and time.

Through this dynamic interplay, these feminist writers have challenged traditional academic and literary modes of expression, reimagining writing as a radical act of self-creation and collective empowerment. Writing, in their vision, transcends its function as a mere tool for articulation; it becomes a transformative process of becoming – bridging the personal and the political, the individual and the communal. This approach underscores the subversive potential of language, framing it as a site of resistance and renewal that opens pathways to solidarity and transformative change. Their perspective also resonates with the concept of the 'distribution of the sensible', coined by French philosopher Jacques Rancière for whom:

> Political statements and literary locutions produce effects in reality. They define models of speech or action but also regimes of sensible intensity. They draft maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making. They define variations of sensible intensities, perceptions, and the abilities of bodies. (Rancière 2004, 39)

This concept, deeply tied to politics and aesthetics, proves central to ethnographic writing: words do not merely describe reality; they actively shape it. In this sense, we have embraced micro-narratives to prioritise individual experiences over grand totalities, constructing alternative frameworks that challenge dominant structures. This approach calls for an ethnographic aesthetic that moves beyond conventional representations, focusing on spaces and subjectivities that embody decolonial resistance. Rather than treating these

spaces as objects of external interpretation, we view them as sites of meaning-making, using cognitive maps to approach social realities from the bottom up. This perspective shapes our ethnographic practice: the choice of writing form becomes a political act that disrupts established frameworks, values experience in new ways, and encourages reflexivity. Through these processes, we navigate diverse expressions of the margin, which have become central to our reflexive inquiry.

The concept of the margin has been explored by various scholars, artists, and activists as a space inherently tied to language and resistance, a way to assert their positionality against the centre. As hooks reminds us, marginality is not an imaginary construct but rather "it comes from lived experience" (1989, 20).

One of the most powerful examples is Anzaldúa. In 1987, the Chicana writer and political activist, reflecting on her experience as a 'border woman', a *mestiza* from the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border, defined the borderland, *la frontera*, as a space that is

> physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (Alzandúa 1987)

When one reaches the margins and chooses to inhabit them, new forms of thought, relationships, writing, and language emerge – forms of rebellion and disobedience that no longer conform to the categorizations imposed by the West, which has established itself as the geopolitical, economic, and epistemological centre. Inhabiting the border means rejecting the colonial label of 'dangerous aliens' historically imposed on those at the margins. Instead, it becomes a space to build alliances and resistances, a place to learn from, engage with, and have dialogue with those who occupy it. This dialogue is shaped by the diverse polyphony of the borderland, where language is never singular; people speak "*lenguaje que corresponde a un modo de vivir*" – poetry, meticulous historical reconstruction, personal and communal memories, indigenous languages, storytelling, and songs (Alzandúa 1987, 55-6). From this arises a new consciousness: la *conciencia mestiza*, a consciousness of the borderlands, where concepts and ideas cannot be confined within rigid boundaries:

> *La mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterised by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (Alzandúa 1987, 79)

La frontera is the geographical space that hosts the epistemological 'third space' theorised by Mignolo, from which emerges 'border thinking-sensing-doing', or the practice of 'epistemic disobedience' (2011). The coloniality of power manifests even in seemingly neutral domains, such as epistemology. This means that the rules and structures of dominant knowledge continue to perpetuate colonial hierarchies, maintaining the epistemic divide between what is considered 'legitimate' knowledge and what is relegated to the margins. As Mignolo states

> If you 'study' colonialism or the subaltern but you maintain the rules of the social sciences and humanities game, you maintain the coloniality of power that reproduces the epistemic colonial difference. (Mignolo 1999, 241)

Building on Alzandúa's experiences and theorization as 'border woman', hooks conceptualises the margin as a space of radical openness, drawing from her own lived experiences and emphasizing the political legacies embedded in that space. By adopting a 'politics of location' as a methodological approach, the margin transforms into a dynamic site of renewed and alternative meanings. Far from being a static or peripheral space, the margin is a vantage point from which to critically interrogate the centre. However, it is also a challenging space to inhabit – demanding not only intellectual engagement but also a willingness to confront discomfort, complexity, and vulnerability. The margin repeatedly asserts the importance of positionality, of the place from which one speaks and exposes oneself – as a political choice.

This raises profound questions: How can we, coming from positions of privilege, enter the margin without replicating the dynamics of the centre? How do we understand radical openness when viewed from a position of power? What does it mean to act ethically and responsibly within the politics of location as outsiders to the margin? And, crucially, how do we write about it? In "Choosing the Margin", hooks directly addresses these challenges, asking:

> Within complex and ever-shifting realms of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of the colonizing mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorizing, of making culture towards that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible? (hooks 1989, 15)

Hooks argues that the margin, as a space of radical openness, is filled with possibilities. Crucially, positionality is not a static choice

but a fluid and evolving political act. Standing in resistance with the oppressed requires an ongoing commitment to movement – a willingness to rethink, unlearn, and reimagine. She further urges:

> I'm urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions. I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom. (hooks 1994, 12)

But what does it mean to transgress? How do we put transgression into practice? What are the boundaries we are called to move against and beyond? And how do we cultivate the capacity for such movement?

The margin itself, hooks argues, is a space of transgression, a space that exists in constant motion and relation with others. To position oneself within the margin is to embrace this movement, to remain open to "envisioning new, alternative, oppositional aesthetic acts" (hooks 1989, 15). It is a practice of learning, unlearning, and co-creating a practice that insists on the possibility of change, both personal and collective.

Thus, engaging with the margin as a space of radical openness challenges us to confront our own positionalities and privileges. It invites us to see the act of writing not merely as a mode of documentation, but as a site of resistance and renewal – a dynamic interplay between self and other, centre and periphery. Embracing this perspective allows us to imagine and enact forms of scholarship that disrupt hierarchies, cultivate solidarities, and foster transformative possibilities.

It is from this commitment that our own writing practice has emerged. Grounded in our ethnographic experiences, we have sought to articulate a mode of writing capable of enacting small but significative 'acts of opposition' – alternatives to traditional academic and ethnographic forms. While our respective field sites and methodologies were distinct, they were held together by a shared decolonial framework and a common desire to write from – and with – the margin. Writing became a methodology in itself: both a personal practice through fieldnotes and a collective, experimental process shaped within the space we created through 'ConversA(c)tion'. It offered a way to aesthetically represent the lived experience of marginality, along with its inherent transformative and political potential.

This process does not claim to offer a revolutionary discovery but instead is nourished by the paths opened by other scholars, activists, and writers. For us, writing becomes the material form of thought – the embodied act of thinking together through shared

texts. It is both a method and a practice: an aesthetic expression of the process of making sense of reality, deeply attuned to the bodily and affective dimensions that shape it. As Quintana reminds us,

> when speaking of affects, what is asserted is the exteriority and the conflictual nature of emotional forces, the social relations from which they stem, their assemblages and uncoded excesses. (Quintana 2023,73)

Inspired by the performative power of writing and informed by a dialogic practice of quoting and exchanging ethnographic fragments, our methodology has taken form from the very positionalities we inhabited in the field – positionalities constantly unsettled by the affective entanglements we experienced. This ongoing dialogue, often unfolding outside institutional spaces, led us to revisit those moments which, as the Colombian philosopher describes, are shaped by:

> encounters traversed by sensorial experiences in which tones, textures, smells, atmospheres, unforeseen intimacies, voices rooted in territories – and at the same time able to detach from previously formed images of these territories – emerge. Complicities. But also tensions, silences, discomforts. Elements that are often not made visible in writing but that affect, from beginning to end, the way I compose an idea, an argument. (Quintana 2023, 36)

Through this lens, our practice became about creating resonances – between our distinct yet connected experiences – and assembling, from our shared fieldnotes, archival fragments, daily encounters, and layered language registers, a different kind of space: the page. This reassembly is, for us, a political and subversive gesture – a way of writing with the margin, and of rendering resistance legible on its own terms.

In the following sections, we will delve into our respective ethnographic experiences, weaving in excerpts from the fieldnotes we have previously shared in 'ConversA(c)tion'. These fragments will open up intertextual and interpersonal reflections, rooted in the affective textures and emotional intensities that have shaped our situated and dialogical understanding of the 'margin' – and the diverse forms that resistance may take within it. The aim is not to redefine the notion of the margin, but rather to understand how the margin can be a space where it is possible to think and write differently, and how ethnographic research should detach itself from academic impositions and remain open to the destabilizations that come from truly living theory – not just metaphorically.

3 Interrogating Ethnography: Navigating Alternative Methodologies from the Margin, Bogotá, Colombia

In my research, I focused on Popular Education and pedagogical decolonization. I have been collaborating with various educational community-based processes in the peripheries of Bogotá, Colombia. The aim was to explore how these grassroots alternatives to the traditional education system, in conjunction with community neighbourhood movements and cultural politics, can offer critical tools and practices to challenge Eurocentric educational discourses.

The methodology adopted was inspired by the participatory action research (PAR) approach as theorised by Orlando Fals Borda, in constant dialogue with the pedagogies of Popular Education. Participatory action research involves active engagement in the territory and a political militancy that makes the researcher an integral part of the social processes they observe and engage with. It fosters the collective production of knowledge based on the experiences of those who inhabit the territories, combined with an educational action, and a disruption of the dichotomous relationships between the researcher and the research object. In my case, such involvement also required a critical reflection on the tensions arising from my external positioning in relation to the social transformation this methodology seeks to promote.

This involvement also meant experiencing these territories not only as sites of research but as privileged epistemological and political spaces – taking seriously the epistemic power of local stories, situated knowledge, and the everyday practices that emerge within them. In this sense, the research positions itself in an intermediate and dialogical space between the academic knowledge that guides the investigation, and the extra-academic experience lived in the field. It thus reflects a methodology inspired by Popular Education, which seeks to maintain a critical and transformative connection between theory and praxis.

We can therefore speak of a reflective, educational, and *conscientizing* ethnography, or of a process of participatory learning. My field experience became a true path of radical (trans)formation. Popular Education, initially considered an object of study, gradually also became a critical tool for ongoing reflection and conscientization, allowing me to critically examine my own actions, to reconsider my interpretative categories, and to question the power dynamics that shape both the society I was observing and my own positioning as a Western researcher.

Throughout my entire ethnographic research journey, the margin was essential. It manifested as a geographical and physical space, an epistemological lens, and a breeding ground for alternative educational practices, community-based movements, and political

relations. In fact, it is where oppression and stigmatization come into sharp focus, yet it also incarnates a space of expression – a vibrant, creative community – based realm where new concepts and practices can be explored and experienced. Eventually, with its interconnected meanings, it became the place where I was compelled to rethink my entire investigation. It offered me the tools and perspectives to deconstruct and reframe the ethnographic experience in new and improvisational ways, based on coalition, conspiring, friendship, and love.

Addressing the margins as specific geographical locations, in this case, those areas on the outskirts of Bogotá, it became evident that stigmatization, violence, and the pathologization of their inhabitants are defining characteristics of these spaces. The city is designed to perpetuate divisions imposed by colonial and neoliberal superstructures; migrants, refugees, displaced people, informal recyclers with large recycling bags for sorting, Black communities, and other marginalised groups are forced to live far away from the centre – on the banks of the Bogotá River, in neighbourhoods that mark the edge of the city, at the foot of the Eastern Hills. As Frantz Fanon describes in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), the colonised city is not merely an ordered space but reflects the forces, structures, and boundaries of the colonial world. This space is not organised equitably; rather, it is 'compartmentalised', and it operates on principles of mutual exclusion. The term suggests a structural segregation that stems from colonial urbanization processes, where the expansion of the city pushes the 'wretched' to the geographical margins, thus exposing racialization, ethnophobia, and aporophobia – fear and repulsion toward the poor.

As mentioned, the margin is not merely a site of exclusion but a space of potentiality. In engaging with this space, I discovered fertile ground where the decolonization of educational practices takes shape through its entanglement with political movements, grassroots cultural politics, artistic expressions, and everyday life. Education in the margin is not a domesticated practice but one of transformation and liberation – an ongoing, collective process in which the entire community simultaneously becomes both student and educator. Rooted in the lived experiences of marginalised individuals navigating oppressive systems, these practices challenge dominant narratives and offer a perspective grounded in daily resistance. The margin thus emerges as a space of defiance, where new possibilities for liberation and justice are not only imagined but actively forged.

One of the projects I have been involved with is a popular eco-political school. This initiative embodies an eco-pedagogical commitment with a strong political dimension, deeply rooted in the unique context of the Villa Cindy neighbourhood, situated along the banks of the Bogotá River. The school focuses on educating children

about the structural injustices affecting marginalised communities in Bogotá. During an interview, one of the founders of the school shared that the need to establish a popular school in that area stemmed precisely from a desire to reflect on the concept of 'trash'. She said: "The aim was to think, reflect, criticise the *basura* (trash). As an object, as an element that shapes society. So, when I attended the first *olla comunitaria*, I noticed the entire area was full of recyclers. I thought, 'This is a great place to start a process!'".

Her words immediately made me reflect on how, in the margins, the dominant system imposes what Segato (2018) calls 'pedagogies of cruelty', practices that condition individuals to reduce living beings and their vitality to mere objects, commodified within a modernity project centred on materialism, individualism, and consumption. 'Trash' represents what is discarded by society; everything relegated to the margins – discarded, unseen, unheard. Through this metaphor, we are invited to reflect on how society produces and manages 'waste', both in the physical and social sense of exclusion.

Yet, from this exclusion and rejection, anti-systemic practices can emerge. In fact, educators reclaim what is seen as 'waste' and create an educational alternative practice around it. Against the pedagogies of cruelty that normalise violence against subaltern bodies and territories, community movements organise themselves around what is considered 'nothing' by coloniality. Creating this kind of educational praxis is deeply tied to the formation of revolutionary subjectivities, shaped by the shared experience of living in the margins. Drawing inspiration from hooks' assertion that the margin is both a space of oppression and resistance, the research redefined the term 'margin', moving beyond its traditional association with exclusion and embracing it as a powerful act of reclamation for those who inhabit it.[2]

2 All ethnographic notes that follow in this chapter are original excerpts drawn from field diaries and fragments of texts exchanged by the two researchers during their collaborative conversations. Originally written in Spanish, Italian, or French, these texts were translated and reworked through a shared process of dialogue and co-writing. The notes take multiple forms in the chapter: some run along the right margin, recalling the edges of a notebook, while others – particularly those in poetic form – flow across the centre of the page in wave-like patterns. Their creative and, at times, poetic presentation reflects a conscious choice to move beyond conventional academic writing.

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, Supplement, November 2025, 121-164 | e-ISSN 2385-3042

Ethnographic note 1: conversations in my head with Alzandúa

"Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them". (Alzandúa 1987, 3)

I know that borders are imaginary places, but as I climb that steep hill, the words of the taxi driver echo in my head. "Be careful, they'll rob you here, you're *gringa*". I glance at my reflection in a store window without drawing too much attention. I'm very *gringa*, there's not much I can do to hide my appearance. At first, the educators and children will constantly remind me of it. Soon after, there's no distinction anymore, no boundary marking the limits of safety. The territory and the community become home.

"The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the *mulato*, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'". (1987, 3)

After three hours of public transport, I arrive in the neighbourhood, exhausted. The landscape is both beautiful and unsettling. There's a bright green lagoon from which rises a neighbourhood made of bare brick. Trash everywhere. Men and women unloading huge bags of recyclable material from large trucks. The smell from the sewage system is unbearable. The dust kicked up by the trucks, cars, and motorcycles speeding down the unpaved streets makes the air unbreathable. Dogs and sheep steal food from the garbage. "I'm looking for the white church, I think it is near the Oasis neighbourhood. I came last week, but I can't find the way". The recycler looks at me, puzzled by my presence, and calls his wife, "Come, *mami*, it's not this way, I'll show you".

"Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot". (1987, 3)

Enter, I dare to suggest – especially in a time when spaces of care are scarce, where dreaming feels fragile, and imagining true alternatives to the world we have inherited grows ever more elusive.

Enter, I have been accepted, nourished with food, dried after heavy downpours, teased, coloured, hit by balls, gently politicised, taught historical notions, educated, and loved.

When I had to leave, at the end of my ethnographic period, I felt vulnerable. One of the educators gave me a book about Popular Education. I cried all my tears.

The geographical margin thus becomes a pedagogical laboratory, a new epistemological lens, and a creative space for the sociologist herself, who must navigate a dense web of re-significations, challenging prior expectations, concepts, and methodologies. I consider the margin as a creative space for the ethnographer herself, where the resistances and oppressions of its inhabitants enable the emergence of new languages, forms of writing, and forms of investigation. It becomes, within ethnographic research, a space of possibility where collective creation fosters the collective decolonization of ethnographic sensibilities and invites the ethnographer to move beyond academia.

The same ethnographic methodology got out of my hands and daily improvisation played a crucial role. The fieldwork extended beyond the boundaries of educational projects, encompassing all the experiences that life in the margin offered me, while seeking a transformative practice that merges research with political commitment – *en busca de un método*/looking for a method, as Colombian sociologist Fals Borda described it (2015). Therefore, my role as an ethnographer was constantly redefined through relationships with those who inhabit these spaces daily. The communities and educators I encountered fostered both political and personal growth; on this path, children I worked with played a key role in my transformation from ethnographer to educator.

Once again, I draw on Lugones' insights, understanding playfulness as a way of knowing, being known, and learning through diversity – a means, in the words of the Argentine philosopher, to 'travel worlds'. In the field, play became a vital bridge to connection, offering a unique entry point into communities and their dynamics. It was far easier to integrate into spaces where daily engagement unfolded through games, sports, hands-on workshops, and caregiving practices. Play also allowed me to relinquish control. With its ability to dismantle imposed structures, play reshapes meanings, emotions, and interactions, prevented me from being confined to fixed roles or a sense of detachment. It led me to reconsider the very nature of research, dissolving the artificial boundaries between academic objectivity, personal experience, political activism, and practices of care:

> Playfulness, at its core, embraces a willingness to be a fool – a mindset that involves letting go of concerns about competence, rejecting self-importance, questioning established norms, and finding wisdom and joy in ambiguity and contradiction. A playful attitude is, therefore, defined by openness: openness to surprise, to embracing foolishness, to reshaping oneself, and to reimagining the worlds we inhabit through play. (Lugones 1987, 17)

Ethnographic note 2: Confusion 1

I don't know what I'm doing anymore. For the past few months, every Friday I've spent two hours watching children's movies. I've taken salsa lessons. I've also gotten punched in the face and insulted by a 6-year-old. Everything's fine. Every Thursday, I help a child with his homework, and I still can't make him understand why he should write on the lines and not on the edges of the page. The other day, they nearly destroyed the library after I let them colour with their hands to express their emotions. One of them poured an entire jar of dirty water over the other's head. When I went to the bathroom to dry him off, two siblings had painted all the tiles with black paint. I took part in a workshop to make podcasts. Tomorrow, I'll make pizza for 30 children.

Everything is out of control, but at the same time, it feels like I've found the best way to be, to exist, to help, to do research.

Ethnographic note 3: Playfulness

The friendship with the educators and the daily care of the children are making ethnography a joyful experience. Children have the ability to remove masks; you arrive in the field as a stranger, and in less than 10 minutes, you're rolling in the grass or answering a barrage of questions after which there's little left to say about yourself. They reveal you before you can construct a different version of yourself. Can an ethnographer pretend to be a rabbit? Does an ethnographer know how to draw a dolphin? Should I remind everyone that I'm there to do research? Play is part of my field, it lets me enter imagined and unimagined realities, it allows me to be known for who I am, freeing me from external impositions. If that day the game is to pick as many flowers as possible, I'll pick as many flowers as I can. It doesn't matter if the ethnographic notes will reflect my obvious defeat.

Also, throughout the fieldwork, I realised that the guiding concepts I had initially chosen – such as Popular Education, community, margin, and resistance – were insufficient to fully capture the complexity of the projects I was engaging with. The margin continually elaborated the senses of what is education, what is a community, what is political, what is resistance. Definitions changed continuously for one year and a half. It is important to note that the projects I have identified as the focus of this investigation are neither clearly nor unequivocally definable as projects of Popular Education. In Colombia, the word commonly used to describe these initiatives is *proceso*. A simple metaphor that nonetheless encapsulates the indeterminacy and continuous evolution of actions – eluding fixed definitions, unfolding

e-ISSN 2385-3042

within contradictions. A *proceso* is something always in motion, a constant reworking of elements that draw from past practices, engage with present elaborations, and move toward future objectives.

Bell hooks critiques the way those from privileged backgrounds perceive the margin as a passive object of study, failing to recognise or learn from the lived experiences and resistance of those who inhabit it through continuous engagement. In her reflections on the feminist movement, whose practices also shape our ethnographies, she argues that true revolution requires a liberatory praxis in which everyone must actively participate. Such a transformation can only take shape through the recognition and integration of the experiences of those who endure oppression at the margins, ensuring their active role in both theory-making and political action (1984, 161).

Ethnographic note 3: confusion 2

We spent three whole days painting all the pots and sawing with the children. Less than a week later, someone damaged them by writing stupid phrases or scribbling with a black spray can. We gathered everything up, cleaned the entire area, and put up a big sign that said *no tiren basura porfa* (please don't throw trash). While we were picking up the last bits, a man came and dumped an entire cart of broken furniture at the feet of one of the educators. "You need to stop with this nonsense". This is a true story. How can they not understand that it's an open space for the children? That this is a Popular school? That it is/exists for the benefit of all? I suspend judgment. I can't understand. A deep breath. I won't include this story in my thesis because, honestly, what could I even say? How would I present it with the necessary analysis?

To critically approach the subjects and understand the struggles that characterise the margins, I drew inspiration from Gutierrez's practice, which suggests "learning about struggles through the struggles themselves" (2013). This involves reflecting on and from their inherent instability – that is, starting from their contradictions – while keeping in mind the idea of understanding cultural and social processes as a dynamic mosaic of overlapping and interdependent antagonisms. In the margins, oppressive structures do not function in isolation, nor are they imposed solely by the centre; rather, they operate interdependently. The margin itself – far from being an idealised space, "where the oppressed live apart from their oppressors as 'pure'" (hooks 1989, 21) – is deeply contested, shaped by internal tensions and daily struggles. Political movements and projects seeking change often faced resistance and were not always universally embraced as beneficial for the territory. Communities,

too, can internalise and perpetuate racist, misogynistic, and colonial behaviours within their own spaces.

The margin is thus a space that can never be romanticised; realizing this required critically examining the impact of my own social, cultural, and personal background on my approach to the ethnographic field. It was equally crucial to understand how this background influenced what I observed, interpreted, and analysed in the realities I encountered. Often, the complexities of the territories, the internal conflicts within communities, the difficulties faced by the children I interacted with, and the reasons behind certain pedagogical choices were difficult to fully grasp. This was partly due to the expectations and imaginaries I brought with me to the territories, which sometimes did not align with the realities of the field, and partly due to the need to delve deeper into issues that remained unclear.

Responding to the imperatives of integrating subaltern voices and practice and adopt a decolonial reflexive approach, it was central to understand my *lugar de fala* (place of speech), as articulated by Ribeiro (2017). This concept does not confine individuals to speaking solely from their own lived experiences or social group; rather, it emphasises the importance of recognizing one's social position – whether privileged or marginalised – when engaging in discussions, as it shapes the way social realities are perceived and interpreted. For ethnography, this translates into a 'politics of location', a critical awareness of one's positionality within the structures of knowledge production. Crucially, recognizing diverse experiences and perspectives across different 'loci of speech' allows for a move beyond universalist frameworks, creating space for alternative ways of knowing and understanding reality. A fundamental part of the ethnographic field was thus built through misunderstandings or partial understandings. In this, I share how the relational ontological proposals of de Castro and de la Cadena, who oppose approaches that treat difference as a result of incommensurable cultural perspectives. Entering the heterogeneous logics of daily life implies inhabiting and being ready for misunderstandings and ambiguities – what de Castro defines as "different positions of perspective" (2004, 5) – and practicing what de la Cadena calls "ontological openings", slowing down our interpretative frameworks (2007, 6). As a result, my perspective was fundamentally unfinished. Yet it was this very incompleteness that made it flexible, responsive, and constantly reshaped within specific space-time contexts, actively embodying a 'politics of location'.

Ethnographic note 4: Memories that count

If I think about my ethnography now, I barely mention academia and success. I think of everything I have learned from my companions, to whom I owe a gentle, understanding, and open politicization, as well as a reconstruction of myself through an unprecedented community engagement. I think of all the children who made me vulnerable through games, drawings, and hours spent playing *ponchados*. I think of the battered territories I have experienced, which, as relational spaces, hosted the cultural and identity policies of the place. I think of the assemblies in which I participated silently, those in which I found the courage to speak up; I think of the *ollas comunitarias*, the *mingas* (collective cooking pots, community and volunteer workday), and the festivals; I think of the occupations and the reclaiming of space by marginalised children. That's because reflecting on these memories and bringing them back to an academic dimension is complex, as these are practices and knowledge that arise and impose themselves outside of institutionalised spaces of power and knowledge.

The practical and concrete actions undertaken by the community preceded and guided the development of broader theories or concepts, emerging from the community's *quehaceres* (practices and knowledge) that had already permeated the space, grounded in a shared and inclusive sense. As Lugones argues, it is not about understanding and conducting research on "theorised possibilities", but about learning from the "lived possibilities" articulated in intimate daily life of the margin (2005, 70). Entering the margins requires the ethnographer to actively participate in struggles – both personally, through self-deconstruction, and collectively, by learning to embrace love. Bell hooks writes:

> Acknowledging the truth of our reality, both individual and collective, is a necessary stage for personal and political growth. This is usually the most painful stage in the process of learning to love. […] Choosing love we also choose to live in community, and that means that we do not have to change by ourselves. We can count on critical affirmation and dialogue with comrades walking a similar path. (hooks 1994, 295-6)

The social dimension of resistance plays a fundamental role because, as Lugones notes, society constantly relegates individuals to a state of deep isolation, hindering and making impossible any attempt at collective creativity and shared construction (Lugones 1992, 36). As researchers, it is our duty to act to promote and participate in

collective resistance, overcoming academic isolation and considering research as a process of practical-theoretical co-construction based on alliances where the community is the ultimate beneficiary. To this end, I have decentralised my academic project, weaving together ethnography, activism, care, love and friendships as mutually reinforcing elements, seamlessly integrating them. While invocating love in the ethnographic field may seem like romanticization, if understood in Lugones' terms, love becomes "a way of taking responsibility", a means "of practicing not being condemned to oppress others" – an essential approach for any researcher (2003). Thus, research expands beyond the confines of academia, evolving into a renewed political practice that reinvents ethnography as an educational process grounded in a socio–praxis that is territorialised, situated, and contextualised within vulnerable realities.

Ethnographic note 5 – Care

I packed some photographs; they are a precious gift. I placed them inside the book on Popular Education methodologies. Of all those written methodologies, they didn't mean much to me. These photographs, on the other hand, captured the essence of what Popular Education is.

Me adjusting the tie on Mr. Cement's puppet with C.
A little girl eating *sancocho* sitting on my legs.
When we reopened the school in April and we were only 4 educators.
Me with my face covered in red paint, holding a paintbrush during a *minga*.
The last photo with some children before the migration through the Darien border.
The group photo from Carnival. There are so many of us that I don't even recognise myself.
Another little girl placing her feet on mine to walk together, in balance.

4 Interrogating In-Betweenness: Defining Spaces of Margin from the Centre, Geneva – Switzerland

My research focuses on how racism has been challenged over time in Switzerland. Specifically, it examines how trade unions and militant spaces have responded to migrant workers' struggles from the 1970s to the present. Switzerland constitutes an especially compelling case study, as its history – almost always portrayed as neutral and positioned outside of global affairs – has only recently entered academic reflection on race (dos Santos Pinto et al. 2022). Yet the country supposed neutrality has played a crucial role in concealing

e-ISSN 2385-3042

the enduring processes of racialization and exclusion within Swiss society.

Postcolonial and decolonial theories, taken together, offer critical insights into these continuities between past and present. They invite us to understand colonialism not as a closed historical chapter, but as an ongoing structure that informs current institutional practices, discourses, and forms of governance. Their lens help illuminate how racialised labour regimes, exclusionary national imaginaries, and discursive strategies of innocence persist in shaping Swiss public and political life.

However, these critical perspectives often remain abstract or fail to meaningfully enter Swiss public debate. Racism is still widely framed as a relic of the past or the result of individual ignorance, rather than as a systemic and structural phenomenon. In both institutional and public arenas, it is frequently reduced to outdated ideology or personal prejudice, rather than recognised as an entrenched system of power. In this sense, Alana Lentin argues that deflection, distancing, and denial – the three D's, as she terms them – are key to understanding dominant European narratives. These discursive strategies have contributed to concealing Switzerland's – like that of its neighbours' – historical role in colonial projects and to obscuring the material and symbolic manifestations of racism that persist to this day.

Ethnographic Museum

Read the descriptions –
Don't leave.
Stay here.
Look at us.
Look at where we come from.
Feel the superiority that rises,
In having us here, taken.
Now step into the rooms,
Meet the artists through their work.
Feel the nexus –
Between what has been and what is still.

The ethnographic museum, often viewed as a metaphor for colonial legacy, is in fact its concrete manifestation – a material site where bodies, objects, and imaginaries have been displaced, reordered, and aestheticised under the guise of knowledge and cultural appreciation. It stages a persistent tension: one of representation shadowed by erasure, fascination intertwined with domination. This dynamic – where visibility masks denial, and historical violence slips into contemporary disavowal – mirrors broader discursive

mechanisms in the Swiss context, where national narratives continue to obscure the country's historical complicity.

In this light, the specificity of the Swiss narrative becomes particularly striking when examined through the lens of 'margins' – a term often used to describe Switzerland's supposed peripheral position within the global colonial and imperial project (Fischer-Tiné, Purtschert 2015). While Switzerland is frequently portrayed as marginal or neutral, its deep entanglement in transnational colonial networks and informal power structures complicates this portrayal.

Recent scholarship on postcolonial Switzerland reveals that the concept of marginality itself functions as a discursive strategy – one that reinforces national innocence. This is especially noteworthy given Switzerland's geographic and political location at the heart of Europe. The use of the term 'margin' creates an illusion of distance from colonial power, when in reality, as the text *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins* (2015) compellingly demonstrates, the country was deeply involved in colonial processes. Switzerland contributed to and benefited from colonialism through its economic networks, scientific institutions, and cultural imaginaries, despite lacking formal colonies. In view of this, marginality is not a marker of disengagement, but a rhetorical device that obscures complicity and sustains a myth of exceptionalism.

Switzerland's involvement in colonialism was multifaceted. Missionaries and religious institutions supported colonial expansion; Swiss mercenaries served in imperial armies; individuals and families profited from slavery and colonial trade; and financial institutions channelled those profits back into the national economy. Moreover, Swiss academia played a central role in developing and legitimizing racial science and eugenics, providing intellectual scaffolding for colonial hierarchies.

The limited academic and public engagement with race as a category of social analysis in Switzerland must be understood in the context of this carefully curated narrative of neutrality and innocence (Salamat 2024). As recent studies have shown, such discourse enables the country to sidestep critical conversations about its colonial entanglements. If we recognise the postcolonial era not as a rupture but as a period in which colonial violence – symbolic, discursive, and material – has been reconfigured rather than dismantled, then Switzerland must be acknowledged as part of this ongoing history. The cultural legacy of colonialism remains palpable: representations, commodities, and imaginaries tied to colonial power continue to permeate Swiss society.

James Baldwin's reflections in "Stranger in the Village" (1953) – written during his stay in the Swiss village of Leukerbad – offer a powerful lens through which to understand these dynamics. In this

deeply prescient essay on race, whiteness, and belonging, Baldwin writes:

> Yet they move with an authority which I shall never have; and they regard me, quite rightly, not only as a stranger in the village but as a suspect latecomer, bearing no credentials, to everything they have – however unconsciously – inherited. [...]These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it. (Baldwin 1955, 165)

Although written over seventy years ago, Baldwin's insight continues to resonate today. It speaks not only to the historical construction of whiteness and power in Switzerland, but also to the ongoing ways in which authority, exclusion, and racialised belonging are negotiated in contemporary Swiss society. His words confront us with the enduring legacies of colonialism and challenge the notion that the Swiss context is somehow exceptional or disconnected from broader global histories of domination. Baldwin's village is not just a metaphor of the past – it is a mirror held up to the present.

Eloquence Contest

A room full of people,
An Arab man in a suit is on the stage.
"No colonies, no racism",
His title echoes.
"Look at the name of our streets", he says,
"Our parks, our buildings –
Here lies your colonial, racist heritage,
Hidden in plain sight,
Celebrated in the names we speak
Without knowing. We must know from now.

Public discourse – especially when delivered in polished, official settings – can often serve to conceal more than it reveals. Declarations of neutrality, condemnations of violence, or proclamations of national innocence become part of a rhetorical performance that masks deeper continuities of power and exclusion. In spaces where historical accountability is resisted and where colonial entanglements remain unacknowledged, even the language of critique can be absorbed into the machinery of denial. But when such performances falter, they sometimes expose the cracks – the moments when what is hidden in plain sight begins to speak.

These cracks in the façade of Swiss neutrality are not just abstract but appear in the concrete gestures of the state. One such fissure in the surface is the 2003 official recognition of slavery and the slave

trade as crimes against humanity. At the same time, however, the Swiss Confederation reasserted its distance from colonial history, citing its lack of formal colonies and its long-standing neutrality. This gesture allowed the state to position itself as external to the structures of colonialism and racism, thus reinforcing a self-referential narrative of exceptionality – one seemingly outside the circuits of global responsibility (Purtschert, Falk, Lüthi 2016, 290).

To make sense of these rifts, we need concepts that go beyond surface gestures. As Mellino reminds us, echoing Césaire, the white Eurocentric gaze often falls into a "discursive procedure of (self-)absolution" (Mellino in Césaire 2020, 7-8). This self-cleansing gesture, where states symbolically acknowledge the violence of the past while simultaneously erasing their implication in its afterlives, is a defining feature of what Aníbal Quijano calls 'coloniality'.

In this sense, there is an urgent need to interrogate the language and frameworks that sustain these dynamics. The way history is told and the vocabulary used to describe power relations play a crucial role in shaping collective memory and political discourse. As Braidotti argues:

> Ethics is the other way around the vicious circle of language. It consists in unveiling this complex and paradoxical political economy and exploring its complexity and inner contradictions. To the extent that a text enacts the nexus of power and meaning, power and discourse of which it is composed, it both exposes and holds them to accountability. (Braidotti 2014, 165)

Interrogating language is thus not a mere academic exercise but a political necessity – one that allows us to unravel the interpretative frameworks that legitimise exclusion and invisibilization. In the case of Switzerland, the dominant discourse surrounding race reflects this complexity. While Swiss national narratives often avoid explicit discussions of racism and segregation, terms like 'xenophobia' are frequently used to address issues of exclusion and discrimination, particularly regarding racialised people, migrant workers, asylum seekers, or the Muslim community. This choice of language reflects broader European tendencies to frame racial dynamics through cultural fear, as noted by scholars like Alana Lentin (2011). The persistence of such language has helped to obscure the historical roots of these social divisions, even as Switzerland's demographic composition has quickly evolved. Today, over 40% of the Swiss population has a migratory background, and in cities like Geneva, this proportion exceeds 65%.

Although Switzerland did not experience postcolonial migratory flows on the same scale or in the same form as former colonial powers such as France or the United Kingdom, its migration policies since

the post–World War II period have consistently produced racialised hierarchies. These hierarchies are organised around national origin, skin colour, and perceived cultural proximity, shaping access to labour, social rights, and political participation in deeply unequal ways.

The construction of 'Swissness' – closely tied to whiteness – has been actively maintained through formal and informal mechanisms that reward assimilation and cultural conformity while punishing visible difference. For many migrants and racialised individuals, integration becomes a process of 'performing whiteness': adopting linguistic, cultural, and behavioural norms coded as 'Swiss' in order to gain conditional acceptance (Cretton 2018). This performance, however, rarely results in full belonging. Instead, it reinforces whiteness as the unmarked and invisible standard of citizenship and nationhood.

At the same time, Swiss public discourse often frames multiculturalism as a positive, liberal value – a celebration of diversity that supposedly reflects the country's openness. Yet this form of surface multiculturalism tends to function depolitically, emphasizing folkloric or culinary diversity while leaving structural racism and historical inequalities unaddressed. By promoting a harmonious image of coexistence, it erases the power dynamics and exclusions that underpin national identity. In this way, the discourse of multiculturality can obscure race altogether, denying the systemic forms of discrimination that shape the everyday realities of racialised communities in Switzerland.

When the veneer of harmony shatters, the fault lines of exclusion become undeniable. The cracks appear most visibly in the rise of Islamophobia: the 2009 minaret ban and the 2021 face-veil prohibition. These political campaigns, often framed in terms of secularism, security, or gender equality, function as racializing tools that construct Muslims as culturally incompatible and fundamentally outside the bounds of 'Swiss' identity. Islam in these contexts is not just a religion but a racialised category, and such measures legitimise exclusion while reinforcing a national self-image grounded in whiteness, homogeneity, and moral superiority.

At a Conference

He stood and spoke
"Hello Hello" – he said.
"I condemn violence –
Of Course! I am neutral and apolitical.
This is why I'll ask
A neutral and apolitical question –
Though still a little personal.
I am Swiss,
I grew up in Switzerland.
Strangely, a joyfully childhood
In a land where I was told we were good –
Not like the racists French.
My Moroccan dad told me I was lucky,
For here, colonial logics were left behind
So, yes, I had a happy childhood".
"Later, I studied –
to become more curious
To learn about the world here and beyond.
Today I am sad.
Any idea?"

"The answer?
Militant spaces and common struggle"

For bell hooks, the margin is not simply a place of exclusion, but a space of radical possibility – a site of resistance, where oppositional worldviews are nurtured through the everyday struggle against systems of domination. It is not pure, nor outside the reach of power, but shaped by historical and relational complexities. As hooks writes, the margin is "a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist" (hooks 2015, 150). It is precisely because the margin exists in tension with the centre that it holds transformative potential. It is a space from which dominant narratives can be questioned, identities reimagined, and collective forms of solidarity and struggle can emerge.

In a context like Switzerland – where 'racelessness' often prevails, and neutrality is valorised as a moral and political ideal – talking about race and racism becomes not only difficult but frequently delegitimised. The dominant discourse works to erase the language, the history, and the visibility of racialised experience. This erasure raises a critical question: Where, then, can resistance take place? Where are the margins from which an alternative politics can emerge?

The poem ends with an answer: "Militant spaces and common struggle". These words name a direction, if not yet a destination. In light of bell hooks' framework, the "militant spaces" invoked are not just physical sites, but relational and imaginative ones – places forged in resistance and sustained by shared struggle.

In this spirit, focusing on trade unions becomes a deliberate and critical choice. Historically, unions have been imagined as militant collectives – spaces where workers gathered to resist exploitation, demand dignity, and fight for structural change. In many national myths of resistance, they occupy the heart of the political margin. And yet, in contemporary Switzerland, these spaces have become increasingly institutionalised, professionalised, and embedded within a welfare logic that can blunt their radical edge. Today, unions often struggle to engage meaningfully with the lived experiences of racialised and migrant workers. The margins risk becoming rhetorical – divorced from the material struggles they were meant to represent.

Ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with trade unionists – many of whom come from migrant backgrounds – reveal that trade unions often fall short of expectations as spaces of resistance. Workers frequently perceive unions as service-oriented institutions rather than political collectives, and the emotional solidarity forged through struggle tends to emerge only in the context of specific labour disputes. These moments, however, are typically isolated and of limited duration; they do not reflect a broader vision of trade unions as politically transformative or revolutionary forces.

The historical development of Swiss trade unionism helps explain many of these dynamics. Since the late 1930s, labour relations have been shaped by a model of social partnership – an institutional arrangement in which employers and employees negotiate collective work conventions aimed at minimizing conflict. This system, known as the 'peace of work', positions unions as mediators within a framework of class collaboration, rather than as antagonistic actors in class struggle as envisioned in Marxist theory. Within this logic, militancy is not absent, but it is managed, often redirected toward bureaucratic negotiation rather than collective mobilisation.

This institutional history sheds light on the ambivalent experiences of many workers – and trade unionists themselves – within these spaces. The paradox of visibility and invisibility, formality and fragility, reflects the tension between what these spaces promise and what they deliver. And yet, this does not mean they are empty.

Drawing inspiration from Braidotti's 'politics of location', the research moved towards micro-narratives to explore how subtle and often invisible forms of daily opposition are experienced by workers and trade unionist. This led the investigation to look at how individuals navigate between resistance and oppression, expressing themselves outside official spaces and through alternative means.

Through the narratives and personal stories of militants and trade unionists, I had the opportunity to explore multiple political paths where political work is continuously shaped 'in-tension' by experiences beyond institutional frameworks. Many trade unionists

today come from academic backgrounds, and their individual perspectives are influenced by past militant engagements, personal emotional or generational frameworks, and a strong desire to actively contribute to political change. However, as trade unions often struggle to define the contours of emotional communities within a broader political project, frustration emerged as a recurring theme in my ethnographic fieldwork.

The gap between expectation and institutional reality is not always immediately visible. It is often articulated elsewhere – across different times and spaces – through laughter, pleasure, or moments of shared joy that help carry the emotional complexity of daily labour. These fleeting encounters do not erase the weight of institutional limits, but they offer small acts of endurance and connection that make collective political life possible.

Out

Let's meet outside,
Loud music,
Wine and smiles.
Most spoken word:
'Tired'
Do you want to register?
No –
I'll write about it later.

If the politics of emotions are a key factor in understanding the history of politics, then individual and collective perspectives, shaped by shared experiences, become essential in grasping specific political structures and landscapes. If one were to map the trajectories of trade unionists, tracing the individual paths that lead them into other political spaces, the resulting map would reveal a highly complex network. These pathways could be seen as both personal and social bridges, where political possibilities converge. The limitations that arise within institutional spaces could, in this context, be interpreted as 'gaps', in the sense expressed by Sack, Meier and Bürgisser:

> Gaps need not be intimidating entities but opportunities, a third space or an in-between space where ideas can be explored and celebrated outside of the limitations set by particular social standards. (Sack, Meier, Bürgisser 2025, 27)

While the author's reflection focuses on the role of performative arts in social change, it offers an intriguing lens through which to examine new spaces of inquiry – ones that illuminate communities of practice operating beyond traditional and fixed institutions.

Within spaces where different subjectivities intersect and navigate between institutional and non-institutional realms, feminist strike collectives have emerged as particularly significant sites of inquiry for historical, social, and political research on antiracist discourse and practices.

The feminist strike collectives that autonomously organise across various Swiss locations trace their origins to the historic women strike of 1991. A decade earlier, in 1981, Switzerland had voted to adopt Article 4.2 of the Constitution, which enshrined gender equality. However, by 1991, it had become evident that political and economic institutions had failed to implement the promised changes. On June 14 of that year, a wave of protest swept across the country as thousands of women took to the streets to demand concrete action. This unprecedented strike, led by trade unionists in alliance with the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF), mobilised a significant portion of the population, reaching beyond traditional militant and political spaces to create new sites of solidarity, collective action, and resistance. Nearly three decades later, on June 14, 2019, the feminist strike returned with renewed force: 500,000 people responded to the call issued by women within the Swiss Trade Union Federation, determined to bring gender equality back to the centre of public debate (Federici et al. 2020).

A Look at the Past

"Do you know the meaning of striking in Switzerland?
Do you know what brought us here?
We'll tell you.
Look at the pictures –
You might recognise us.
We were there
Now we need to understand,
And organise
The next strike is coming".
In the room, everyone was listening.

While deeply rooted in past struggles, the contemporary movement also aligns with broader feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist mobilizations, emphasizing the intersecting forms of violence experienced by marginalised bodies. Today, the feminist strike remains a crucial counter-power within the Swiss political landscape, though its relationship with trade unions remains complex. While unions provide institutional legitimacy to the strike, their function as spaces of negotiation within the labour market also imposes certain constraints on the movement.

Today, the Feminist Strike disrupts entrenched union structures, challenging their deeply rooted patriarchal and paternalist

foundations. Activists are transforming these arenas into spaces of intergenerational dialogue, introducing rituals of solidarity that bypass traditional hierarchies, and advocating for greater representation of racialised, queer, and LGBTQ+ workers. In doing so, they reimagine unions not as mere service providers or sites of compromise, but as crucibles of collective power – places where diverse struggles converge and new political imaginaries emerge. Yet this transformation unfolds in tension. As feminist representatives work within union bodies, they must continually confront and unsettle the patriarchal logics that still shape Swiss trade unionism.

Unbelievable

"I'm so angry, I am crying", she says.
"Why do they feel the need to speak for us?
We speak, and they speak after us –
So white, so men, so cis".

"The strike is our victory –
They didn't care to support,
And now they are "proud".

"Fucking paternalists"

For me, these collectives did not only represent sites of resistance – they became spaces of learning, experimentation, and methodological reorientation. Engaging with them shifted my position as a researcher and allowed me to experience fieldwork from a place that felt freer, more collaborative, and deeply feminist.

Bell hooks' reflections on the margin were instrumental in reframing both the practice of fieldwork and the contours of political inquiry. Her work offered not only a theoretical perspective but also a methodological provocation, leading me to occupy this place of in-betweenness – where the friction between institutional and non-institutional forms of resistance becomes a generative force. Within trade unionist contexts, this meant witnessing how feminist critiques continuously reworked dominant narratives, particularly around the intersecting violences that structure contemporary social life. Within the collective, it meant trying to grasp the multiplicity of experiences that produce, both personally and collectively, a critical space from which visible actions are formulated to interrogate and challenge our societies.

My methodological approach thus emerged as a layered and responsive practice: grounded in in-depth interviews, militant narratives, participant observation, informal conversations, and a steady accumulation of fieldnotes. These notes were never merely documentation; they became spaces of reflexive engagement, where I attempted to trace the rhythm, texture, and contradictions of

e-ISSN 2385-3042

everyday political work – including its silences, affective resonances, and incompleteness. They also prompted me to constantly rethink how I translated lived realities onto the page.

By placing these methods in conversation, the research sought to remain faithful to the complexity of movements that inhabit the margins – not as static spaces of exclusion, but as dynamic sites of experimentation, contestation, and potential transformation.

The margins have thus shifted beyond trade unions, towards new and unconventional spaces where people come together, engage in dialogue, and bring struggles back to the streets – struggles that lie at the heart of both individual and collective resistance. It is precisely within these spaces, shaped by diverse subjectivities, that questions of whiteness and racism emerge. In fact, it is important to acknowledge that feminist strike collectives remain predominantly white, with limited representation of racialised individuals. Since 2019, addressing this systemic reality has been a persistent concern. The Feminist Strike, as a movement that defines itself as anti-racist and intersectional, strives to challenge existing structures both in discourse and in practice. At the same time, the necessity of developing new practices of solidarity – ones that do not replicate existing forms of dominance – remains an open and ongoing challenge, as

> The centres proliferate in a fragmented manner but lose none of their powers of domination. The conclusion is clear: it is important to resist the uncritical reproduction of sameness on a planetary scale. (Braidotti 2014, 178)

Recognizing this dynamic turns spaces such as the feminist collectives into a strategic starting point for resistance – a space where dominant structures can be questioned, redefined, and ultimately, disrupted. Through experiences of political engagement with other social and political actors, this question presents itself as a 'margin' in the sense of a space of resistance, political re-elaboration, and openness to new alliances.

Answer the Questions: We'll Make Clouds of Words

Our own.
What does feminism mean to you?
Sorority, struggle, care, power.
What would be your ideal feminist collective?
Dialogue, solidarity, diversity, transformation.
What is missing?
Non-white voices, more or them,
moments of profound discussion... a library!

The clouds appear on the table,
Linked to one another,
never unfold in solitude,
in the space we share.

In the context of feminist strike collectives, the words that come out in these counter-power spaces enter the public sphere whenever these collectives make statements. Though predominantly white, the collectives remain aware of their positionality and continually interrogate their own limitations. They refuse to reproduce welfarist attitudes and instead challenge the political landscape, engaging in performative acts that seek to expose systemic violence and raise awareness. By choosing to disrupt dominant discourses in this way, the collectives play a crucial role in pushing for a more inclusive political conversation within what Bhabha (1994) terms the "third space".

Bhabha (1994) describes this space as an ambivalent site of cultural encounter – one that both resists and negotiates with dominant power structures. As Jefferess (2008) argues, this in-between space is not simply a site of failure for colonial narratives but one where they are actively transformed in politically meaningful ways. Here, the totalizing force of the coloniser's authority is disrupted, creating a gap between expectation and response – one that destabilises fixed binaries and produces alternative modes of subjectivity. However, while Bhabha's framework highlights the discursive dimensions of resistance, it is crucial to consider how this negotiation interacts with material struggles. Without addressing the economic and institutional inequalities that persist within postcolonial and neoliberal contexts, the third space risks becoming a purely theoretical construct. This suggests that the third space is not an evenly shared site of negotiation but rather one that is, as Parry (2004) puts it, 'differentially occupied'.

The experience of diaspora, for example, is not homogeneous, especially in multicultural cities such as Geneva. It varies significantly depending on one's legal status, occupation, gender, and class. Second – or third-generation immigrants, skilled immigrants, undocumented workers, and students may navigate the third space in radically different ways, and these differences must be taken into account when analysing the process of cultural negotiation. In short, while Bhabha's framework is valuable for highlighting hybridity and the deconstruction of binaries, it fails to fully address the unequal power dynamics that shape lived experiences within the third space, leaving gaps in its applicability to diverse postcolonial realities.

The ethnographic fieldwork that began within trade unions and later expanded into spaces that have distanced themselves from institutional frameworks has revealed the concreteness of these

limitations. At the same time, these spaces represent an interesting site of resistance, presenting themselves as spaces of continuous interrogation, where knowledge is acquired through collective participation and collaboration and where political choices are made as "a complex strategic operation of positioning" (Braidotti 2014, 168).

Tribunal's Court

A black girl is facing the judge.
White skin, nice suit, white silence.
In the room, the accusee –
Also white.
Also still.

Her voice cracks the air –
Maybe from fear,
Maybe from the echo of too many rooms
Where words like hers
Were trimmed down,
Made manageable,
Made small.

The judge leans in,
A voice polished with paternalism.
He speaks not to her,
But through her,
As if her body were a screen
For some old reel
Where Black girls don't think,
They only feel.

The room remains composed.
Inside it, the rage hums low –
A soft, militant tremor
In the bodies of women watching.

From twenties to eighties,
They sit quiet,
Bearing witness.
Each wrinkle, each gaze,
Is a testimony.

They shift forward in their seats,
Not to interrupt,
But to hold the ground steady.
The silence is full –
Charged with something that doesn't erupt,
But settles deep in the body.
Tension travels through glances,
Clenched jaws,
In the way hands are held still.

In that room,
Rage was not rupturing –
It was binding.
A quiet solidarity,
Where the past stood with the present,
And the future listened.

This moment captured more than a scene – it revealed how deeply intergenerational expressions and reflections shape the terrain of resistance. It reminded us that what we inherit is not only memory, but ways of holding each other through struggle.

In conclusion, the micro-narratives and life stories of activists from various generations, in dialogue with the findings of my ethnographic study conducted among unions and the Feminist Strike Collective in Geneva, illuminate the tensions and emerging possibilities within these spaces of ongoing in-betweenness. Drawing from historical studies on trade unionism, feminism, and racism in Switzerland, this research has explored the creative, subjective, and political potential of these boundary experiences that both emerge from the individual and the collective. It presents the third space not as a site of complete decolonization but as a place where multiple subjectivities participate in a movement for transformation:

> an act of resistance against methodological nationalism and a critique of Euro-centrism from within. (Braidotti 2014, 179)

Ethnographic note: Sorority

There were four of us. We travelled to the outskirts of the city, to the neighbourhood where I was born and raised. There, we met with local women and others from a nearby asylum seeker centre. We talked about swimming pools.

In a country where racism and Islamophobia are disguised under words like fear, inadaptability, and hygiene, swimming pools become sites of exclusion, rather than sites of playfulness and conviviality.

We listened, we organised.

On 14 June, the collective will be there – for the liberation of the swimming pools!

5 'ConversA(c)tion': From 'World-Sensing' to 'World-Making'

Moving through the words we have shared has become as natural as the ebb and flow of waves crashing against the shore. Each time we retreat, we carry with us a little sand, a few fragments. Contaminated by our passage, traces of what we have touched remain with us, clouding and numbing us. I no longer see as I did before – your words create new currents, open new paths, and reshape concepts that remain tangled in my mind, blurring the certainties I had already set down on paper.

Do you remember?

In some way, we travel with each other, we blur the waters, like sand is carried by the sea.

we were lying down on the hammock,
suspended between thought and breath.

We took time –
time to rest,
time before the next note,
before the next sentence
would carry our weight again.

And then –
I slipped,
stepping into the cold water at our feet,
startled, laughing louder,
and the world turned
with a splash

It was time to go back to writing.
But something stayed.
The feeling of safety –
of being held.
We weren't alone in this.
Not then.
Not now.
It was our fall,
and our laughter.

Care

our rising into the next sentence.

Margins appear to me as unresolved and

always unresolving spaces.

Together.

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, Supplement, November 2025, 121-164
e-ISSN 2385-3042

Through the feminist collective, I have come to see this as a central characteristic. People come and go, bringing their individuality and their ways of seeing the world. Militancy follows personal life paths – it pauses, shifts, and sometimes begins again. In a capitalist society that constantly drives us toward performance, we rarely allow ourselves to stop. The same happens in militancy – time is seldom acknowledged, though it should be. Here, however, I feel that it is.

I still remember it.

And I still feel that lightness today, between one sentence and the next. The laughter tucked between the words of a paper that wasn't flowing all that smoothly.
With you, I learn every day what it means to be part of a micro-collective of care.
Where I can't reach, you do.
There's no competition, only support. A gentle accompaniment toward a shared achievement.
Like when someone enters an unfamiliar territory and becomes part of it in the most spontaneous form of relation: by collaborating, by loving.
One stands for the other, to watch them fall and laugh together. To help them back up.

Conviviality.

People come and go, but through the contamination of those who pass through, the collective grows and expands its horizons.
An educator once told me that through their pedagogical actions and their practices of care and resistance with children, they were seeking a 'butterfly effect' on a global scale.
I hope we'll always be tickled by that wind stirred from the margins, a breeze that might one day become a revolutionary typhoon

Lugones refers to the practice of 'travelling' between worlds as "the shift from being one person to being a different person" (1987, 11), a necessary process for abandoning an arrogant perception of reality in favour of co-constructing it through generous and continuous collective dialogue. She introduces this figuration to emphasise how engaging with multiple perspectives helps us articulate alternative visions of justice and liberation rooted in the plurality within and around us (2003). This, in turn, reflects the existential message of 'crossing', as theorised by Jaqui Alexander. In *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2006) the Black scholar argues that the colonial project is based on the "division of things that belong together" (283); it has led us to treat emotions as distinct from politics, spirit as disconnected from activism, and the Self as independent from the Other and the community. The pedagogies she presents, which proved central in our individual and collective writings, aim to restore wholeness and heal these fractures through Black feminist methodologies. These methodologies call us to

> The urgent task of configuring new ways of being and knowing and to plot the different metaphysics that are needed to move away from living alterity premised in difference to living intersubjectivity premised in relationality and solidarity. (Alexander 2006, 7-8)

Essentially, it calls for a rethinking of how we relate to one another and to the world, moving from divisions toward a more integrated and cooperative way of being.

Of course, the margins we encountered in our respective fieldwork did not present themselves in ways that were easily comparable or parallel. Their concreteness, shaped by distinct geographies, histories, and political tensions, refused any simple mirroring. Yet it was precisely in reflecting on these divergences that our dialogue gained depth. The need to make sense of radically different experiences pushed us toward a shared act of subversion – a methodological and theoretical commitment not to return from the margins to the centre without first interrogating how those margins had transformed us. Our writing, then, became a space of rupture and refusal, where we could re-articulate what it means to know, to feel, and to express from the edges, without smoothing those edges to fit dominant epistemic frames.

When we began sharing our emotions from the ethnographic field, our focus shifted from linear, rational modes of writing to chaotic, poetic notes, where the self could express its movements while searching for a way to articulate its feelings. As we recount in "The Day We Discovered We Were Islands in an Archipelago" (2024), our ethnographic research began with a sense of disconnection – Elsa returning to Switzerland, Nabila moving to Colombia. Distance and

time zones made dialogue difficult, and as we entered the field, isolation and disorientation set in. Early on, we realised that sharing our experiences was not just valuable but essential. So, we began writing together in a shared document, exchanging emotions, doubts, and uncertainties. Over time, even without constant discussion, this document evolved into a dense and spontaneous web of creative expression shaped by the need for connection. Through this practice, writing and rewriting became central to the process itself. We used words not to fix meaning, but to move through it – to give voice to the vividness of our experiences and to the emotions that animated our time in the field.

We called 'con|fusion' the transition from initial isolation in the ethnographic field – marked by chaos and emotional intensity – to a space of shared experience through collective writing. It was in this context that we turned to the concept of 'tidalectics' – a term that mirrors the act of traveling, crossing, and navigating our visions. While dialectics has long served as the dominant framework for structuring modern thought – organizing the world through oppositional and separated categories – 'tidalectics' offers an alternative mode of thinking, one that embraces the dynamic, cyclical, and interwoven nature of reality. Coined by Barbadian poet and scholar Kamau Brathwaite (1999) in *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey*, 'tidalectics' draws inspiration from the fluid, rhythmic movements of water, proposing a mode of engagement that resists rigid binaries in favour of flux and relationality. For us, this concept was not merely metaphorical; it became a methodological orientation that shaped how we lived and how we wrote ethnography. We sought to incorporate its undulating patterns into our own experiences, allowing its aquatic sensibility to guide our approach to knowledge, representation, and lived practice.

'Tidalectics' challenges the idea that difference must always be fully legible or reducible to familiar categories. Instead, it advocates for a form of coexistence that respects singularity without demanding assimilation or absolute clarity. Drawing from Édouard Glissant's work and poetic, we embraced the opacity of the Other – a process that opens new ways of engaging with difference, while also challenging the colonial logic that conditions us to perceive identity through assimilation, transparency, or fixed categories. By doing so, we created a space for more nuanced and reciprocal forms of relation (Glissant 1997).

The acceptance of opacity, together with feminist and decolonial methodologies – such as those inspired by the concepts of 'crossing' and 'traveling' – offers us tools to articulate reality outside the dominant structures. This shift requires methodologies that bridge the gap between the mind and the body, emphasizing an embodied engagement with knowledge and language (Galeano 1989; Fals Borda

2015). In this sense, Mignolo's reflection on the differences between 'worldview' and 'world sensing' (2011, 275) is particularly relevant. The decolonial scholar criticises the concept of 'worldview' because, as a perspective rooted in the Western tradition, it privileges sight and dominant epistemological categories, reducing the understanding of the world to a single, limited vantage point. In contrast, he proposes the concept of 'world sensing', which embraces all senses and human affections. This broader and more inclusive approach invites us to consider the multitude of ways in which human beings perceive and understand reality, incorporating a wider range of cultural, emotional and epistemological perspectives.

Through the relationships we built, we integrated emotions and feelings – often dismissed in academia as non-rational – into our work, shaping our writing onto the page. Our texts took the form of a collective improvisation or rehearsal, as intended by Harney and Moten (2013). The value of rehearsal is to keep writing open, allowing space for experimentation and co-creation. Sharing our writing without fear of judgment allowed experience to emerge in its most natural, unfiltered form. This act of continuous 'ConversA(c)tion' gave us the space to articulate a marginality that mirrored the one we lived in our daily ethnographic practice. Our experiences collided and converged; our words – first in French, Italian, Spanish, and later in English – grew out of collaboration. Translation itself became a creative and emotional act: a shared process of rewriting and re-living our thoughts, one that brought us ever deeper into the felt texture of our daily encounters.

The goal was not to make the text closed or definitive but to keep it in a state of trial, like a theatrical or musical rehearsal, where elements are repeated and modified before a final version – one that will never truly arrive, always remaining incomplete, open to interpretations and further developments. In this way, texts are not a static product but present themselves as continuously evolving processes and social spaces (Harney, Moten 2013).

To write, think, and create collectively is to resist the isolating structures of the academy and to engage in a form of study that is not extractive but generative – one that is grounded in relation, responsibility, and transformation. This is not merely an academic exercise but a commitment to an ongoing process of unlearning and remaking, where knowledge is not possessed but shared, and where the work is never finished, only carried forward. The sense of coalition theorised and practiced by Harney and Moten for/with the 'undercommons' resonated strongly with our intentions. They emphasise that coalitions emerge from the recognition that the current system is harmful to all those involved, and that it is the recognition of shared struggles that is crucial, especially from a position of privilege.

While the work *Undercommons* critiques academia and institutions, its significance extends far beyond them. As Ferreira da Silva states in the foreword of *All Incomplete* "the undercommons is crucially about a sociality not based on the individual" (Ferreira da Silva 2021, 9). They embody a radical and dissident project of love that not only challenges but outright rejects dominant power structures, including institutionalised education. Functioning as both a practical framework and an aspirational vision, this concept invites a critical re-examination of traditional political paradigms while envisioning new forms of resistance. Rather than being bound by shared ownership of material resources or physical spaces, the 'undercommons' emerge from the deep, lived connections among those pushed to the margins. Instead of seeking recognition from the very system that has relegated them to the periphery, they embrace rupture – choosing not reform, but dismantlement. Their objective is to tear down the structures that constrain their ability to connect, organise, and create spaces of existence beyond imposed limitations. In this underground space of resistance, Moten and Harney conceptualise 'study' as "what you do with other people" (2013, 110).

It is within this spirit of radical relationality that our own collaboration found form. Though our writing styles were distinct, they began to speak to one another – responding, resonating, shaping a rhythm of mutual recognition. What emerged was not a single narrative but a movement between voices, an invisible yet palpable motion that bound our separate experiences into a shared whole. This was not just a method, but a way of relating – a form of 'study' grounded in care, trust, and a refusal to conform to rigid academic expectations.

This practice demanded a shift in how we approached knowledge production – not as an individual pursuit confined to rigid disciplinary boundaries, but as a collaborative process that values relationality over authority, multiplicity over singularity. It required embracing uncertainty and discomfort, allowing space for forms of knowing that do not fit within dominant epistemic frameworks. Writing – through 'world sensing' – became a means of 'world-making', a way to contest and reimagine the conditions that determine what is heard, seen, and valued.

Reflecting on Tuck and Yang's essay, it is reductive to treat decolonization as merely a discursive matter, confined to linguistic and stylistic choices. However, we argue that practicing an ethnography rooted in sharing and coalition – while embracing non-academic, emotional, and creative forms of representation – offers ways to resist this reduction.

We carved out our own margin within the academy, drawing on the insights of bell hooks. As she suggests, counter-languages and

alternative forms of writing serve as spaces of both self-decolonization and transformation – not only for those at the margins but for the centre as well. These counter-languages do not remain fixed at the periphery; rather, they have the potential to move toward the centre – not to assimilate, but to disrupt and reshape it – becoming powerful tools for both systemic and personal decolonization. In this sense, we reclaimed the margin as a generative space for our writing practices.

Through alternative ways of understanding and expressing the 'I' and the 'we' in a shared process that went way beyond theoretical abstraction and transformed in an actual act of 'becoming', we have come to understand that solidarity and sorority cannot simply be invoked as abstract ideals or rhetorical gestures. For these alliances to be meaningful, they must be rooted in an awareness of power, privilege, and historical context. They require learning together as an act of allowing ourselves to blur with the experience of the other forming micro-collectives of resistance.

Bibliography

Baldwin, J. (1983). "Stranger in the Village". *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press, 159-75.

Bhandari, N.B. (2022). "Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space Theory and Cultural Identity Today: A Critical Review". *Prithvi Academic Journal*, 5(1), 171-81. https://doi.org/10.3126/paj.v5i1.45049.

Braidotti, R. (1998). "Figurazioni del nomadismo. Homelessness e Rootlessness nella teoria sociale contemporanea". *ACOMA: Rivista di studi nordamericani*, 5(13), 43-57.

Braidotti, R. (2014). "Writing as a Nomadic Subject". *Comparative Critical Studies*, 11(2-3), 163-84. https://doi.org/10.3366/ccs.2014.0122.

Brathwaite, K.; Mackey, N.; Funkhouser, C. (1999). *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey*. Staten Island: We Press.

Césaire, A. (2020). *Discorso sul colonialismo*. Bologna: Ombre corte.

Cretton, V. (2018). "Performing Whiteness: Racism, Skin Colour, and Identity in Western Switzerland". *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41(5), 842-59. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1312006.

De La Cadena, M. (2017). "Matters of Method; Or, Why Method Matters Toward a *not Only* Colonial Anthropology". *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 7(2), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.14318/hau7.2.002.

dos Santos Pinto, J.; Ohene-Nyako, P.; Pétrémont, M.E.; Lavanchy, A.; Lüthi, B.; Purtschert, P.; Skenderovic, D. (dir.) (2022). *Un/doing race: Raccialisation en Suisse*. Genève: Seismo.

Fals Borda, O. (2015). *Una sociología sentipensante para América Latina*. Ed. por Víctor Manuel Moncayo. Ciudad de México; Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores; CLACSO.

Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Transl. by C. Farrington. New York: Grove Press.

Federici, S.; Simonet, M.; Merteuil, M.; Kuehni, M. (2020). *Travail gratuit et grèves féministes*. Genève: Entremonde.

Fischer-Tiné, H.; Purtschert, P. (eds) (2015). *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Cambridge Imperial and Post-colonial Studies Series.

Galeano, E. (1989). *El libro de los abrazos*. Ciudad de México: Siglo XXI Editores.

Gios, E.; Tavolieri, N. (2024). "The Day We Discovered We Were Islands in an Archipelago". *Etnofoor*, 36(1), 35-52. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27314427.

Glissant, E. (1997). *The Poetics of Relation*. Transl. by B. Wing. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Hall, S. (1992). "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies". Grossberg, L.; Nelson, C.; Treichler, P. (eds), *Cultural Studies*. London; New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203699140.

Harney, S.; Moten, F. (2013). *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. London: Minor Compositions. https://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=516.

Harney, S.; Moten, F. (2021). *All Incomplete*. Foreword by D. Ferreira da Silva. London: Minor Compositions. https://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=1032.

hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*. Boston: South End Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743172.

hooks, b. (1989). "CHOOSING THE MARGIN AS A SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS". *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 36, 15-23. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111660.

hooks, b. (1994). *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203822883.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2015). *Yearning. Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743110.

Jefferess, D. (2008). *Postcolonial Resistance: Culture, Liberation, and Transformation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442688841.

Lentin, A.; Titley, G. (2011). *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age*. London: Zed Books. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350223035.

Lorde, A. (1984). "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House". Moraga, C.; Anzaldua, G. (eds), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table Press, 94-101.

Lugones, M. (1987). "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception". *Hypatia*, 2(2), 3-19. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810013.

Lugones, M. (1992). "On Borderlands/La Frontera: An Interpretive Essay". *Hypatia*, 7(4), 31-7. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810075.

Lugones, M. (2003). *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*. Lahnam: Rowman & Littlefield.

Lugones, M. (2005). "Multiculturalismo radical y feminismos de mujeres de color". *Revista Internacional de Filosofía Política*, 25, 61-76. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=1262684.

Mellino, M.A. (2012). *Cittadinanze postcoloniali. Appartenenze, razza e razzismo in Europa e in Italia*. Roma: Carocci Editore.

Mezzadra, S.; Rahola, F. (2006). "The Postcolonial Condition: A Few Notes on the Quality of Historical Time in the Global Present". *Post Colonial Text*, 2(1). https://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/393/819.

Mignolo, W.D. (1999). "I Am where I Think: Epistemology and the Colonial Difference". *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 8(2), 235-45. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569329909361962.

Mignolo, W.D. (2011). "Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing on (De)coloniality, Border Thinking and Epistemic Disobedience". *Postcolonial Studies*, 14(3), 273-83. https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2011.613105.

Mignolo, W.D.; Walsh, C.E. (2018). *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371779.

Parry, B. (2004). *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*. London; New York: Routledge.

Purtschert, P.; Falk, F.; Lüthi, B. (2016). "Switzerland and 'Colonialism without Colonies'". *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 18(2), 286-302. https://doi.org/10.17613/yd0h-v130.

Quintana, L.; Soto, D.P. (2023). *Espacios afectivos: instituciones, conflicto, emancipación*. Barcelona: Herder Editorial.

Rancière, P. (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. London; New York: Continuum International Publishing Book.

Ribeiro, D. (2017). *O que é lugar de fala?* Bela Horizonte: Editora Letramento. Feminismos Plurais.

Sack, M.; Meier, M.; Bürgisser, A. (eds) (2025). *Performative Arts and Social Transformation: The Potential of In-Between Spaces*. Bielefeld: Transcript Publishing.

Salamat, H. (2024). "Le passé colonial dans la mémoire collective de la Suisse". Musée national suisse (ed.), *Colonialisme. Une Suisse impliquée*. Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 63-76.

Segato, R. (2018). *Contra-pedagogías de la crueldad*. Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros.

Stacey, J.; Wolff, J. (eds) (2013). *Writing Otherwise: Experiments in Cultural Criticism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv6wgn6c.

Tuck, E.; Yang, K.W. (2012). "Decolonization is not a Metaphor". *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 1-40. https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630.

Viveiros de Castro, E. (2004). "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation". *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*, 2(1), 3-22. https://doi.org/10.70845/2572-3626.1010.

Walsh, C. (2007). "Shifting The Geopolitics Of Critical Knowledge". *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 224-39. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162530.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
Vol. 61 – Supplement – November 2025

Pathways to *Nirvāṇa*: Aquatic Imagery and Visual Metaphors in Gandhāra

Alice Casalini
The University of Chicago, USA

Abstract This article offers a new analysis of stupa architecture that takes into consideration the metaphorical value of aquatic imagery on staircases. Using Stupa 10 at the Buddhist monastery of Andan Dheri (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan) as a case study, the piece discusses how the metaphorical value of water-related imagery in a Buddhist context was enriched and supported by the architectural form of the stupa. The article argues that the specific iconographic program centred around metaphors of water-crossing and water-flowing created a space of devotion where devotees could enact and embody spiritual refinement in the physical space through their movements.

Keywords Gandhāran art. Aquatic imagery. Visual metaphors. Buddhist architecture. Nirvāṇa.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-02-13
Accepted 2025-03-26
Published 2025-11-14

Open access

Citation Casalini, A. (2025). "Pathways to *Nirvāṇa*: Aquatic Imagery and Visual Metaphors in Gandhāra". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 61, Supplement, November, 165-204.

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2025/03/006

1 Introduction

In the religious-philosophical system of Buddhism, no concept is more difficult to define than that of *nirvāṇa*. About this, Collins (1992, 216-19) wrote:

> any concept of salvation must eventually involve an appeal to indescribability [… which] is rarely, however, quite so consistent and uncompromising as in the case of the Buddhist *nirvāṇa*.

To circumvent this aporia, Buddhist textual tradition over the centuries has often employed metaphorical language: *nirvāṇa* is a fire or lamp that goes out because it has no more fuel (*Padīpopamasutta* SN 54.8), or because the flame is quenched (*Therīgathā* 5.10); it is the stillness of a broken cymbal (*Dhammapada* 134); it is a city that the Buddha built (*Nagarasutta* SN 12.65); it is the ocean, unchanging and immutable (*Uposathasutta* Ud. 5.5).

These and other metaphors have been discussed extensively regarding their role and function within the Buddhist textual tradition.[1] Metaphorical acts in the Buddhist visual language, as well as the issue of metaphoricity in Buddhist architecture, however, have seldom been the principal topic of investigation in Gandhāra.[2] This article seeks to fill in part this lacuna. It takes into consideration the use and meaning of aquatic imagery in the art of Gandhāra and shows that its metaphorical value was effected through careful architectural design and direct dialogue with the religious substratum of the time. It does so by examining the architectural relations of aquatic

1 The use of metaphoric language in Buddhism is a vast subject that many have explored over the years, therefore, a comprehensive overview cannot be attempted here. However, it is worth mentioning a few contributions that have informed my approach in this piece. On *nirvāṇa*, seminal work is by Collins (1982; 1998) and, more recently, Hwang (2006). McMahan (2002) has investigated the role of metaphors in Mahāyāna literature, while Schlieter (2013) has offered an account of metaphors of karma. O'Brien-Kop (2017) discussed the role of metaphorical imagery shared between Sarvāstivāda Buddhism and the Yoga of Patañjali. Tzohar (2018) analysed figurative language in early Yogācāra philosophy in the works of thinkers such as Vasubandhu, Asaṅga and Sthiramati. Silvestre-López (2019) and Maes (2022) have both discussed metaphorical language in the context of meditation and liberation. Concerning Gandhāra, the work of Marino (2017; 2020) on the pedagogical value of metaphors comes to mind.

2 Among those who have dealt with the topic more recently, I refer the reader to Filigenzi (2002), Brancaccio (2011), Neelis (2014) and Iori (2018), who all have ventured into discussing in explicit details the complexities of the symbolic cachet of the Gandhāran visual language. The Buddhist meaning of imagery connected to water, marine creatures, and figures of swimmers has been in part investigated in the context of the Buddhist art of Kucha by Zin (2019). It is to this work that I owe the initial inspiration for my approach here. Seminal works on the symbological apparatus of the stupa at large are Irwin 1979; 1980, Snodgrass 1985, Fussman 1986, and Kottkamp 1992.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

imagery within the context of a stupa staircase, on the one hand, and by discussing relevant Buddhist textual sources from the time on the other. By interrogating the rapport between images and their architectural context, the piece shows that aquatic imagery was used to create a virtual space where physical movement became spiritually efficacious and was conceptualised as a tool for spiritual betterment.

Since my case study is a monument in the monastic site of Andan Dheri, Stupa 10, of which I offer a partial reconstruction, I begin with a brief overview of the site and the archaeological findings related to the monument.

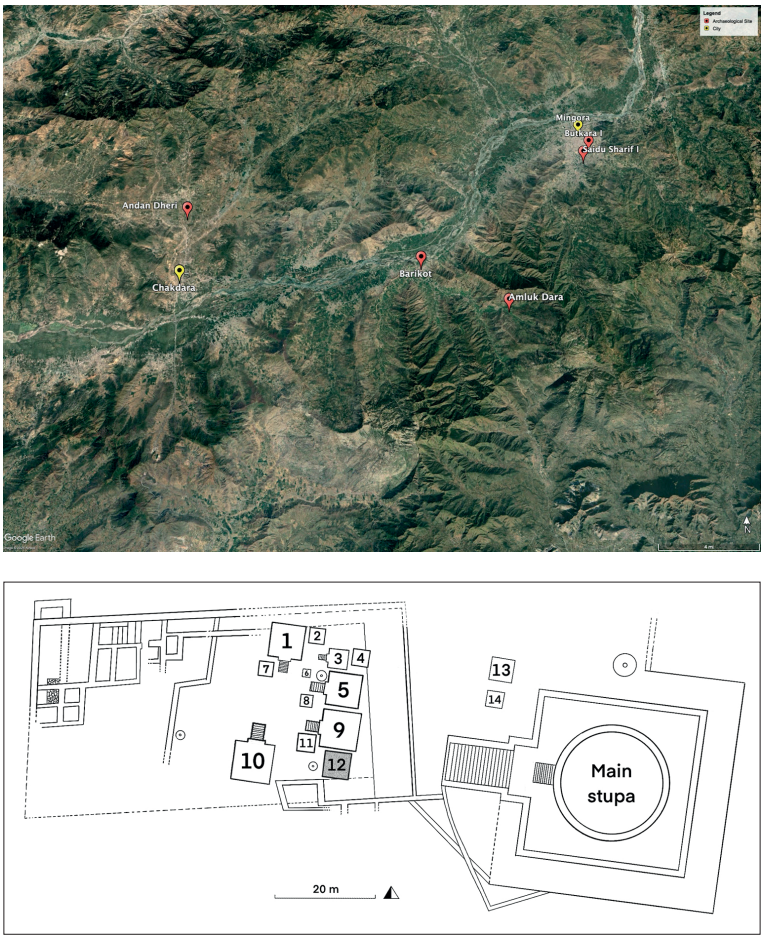


Figure 1 a: Map of Gandhāra showing the location of Andan Dheri and other important sites in the region. Base map from Google Earth.
b: Plan of the monastery of Andan Dheri. Redrawn by the Author after Dani 1968-69, fig. 2

2 Andan Dheri and the Staircase of Stupa 10: De-Fragmenting the Evidence

Andan Dheri is the site of a Buddhist monastery in the district of Lower Dir, lying in the Uchh Valley in Swat **[fig. 1]**. The site, approximately 6.5 km north of the city of Chakdara, is next to the modern Chakdara-Dir Road, which lies on the path of a major ancient route running across the plain. This important location certainly made Andan Dheri a vibrant religious center visited by many pilgrims over the centuries (Dani 1968-69, 34).

The significance of Andan Dheri is interwoven with the historical and mythological geography of the region. The whole valley is connected to a Buddhist legend told by the Chinese monk and pilgrim Xuanzang (602-664 CE) in his travelogue, the *Da Tang Xiyouji* 大唐西遊記 (Journey to the West). The Chinese pilgrim reported that, during one of the Buddha's previous lifetimes when he was a *deva*, the valley suffered from great famine and disease. The *deva*, moved to compassion, transformed his body in that of a giant serpent (Skt. *nāga*) and lied in the valley, calling on all villagers of the land to feast on his flesh. Anyone who ate the serpent miraculously healed and famine was finally eradicated from the region. Xuanzang mentioned two major stupas in the valley, that of *Sapoushadi* 薩裒煞地, more than twenty meters tall and whose name has been reconstructed to the Sanskrit *Sarpauṣadhi* (the serpent's medicine); and the stupa of the serpent Sūma, situated not far off from the previous one. It is impossible to say with certainty whether any of these two was the stupa of Andan Dheri, but these records show that the valley itself was the background of much Buddhist folklore related to the aquatic figures of the *nāga*s, even during Xuanzang's time (Li 1996, 74-5).

Andan Dheri is a relatively well-documented and well-preserved site that was excavated in relatively recent times.[3] The site was divided in two major units, the large monastic dwellings to the west and the main stupa with the stupa court to the east. The main stupa was built on top of a massive square podium (36.5 m per side), with an offset projection and a long staircase. Another set of shorter stairs connected the top of the podium to a circumambulation path around the stupa drum, in a configuration that must have likened this monument to others in the region, such as that of Amluk Dara (cf. Olivieri 2018). Intervening between these two units was a stupa court with twelve minor stupas.

3 Several doubts remain about relative and absolute chronology, stratigraphic periodization, and even the sculptural stylistic typologies – Taddei (1973) has partly addressed these issues; I am currently reviewing the archaeological record of the site in light of recent archaeological work in the region.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

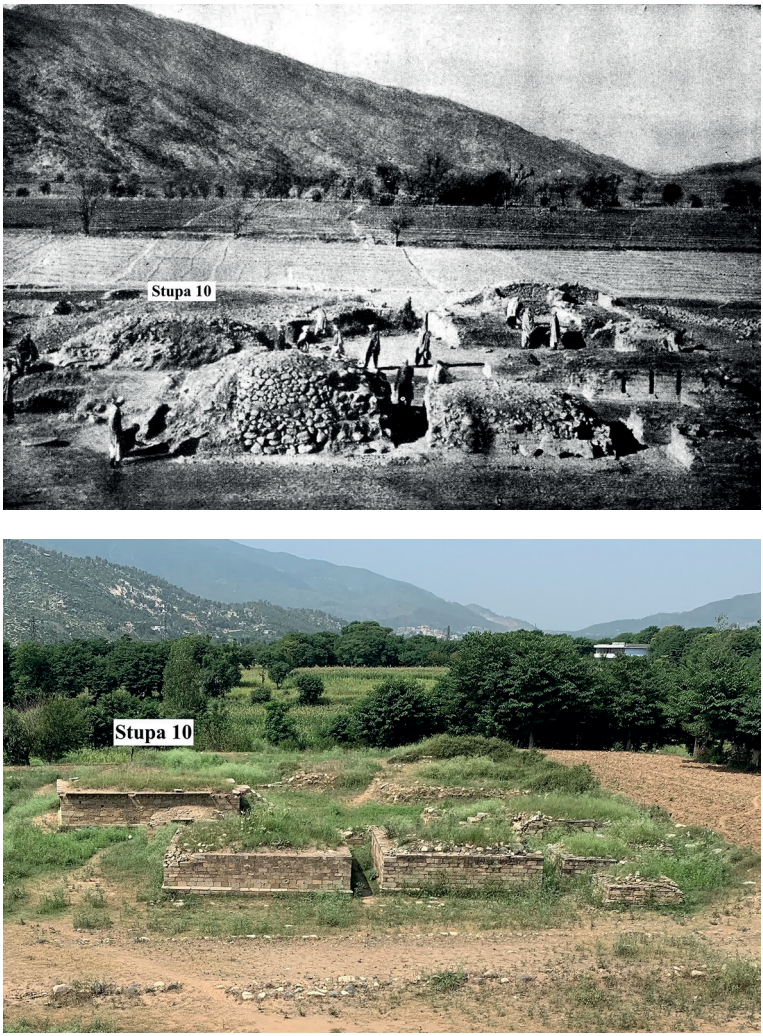


Figure 2 a: The stupa court of Andan Dheri seen from the east in 1966. After Dani 1968-69, pl. 2a.
b: The stupa court in 2019. Photo by the Author

Stupa 10 is one of the medium size stupas in the court. Due to changing patterns of neglect and restoration over time, Stupa 10 has changed significantly since its excavation in the late 1960s. For example, the stupa podium now appears rectangular (5.96 × 8.8 m), whereas the archaeological report makes no mention of such deviation from the norm. There, the stupa is described as measuring approximately 6.6 m per side and in the plan the podium was drawn square, not

dissimilarly from all the other secondary stupas (Dani 1968-69, 33-64). It is likely that an oversight in one of the reconstruction campaigns resulted in the elongation of the podium – after all, the structural profile of the monument was extremely ruinous from the start, as can be seen in some of the excavation photos, to the point that it might have been unrecognisable at a later stage when reconstruction was carried out **[fig. 2]**.

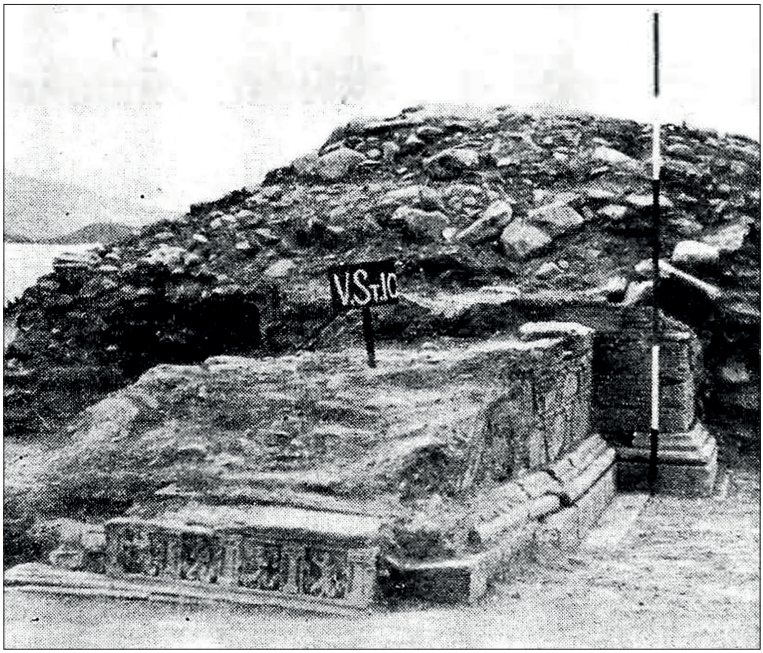


Figure 3 Photo of Stupa 10 during excavation with relief panel *in situ*. After Dani 1968-69, pl. 5c

Most sculptures from the site were either found scattered around the ruinous stupa mounds or had been looted, depriving the monuments of their original décor. The excavators, however, found one *in-situ* panel on the first step of the staircase of Stupa 10, DMC 505 **[fig. 3]**. This panel is a stair-riser depicting a line of four tritons with double fishtails, each in their own field separated by Gandhāran-Corinthian pilasters. The two central tritons are playing musical instruments – a type of *tympanon* and an *aulos* – while the one on the right dances, perhaps holding cymbals; the one on the left is performing the 'Persian snap', a gesture that is often performed by figures appearing on boundary or connecting elements such as stair-risers, cornices, and *nāgadanta*s (Lo Muzio 2019). The panel is now in the Dir Museum of Chakdara **[fig. 4]**.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Figure 4 Unknown artist(s), Relief panel with tritons. Third century CE. Grey schist, 17 × 72.6 cm. Andan Dheri, Stupa 10, Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 505 / ADN 533. © KPDOAM/DiGA CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Figure 5 The restored staircase of Stupa 10 in 2024. Note that the first step is now almost completely buried under the modern ground level. Photo by the Author

Any reconstruction of the original appearance of the staircase of Stupa 10 is necessarily limited, since DMC 505 is the only object found *in situ* and the sculptural pieces retrieved from the vicinity of the stupa are scant. However, we can advance a few hypotheses here by looking at available *comparanda* from the other minor stupas at this same site and others – starting with the built structure. Taking the "Gandhāran step" as the standard measurement (run: 30~32 cm × rise: 16~20 cm) (Faccenna 1995, 168), the original number of steps for the length of the staircase (approximately 2.4 m) was nine (eight plus the landing on top). Indeed, while at the time of excavation only the first step was preserved, nine steps have been restored at the site now **[fig. 5]**.

Figure 6 Unknown artist(s), Relief panels with aquatic imagery (not to scale).
a) Third century CE. Grey schist, 13 × 22.5 × 5 cm. Andan Dheri, Stupa 5 (2), Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 92 / ADN 95. © KPDOAM/DiGA CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum;
b) Second-third century CE. Grey schist, exact dimensions unknown or unrecorded. Shotorak. *in situ*. After Meunié 1942, fig. 70; line drawing of the relief flipped upside down by the Author;
c) Second-third century CE. Grey schist, exact dimensions unknown. Sahri Bahlol, Peshawar Museum, PM 1325. Photo by the Author;
d) Second-third century CE. Serpentinite, 16.8 × 43.2 × 4.8 cm. Buner (?), Metropolitan Museum of Art, 13.96.21. Public Domain

Panel DMC 505 is 72.6 cm long and covers approximately half the total length of the first step (157 cm), meaning that another panel of similar length must have been installed next to this one.[4] The adjacent stair

4 Most of the measurements of the monuments reported here are those I took in person at the site in June 2024. These numbers are approximations, as they are based on the reconstructed structures as they appear today; furthermore, the ground level has also

riser has not survived. However, it is likely that other stair-risers, possibly even the adjacent one, showed more marine creatures, as other surviving stair-risers from the larger corpus of Gandhāran art confirm the popularity of this theme in the décor of staircases. From the vicinity of Stupa 5, for example, comes a slightly smaller fragment with the same subject matter **[fig. 6a]**. The panel is broken at both ends, but it clearly shows a winged double-tailed triton framed by two Gandhāran-Corinthian pilasters that are almost identical to those of DMC 505. This triton is holding an object on his shoulder, perhaps a wineskin. Almost identical is the stair riser found *in situ* in court F at the monastery of Shotorak in Kāpiśa, Afghanistan (but clearly reused: it was found installed upside down) **[fig. 6b]** (Meunié 1942, 14).[5] One other example of tritons, together with dragon-like creatures, is a stair-riser from the monastery of Sahri Bahlol, in the Peshawar Valley **[fig. 6c]**. A different typology of marine deities and/or creatures appear in a couple of stair-risers from the set of the so-called 'Buner reliefs' **[fig. 6d]**.

Other themes on stair-risers also recalled liquescence, albeit in a different context. Winemaking and wine-drinking scenes – known as Dionysiac or Bacchanalian scenes (Brancaccio, Liu 2009; Tanabe 2020) – were often depicted in close spatial association with tritons, ichthyocentaurs and other marine creatures. From Stupa 10, two pieces are related to this theme, DMC 142 and DMC 147.[6] In the former, a vintner is depicted with a wineskin strewn over his shoulder. He is wearing a short tunic and is framed by a Gandhāran-Corinthian pilaster to his right. The latter was a longer panel of which only the central scene, flanked by two pilasters, is fully preserved, though much damaged. Three figures are seen gathered around a large basin or krater on the floor: the one on the right appears to be dancing (possibly performing the Persian snap?), while the one in the center holds a wineskin and the one on the left holds a cup or a pan as he is

risen since the excavation. When possible, I have checked and corrected them against Dani's maps and old photographs in the 1968-69 report – with the caveat that Dani's report is not always reliable (Taddei 1973).

5 The evidence from Shotorak also shows that aquatic imagery in staircases was used from an earlier time well into the late Kushan era. Not only the triton panel was reused, but two stair-side bases (a typology of objects described in detail below) depicting tritons were found *in situ*, but were clearly part of an earlier, much larger staircase that gave access to the main stupa at the site (Stupa F1). The staircase was later reduced in width and the stair-risers were re-used for a new first step added in front of the earlier one (Meunié 1942, 14-15). According to the excavator, the monastery of Shotorak flourished under Kushana rule in the second century CE but was occupied for a long period of time (69-70). Of the few coins retrieved from the site, one is identified as a coin of the Greco-Bactrian king Eukratides (172-145 BCE), one as that of an unidentified Kushan ruler, and a Vāsudeva issue (191-232 CE or 275-300 CE).

6 Images of these and following objects are available at *heidICON*: `https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/`.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

moving towards the basin.[7] Similar pieces with revelry scenes were retrieved from the stupa court (DMC 459, DMC 506, DMC 4, DMC 126) but, with the exception of DMC 126 coming from the vicinity of Stupa 1, all these pieces have no precise provenance.

The role of wine-related imagery is complex and multivalent not only in the Buddhist context but also within the pre- or non-Buddhist, Kafir-Dardic cultural substratum of the Swat Valley (Tucci 1977; Klimburg 2016; Filigenzi 2019), and is intimately connected to geographic features in the Swat Valley. As the water imagery recalls the fluvial nature of the landscape around the monasteries, wine imagery, too, speaks of the social and ecological networks that Buddhist monasteries inhabited, surrounded by verdant agricultural lands where viniculture took place, often under the direct supervision of the Buddhist monastic communities (Falk 2009; Coloru, Iori, Olivieri 2024). Wine imagery is also clearly related to revelry and merry-making, which seems to be the overarching connecting thread between wine-enjoyers and tritons, who are themselves engaged in dancing and music playing, and sometimes even drinking.

Other likely stair-risers (on the basis of form, framing devices, and dimensions), whose detailed findspot has not been recorded, pertain to two more thematic categories: the first is that of procession of human 'types' – nobles, ascetics, soldiers (e.g. DMC 200, DMC 161, DMC 44, DMC 45, DMC 48); the second is that of phytomorphic and/or geometric designs (e.g. DMC 239, DMC 463, DMC 483, DMC 486).[8] Since it is unclear at this stage which ones of these panels might have belonged to the staircase of Stupa 10, I prefer to leave a discussion of their role and significance to future investigation.[9] In general, however, we can point out that the iconographic apparatus of stair risers is both varied and complex, and ranges from explicit and direct representations of beholders themselves engaged in ritual performances to complex ornamentation that might have merged a decorative impetus with finer symbolic meaning(s). The aquatic imagery on stair risers, therefore, appears embedded within a sophisticated system of symbolic figuration that has been uncovered only in part.

7 A similar scene is seen in a relief from Kafir-Kot now in the British Museum (BM 1899,0609.11).

8 Phytomorphic-geometric design appears on stair-risers found *in situ* in the site of Aziz Dheri in Swabi (Khan 2010).

9 Other scenes that usually appear on stair-risers involve *jātaka* stories, like the sets found in Jamālgaṛhi (Errington 2022) or Sahri Bahlol – most are now in the Peshawar Museum. No *jātaka*s have been identified in the stair-riser corpus from Andan Dheri.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Figura 7 Unknown artist(s), Strings from Andan Dheri Stupa 10.
a) Third century CE. Grey schist, 10 × 13 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 138 / ADN 144b;
b) Third century CE. Grey schist, 14.5 × 11 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 145 / ADN 151;
c) Third century CE. Grey schist, 19 × 15.5 × 5 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 143 / ADN 149;
d) Third century CE. Grey schist, 10.5 × 12 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 146 / ADN 151.
All photos: © KPDOAM/DiGA CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Other objects from Stupa 10 pertaining to the aquatic category are some triangular panels that served as strings, the lateral element framing each step of a staircase below the banister. Of the original corpus, which must have totalled to sixteen strings, only four were found in relation to Stupa 10: DMC 138 (a winged beast with a chest mane), DMC 145 (a winged beast with a dog or *makara* head),[10] DMC 143 (a young beardless ichthyocentaur), and DMC 146 (only the coiled fish-tail is preserved) **[fig. 7]**. They were all part of the left-side banister structure. Among the ten other strings retrieved from the site whose exact *in situ* location cannot be ascertained, at least two seem to be

10 On the dog head in relation to aquatic creatures, see Minardi 2016.

related to this specific staircase in terms of dimensions and style: DMC 7 (from the left side once again) and DMC 475 (from the right side) **[fig. 8]**. In general, from the totality of strings retrieved from the site (twenty-two objects), only one depicts a terrestrial animal (a lion). Only the head is preserved, so it is impossible to know whether it had a fish-tail – examples of lion-fish hybrid creatures in the Gandhāran mythological bestiary are rare, but not unseen.[11]

Figure 8 Unknown artist(s), Additional strings, possibly from Andan Dheri Stupa 10. Left: Third century CE. Grey schist, exact dimensions unrecorded. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 7 / ADN 6. Right: Third century CE. Grey schist, 10.5 × 13.5 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 475 / ADN 500. All photos: © KPDOAM/DiGA CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

The last relevant object retrieved from Stupa 10 is an 'L-shaped' stone block with curved ends in the shape of a reversed 'S', DMC 149 (approximately height 19 × width 19 × length 37 cm) **[fig. 9a]**. Only one of the longer sides is decorated and shows a winged triton with double fishtails turning to his right; he is either holding something in his right hand or he is dancing, while his left hand rests on his hip. This typology of objects, still generally misunderstood in the literature as generic pedestals or weights, should be securely identified as stair-side elements, one of the parts of the architecture of stupa stairways (Brancaccio 2018). DMC 149 was the base of the left-side banister – it thus makes sense that the triton, being sculpted on the outward-facing side, is looking to his right towards the rise of the staircase and, therefore, towards the stupa. I believe the

11 See for example, the corner animals below in Figure 12b. A small body of strings from Sahri Bahlol, now in the Peshawar Museum, include at least two birds among the more common set of marine beasts (PM Acc. No. 2908 and 2937). It is impossible to say with precision what type of birds they are – they both show a hooked beak typical of eagles (are they *garudas*?) but have long necks and plump chests, not too dissimilar from geese. Perhaps they are intended to be *haṃsa*s, aquatic migratory birds (either the bar-headed goose or the mute swan) often seen in Hindu iconography as vehicles of Brahma, the river goddess Sarasvati or the divine architect Viśvakarma.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

corresponding right-side object to this one has been found at the site, despite not being recorded as associated with Stupa 10. This is DMC 150: not only it mirrors the first stair-side base, but the dimensions of the object, the sculptural style and the subject matter – a similar triton engaged in dancing or playing music – all conform to DMC 149 **[fig. 9b]**.[12] The front side of both objects show a weight-bearing squatting figure in a square field.

Figure 9 Unknown artist(s), Stair-side elements from Andan Dheri Stupa 10.
a) Third century CE. Grey schist, 19 × 37 × 19 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 149 / ADN 157;
b) Third century CE. Grey schist, 19 × 22 × 19 cm. Dir Museum of Chakdara, DMC 150 / ADN 158.
All photos: © KPDOAM/DiGA CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

12 Other stair-side elements retrieved from the site are DMC 365/AND 383 (depicting a double-tailed triton); DMC 523 ADN M17 (no décor/too abraded); DMC 494 ADN 519 (depicting a double-tailed triton); DMC 222/ADN 231 (depicting a double-tailed triton); DMC 101/AND 105 is a stair-side element too, but the lower part of the object has not survived. Associated with Stupa 5, it depicts three lotus flowers on the decorated part. It is thinner than other stair-side bases and does not have the characteristic 'L' shape of the other bases in Andan Dheri; however, a similar example of this type of object with a similar thinness was found *in situ* in Pānṛ (Faccenna, Khan, Nadiem 1993, pl. 82a).

These elements, though extremely fragmentary at a first glance, allow a tentative reconstruction of the original look of at least the initial part of Stupa 10 staircase. I have illustrated two visualizations of Stupa 10 in Figure 10.

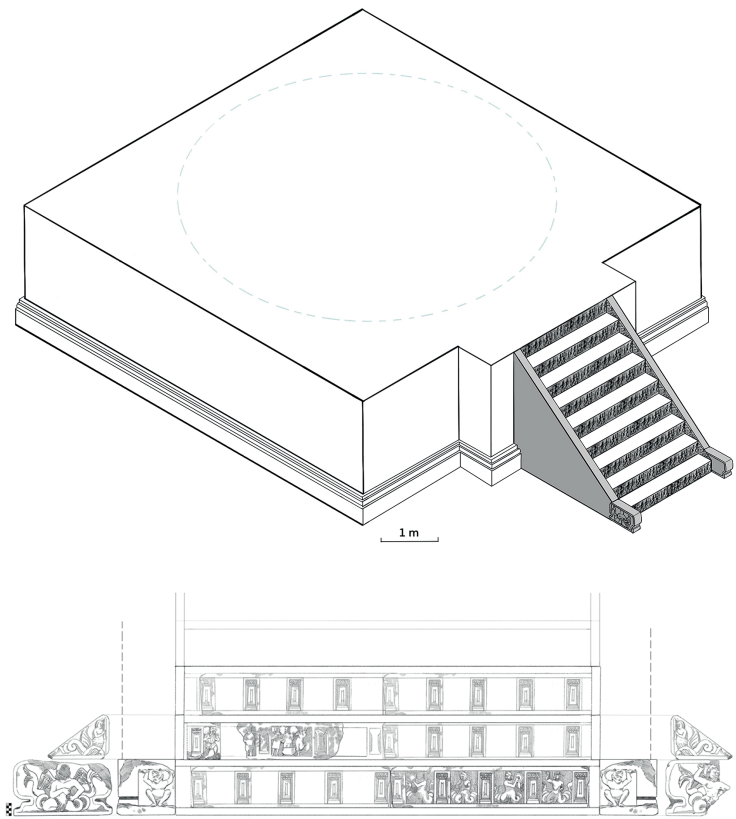


Figure 10 Hypothetical reconstruction of Andan Dheri Stupa 10. a: Isometric view of staircase and podium volumes; b: and frontal view of the first steps. Line drawings by the Author

3 Aquatic Imagery at the Threshold to *Nirvāṇa*

As discussed so far, despite the fragmentary state of the corpus, a sizeable portion of the objects that made up the iconographic program of staircases directly depicted aquatic creatures or was related to marine imagery. The presence of this type of aquatic imagery in a Buddhist context has puzzled many for a long time. Southworth (2016)

has connected Gandhāran marine imagery to the figure of the *ketos* and other Greco-Roman sea monstrosities, arguing that sea imagery was intimately connected to Hellenism not only in form but also in meaning: as tritons and ichthyocentaurs acted as psychopomps in that context, so they did in the funerary context of a stupa. Tanabe (2002; 2003), specifically in relation to similar images on toilet-trays or cosmetic palettes, also argued that *ketos*-like figures symbolized the journey of the soul across the Great Ocean but connected it to the goal of reaching Sukhāvatī (the Pure Land of Buddha Amitābha). Galli (2011) saw the use of aquatic mythological creatures as part of a strategy of appropriation of Hellenistic court imagery by local elites. Olivieri and Iori (2021), too, have argued that marine figures, together with Dyonisiac and Iranian imagery, were part of a strategy by patrons and urban actors to stage their political and social power by employing the Hellenistic and Greco-Iranian imagery as symbolic capital to strengthen their social and political position. Following Boardman's (1986; 1987) analysis of similar motifs in the West, others like Pons (2011), perhaps unsatisfied with the partiality of these interpretations, have rejected any deeper meaning to the images of sea-monsters and have deemed them as basic motifs of purely decorative value.

One cannot agree with the specificity of Tanabe's Sukhāvatī reference in all cases of water imagery, even though the Mahāyāna currents the reference recalls are both chronologically and geographically relevant for Gandhāra (Schopen 1987; Rhi 2003; 2005; 2011a; 2023). The iconographic program of Stupa 10 in Andan Dheri does not show any specific reference to Pure or Buddha-lands – indeed, it is quite in line with the narrative art that was especially popular in the Swat Valley and that centered around the historical Buddha's *res gestae* (Taddei 2015).[13] However, the rising popularity of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Gandhāra around the turn of the first millennium certainly played a part in redefining some aspects of devotion, such as direct approach to devotional icons as well as a renewed emphasis on crossing boundaries in the physical worlds to reach higher realms. The apparent conformity to Classical or Hellenistic iconography tells us about the persistence of certain images, and perhaps of certain mythologies, as it showcases the movement of symbols and their transfer across cultures and across time. However, it does not shed any light on the meaning and role of this type of aquatic imagery in a Buddhist context. On the other hand,

13 The remains from the stupa décor on top of the podium are incredibly scant, but some exist, and hint to the narrative nature of the frieze on the stupa drum. See for example, DMC 153, a stacked relief with people conversing on top and four unidentified figures at the bottom; DMC 144, another stacked relief showing the Great Departure; DMC 152, which only preserves the top register with a mundane scene.

it is also difficult to agree with the dismissal of this imagery as 'just décor', since the assumption that decorative motifs do not bear any meaning would overlook the patent popularity of an entire category of imagery located at important transitional spaces in the stupa. I see no reason to doubt that Hellenistic and Greco-Iranian motifs were used as part of a strategy of social and political self-representation, as Galli, Olivieri and Iori argue. However, these solutions fail to consider the architectural and doctrinal contexts of aquatic imagery. I also want to suggest, then, that rather than being non-Buddhist motifs, all these images do have a Buddhist meaning that finds efficacy in the metaphorical cachet of aquatic imagery.[14]

I present my argument here in two stages which stem from two interrelated, but slightly divergent points – one visual, one textual. The first point is that aquatic imagery is a function of liminality. In this case, I refer to visual *comparanda* from other objects, not necessarily related to staircase décor. The second point is that the necessary association between aquatic imagery and staircases, hinged upon the liminal nature of both, stems from metaphorical acts that deploy physical movement as symbolic matter – here, it is in the Buddhist canonical and para-canonical texts that evidence can be found. Combining these lines of inquiry suggests that, in the Gandhāran context, architecture, sculpture and the devotee's physical movement could embody – even effect – a spiritual transformation: movement in space, passage through a built and sculpted environment, became Buddhistic praxis.

3.1 Functions of Liminality

The stele in Figure 11 is one of the most famous objects from Gandhāra: the excellent quality of the carving and the virtuosity displayed by the sculptor in creating depth makes this stele one of the masterpieces of its time. Known as the Muhammad Nāri stele, this large object depicts with great vivacity a tableau of the Buddha in his realm among many supernatural beings. The Buddha sits on a large lotus at the centre of the scene, surrounded by a heavenly host of bodhisattvas and *deva*s: some of them are engaged in conversation with one another, others are looking at the Buddha in adoration or are blinded by the light he is emanating, others still are offering garlands

14 The significance of aquatic imagery in the early South Asian context is not touched upon in this article, which is concerned with Buddhist specificities as they pertain to staircase architecture. However, one cannot forget the fundamental role of water in South Asian cosmology and cosmogony, as both structural foundation of the universe and life-giver matter (Coomaraswamy 1993; Mitra 2023) – aspects that are certainly relevant for the Buddhist imaginary as well.

and flowers. A large flowering tree towers above the Buddha's head, surrounded by flying spirits. Two additional Buddhas and their emanations hover above on the highest register, set in roundels on top of small lotuses.

Figure 11 Unknown artist(s), *Muhammad Nari stele*. Third-fourth century CE. Grey schist, 119 × 97 × 28 cm. Exact provenance unknown, Lahore Museum. Photo by the Author

The stele has been the subject of many discussions, especially with regard to the identity of the central Buddha, variously identified with Śākyamūni in his cosmic aspect, or in his *saṃbhogakāya* aspect (the 'body of enjoyment' or the 'body of limitless form'), Amitābha in Sukhāvatī (the Western Pure Land), Akṣobhya in Abhirati (the

Eastern Pure Land), or even the Buddha of the past Dīpaṅkara at the moment of enlightenment (Huntington 1980; Rhi 1991; 2023; Harrison, Luczanits 2012; Vendova 2023). This is a debate I do not intend to rehash, as it goes beyond the point of my current discussion and I am content with Rhi's assessment that this and similar steles represent a theophanic vision, that is, "a grand vision of a Buddha […] who has been elevated to the status of supramundane being" (2011, 115). For the sake of my argument, I focus instead on the visual mechanisms that are implemented in the stele to signal boundaries and their crossing as a significant spiritual act; I argue that these boundaries are not only visualized through aquatic imagery, but that they also made the water realm into an explicit symbol of liminality.

The Muhammad Nāri stele represents a form of the Buddha that does not inhabit the current plane of existence, but that lives instead in his own buddha-field or buddha-domains (Skt. *buddhakṣetra*). As Harrison and Luczanits put it, this cosmological Buddha lives in "a different order of reality" (2012, 109). This field, however, becomes visible or accessible to the practitioner only insofar as he or she undergoes a process of spiritual refinement. This point is made explicit, for example, in the Larger *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra* (LSukh), when the Buddha describes the many wondrous details of Sukhāvatī to his disciple Ānanda.[15] He tells him that

> *yaśca* […] *ākāṅkṣeta kulaputro vā kuladuhitā vā kimityahaṃ dṛṣṭa eva dharme tamamitābhaṃ tathāgataṃ paśyeyamiti, tenānuttarāyāṃ samyaksaṃbodhau cittamutpādya adhyāśayātiśayatayā saṃtatyā tasmin buddhakṣetre cittaṃ saṃpreṣya upapattaye kuśalamūlāni ca pariṇāmayitavyāni*. (LSukh 27)[16]

> if […] any son or daughter of a good family should wish, "How then may I see that Tathagata Amitabha visibly?" then he must raise his thoughts on to the highest perfect knowledge, he must direct his thought with perseverance and excessive desire towards that Buddha country and direct the stock of his good works towards being born there. (Transl. by Mueller 1894, 45)

Towards the end of the *sūtra*, Ānanda asks Śākyamūni to see Amitābha in Sukhāvatī, but it is Amitābha himself who, upon hearing of this desire, shines his light forth: Ānanda can finally see this magnificent realm "through to the Buddha's power, due to the

15 The LSukh is one of the oft-cited sources for the imagery in this stele: cf. particularly Huntington 1980.

16 The Sanskrit text is from Vaidya 1961, 221-53.

purity of his light".[17] The vision is reciprocal: Ānanda and the other beings in this world, called Sahāloka, see Amitābha in Sukhāvatī, and all beings in Sukhāvatī see Sahāloka and Śākyamūni (Mueller 1894, 61). The LSukh makes explicit that to gain a direct vision of the buddha-domain, a practitioner must attain a comprehension of higher knowledges and secure a Buddha's intercession.

In the Muhammad Nāri stele, this intercession is depicted in the upper right section. There, Buddha Śākyamūni, accompanied by the loyal Vajrapāṇi, is shown ushering in the vision of the field to one of his disciples. Most recently, Vendova (2023) identifies this specific disciple with Mahāmaudgalyāyana, according to the description of Dīpaṅkara's enlightenment in the *Mahāvastu*, but the generic nature of the image makes it that it could also very well be Ānanda, or any other practitioner intent on this spiritual path. It is worth noting that in these revelation images, the interlocutor-practitioner is always a monk, someone who had explicitly renounced the everyday world and was expected to attain higher knowledges.

Another point of access to the theophanic vision, however, is across the pond at the bottom of the stele. The lower register of the stele depicting the pond is arguably the most direct limit that the beholder traverses, at least metaphorically.[18] As the revelation scene above did by depicting a monk, the bottom register showcases human agents, too: among the characters flanking the lotus stem upon which the Buddha is sitting are a woman and a man. They are two of the very few characters in this stele who do not sport a halo behind their head.[19] These figures are intended to represent the donors of the stele, one of the many wealthy couples of Gandhāra who became benefactors of the monastery which once held this object (Harrison, Luczanits 2012, 107). Even though perhaps very few lay visitors of a monastery could fully identify with the wealthy couple, within the economy of the stele these two figures are the closest to any (very human) beholder who might happen to stand in front of it. Together with the monk, they

17 LSukh 39: *buddhānubhāvena tasyāḥ prabhāyāḥ pariśuddhatvāt*.

18 It is now impossible to recover the original *in situ* location of this object, however, its large dimensions (height 119 × width 97 × depth 28 cm) make it likely that it was positioned within a large chapel or shrine, either around the perimeter of a stupa court or within the monastic dwelling area or, alternatively, against the drum of a large stupa. In both cases, the stele would have been placed on a pedestal of some sort, elevating it from the ground level or from the level of the platform inside a chapel. The beholder would probably have encountered the Buddha's gaze either at eye-level or from a slightly lowered position. Given the dimensions of the stele, the Buddha might have not been too elevated, but in any case, the bottom register with the aquatic scene would have been the closest to the beholder.

19 All other halo-less figures are clearly recognisable as non-human spirits or demigods through other iconographical features.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

are the only two human actors who have managed to cross over into the Buddha's realm.

The boundary the donors have crossed to get access to this cosmic *buddhakṣetra* is one marked by a watery realm. The two, each on top of a lotus flower, stand on each side of the Buddha's lotus throne. Their lotuses rise from the tumultuous waters of a large pond or lake. In the pond, fish and *nāga*s swim among the waves and a couple of ducks fight the whirlpools.[20] Two more *nāga*s with their cobra hoods emerge from the waters, their bodies still halfway submerged.[21] Water plants and flowers float on the moving surface of the pond. In the visual economy of this stele, the boundary between the worlds of the viewer and that of the Buddha is explicitly marked by aquatic imagery and the implication here is that the beholder who wants to attend to the Buddha as part of his divine host must traverse the watery realm that separates them from him.

The reference to bodies of water – ponds, oceans, rivers – is explicit in the description of *buddhakṣetra*s as they appear in the LSukh and in other texts pertaining to similar Mahāyāna traditions. In the LSukh, Śākyamūni describes to Ānanda all the different kinds of sweet-smelling rivers that make the landscape lovely in many details (LSukh 18); the *Avataṃsaka sūtra*, one of the longest Mahāyāna texts composed or collated in Central Asia (Hamar 2007, 163-4), offers numerous descriptions of the million wondrous ponds, pools, and reservoirs across the many buddha-worlds, filled with all kinds of beautiful birds and flowers, made of precious metals,

20 Regarding the ambiguous shape of *nāga*s, Saxena (2021, 225-6) has shown that *nāga*s often appear in three forms: as multi-headed snakes; as humans covered by a snake hood; as hybrids with human upper body and a coiled snake tail. All three *nāga* forms appear in Gandhāran art. On this specific issue cf. also Sharma 2014.

21 There are two more figures, male and female, flanking the stem: the female on the proper right is holding her hands (now damaged) in front of her chest in a gesture of prayer; her exact role and identity are unclear. The male on the proper left is touching the lotus stem, applying jewels to it. He is holding something in his right hand, but it is unclear what this is meant to be: Harrison and Luczanits (2012, 80) talk of a *rython*, but both the zoomorphic head of the object and the crisscross finish of its body appears closer to the cornucopia that Hārītī (or Ardoxšo) is sometimes seen holding (cf. in the Ashmolean Museum EA1962.42 or at the British Museum 1950,0726.2). The object top, however, does not open in a *rython* or a cornucopia mouth, but unusually drapes over and around the man's shoulders. Could it be another marine creature? If it is, it is certainly a hybrid of many forms, donning a dog head with one (or two?) sets of horns and a snake body. On the dog head appearing on marine creatures, I have already cited Minardi (2016), but I'd like to add a comparison with a similar horned beast (a dragon figure?) appearing in a relief from Sahri Bahlol (Stein 1914, pl. XVa), now in the Peshawar Museum. The act of holding a marine creature in one's hand is somewhat significant, albeit unclear: among the boatmen depicted on the stair-risers in the group of the Buner reliefs (see specifically 13.96.21 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and 1889,1016.1 at the British Museum), two are holding a fish in their raised hand in a similar fashion to the figure in the stele, with the head of the fish resting in the palm and the body coiling up vertically and partly draping over the forearm.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

emitting a sweet smell of sandalwood from the fragrant mud that covered their bottom, and so on and so forth (Cleary 1993, *passim*). It is not surprising that depictions of marine environments feature prominently in the making of such cosmic visions of buddha-fields like the Muhammad Nāri stele, which is clearly intended to recall one of these fantastic cosmic realms.

Figure 12 Unknown artist(s), Relief panels, part of a false niche or false gable. a) Second-third century CE. Grey schist, 61 × 68.62 cm. Landi. Peshawar Museum, PM 02809, donated by P.G.G. Pipon, Esquire, I.C.S; b) Second-third century CE. Grey-blue schist, 56 × 44.47 cm. Exact provenance unknown, Peshawar Museum, PM 02788. Photos by the Author

Marine imagery preserves its liminality even when it is *not* directly tied to a water environment that separates the beholder's reality from that of a Buddha. This is the case, for example, of the objects shown in Figure 12, both top parts of complex relief panels once affixed onto a stupa drum. The two are quite similar, both in terms of dimensions and use of figurative space: the main scene is at the bottom, enclosed in a semi-circle – one depicts the conversion of *nāga* Apalāla **[fig. 12a]**, the other the Buddha's descent from Trāyastriṃśa Heaven **[fig. 12b]**. Above these scenes in each panel, two superimposed lunettes depict scenes of worship developing around a central object or Buddha.[22]

22 The exact identification of the episodes depicted above the descent from Trāyastriṃśa is unclear and one of them is heavily damaged; they are perhaps meant to represent Buddha preaching in heaven right before he comes back down on the tripartite staircase. The scenes above Apalāla's conversions might be related to the story of how the Buddha's bowl came to be guarded and worshiped by the *nāga*s. According to one tradition reported in the *Nidānakathā*, after eating the milk-rice given to him by Sujātā, Śākyamūni put his bowl in the river, where it first floated upstream and then sank to the riverbed, where it was taken by the *nāga* king Kāḷa (Ānandajoti 2020, 174). According to another version, while in *Śrī Laṅkā*, Faxian heard that the Buddha's bowl was in Gandhāra, but that after many peregrinations across the Buddhist world, it would eventually come in the hands of a *nāga* king, who will guard it until Maitreya's advent (Beal [1884] 2013, lxxviii). In the top lunette, the bowl is set upon a draped table

In both panels, the corners of the lunettes are inhabited by marine creatures: ichthyocentaurs in Figure 12a and lion-fish hybrids in Figure 12b. Each beast is nested in the narrow and angular leftover space created by the shape of the arch and closes the rear end of worshipers' processions moving towards the central ritual focus. In way, they are signalling the limits of these acts of worship made by the human actors within the figurative space of the lunettes.

These figures and their inherent visual malleability make them the natural choice for interstices: their coiling tail can be manipulated easily by the artist who must fill the leftover space of corners or frames. But the ease with which this type of imagery is made to fit borders and boundaries is not only a function of their form, it is also attached to their meaning as creatures that exist within movement and transition – from their form, stuck between human and non-human, to the space they inhabit, the ever-changing and ever-flowing watery realms that are close enough to the human world yet just beyond human reach. Indeed, it seems that the marine imagery – were it a *nāga*, a hippocamp, an ichthyocentaur – is so inherently associated with the threshold that it becomes the most natural symbol for it.

When I say that aquatic imagery is a *function* of liminality, then, I mean that this plethora of sea creatures and riverine theriomorphic characters are an index of the marginal by virtue of inhabiting and shaping its space. Their positionality within the visual economy of the Gandhāran visual language signals the boundary and the threshold. The topic has been investigated recently by Stefano Beggiora in the early South Asian context; building on the "Monster Theory", which takes the monstruous and the prodigious as necessary qualities in transformation and transition (Cohen 1996), Beggiora writes that

> [the *nāga*s'] liminal function is emphasised by the fact that they come from the netherworld, but also that through them the individual can make a qualitative leap, transforming himself. On the other hand, the theme of transformation is in some way specular between the parties, in the sense that some myths of the *nāga*s seem almost to re-propose the theme of the siren–or mermaid-like creatures well-known in other cultures–which loses

and is being venerated by many (note, however, that no figure in the lunettes don the cobra hood that is typical of the *nāga*s' depictions; except for the ichthyocentaurs in the corners, no other figure is directly connected to a water environment here). In the bottom lunette, the scene is difficult to identify with certainty: the garb and headgear worn by the figures is difficult to discern and, therefore, their gender (especially that of the figure right next to the Buddha on the proper right) remains ambiguous: could it be the scene of Sujātā offering the milk-rice to Śākyamūni before his enlightenment? In this case, however, the Buddha would still be a bodhisattva. Could it be the Buddha being offered four bowls by the *lokapāla*s? The question remains open.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

> its tail after joining a mortal, in a context, however, of intimate sacrifice and spiritual transformation. (2022, 148)

The liminal significance of the water realm, sublimated in the figure of the *nāga*, is compounded upon by the secondary role it assumes in relation to the primacy of Buddhism: cults related to water, rivers, and the natural world in general were historically tamed and integrated within the Buddhist worldview (Brancaccio 1999; Shaw 2004). A popular *nāga* cult existed in the North-West before the advent of Buddhism, when it was both supplanted by and integrated in it – in some instances, archaeological evidence has been found of Buddhist structures physically superseding earlier cultic spaces dedicated to the chthonic and marine deities at the turn of the first millennium (Saxena 2021, 230-1; Singh 2004). Therefore, it is not surprising to see aquatic creatures that can be deemed as *nāga*s themselves or as part of their aquatic entourages appear in the art of Gandhāra as frequently as they do in subjugated positions of transition, where they are put to mark passage by virtue of being trampled on, surpassed, and crossed over.

Indeed, it is the idea of crossing over and superseding boundaries that is inherent in the transformative nature of the *limen* that makes water imagery particularly apt for spaces of passage. This transformative nature assumes a specific meaning within the spiritual economy of Buddhism. It is to this aspect – the Buddhist specificities of water imagery – that I now turn.

3.2 To Cross Over, to Flow Into: Waterways to Liberation

It is my argument that, in the décor program of a stupa, the necessary association between staircases and aquatic imagery (hinged upon the liminal nature of both) stems from metaphorical acts that make physical movement into a spiritual matter. To prove this claim, I first look at the rich Buddhist literary realm and explore the aquatic metaphors used there to describe the process of spiritual refinement and the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. In a second moment, I explore how these metaphors are woven into the religious architecture of stupas.

A very popular group of metaphors for *nirvāṇa* are those related to bodies of water. As shown by Collins (1982, 249-61), they are of two types, one negative and one positive: in the former, the water is seen as something to combat and overcome, while in the latter it is invested with the positive attributes of the final spiritual goal. Within the positive group, one of the most enduring and successful metaphors of the Buddhist soteriological message is that of *nirvāṇa* as "the other shore" or "the far shore" (Skt. and Pāḷi *pāra*; alternatively,

also "dry land", Skt. *sthala*, Pāli *thala*).[23] The semantic field here refers to a riverine landscape: if the far shore is *nirvāṇa*, then the near shore is the present moment in the practitioner's life when he or she is still imbricated in the many and impure *dharma*s of the world. The fast-flowing waters of the river are an expansion of the near bank, as they stand for the chaos of *saṃsāra* stopping one from reaching the other shore safely.

The real spiritual transformative act in the context of this metaphor lies in the physical movement that brings the practitioner from the near shore to the far one: the act of 'crossing over' itself is repleted with spiritual significance, a fact not lost on early Buddhist commentators. An anonymous Gandhāran monk explained liberation with these words:

> *[*ti]ṇo, muto, śato, vimutida*. (CKM 9)
>
> Crossed over, liberated, calm means 'the state of liberation'. (Transl. by Baums 2009, 329)[24]

The word translated here as 'crossed over' is *tiṇo*, which corresponds in Skt. to *tīrṇa* and in Pāli to *tiṇṇa*. The verbal root √*tṝ*, whence both they come from, has been analyzed as such:

> √*tṝ* in its primary denotation entails the idea that its agent crosses a place by moving from one specific point to another. In the context of a river, these two points are understood to be the hither bank and the opposite shore. The banks do not have to be mentioned explicitly. In other words, it suggests a movement perpendicular to the riverbanks. The crossing expressed by the root √*tṝ* thus implies a spatial tension and appears to demand a certain (physical) effort of its agent. (Maes 2022, 58)

In the metaphorical language of liberation, the movement implied with √*tṝ* lends itself quite aptly to explain the goal of 'going beyond' of one who has fully embraced the process of perfecting with the goal of liberation. The Buddhist canon constantly stresses movement and motion as indicators of a practitioner always journeying, always striving in their process of spiritual refinement: the Buddhist path is for going and growth, not for standing still (Horner 1947, 138).

23 In some cases, the other shore becomes the island of *nirvāṇa* (Skt. *dvīpa*, Pāli *dīpa*): see for example *Dhammapada* 25: "By hard work and diligence, by restraint and by self-control, a smart person would build an island that the floods cannot overflow" (Transl. by Sujato 2023, 6).

24 This text, according to Baums (2009), is a commentary on a miscellaneous collection of verses that have parallels in the *Kṣudraka Āgama* of the Dharmaguptaka school.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

But crossing over is a notoriously difficult, painstaking, and laborious process, and many fail to leave this shore behind. See for example these verses from the Pāḷi *Dhammapada*:

> *Appakā te manussesu*
> *ye janā pāragāmino*
> *Athāyaṁ itarā pajā*
> *Tīramevānudhāvati*. (*Dhammapada* 85)
>
> Among humans few are those
> who cross to the other shore.
> The rest just run around
> along the near bank. (Author's transl.)

Following in this visual cachet that relates the strenuous process needed to cross over to the far shore, another popular image often used in this semantic context is that of the flood (Skt. and Pāḷi *ogha*). In these metaphors, the Buddha (or the accomplished practitioner) is described as someone who has "overcome the flood" (Skt. and Pāḷi *oghātiga*) or "crossed the flood" (Skt. *oghatīrṇa*, Pāḷi *oghatiṇṇa*). In discussing the meaning of *ogha* in relation to the latent defilements carried over into one's life from the previous ones (Skt. *anuśaya*), the Gandhāran Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu (fourth-fifth century CE) stressed the inescapable violence of this image in his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (The Treasury of the Abhidharma with Its Self-Commentary):

> *adhimātravegatvādoghāḥ tarhi tadvānuhyate tadanuvidhānāt*. (Kośa 308|21)[25]
>
> The *anuśaya*s are called *ogha*s because of their unstoppable force: in fact, just like that, they trample anything that yields [to their impulses]. (Author's transl.)

Closely related to the flood, and just as treacherous, is the image of the ocean. In the *Buddhacarita* (Life of the Buddha), a poem written by the Buddhist monk Aśvaghoṣa in the first century CE, the ocean is qualified as the "ocean of existence" (Skt. *bhavasāgara*; cf. for example verse 13.8) or "ocean of suffering" (Skt. *duḥkhārṇava*, verses 1.70 and 12.9).[26] A stanza from the *Dharmapada* in the Split Collection

25 The reference for the Skt. text is to page and line of the text as edited in Pradhan 1967.

26 The same compound is also used in verse 9.24 to refer to Śuddodhana's grief after Siddhartha has left the palace. The *Buddhacarita* has been translated by Olivelle (2008).

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, Supplement, November 2025, 165-204
e-ISSN 2385-3042

describes this chaotic and dangerous ocean of existence in vivid details:

Ekamulo du .. + + +
+ + + + + + + +
Samudro badaśavaṭo
*Padalo pa[dari munj*i. (CKM 369)[27]

One is the root, two are the whirlpools,
[three are the stains, five the spreads,]
There are twelve whirlpools in the ocean:
This is the abyss that the sage has crossed. (Author's transl.)

The aquatic vision conjured here depicts a sea that is choppy and stormy, where twelve whirlpools (the six internal and the six external sense-bases, Skt. *āyatana*s) await the seafarer practitioner. But that is not the only danger: craving (the one root), pain and pleasure (the two whirlpools), lust, hatred and delusion (the three stains), and sense-pleasures (the five spreads) also lurk in the abyss to prevent the practitioner to cross the deep ocean and reach the other shore safely.

Therefore, to help the practitioner make this treacherous traverse, oftentimes the image of a boat or, alternatively, a raft is conjured in relation to the crossing of the river or flood. The Khotan *Dhammapada* states:

sija bhikhu ima nama
sita di lahu lahu bheṣidi
chetva raka ji doṣa ji
tado nivaṇa eṣidi. (CKM 77)

O monk, bail out this boat.
Bailed out, it will become light.
Having cut off passion and evil,
it will go to *nirvāṇa*. (Transl. by Lenz 2003, 56)

It is unclear what exactly the boat or the raft stand for in this metaphor; perhaps the ambiguity of the significance is part of its semantic multivalence. Sometimes it is intended as the body and mind of the practitioner, which can be refined through practice to deliver them to liberation. It is known that many meditation techniques based on the examination of the body, such as the meditation on

References to the text are from this work.

27 CKM 369. Given the lacunae of the text, my translation is based on the parallel passage in SN 1.44, the *Ekamūla sutta*. The Ghd. text is reconstructed by Falk 2015, 47.

the foul (Skt. *aśubha-bhāvana*) and the mindfulness of breathing (Skt. *ānāpānasmṛti*) were known and practiced in the Buddhist North-West (Dhammajoti 2009, 284-95; Fa 2019; Anālayo 2022, 33-5). Alternatively, the boat can also stand for the teachings of the Buddha, the *Dharma* itself, and the entire system of knowledge derived from it that will aid in delivering the practitioner from *saṃsāra*.[28]

In a story preserved in the Gāndhārī manuscript of the *Anavataptagāthā* (Songs of Lake Anavatapta), the image of crossing the river or flood to the other shore is taken out of the metaphorical space and becomes an actual plot point.[29] The sage Yaśas is recounting his past deeds, both good and bad, that lead to his current existence. Being reborn as the son of a wealthy merchant, Yaśas one day became aware of the repulsive nature of the body and of the impermanence of the world. Frantically running outside the house and outside the city, he came to a stop on the banks of a great river, where he saw an ascetic walking on the other side. The ascetic was none other than the Buddha, who addressed him from the far shore:

> "*Ehi kumara ma bhaya id(*u) te (*ṇiru)vadhrodu^{o}*" (CKM 1)
>
> "Come, young man, do not fear! This is your [place] (*without) affliction". (Salomon 2009, 179)

Yaśas responded to the man's call and thought:

> *imaśpi eva takṣaṇo viadaraghe bhav(*idu)^{o} (*ma)ṇ(*i)padua ujita ṇadiritu taritaṇa ^{o}uaghami karuṇio śastu apradipughalu <* ^{o}> tada karuṇio śaste tiṣidu me viditvaṇa ^{o}deśeṣi masuru dharmu cadusacapraghaśaṇo.^{o}* (CKM 1)
>
> At that very moment, [I] was caused to become free from passion. Throwing off [my] jeweled shoes, *I crossed to the [other] bank of the river*, and I approached the compassionate Teacher, the one without a rival. Then the compassionate Teacher, knowing that I was thirsty, proclaimed the sweet Dharma which reveals the four (noble) truths. (Salomon 2009, 179; italics added)

28 A good overview of the uses of boat imagery in the *jātaka*s is given by Shaw (2012). On the imagery of shipwreck and navigation in the context of southern Buddhism, see Shaw 2014.

29 In the *Anavataptagāthā*, the Buddha's major disciples recount their previous lives to show the various karmic entanglements that brought them to the current state of life. There are several versions of the *Anavataptagāthā*, from the Gilgit manuscript corpus to the Central Asian texts found in Xinjiang, to the Chinese *Tripiṭaka*. Accounts of all versions are given by Salomon (2018, 207-8; 2009 with the review by von Hinüber 2010, 90-4).

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Here, the distance between the space of the metaphor and the space of reality – at least within the boundaries of Yaśas' story – are so close as to be virtually null: Yaśas physically moves from the near to the far shore and he also reaches at the same time a higher spiritual level, where he can receive the four noble truths directly from the Buddha – these truths will set him on the right path towards *nirvāṇa*.[30]

As I mentioned above, however, aquatic imagery in relation to *nirvāṇa* also has a positive connotation: *nirvāṇa* here is like the ocean, now seen in a virtuous light, as it shares with it the characteristics of being still and unchanging, immeasurable, and not clinging to anything around it (Collins 1998, 221-2).

In this case, both the near and far shore are intended as just another set of hindrances:

> *yo ecasari na precasari*
> *sar[va iha]* + + + + + + +
> *so bhikhu jaha* + *orapara*
> *urako jiṇa viva tvaya puraṇa*. (CKM 77)[31]
>
> The monk who has not gone too far nor lagged behind
> But has stepped over all the [diversified world]
> Abandons the near and far shore
> Just as a snake leaves behind his old, worn-out skin. (Transl. modified from Lenz 2003, 70)

In this passage both shores are seen as places to keep away from and avoid, to the point that, were the practitioner to be thrown back on one of the shores, their mind would be like a fish, thrashing to escape the rule of Māra.[32] This and similar metaphors that include both shores as hindrances refer to a type of aquatic imagery that not only invoke *nirvāṇa* as the ocean but also – and most poignantly – the practice of spiritual refinement as the stream or river.

30 The role of *karma* in this entire process cannot be understated: Yaśas can cross the river (that is, reach a higher spiritual step) in this life because he has gone through many cycles of rebirth that have matured his *karma* to the point where his mind is now fertile ground for the Buddha's teaching, and liable to receiving them. In the first part of the story, in fact, Yaśas recounts two other previous lives when he was an ascetic living in the wilderness and meditated upon the rotting corpse of a woman and when he was in the Brahma Heaven (Salomon 2018, 223).

31 The text is reconstructed in Brough 1962, 131. Cf. the translation of the parallel verse in the London Dhammapada by Lenz (2003, 70): he translates the relevant term *orapāra* (this side and the other side) as "this life and the next", following the commentarial tradition of the *Niddesa*. However, as Jones has shown (2016, 100-4), there is ambiguity on the exact meaning of the term even among the early commentators.

32 As in *Dhammapada* 34.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

In this context, the practitioner – aptly called a stream-enterer (Skt. *srotāpanna* Pāḷi *sotāpanna*) – has embarked on the dharmic path that leads to final cessation, just like a stream eventually flows on towards and into the ocean. Returning to either shore would mean abandoning the path to liberation. Oftentimes in this metaphor, the practitioner is then compared to a log which must avoid obstacles in the river currents to be able to reach the ocean, just like a devotee must avoid obstacles on the way to reach *nirvāṇa*.

The metaphor of the stream is just as spatial as the one involving the flood: rather than a vertical or perpendicular movement across an obstacle, however, we are now looking at a horizontal or parallel movement of an object between two flanking obstacles. The metaphor of the stream, exemplified above in the passage from the Khotan *Dhammapada*, fits spatially with the refrain "as a snake sheds its old worn-out skin", another popular image used to describe the practitioner who has abandoned the world. The horizontal movement of the snake slithering away in between the boundaries of its old skin replicates in fact the movement of the practitioner moving down the stream between the boundaries of the two riverbanks and towards the ocean of liberation (Jones 2016, 115-16).

Aquatic metaphors are far from unequivocal, in the sense that every image is polysemic and polyvalent, and often every term has two or more complementary and even contradictory referents. The river or stream is both the obstacle of samsaric flow and the path that streamlines the monk towards *nirvāṇa*; the farthest shore is both *nirvāṇa* or another flavor of *saṃsāra*; the ocean is either liberation or the vast and endless cycle of rebirths. Despite the ambiguity, however, all variations of aquatic imagery stress movement – a change of location from one state to the other that is mapped onto spiritual development.

Following in this semantic ambiguity, the spatial implications are two-fold. There are two similar, but diametrically opposed movements implied in the use of water imagery. On the one hand, we have the image of the river (or flood), whose flux is constantly worried by tumultuous and dangerous currents: this body of water must be traversed by any means necessary to reach the far shore, even by using a boat or raft. The implied movement here is a perpendicular one with respect to the river, as it goes across the stream. On the other hand, in the second image of the beneficial ocean, the stream is to be followed in its current which will eventually flow into the seas. The implied movement here is a parallel one, where the practitioner follows along rather than going across, and is ideally equidistant from both dangerous shores.

The architecture of staircases is made to embody both these metaphors in space by virtue of their very form. In this space of passage, the practitioner enacts both the crossing over (the river) and

the flowing into (the ocean). As they go up the stairs, they cross over the aquatic landscape of *saṃsāra* that is shown in the stair-risers, and they leave behind the near shore one step at a time. However, they not only perform the perpendicular movement against the steps, they also perform the parallel movement following the stream of the steps up to the stupa – each string and the creatures within, flanking the beholder as they go up, face towards the stupa as if to guide them to it **[fig. 13]**. The resonance with both types of aquatic metaphors (that of crossing over the flood of *saṃsāra* to reach the far shore of *nirvāṇa* and that of following of the stream towards the ocean of *nirvāṇa*) is clear, as they are indexically represented in the architectural context.

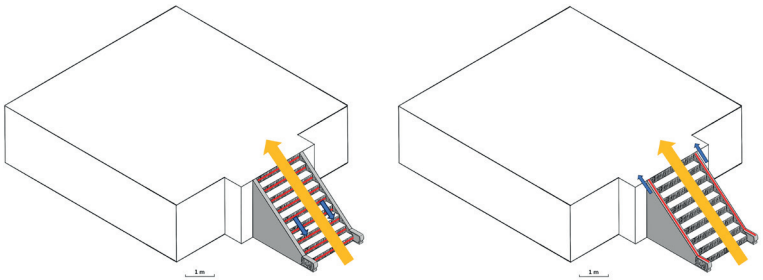


Figure 13 Visualization of the two types of approach on the staircase.
a) cross over: movement against the steps;
b) follow along: movement along the banister.
Line drawings by the Author

The presence of aquatic imagery on the staircase of Stupa 10 in Andan Dheri is not only a nod to its literary counterpart: while it undeniably is in conversation with this religious and literary substratum, it also shows a sophisticated understanding of how the metaphoric language itself can be made to work in a physical setting. Aquatic imagery, located in a specific in the architectural economy of the stupa, makes the physical movement towards it spiritually significant. The metaphor is made architectural as the practitioner embodies the movement of spiritual refinement by literally stepping over the ocean of *saṃsāra* and following along the stream towards *nirvāṇa*. In other words, the staircase deploys space not only as a background for rhetoric, but as a significant metaphorical matter.

4 Conclusions: A Visual Metaphor for Spiritual Refinement

This article makes two direct contributions: one narrower, to the analysis of Buddhist visual language and architecture in Gandhāra, and one broader, to the study of visual metaphors and the discussion of metaphoricity in architecture.

As per the former, I have argued that the aquatic imagery that abounds on stupa staircases is part of a religious and spiritual strategy that centres around the rhetoric of overcoming *saṃsāra* to finally reach the goal of complete cessation, that of *nirvāṇa*. The way in which this salvific strategy is effected is through a careful use of metaphorical visual language in an architectural context. The water imagery invites the beholder to embody the significance of the acts of traversing and journeying by situating them in a virtual space where the physical and the spiritual overlap. One the one hand, images of tritons and other marine creatures make the staircase into a riverine and/or sea landscape. On the other hand, the architectural form of the staircase sustains the vision of an aquatic realm to cross or follow. Within the visual metaphor, the practitioner is compelled to cross the watery realm when going up a staircase in the physical world. At the same time, the movement acquires ritual potency as the aquatic imagery deploys its symbolic significance, so deeply interrelated with the process of progressively approaching *nirvāṇa*.

The staircase, then, is made into a virtual space where the beholder is not merely climbing up towards the stupa, but is embodying the process of spiritual refinement. In this sense, the actual space of the staircase opens into the realm of the virtual on several levels by engaging the metaphoric value of aquatic imagery through language (as preserved to us in the textual tradition), the iconographic apparatus and the architecture:[33] the staircase is a staircase, but it is also a river and a stream; the tritons and ichthyocentaurs are décor on a schist slab, but they are also the creatures swimming about the waves and whirlpools; and this water realm is not mere water, but the endless flux of *saṃsāra*, or the safe flow of the doctrine. The virtual space of the river and the stream is placed upon the space of the staircase, and as the beholder goes through one, she goes through the other too. A larger implication here is that religious art can be (and often is) intended to enhance the physical space they create and inhabit in order to make it into a space of religious efficacy – a space that, despite being hinged on a parallel to the physical, is fundamentally other (Knott 2008). In this sense here,

33 On multimodality in visual metaphors, see the contributions in the volume edited by Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009), as well as Forceville 2008.

the otherness of religious spaces is predicated upon its capacity to open into a virtual dimension where the indescribable can take place and operate despite being, by definition, beyond limits of thought and representation.[34]

Another contribution this article attempts is to the analysis of visual metaphors, specifically to their function, workings, and meanings in a religious context. Starting from the now accepted paradigm that metaphors are not just a matter of language, but that they also structure thought and action (Lakoff, Johnson 1980; Ortony 1993), the article interrogates the role of both seeing and moving as major contributing factors in activating the metaphoric value of objects and architecture. Just like Bal says in the introduction to this volume I, too, "seek to understand the skill of looking we take too easily for granted". In this regard, the power of visual metaphors lies in the images' ambiguity (Feinsten 1982) or incongruity (Schilperoord 2018) with respect to a construed set of visual expectations and assumptions, oftentimes predicated upon varying degrees of formal overlap between diverse objects (Van Weelden, Maes, Schilperoord 2018) – both qualities explode the meaning of seeing, whereby viewers are asked to look more closely and to prod more deeply, in order to see things both as they are and as more than what they are.

A certain 'malleability of looking' is accepted and even encouraged within the Buddhist religious-philosophical system as a response to an ambivalent attitude towards the act of seeing: one the one hand, vision can return images of the world that are pernicious to the path of salvation and murk the perception of how things are; on the other hand, because these suspicions around seeing exist, the act of looking itself can and should be interrogated and manipulated to serve the spiritual goal of the practitioner. The two aspects are sides of the same coin and cannot exist without one another, as it is the capacity of a beholder to interrogate their sensual frameworks – vision as the foremost – and to intervene on them that will bring forward a chance to see beyond the limits of the world presented in front of one's eyes (Kinnard 1999, 176-81). So, for example, the accomplished practitioner is someone who sees the bottom of a lake in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* 2), because they have trained their eyes to do so: for those who are not accomplished, the waters are cloudy and murky, and the lakebed impossible to see. Images of these kind describe the "clear sight" or "clear eyes" of one who possesses higher knowledges, which allow them to discern the true nature of things, even when it is hidden.

34 On the virtual as an opening of the real, see Diodato 2021, 86; Harris 2014; Davis 2017, 111-12.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

As shown by the case described here, however, visual metaphors in architecture are successful only insofar as we take movement and embodied experience into account (Hale 2013). Building on Schilperoord's argument (2018, 42-3) that metaphoricity is not an inherent quality of images, regardless of their degree of anomalousness with respect to visual expectations, the metaphoric value of the aquatic imagery becomes fully realized as a symbol for *nirvāṇa* when the moving body of the beholder is made active element in the metaphor itself. If ascending through the water realm on the staircase is a metaphor for crossing over, then the moving subject is by necessity implied every time, as there is no crossing over *per se*, without a subject willing to do so. Movement is thus a fundamental component of the conceptual structure that allows viewers to interpret images and objects in space and to insert them within a horizon of meaning where salvation is not only desirable, but most importantly, accessible to all.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Richard Neer and Jaś Elsner for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article, and Claudia Zancan for being a generous and meticulous editor. Jessie Pons kindly helped in managing image credits from DiGA/KPDOAM. My gratitude also goes to Susan Whitfield, John Falconer and Amanullah Afridi who braved the Pakistani summer heat to visit Andan Dheri with me. Special thanks to Shafiq Ahmad, who assisted in taking new measurements of every monument at the site. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers who offered comments and helped improve this article. Any remaining faults are mine.

Abbreviations

CKM = Corpus of Gāndhārī Manuscripts, available at `https://gandhari.org/`.

Kośa = *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (The Treasury of the Abhidharma with Its Self-Commentary) by Vasubandhu. Sanskrit text based on the edition by Pradan, P. (1975). *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu*. Patna: K.P. Jayaswal Research Center.

LSukh = Larger *Sukhāvatīvyūhasūtra*. Sanskrit text based on the edition by Vaidya, P.L. (1961). *Mahāyāna-sūtra-saṃgrahaḥ*, vol. 1. Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute.

Bibliography

Anālayo, B. (2022). *Early Buddhist Oral Tradition: Textual Formation and Transmission*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.

Ānandajoti, B. (ed.) (2020). *The Nidānakathā, or Introduction to the Jātaka Stories from Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales. The Oldest Collection of Folk-Lore Extant Being the Jātakatthavaṇṇanā for the First Time*. Edited in the Original Pāli by V. Fausböll and translated by T.W. Rhys Davids (1880). s.l.: Holy Books. https://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/The-Nidanakatha.pdf.

Baums, S. (2009). *A Gāndhārī Commentary on Early Buddhist Verses: British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragments 7, 9, 13 and 18* [PhD Dissertation]. Seattle: University of Washington.

Beal, S. [1884] (2013). *Si-Yu-Ki Buddhist Records of the Western World: Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang (AD 629)*. London: Routledge.

Beggiora, S. (2022). "Aquatic Mythologies: Divine, Liminal and Fantastic Creatures in the Indian Tradition". *Shima*, 16(2), 143-59.

Boardman, J. (1986). "The *Ketos* in India". *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique*, 14, 147-53.

Boardman, J. (1987). "'Very Like a Whale': Classical Monsters". Farkas, A.E.; Harpers, Pr.O.; Harrison, E.B. (eds), *Monsters and Demons in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds. Papers Presented in Honor of Edith Porada*. Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 73-84.

Brancaccio, P. (1999). "Aṅgulimāla or the Taming of the Forest". *East and West*, 49(1/4), 105-18.

Brancaccio, P. (2011). "Gateways to the Buddha: Figures Under Arches in Early Gandharān Art". Brancaccio, P.; Behrendt, K. (eds), *Gandharan Buddhism: Archaeology, Art, and Texts*. Toronto: UBC Press, 210-24.

Brancaccio, P. (2018). "Approaching the Stupa. Architectural Elements of the 1st Stairway of the Main Stupa of Amluk-dara (End-1st Century CE)". *Journal of Asian Civilizations*, 41(1), 161-72.

Brancaccio, P.; Liu, X. (2009). "Dionysus and Drama in the Buddhist Art of Gandhara". *Journal of Global History*, 4(2), 219-44.

Brough, J. (1962). *The Gāndhārī Dharmapada*. London: Oxford University Press.

Cleary, T. (1993). *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications.

Cohen, J.J. (ed.) (1996). *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Collins, S. (1982). *Selfless Persons*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Collins, S. (1992). "Nirvāṇa, Time, and Narrative". *History of Religions*, 31(3), 215-46.

Collins, S. (1998). *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coloru, O.; Iori, E.; Olivieri, L.M. (2024). "Wine in Gandhāra. Notes on a Mythical and Economical Geography". Antonetti, C.; De Notariis, B.; Enrico, M. (eds), *Wine Cultures. Gandhāra and Beyond*. Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 167-213.

Coomaraswamy, A. (1993). *Yakṣas: Essays in the Water Cosmology. New Edition Revised and Enlarged*. Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.

Dani, H.A. (1968-69). "Excavations at Andan Dheri". *Ancient Pakistan*, 4, 33-64.

Davis, W. (2017). *Visuality and Virtuality: Images and Pictures from Prehistory to Perspective*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Dhammajoti, K.L. (2009). "The *Aśubhā* Meditation in the Sarvāstivāda". *Journal of the Centre for Buddhist Studies, Sri Lanka*, 7, 248-95.

Diodato, R. (2021). *Image, Art, Virtuality*. Heidelberg: Springer International Publishing.

Errington, E. (2022). "Reconstructing Jamālgarhī and Appendix B: The archaeological record 1848–1923." Rienjang, W.; Stewart, P. (eds), *The Rediscovery and Reception of Gandhāran Art: Proceeding of the Fourth International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project*, University of Oxford, 24th–26th March, 2021. Oxford: Archaeopress, 1-42.

Fa, Q. (2019). "The Development of *Aśubha* Meditation in the Sarvāstivādin Tradition". *International Buddhist College Journal of Buddhist Studies (IBCJBS)*, 1, 163-80.

Faccenna, D.; Khan, A.N.; Nadiem, I.H. (1993). *Pānr I (Swat, Pakistan)*. Rome: IsIAO.

Faccenna, D. (1995). *Saidu Sharif I (Swat, Pakistan). The Buddhist Sacred Area. The Stūpa Terrace*. Rome: IsMEO.

Falk, H. (2009). "Making Wine in Gandhara Under Buddhist Monastic Supervision". *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 23, 65-78.

Falk, H. (2015). "A New Gāndhārī Dharmapada (Texts from the Split Collection 3)". *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University*, 18, 23-62.

Feinstein, H. (1982). "Meaning and Visual Metaphor". *Studies in Art Education*, 23(2), 45-55.

Filigenzi, A. (2019). "Non-Buddhist Customs of Buddhist People: Visual and Archaeological Evidence from North-West Pakistan". Kellner, B. (ed.), *Buddhism and the Dynamics of Transculturality*. Leiden: De Gruyter, 53-84.

Filigenzi, A. (2002). "L'arte narrativa del Gandhara". Callieri, P.; Filigenzi, A. (a cura di), *Il Maestro di Saidu Sharif. Alle origini dell'arte del Gandhara = Catalogo della mostra* (Roma, 18 aprile-21 luglio 2002). Roma: IsIAO, 93-106.

Forceville, C. (2008). "Metaphor in Pictures and Multimodal Representations". Gibbs, Jr., R.W. (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 462-82.

Forceville, C.; Urios-Aparisi, E. (eds) (2009). *Multimodal Metaphor*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Fussman, G. (1986). "Symbolisms of the Buddhist Stūpa". *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 9(2), 37-53.

Galli, M. (2011). "Hellenistic Court Imagery in the Early Buddhist Art of Gandhara". *Ancient Civilizations from Scythia to Siberia*, 17(2), 279-329.

Hale, J. (2013). "Critical Phenomenology: Architecture and Embodiment". *Architecture and Ideas*, 12, 18-37.

Hamar, I. (2007). "The History of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra*: *Shorter and Larger Texts*". Hamar, I. (ed.), *Reflecting Mirrors: Perspectives on Huayan Buddhism*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 139-67.

Harris, S.J. (2014). "Painting, the Virtual, and the Celluloid Frame". Grimshaw, M. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Virtuality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 463-80.

Harrison, P.; Luczanits, C. (2012). "New Light on (and from) the Muhammad Nari Stele". BARC Research Center for Buddhist Cultures in Asia (ed.), *2011 nendo dai ikkai kokusai shinpojiumu puroshīdingusu: Jōdokyō ni kansuru tokubetsu kokusai shinpojiumu* 2011 年度第1回国際シンポジウムプロシーディングス―浄土教関する特別国際シンポジウム (Proceedings of the First International Symposium of 2011 – Special International Symposium on Pure Land Buddhism). Kyoto: Ryukoku University Research Center for Buddhist Cultures in Asia, 69-127.

Horner, I.B. (1947). "Some Aspects of Movement in Early Buddhism". *Artibus Asiae*, 10(2), 138-41.

Huntington, J. (1980). "A Gandhāran Image of Amitāyus' Sukhāvatī". *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, 40, 651-72.

Hwang, S. (2006). *Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism*. London: Taylor & Francis.

Iori, E. (2018). "False-Niche or False-Door? The Evidence in Real and Represented Architecture". *Journal of Asian Civilizations*, 41(1), 107-34.

Irwin, J. (1979). "The Stūpa and Its Cosmic Axis: The Archaeological Evidence". Taddei, M. (ed.), *South Asian Archaeology 1977: Papers for the Fourth International Conference of the Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe*. Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 799-845.

Irwin, J. (1980). "The Axial Symbolism of the Early Stūpas: An Exegesis". Dallapiccola, A.L.; Zingel-Avé Lallemant, S. (eds), *The Stūpa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 12-39.

Jones, D.T. (2016). "'That Bhikkhu Lets Go Both the Near and Far Shores': Meaning and Metaphor in the Refrain from the *Uraga* Verses". *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, 11, 71-107.

Khan, N. (2010). *The Sacred and the Secular. Investigating the Unique Stūpa and Settlement Site of Aziz Dheri, Peshawar Valley, NWFP, Pakistan*. Peshawar: DOAM.

Kinnard, J. (1999). *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism*. New York: Routledge.

Klimburg, M. (2016). "Transregional Intoxications. Wine in Buddhist Gandhara and Kafiristan". Pellò, S. (ed.), *Borders. Itineraries on the Edges of Iran*. Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 271-302.

Knott, K. (2008). "Spatial Theory and the Study of Religion". *Religion Compass*, 2(6), 1102-16.

Kottkamp, H. (1992). *Der Stūpa als Repräsentation des buddhistischen Heilsweges: Untersuchungen zur Entstehung und Entwicklung architektonischer Symbolik*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Lakoff, G.; Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lenz, T. (2003). *A New Version of the Gāndhārī Dharmapada and a Collection of Previous-Birth Stories: British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragments 16+25*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Li, R. (transl.) (1996). *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*. Moraga: Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai America.

Lo Muzio, C. (2019). "Persian 'Snap': Iranian Dancers in Gandhara". Strohm, R. (ed.), *The Music Road. Coherence and Diversity in Music from the Mediterranean to India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 71-86.

Maes, C. (2022). "'The Buddha is a Raft': On Metaphors, the Language of Liberation, and Religious Others in Early Buddhism". Jones, C.V. (ed.), *Buddhism and Its Religious Others*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 48-67.

Marino, J.A. (2017). *Metaphor and Pedagogy in Early Buddhist Literature: An Edition and Study of Two Sūtras from the Senior Collection of Gāndhārī Manuscripts* [PhD Dissertation]. Seattle: University of Washington.

Marino, J. (2020). "The Gandhari 'Discourse on Pleasure and Pain': Some Thoughts on Similes and Textual Variation in the Connected Discourses". Dhammadinnā, B. (ed.), *Research on the Saṃyukta-Āgama*. Taipei: Dharma Drum Corporation, 259-300.

McMahan, D. (2002). *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahayana Buddhism*. New York: Routledge.

Meunié, J. (1942). *Shotorak. Mémoires de la Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan*. Paris: Les éditions d'art et d'histoire.

Minardi, M. (2016). "The Hellenistic Chorasmian Ketos of Akchakhan-kala". *Iranica Antiqua*, 51, 165-200.

Mitra, P. (2023). "Water Symbolism in Hindu Culture". Basu, M.; DasGupta, R. (eds), *Indigenous and Local Water Knowledge, Values and Practices*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 39-46.

Mueller, F.M. (transl.) (1894). *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 49. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Neelis, J. (2014). "Literary and Visual Narratives in Gandhāran Buddhist Manuscripts and Material Cultures: Localizations of Jātakas, Avadānas, and Previous-Birth Stories". Fleming, B.; Mann, R. (eds), *Material Culture and Asian Religions*. New York: Routledge, 252-64.

O'Brien-Kop, K. (2017). "Classical Discourses of Liberation: Shared Botanical Metaphors in Sarvāstivāda Buddhism and the Yoga of Patañjali". *Religions of South Asia*, 11(2-3), 123-57.

Olivelle, P. (ed.) (2008). *Life of the Buddha*. New York: University Press Clay Sanskrit Library.

Olivieri, L. (2018). "Amluk-dara (AKD 1) A Revised Excavation Report". *Journal of Asian Civilizations*, 41(1), 1-106.

Olivieri, L.M.; Iori, E. (2021). "Monumental Entrance to Gandharan Buddhist Architecture Stairs and Gates from Swat". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 57(1), 197-240.

Ortony, A. (ed.) [1979] (1993). *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pons, J. (2011). "From Gandhāran Trays to Gandhāran Buddhist Art: The Persistence of Hellenistic Motifs from the Second Century BC and Beyond". Kouremenos, A.; Chandrasekaran, S.; Rossi, R. (eds), *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 153-75.

Pradhan, P. (ed.) (1967). *Abhidharma-koshabhāṣyaṃ of Vasubandhu*. Patna: K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, TSWS.

Rhi, J. (1991). *Gandhāran Images of the 'Śrāvastī Miracle': An Iconographic Reassessment* [PhD Dissertation]. Berkeley: University of California Berkeley.

Rhi, J. (2003). "Early Mahāyāna and Gandhāran Buddhism: An Assessment of the Visual Evidence". *The Eastern Buddhist*, 35(1/2), 152-202.

Rhi, J. (2005). "Images, Relics, and Jewels: The Assimilation of Images in the Buddhist Relic Cult of Gandhāra: Or Vice Versa". *Artibus Asiae*, 65(2), 169-211.

Rhi, J. (2011a). "Bodhisattvas in Gandhāran Art: An Aspect of Mahāyāna in Gandhāra". Brancaccio, P.; Behrendt, K. (eds), *Gandhāran Buddhism: Archaeology, Art, Texts*. Toronto: UBC Press, 151-82.

Rhi, J. (2011b). "Wondrous Vision: The Mohammad Nari Stele from Gandhara". *Orientations (Hong Kong)*, 42(2), 112-15.

Rhi, J. (2023). "Does Iconography Really Matter? Iconographical Specification of Buddha Images in Pre-Esoteric Buddhist Art". Stewart, P.; Rienjang, W. (eds), *Gandhāran Art in Its Buddhist Context*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 1-41.

Salomon, R. (2009). *Two Gāndhārī Manuscripts of the Songs of Lake Anavatapta (Anavatapta-gāthā): British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragment 1 and Senior Scroll 14*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Salomon, R. (2018). *The Buddhist Literature of Ancient Gandhara: An Introduction with Selected Translations*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.

Schlieter, J. (2013). "Checking the Heavenly 'Bank Account of Karma': Cognitive Metaphors for Karma in Western Scholarship and Early Theravāda Buddhism". *Religion*, 13(4), 463-86.

Schopen, G. (1987). "The Inscription on the Kuṣān Image of Amitābha and the Character of the Early Mahāyāna in India". *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 10(2), 99-137.

Sharma, R.K. (2014). *Nāga in Indian Iconography and Art from the Earliest Times to c. 13th Century AD*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International.

Shaw, J. (2004). "Nāga Sculptures in Sanchi's Archaeological Landscape: Buddhism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Local Agricultural Cults in Central India, First Century BCE to Fifth Century CE". *Artibus Asiae*, 64(1), 5-59.

Shaw, S. (2012). "Crossing to the Farthest Shore: How Pāli Jātakas Launch the Buddhist Image of the Boat Onto the Open Seas". *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, 3, 128-56.

Shaw, S. (2014). "The Capsized Self: Sea Navigation, Shipwrecks and Escapes from Drowning in Southern Buddhist Narrative and Art". Thompson, C. (ed.), *Shipwreck in Art and Literature*, London: Routledge, 27-41.

Saxena, K.K. (2021). *Before Kṛṣṇa: Religious Diversity in Ancient Mathura*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schilperoord, J. (2018). "Ways with Pictures: Visual Incongruities and Metaphor". Steen, G. (ed.), *Visual Metaphor: Structure and Process*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 11-46.

Silvestre-López, A.J. (2019). "Deliberate Metaphors in Buddhist Teachings About Meditation". Navarro i Ferrando, I. (ed.), *Current Approaches to Metaphor Analysis in Discourse*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 205-34.

Singh, U. (2004). "Cults and Shrines in Early Historical Mathura (c. 200 BC-AD 200)". *World Archaeology*, 36(3), 378-98.

Snodgrass, A. (1985). *The Symbolism of the Stūpa*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Southworth, K. (2016). "The Travels of Two Marine Beasts from the Mediterranean to Gandhara – A Transfer of Form and Meaning?". *Art of the Orient*, 5, 101-8.

Stein, M.A. (1914). "Excavations at Sahri Bahlol". Vogel, J.Ph. (ed.), *Archaeological Survey of India. Annual Report 1909-1910*. Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 46-64.

Taddei, M. (1973). Review of *Chakdara Fort and Gandhara Art* by Dani, A.H. *East and West*, 23(3/4), 380-4.

Taddei, M. (2015). "Narrative Art Between India and the Hellenistic World". *Transcultural Studies*, 1, 34-74.

Tanabe, K. (2002). "Greek, Roman and Parthian Influences on the Pre-Kushana Gandhāran 'Toilet-Trays' and Forerunners of Buddhist Paradise (Pāramitā)". *Silk Road Art and Archaeology*, 8, 73-100.

Tanabe, K. (2003). "The Earliest Pāramitā Imagery of Gandhāran Buddhist Reliefs". *Silk Road Art and Archaeology*, 9, 87-105.

Tanabe, T. (2020). "The Transmission of Dionysiac Imagery to Gandhāran Buddhist Art". Stewart, P.; Rienjang, W. (eds), *The Global Connections of Gandhāran Art*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 86-101.

Tucci, G. (1977). "On Swāt. The Dards and Connected Problems". *East and West*, 27(1/4), 9-85, 94-103.

Tzohar, R. (2018). *A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vaidya, P.L. (ed.) (1961). *Mahāyāna-sūtra-saṃgrahaḥ. Buddhist Sanskrit Texts 17*. Darbhange: The Mithila Institute.

Van Weelden, L.; Maes, F.; Schilperoord, J. (2018). "How Visual Form Affects Metaphoric Conceptualization. The Role of Shape Similarity". Steen, G. (ed.), *Visual Metaphor:*

Structure and Process. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 147-62.

Vendova, D. (2023). "Solving the Riddle of the 'Muhammad Nari Stele': A New Look". Stewart, P.; Rienjang, W. (eds), *Gandhāran Art in Its Buddhist Context*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 42-59.

von Hinüber, O. (2010). Review of *Two Gāndhārī Manuscripts of the Song of Lake Anavatapta (Anavatapta-gāthā): British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragment 1 and Senior Scroll 14* by Salomon, R. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 130(1), 90-4.

Zin, M. (2019). "Crossing the Ocean of *Saṃsāra*: Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, no. III 9023". *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, 2, 183-217.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
Vol. 61 – Supplement – November 2025

The Medieval Daoist Metaphor of the Cave: Cosmogony, Sacred Geography, and the Human Body

Xiaoyu Zhang
École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), France

Abstract This article examines three aspects of medieval Daoist theology and practice formed around the metaphor of the cave: the cosmogony represented by the concept of the Hollow Cave (*kongdong* 空洞), the sacred geography embodied in the Grotto-Heavens (*dongtian* 洞天), and the human body conceived through the Grotto-Chamber (*dongfang* 洞房). The objective of this study is to explore how Daoism interpreted the general notion of the cave, and how Daoist conceptions extended beyond religious discourse to influence the broader intellectual context of medieval China.

Keywords Medieval Daoism. Metaphor. Cave. Cosmogony. Sacred geography. Human body.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-02-13
Accepted 2025-08-05
Published 2025-11-14

Open access

Citation Zhang, X. (2025). "The Medieval Daoist Metaphor of the Cave: Cosmogony, Sacred Geography, and the Human Body". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 61, Supplement, November, 205-222.

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2025/03/007

1 Introduction

The cave holds significant metaphorical and mythological meanings across various cultures worldwide.[1] Since prehistoric times, it has functioned as a shelter, sanctuary, burial site, and more, thus naturally associated with concepts such as creation, rebirth, protection, mystery, and divinity. The English word 'cave' is derived from the Latin term *cavus*, meaning 'hollow' or 'concave'. In contrast, the corresponding Chinese character *dong* 洞 traces its etymology to the swiftly flowing water.[2] The meaning of a cave as an enclosed space, whether naturally formed or artificially constructed, was initially represented by the characters *xue* 穴 or *ku* 窟.[3] According to transmitted texts, this connotation does not seem to be attributed to the character *dong* until the later Han period, around the third century (Cai 2019, 15-16).[4] Thereafter, the character *dong* became interchangeable with *tong* 通, which denotes actions such as penetrating, communicating, and thoroughly comprehending. These distinctive traits of the character *dong* thus add additional layers of meaning to the Daoist concept of the cave. In the following discussion, I will first analyze the role of the cave metaphor in shaping Daoist perspectives on cosmogony, sacred topography, and the human body. I will then explore how these three dimensions are interconnected through cave imagery. Finally, I seek to illustrate the significant impact of the Daoist cave metaphor on the intellectual framework of medieval China.[5]

1 An early draft of this paper was presented at the PhD symposium *Metaphors, Conceptualising Horizons of Meaning* at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 26-28 February 2024. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the organizers of this event for their support. I am especially grateful to Jin Wenxin, the moderator of the panel, for her warm welcome and valuable exchange of ideas. I would also like to thank the panelists and audience for their thoughtful questions and critiques. I am deeply indebted to my mentor, Prof. Vincent Goossaert, whose guidance has been instrumental in shaping my research on Chinese religions and whose encouragement continues to inspire me. His insightful critiques and suggestions on this paper have significantly enhanced its quality. Finally, I extend my gratitude to the reviewer and editors of this paper, for their constructive suggestions, which have greatly improved the final version of this work.

2 The ancient Chinese dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining Simple Graphs), dated to the second century, defines the character *dong* as follows: "洞，疾流也" (Dong, [means] the swift currents). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

3 *Shuowen*: "穴，土室也" (Xue, [means] the earthen chamber); *Yupian xuebu* 玉篇•穴部: (Jade Chapters, Section on the radical 'Cave') "窟，穴也" (Ku, [equals] xue).

4 Besides, a study of the character *dong* used in the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon), a fundamental text of traditional Chinese medicine, offers indirect evidence: see Dong, Jiang 2018.

5 The texts from the Daoist Canon cited in this article follow the monumental compilation, *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (or *Daozang tongkao* 道藏通考), co-edited by Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen (2004).

2 Cosmogony: *Kongdong* 空洞 (Hollow Cave)

Cosmological concerns have been a central theme in Chinese philosophy since its inception. The concept of Dao 道, literally meaning 'the Way', as introduced by Laozi 老子, has been particularly influential and is intrinsically connected to the later development of Daoist cosmogony. It provides a fundamental framework for understanding the universe's origin and structure within Daoist thought.[6] The *Daode zhenjing* 道德真經 (Classic of the Way and Virtue, DZ 664), attributed to Laozi, describes the essential characteristics and formation processes of Dao as follows:

> 有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，周行而不殆。可以為天地母。吾不知其名，字之曰道。(001:007a3-5)
>
> There's a thing that is harmoniously unified, predating Heaven and Earth. It is quiet and vast, independent and unchanging. It goes everywhere and does not get injured. It can be the mother of Heaven and Earth. I do not know its name, so I designate it as Dao.
>
> 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為合。(002:002b1-2)
>
> Dao gave rise to the One, the One generated the Two, the Two produced the Three, and the Three brought forth the Myriad Things. The Myriad Things carry *yin* on their backs and embrace *yang*, blend the *qi* and result the harmony.

The Dao is conceived as the ultimate source of the universe and the Myriad Things, arising not from external forces but from its own intrinsic nature. Medieval Daoism inherited and further developed this conception, interpreting Dao's generative power through two primary approaches. The first interpretation adopts a theological framework, identifying Laojun 老君 (Lord Lao) as the incarnation of Dao, a perspective likely rooted in creation mythology traditions. For instance, it might echoes the well-known cosmogonic myth of Pan Gu 盤古, which depicts how the giant, endowed with immense strength, separated the initial formless chaos into Heaven and Earth, and how his body transformed into various elements of the natural world after his death (Yu 1981, 479-500; Schipper, Ye, Yin 2011). Alternatively, the second approach follows a more philosophical framework, attributing

6 There are undoubtedly other ideas that have contributed to the development of Daoist cosmogony. For a discussion on the multiple sources of Daoist cosmogony, see for example: Wang 2012, 67-85.

the generative force to *yuanqi* 元氣 (Primordial Energy), a fundamental concept grounded in the general philosophy and astronomical sciences of the Warring States period and Han Dynasty (circa the fifth century BCE to the third century CE). These two viewpoints are not mutually exclusive but intertwine in certain aspects (Sun 2006, 50-2). In any case, the phase of *kongdong* 空洞 (Hollow Cave) is an indispensable element in the Daoist view of cosmic formation. See below for two citations that illustrate these approaches.

Consider firstly the following citation from the *Hunyuan huangdi shengji* 混元皇帝聖紀 (Hagiography of the Sovereign Ancestor of the Origin of the Chaos), included in the *juan* 102 of the Daoist encyclopedia *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 (Seven Signs of the Cloud Bookcase, DZ1032), compiled by Zhang 張君房 (fl. 1008-29):[7]

> 太上老君者，混元皇帝也。乃生於無始，起於無因，爲萬道之先，元氣之祖也。蓋無光無象，無音無聲，無宗無緒。幽幽冥冥。其中有精，其精甚真。彌綸無外，故稱大道焉。夫道者，自然之極尊也，於幽無之中而生空洞焉。空洞者，真一也。真一者，不有不無也。從此一氣化生，後九十九萬億九十九萬歲，乃化生上三氣。(102:001a5-001b2)
>
> The Most High Old Lord is the Sovereign Ancestor of the Origin of the Chaos. He was born of the Without-Beginning; He emerged from the Without-Cause; He preexisted Ten Thousand Ways; He is the ancestor of the Primordial Energy. Without light, without image, without sound, without noise, without ancestors, and without inception, [he is] dark and mysterious, within which are essences, most true essences. [The essence] is immense without outer boundary, hence it is called the Great Dao. Dao is the Ultimate Sovereign of the spontaneity. Within the dark Non-Being, the Hollow Cave was created. This Hollow cave is the True One. The True One is neither Non-Being nor Being. From this one energy, ninety-nine trillion, ninety-nine billion years later, the generation of the Three Energies proceeded.

In this statement, the Hollow Cave is equated with the True One, which is brought into being by the vague and formless Dao. It is only at this point that the One energy begins to transform and generate the Myriad Things. At the same time, a cosmogony centered around Primordial Energy is also present within the same compilation. In *juan* 2 of the *Yunji qiqian*, which specifically contains treatises

7 Notice that during the time when this encyclopedia is compiled, Daoist currents and textual traditions had developed very different cosmologies, sometimes even competing, as we will see.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

on cosmology from various lineages, there is one passage entitled "Kongdong" 空洞 (The Hollow Cave):

> 道君曰: 元氣於眇莽之內，幽冥之外，生乎空洞。空洞之內，生乎太無。太無變而三氣明焉。[...]上氣曰始，中氣曰元，下氣曰玄。[...]故一生二，二生三，三者化生以至九玄，從九反一，乃入道真。氣清成天，滓凝成地，中氣為和，以成於人。三氣分判，萬化稟生。日月列照，五宿煥明。(002:002a6-002b5)

> The Lord of Dao states: Primordial Energy existed within the Vague and Vast, outside the Dark and Mysterious. It gave rise to the Hollow Cave. Within the Hollow Cave, the Great Non-Being was born. The Great Non-Being undergoes transformation, leading to the clarification of the Three Energies. [...] The upper energy is called the Preliminary [Energy], the middle the Cardinal [Energy], and the lower the Mysterious [Energy]. [...] Thus, the One generated the Two, the Two generated the Three, and the Three transformed to produce the Nine Mysterious. The Nine [Mysterious] returned to the One and thereby entered the True Dao. The clear energy formed Heaven, the heavy energy congealed into Earth, and the middle energy harmonized [the energies] to create humanity. The Three Energies differentiated and transformed into the Myriad things. The sun and the moon were arrayed, and the five planets were illuminated.

This citation suggests that the Hollow Cave represents a particular phase in the formation process but can also refer to the entire sequence of creation. It is not a term consistently used across all Daoist cosmological texts. For example, *juan* 2 of *Yunji qiqian* contains other chapters that present cosmogony as recorded in various earlier texts. The terminology varies, as reflected in titles such as *Hunyuan* 混元, *Hundun* 混沌, and *Hundong* 混洞 (respectively: Origin of the Chaos, Primordial Chaos, and Chaotic Cavern).Nevertheless, from a functional perspective, equivalents to the Hollow Cave can be identified within these systems, signifying a crucial stage in the preliminary cosmogonical process.

How, then, is cosmological idea elucidated through the metaphor of the cave? First, the materiality of the cave provides a vivid image of the One generated by Dao: indistinct, dark, elusive, ineffable, and mysterious. It represents the formless origin that is neither *Non-Being* nor *Being*, but the union of these complementary opposites. Secondly, if we consider the etymology of the Chinese character for 'cave' as related to rapidly flowing water, we understand that the Hollow Cave is not a static, empty space, but rather a dynamic chaos filled with vitality, endless potentiality and generative fertility. An analogy may be drawn between the movement, differentiation, and reintegration of energy (*qi* 氣) into the Myriad Things, and the way in which water

flows, diverges, and converges to form new streams. Thirdly, the cave metaphor illustrates Dao's attribute of connectivity. As explained in *Daode zhenjing guangyi* 道德真經廣義 (Comprehensive Meaning of Dao De Jing, DZ 725), a commentary on *Daode zhenjing* by the prominent Daoist scholar Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850-933): "道，通也。通以一氣生化萬物" (4:6b9) (Dao signifies passage and communication. Through the One energy, [Dao] generates the Myriad Things). Hence, Dao is portrayed as the principle that links the primordial cosmic chaos with all forms of life.[8]

3 The Sacred Geography: *Dongtian* 洞天 (Grotto-Heaven)

The Grotto-Heaven is one of the most emblematic and well-known sacred landscape systems in Daoist religious tradition (Raz 2010, 1399-442; Hahn 1988, 145-56; Hahn 2000, 683-707).[9] Consisting of caverns located within or beneath actual mountains in China, the Grotto-Heavens are conceived as the dwellings of immortals and realms rich in the materials required for producing elixirs. At its core, the journey to these Grotto-Heavens is a pursuit of immortality.

According to transmitted texts, the concept of Grotto-Heaven can already be found in Shangqing 上清 (Highest Purity) tradition, dating back to no later than the fourth century (Miura 2017, 336-40). The first full systematization of the geo-cosmology of Grotto-Heavens known to us was achieved in *Tiandi gongfu tu* 天地宮府圖 (Diagram of Celestial and Terrestrial Palaces and Residences), composed by the Shangqing patriarch Sima Chengzhen 司馬承禎 (647-735). Based on this earlier work, Du Guangting, an eminent Daoist at the late Tang court, compiled a comprehensive catalog and guide to the Daoist spiritual landscape, titled *Dongtian fudi yuedu mingshan ji* 洞天福地嶽瀆名山記 (Record of Grotto-Heavens, Blessed Places, Ducts, Peals, and Great Mountains, DZ 599).[10] The preface of this *Record* outlines the pivotal role of Grotto-Heavens within the context of Daoist geo-cosmography as follows:

8 This specific usage of the character *dong* is also evident in the categorization and nomenclature of the Daoist Canon, in which Dongzhen 洞真, Dongxuan 洞玄, and Dongshen 洞神, constitute three fundamental categories, indicating that through these texts, one can access the mystery, the spirits, and the state of immortality.

9 Several other systems exist, as noted in the *Mingshan ji* (Records of Great Mountains) (DZ 599), which will be mentioned later: "又有海外五嶽，三島十洲，三十六靖廬，七十二福地，二十四化，四鎮諸山。" (001b5-6) (In addition, there are the Five Peaks beyond the Seas, the Three Isles and Ten Continents, the Thirty-Six Pure Hermitages, the Seventy-Two Blessed Places, the Twenty-Four Dioceses, the Four Regulators and other various mountains).

10 For more details on the Grotto-Heaven's historical development, see Verellen 1995, 272-9. See also Weiss 2012, 31-60.

> 乾坤既闢，清濁肇分。融為江河，結為山嶽。或上配辰宿，或下藏洞天。皆大聖上真，主宰其事。則有靈宮閟府，玉宇金臺。或結氣所成，凝雲虛構。[…]為天地之關樞，為陰陽之機軸。(001a2-8)
>
> When Heaven and Earth were separated, and the pure [*qi*] was distinguished from the turbid, the great rivers were formed from melting, and the towering mountains through solidification. Above, the stellar mansions were arranged; below, the Grotto-Heavens were stored. Governed by great sages and superior Perfected, these Grotto-Heavens contain divine palaces and spiritual residences, jade halls and golden terraces – towering structures formed from congealed clouds and solidified *qi*. […] [These places serve as] the pivot of Heaven and Earth, the axle of Yin and Yang.

Moreover, the Grotto-Heavens are interconnected by numerous intersecting paths, forming an extensive subterranean network. Consider the following citation from *Zhengao* 真誥 (Declarations of the Perfected, DZ 1016) by Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456-536), an early text of the Shangqing tradition, which provides a detailed description of the configurations of the Grotto-Heaven in Gouqu 句曲:

> 句曲洞天，東通林屋，北通岱宗，西通峨嵋，南通羅浮，皆大道也。其間有小徑雜路，阡陌抄會，非一處也。(11:7a8-10)
>
> From the Grotto-Heaven of Gouqu [extend] great paths, eastward to Linwu, northward to Mount Dai (in Shandong), westward to Mount Emei (in Sichuan), and southward to Luofu (in Guangdong). Between them lie numerous intersecting paths, [the Grotto-Heavens] are not [confined] to a single place.

This interconnectivity is a defining feature of the Chinese concept of cave, as evidenced by the linguistic equivalence between the characters *dong* (cave) and *tong* (connected) mentioned earlier. Such a specific topological perspective likely draws inspiration from ancient geographical concepts. For instance, the mythical geographical treatise *Hetu guadixiang* 河圖括地象 (The River Chart and the Diagram Encompassing the Earth), probably dating back to Han Dynasty, states: "The famous mountains and great rivers are interconnected through caves and hollows" 名山大川，孔穴相連 (Yasui, Nakamura 1994, 1091). The center point of this network is called *dongting* 洞庭 (cave court), and the underground channels are referred to as *dimai* 地脉 (Earth's veins).

In contrast to those ancient mythical paradises, such as Penglai 蓬萊 (Campany 2006, 291-336), which are believed to exist in far-off seas and accessible only through an arduous journey, the Grotto-Heavens

are situated both within and beyond visible topography. Though continuous with the physical landscape, the Grotto-Heavens form independent microcosms with their own spatial and temporal cycles. As *Zhengao* states: "The sun and moon inside Grotto-Heavens are like those of the Great Heaven (outside), dispensing their light in turn to shine within" 按諸洞天日月[...]蓋猶是大天日月，分精照之 (011-006b1). The internal world of Grotto-Heavens mirrors the external world so closely that individuals who accidentally enter it may not realize they have crossed into another realm.

This unique spatiality links Grotto-Heavens with tombs, another significant representation of the cave metaphor. As art historian Hung Wu noted:

> More profoundly, a grotto-heaven and a tomb were connected by a shared imagination: both places were located in this world but were governed by specific temporal and spatial orders that distinguished them from the surrounding environment of this world. (Wu 2010, 60)

Moreover, Grotto-Heavens are closely associated with tombs due to their shared function as passages toward transcendence. "Any tomb is created first as a vacuum, – it starts out as a pit dug in the earth, rocks or wood piled up to make a hole, or a cave carved in a hillside" (Wu 2010, 17). By the mid to late Western Han (around the first century BCE), these tombs evolved into the chamber grave (*shimu* 室墓) structure. In Han conceptions of the afterlife, death did not represent an ultimate end but rather a transition toward immortality, which could be attained through postmortem cultivation. The chamber grave depicts three distinct spheres, each corresponding to one of the major systems of visual representation: the idealized posthumous underground residence that mirrors the opulent life of the deceased; the cosmic environment that transforms the tomb into a symbolic microcosm; and the immortal paradise embodying the belief in postmortem immortality (Wu 2010, 7-17; Jiang 2015, 28-42). The tomb serves as a crucial medium for the transformation of the body, offering a passage from mortality to immortality, thus paralleling the Grotto-Heavens as the gateway to the transcendent world.

In addition, it is essential to emphasize the deeply intertwined relationship between the inner Grotto-Heavens and the outer mountains, which endowed the former with attributes of fertility and enlightenment. Mountains had long evoked awe and inspired religious imagination due to their majestic height, reaching into the clouds. In ancient Chinese mountain cults, great mountains were revered as guardians of the space, believed to secure and stabilize

(*zhen* 鎮) the physical world.[11] While Daoism aligned with the broader imperial and popular veneration of mountains as symbols of spatial authority, it particularly focused on their interior (Michael 2016, 23-54). Hidden within these mountains – whose etymology signifies "emitting the *qi* that forms Myriad Things"[12] – the mysterious caves are associated with the image of the earth's womb. Just as the primordial hollow cave that created the universe and living beings, the Grotto-Heavens are envisioned as a matrix for producing precious materials for elixir compounding, as well as a site of cosmic revelation (Verellen 1995, 265-90).

Finally, it is worthwhile to revisit the initial assertion of this section, that the journey to Grotto-Heavens is primarily a quest for immortality, and to delve into its deeper implications. In Grotto-Heaven literature, the motif of the 'ignorant intruder' frequently appears as a cautionary figure: a mortal who accidentally enters the eternal and blissful paradise but ultimately retreats due to his attachment to mundane life, thereby losing the paradise forever. Nonetheless, in actual Daoist practice, Grotto-Heavens are exceedingly difficult to locate. Access is reserved for a select few who possess both resolute intention and esoteric techniques. Such an adventure encompasses physical movement, for example, the techniques applied for the exploration often involve the use of *Wuyue zhenxing tu* 五嶽真形圖 (Diagram of the True Form of the Five Peaks), which depicts the true form of the great mountains,[13] and functions as a talisman to protect practitioners from malevolent spirits believed to reside in the mountains.[14] More significantly, the journey consists of a meditative peregrination into a hidden realm beyond the tangible landscape. The enigmatic forms illustrated in the essential talismanic atlas *Wuyue zhenxing tu*, serve more as a guide for an inner journey than a map of topography. Thus, through the cave, one embarks on a passage to the inner realm and into the "pervasive and fecund emptiness which is the Dao" (Raz 2010, 1405).

11 The inspection tours (*Xunshou* 巡守) conducted by emperors to the Five Peaks (*Wuyue* 五嶽) – which are located at the four cardinal directions and the center – serve as a significant symbolic assertation of imperial control over the realm. Similarly, the imperial ritual ceremonies known as *feng* and *shan* rites (*Fengshan* 封禪) predominantly performed at the central Mount Tai 泰, are intended to affirm the emperor's Heavenly Mandate (*Tianming* 天命), thereby legitimating the emperor's divine authority to rule. For a more in-depth discussion of these imperial rites and their corresponding Daoist interpretations, see Tsai 2004.

12 The *Shuowen jiezi* explains the character *shan* 山 (the mountain) as "山，宣也。宣氣散生萬物。" (Equal to *xuan* 宣, which emanates *qi* to form Myriad Things).

13 For a further in-depth study of this diagram and the concept of True Form, see Schipper 1967, 114-62; Huang 2012, 165-76; Steavu 2019, 94-101.

14 For a more comprehensive study on the relation between the concept of True Form and Grotto-Heaven, see Cheng 2013, 95-106.

4 The Conception of the Human Body: *Dongfang* 洞房 (Grotto-Chamber)

The imagery of hollow spaces and connective tunnels remains influential in Daoist conceptions of the human body. The term *dongfang* 洞房 (Grotto-Chamber) here refers to a specific area within the head and reflects the body's cavernous features. Consider the following excerpt from a Shangqing text dated to the late fourth century, *Ziyang zhenren neizhuan* 紫陽真人內傳 (Esoteric Biography of Perfected of Purple Yang, DZ 303), which reveals the conceptual similarity between the internal cavern of the body and those found in the cosmos and mountains:

> 真人曰: 天無謂之空, 山無謂之洞, 人無謂之房也。山腹中空虛, 是為洞庭。人頭中空虛, 是為洞房。(12b1-3)
>
> The Perfected says: 'the emptiness of heaven is referred to as 'hollow', that of mountains as 'grotto', and that of a human body as 'chamber'. The void within the belly of mountains is termed the 'Cave Court', while the emptiness within a human head is designated as the 'Grotto-Chamber'.

The Grotto-Chamber can be literally understood as a residence for the primordial oneness. In the *Baopu zi* 抱樸子 (Master Who Embraces Simplicity, DZ 1185), a fundamental text on alchemy, immortality, and philosophy, the author Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-363) delineates the locations of the primordial One inside the body as follows:

> 道起於一, 其貴無偶, 各居一處, 以象天地人, 故曰三一也。[...] 一有姓字服色, 男長九分, 女長六分, 或在臍下二寸四分下丹田中, 或在心下絳宮金闕中丹田也, 或在人兩眉間, 卻行一寸為明堂, 二寸為洞房, 三寸為上丹田也。(18:1a5-1b6)
>
> The Dao starts from the One, whose value is unparalleled. [The One] resides separately [in the three parts of the body], representing Heaven, Earth, and Humanity, and thus is referred to as the Three-Ones. [...] The One possesses a name, trappings, and color. It measures nine *fen* for men and six *fen* for women. It dwells within the Lower Cinnabar Field,[15] located two *cun* four *fen* below the navel; or may be situated within the Middle Cinnabar Field, beneath the Deep Red Palace – the Golden Gate of the heart; or between the eyebrows, where moving one *cun* backward (toward

15 The Cinnabar Field (*dantian* 丹田) refers to an energy center within the body where vital energy (*qi*) is believed to be stored and cultivated.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

> the center of the head) reveals the Brilliant Hall, two *cun* the Grotto-Chamber, three *cun* the Upper Cinnabar Field.

This passage indicates that the One represents both the primordial state preceding creation and a divine entity within the human body.[16] Its presence signifies the integration of the Dao within the human form and underpins the primary objective of Daoist body cultivation: to revert to a unified state with the original One and thereby attain immortality. The human body is conceived as a microcosm that essentially mirrors the universe in both nature and structure (Pregadio 2006, 121-58). The entire cosmos is incorporated within the body:

> every single part of the body corresponds to a celestial or geographical feature of the world – the body is the world. Vice versa, the world is also in the body. There are a sun and a moon, stars and planets, mountains and rivers, cities and fields, roads and passageways, palaces and towers. (Kohn 1993, 162)

Such landscape of the inner realm should seem familiar when recalling the configuration of the Grotto-Heavens. Similarly, the immortals residing in the Grotto-Heavens have their counterparts in the body: the Body Gods (*shenshen* 身神). These anthropomorphic deities inhabit various parts of the body, each with a specific name, physical appearance, and trappings. They are the gods inside the body that correspond with the gods of the heaven above.[17] Through the specific meditation technique known as *Cunsi* 存思, which means keeping something in mind and contemplating it, practitioners visualize the Body Gods and their associated body parts according to the instructions. This practice aims to maintain these divinities in their proper locations, helping to prevent illness, ensure divine protection, and ultimately achieve longevity and immortality.[18]

The next point worth investigating is the cave's tunnel-like feature as it appears in Daoist conceptions of the human body. In this view,

16 While the concept of the One is polysemous across different traditions, for a comprehensive study of the notion of the One and its associated practices, see Schipper 1993, 130-59. See also Kohn 1989, 125-58.

17 For example, one emblematic set of divinities resides in the Nine Palaces within the head, which "are symbolic representations of the totality of the universe within human beings. Also present as the Constellation of Nine Palaces in the sky, they are cosmologically related to the nine provinces as established by the sage emperor Yu in his circuit of China as well as to the Writing of the Lo River, a sacred numerological chart representing the nine provinces and thereby the division of the entire world". For additional reference, see Kohn 1991, 236-7.

18 For a more thorough study on the essential practice of early Daoism Cunsi, see Cheng 2017, 141-76; see also Huang 2010, 57-90; see also Li 2009, 174-95.

the internal cave of the body is not a completely enclosed space but is interconnected with the external world without any separation. Through meditation practices, adepts engage in an ecstatic flight, which refers to a spirit excursion across the heaven, the mountains and the body. Such mental trips take place in an intermediary world created by the "active imagination" (Robinet 1989, 160-1). Although this world is imagined and therefore not physically real, it is nonetheless considered real, as it is inhabited by individuals who, through their experiences, create a new self. Thus, the seemingly limited physical body in this way is turned inside out and expanded infinitely. The microcosm of the body is inverted to encompass the macrocosm, as *Ziyang zhenren neizhuan*, introduced at the beginning of this section, further elaborates in its discussion of the body's internal cavern:

> 是以真人處天處山處人，入無間。以黍米容蓬萊山，包括六合，天地不能載焉。(12b3-4)
>
> Therefore, the perfected resides in heaven, within mountains, and within the human body, without any separation between them. [Through his body he travels freely, as if] a single grain of millet could encompass Mount Penglai,[19] embracing the six directions,[20] [so vast that even] Heaven and Earth could not contain it.

5 Conclusion

Up to this point, through a succinct exploration of the three essential domains – the cosmos, the mountain, and the human body – we have observed how the cave metaphor consistently permeates medieval Daoist epistemology. On the one hand, the cave, as a dark and mysterious space, stimulates religious imagination regarding the primordial cosmic creation, sacred sites concealed within the terrestrial landscape, and the human body as a dwelling for divine forces. On the other hand, the specific connotation of the term 'cave' in Chinese language – implying fast-moving water and tunnel-like features – adds further dimensions to each of these realms. This perspective elucidates how Primordial Energy differentiates and transforms into the Myriad Things, how Grotto-Heavens scattered across the Chinese land are interconnected to form a network, and how the body's internal systems correspond with the external world.

19 A mythical mountain in Chinese folklore and Daoist tradition said to be located on islands in the Eastern Sea, often imagined as paradisical realm where dwells the immortals.

20 It literally denotes the north, south, east, west, up, and down, and is frequently employed to refer to the entire universe.

Moreover, these realms are not isolated but are linked through fundamental analogies. They represent "merely relative phenomena, closely interrelated and quickly overcome once one has entered the visionary mode" (Robinet 1989, 164).

The formation of Daoist epistemology is intrinsically associated with the intellectual background of ancient China. The three essential spheres previously discussed are grounded in the 'correspondence theory' (*ganying* 感應) found in Pre-Qin and Han cosmology and philosophy, which posits that Heaven (*tian* 天), Earth (*di* 地), and Humanity (*ren* 人) are dynamically related. A comprehensive analysis of how each of these spheres is situated within the broader intellectual context exceeds the scope of this paper. My focus here is to illuminate how the Daoist cave metaphor, in turn, contributed to shaping the specific perception of the cave in medieval Chinese thought and its enduring influence.

Firstly, in the Chinese language, the character *dong* appears in words such as *dongguan* 洞觀 (to observe deeply), *dongxi* 洞悉 (to fully comprehend), and *dongcha* 洞察 (to perceive insightfully), where '*dong*' functions adverbially to denote clarity or profound understanding – a usage that remains common today. However, such a linguistic application was not prevalent in earlier periods. It is reasonable to infer that the Daoist cave metaphor, representing a site of enlightenment and transcendence, contributed to this semantic expansion.

Secondly, in literary tradition, the renowned tale *Taohuayuan ji* 桃花源記 (Record of the Peach Blossom Spring) written by Tao Qian 陶潛 (Yuanming 淵明, 365?-427), depicts a secluded, hidden realm free from the turmoil and corruption of the outside world. In this narration, the protagonist, a fisherman, enters a paradisaic land through a small opening in the mountain. After passing through a narrow corridor, the world of the Peach Blossom Spring revealed to him. This tale became a symbol of idealized harmony and peace in the collective imagination, inspiring numerous adaptations and interpretations throughout history (Bokenkamp 1986, 65-77; Yang 2013, 329-78). Notably, Tao's tale was recorded shortly after the Daoist revelations at Maoshan 茅山 (364-370), documented in the *Zhengao*, which describes the configurations of Grotto-Heavens.[21] The parallels between literary discourse and Daoist sacred geography are evident, particularly in the structural correspondence between the internal microcosm and the external macrocosm, as well as in the shared yearning for simplicity, transcendence and utopian harmony.[22] Moreover, 'Taoyuan' 桃源 (Peach Spring), a concrete

21 For a thorough study on these revelations, see Strickmann 1981.

22 For a more detailed discussion on the Daoist influence on this tale, see Miura 2017, 388-97. In addition, one should not overlook the influence of the hermit tradition, which

e-ISSN 2385-3042

location in Northern Hunan 湖南 that is closely tied to the setting of Tao's tale, demonstrates an even stronger association with Daoism. It was included in the Daoist numerological configuration of sacred topology, the 'Thirty-Six Grotto-Heavens'. Furthermore, historical records indicate that a Daoist monastery existed at the site of Peach Spring, receiving official recognition in 748, with its foundation likely dates back to Tao's era (Meulenbeld 2021, 1-39).

Thirdly, in the tradition of visual and architectural arts, the later aesthetic principles of Chinese garden design provide an evident example of the Medieval Daoist cave metaphor's long-lasting influence. When addressing this issue, the concept of 'Hutian' 壺天 (Pot-Heaven), which shares many similarities with the Grotto-Heaven, is frequently mentioned. This notion first appeared in the hagiography of an immortal named Fei Changfang 費長房, found in *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Book of the Later Han). The text narrates that Fei observed an old man selling medicines in the market who, every day after the market closed, jumped into a pot. Fei then paid him a formal visit and was invited into the miraculous world inside the pot. The idea of considering a garden as a Pot-Heaven for the secluded retreat of a literati emerged as early as the Tang dynasty. For instance, Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846) wrote in his poem *Chou wuqi jianji* 酬吳七見寄 (Reply to Wu Qi's Letter): "誰知市南地，轉作壺中天" (Who knows [this] place in the south of the town has become a heaven in the pot). After the Tang dynasty, the concept of Pot-Heaven became a key idea in garden design. It was used to designate the garden itself as a serene space for contemplation, relaxation, and introspection, providing an environment where individuals could retreat from wordily distractions, engage in spiritual cultivation, and reconnect with nature. Furthermore, the Pot-Heaven embodies the artistic techniques of garden arrangement, with the aim of reflecting natural scenery withinthe limited scale of a garden, where a simple rockcan represent a mountain, and a small pond can symbolize a vast ocean. What is particularly notable about how the cave metaphor is concretized in garden design is the setting of transitional spaces, often represented by specific architectural elements or winding corridors. These spaces are frequently named after Grotto-Heavens and resonate with the transitional function of the former, which serve as gateways to the immortal's world (Zhou 2018, 74-5).[23] These examples are merely a few, and the influence of Daoist cave metaphor remains a propound topic deserving further scholarly exploration.

significantly shaped the motif of the Peach Blossom Flower, as well as early Daoist practices and reverence for mountains. See Michael 2016.

23 For more examples of the influence of the Daoist cave metaphor on visual and architectural art traditions, see Little 2000, 147-62; Stein 1990; Jiang 2003, 56-62.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Baopu zi 抱樸子 (Master Who Embraces Simplicity). Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343). *Daozang* 道藏 DZ 1185.

Daode zhenjing 道德真經 (Classic of the Way and Virtue). Attributed to Lao Zi 老子 (fl. fifth century BC). *Daozang* 道藏 DZ 664.

Daode zhenjing guangyi 道德真經廣義 (Comprehensive Meaning of the Dao De Jing). Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850-933). *Daozang* 道藏 DZ 725.

Dongtian fudi yuedu mingshan ji 洞天福地嶽瀆名山記 (Record of Grotto-Heavens, Blessed Places, Ducts, Peals, and Great Mountains). Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850-933). *Daozang* 道藏 DZ 599.

Yunji qiqian 雲笈七籤 (Seven Signs of the Cloud Bookcase). Zhang Junfang 張君房 (fl. 1008-29). *Daozang* 道藏 DZ 1032.

Zhengao 真誥 (Declarations of the Perfected). Compiled and annotated by Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (451-536). *Daozang* 道藏DZ 1016.

Ziyang zhenren neizhuan 紫陽真人內傳 (Esoteric Biography of Perfected of Purple Yang). Late fourth century. *Daozang* 道藏 DZ 303.

Secondary Sources

Bokenkamp, S. (1986). "The Peach Flower Font and the Grotto Passage". *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 106(1), 65-77.

Cai Linbo 蔡林波 (2019). "Daojiao dong gainian jiqi shengming zhexue yihan" 道教洞概念及其生命哲学意涵 (The Concept of Taoist Caves and Its Implications for a Philosophy of Life). *Daojiao yanjiu*, 3, 15-16.

Campany, R. (2006). "Secrecy and Display in the Quest for Transcendence in China, ca. 220 BCE-350CE". *History of Religions*, 45(4), 291-336.

Cheng Lesong 程樂松 (2013). "Zhenxing yu dongtian: zhonggu daojiao dilixue zhong suojian de xinyang juhe" 真形與洞天：中古道教地理學中所見的信仰聚合 (True Forms and Grotto-Heavens: Belief Fusion in Medieval Taoist Geography). Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 95-106.

Cheng Lesong 程樂松 (2017). "Cunsi de neijing, qiejin shensheng de shenti" 存思的內景,切近神聖的身體 (The Inner Landscape of Cunsi and the Body Approaching the Sacred). *Fujen Religious Studies*, 34, 141-76.

Dong Shi 董石; Jiang Miao 姜苗 (2018). "*Huangdi Neijing* dongzi yu suoshe bingzheng tantao" 黃帝內經洞字與所涉病證探討 (An Investigation of the Character *Dong* and Its Related Pathologies in *Huangdi Neijing*). *Zhonghua zhongyiyao zazhi*, 33(11), 4856-9.

Hahn, T. (1988). "The Standard Taoist Mountain and Related Features of Religious Geography". *Cahier d'Extrême-Asie*, 4, 145-56.

Hahn, T. (2000). "Daoist Sacred Sites". Kohn, L. (ed.), *Daoism Handbook*. Leiden: Brill, 683-707.

Huang, S. (2010). "Daoist Imagery of Body and Cosmos". *Journal of Daoist Studies*, 3, 57-90.

Huang, S. (2012). *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China*. Cambridge; London: Havard University Press.

Jiang Sheng 姜生 (2003). "Lun daojiao de dongxue xinyang" 論道教的洞穴信仰 (A Study of Taoist Cave Beliefs). *Wenshizhe*, 5, 56-62.

Jiang Sheng (2015). "Hanmu de shenyao yu shijie chengxian xinyang" 漢墓的神藥與屍解成仙信仰 (Elixirs and the Belief of Becoming Immortals Through Shijie in Han Tombs). *Sichuan daxue xuebao*, 2, 28-42.

Kohn, L. (1989). "Guarding the One: Concentrative Meditation in Daoism". Kohn, L.; Yoshinobu, S. (ed.), *Taoist Meditation and Longevity Techniques*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 125-58.

Kohn, L. (1991). "Taoist Visions of the Body". *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 18, 227-52.

Kohn, L. (1993). *The Taoist Experience, An Anthology*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Li Fengmao 李豐楙 (2009). "Dongtian yu neijing: xiyuan er zhi si shiji jiangnan daojiao de neixiang youguan". 洞天與內景 : 西元二至四世紀江南道教的內向游觀 (The Grotto-Heaven and Inner Landscape: Inward Spiritual Journeys in Jiangnan Taoism from Second to Fourth Centuries). *Donghua hanxue*, 9, 174-95.

Little, S. (2000). *Taoism and the Arts of China*. Chicago; Berkeley: The Art Institute of Chicago; University of California Press, 147-62.

Meulenbeld, M. (2021). "The Peach Blossom Spring's Long History as a Sacred Site in Northern Hunan". *T'oung Pao*, 107, 1-39.

Michael, T. (2016). "Mountains and Early Daoism in the Writing of Ge Hong". *History of Religions*, 56, 23-54.

Miura Kunio 三浦國雄 (2017). *Bulao busi de yuqiu* 不老不死的欲求 (The Quest for Immortality). Transl. by Wang Biao 王標. Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe.

Miura Kunio (1983). "Doten fukuchi ron" 洞天福地小論, *Tōhō shūkyō* 東方宗教, 61, 1-23.

Pregadio, F. (2006). "Early Daoist Meditation and the Origins of Inner Alchemy". Penny, B. (ed.), *Daoism in History*. London; New York: Routledge, 121-58.

Raz, G. (2010). "Daoist Sacred Geography". Lagerwey, J.; Lu, P. (eds), *Early Chinese Religion. Part Two: The Period of Division (220-589 AD)*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1399-442.

Robinet, I. (1989). "Visualization and Ecstatic Flight in Shangqing Daoism". Kohn, L.; Yoshinobu, S. (eds), *Taoist Meditation and Longevity Techniques*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 159-91.

Schipper, K. (1967). "Gogaku shinkei zu no shinkō" 五嶽真形圖の信仰 (The Belief in the Diagram of the True Form of the Five Peaks). Yoshioka Y. 吉岡義豐; Soymié, M. (eds), *Dōkyō kenkyū*, 2, 114-62.

Schipper, K. (1993). *The Daoist Body*. Berkely: University of California Press.

Schipper, K.; Verellen, F. (2004). *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Schipper, M.; Ye, S.; Yin, H. (eds) (2011). *China's Creation and Origin Myths*. Leiden; Boston: Brill.

Steavu, D. (2019). *The Writ of the Three Sovereigns*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.

Stein, R. (1990). *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought*. Transl. by P. Brooks. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Strickmann, M. (1981). *Le Taoïsme du Maochan: chronique d'une révélation*. Paris: Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Chinoise.

Sun Yiping. 孫亦平 (2006). "Lun daojiao yuzhoulun zhongde liangtiao fazhan xiansuo" 論道教宇宙論中的兩條發展線索 (Two Threads of Development in Taoist Cosmology). *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu*, 2, 45-54.

Tsai, J. (2004). *Imperial Mountain Journeys and Daoist Meditation and Ritual* [PhD Dissertation]. Standford: Stanford University.

Verellen, F. (1995). "The Beyond Within: Grotto-Heavens (Dongtian) in Daoist Ritual and Cosmology". *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, 8, 265-90.

Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 (2012). "Chutu wenxian yu xianqin ziran yuzhouguan chongshen" 出土文獻與先秦自然宇宙觀重審 (Reexamining Excavated Texts and Pre-Qin Cosmology). *Zhongguo shehui kexue*, 5, 67-85.

Weiss, L. (2012). "Rectifying the Deep Structures of the Earth, Sima Chengzhen and the Standardization of Daoist Sacred Geography in the Tang". *Journal of Daoist Studies*, 5, 31-60.

Wu Hung 巫鴻 (2010). *The Art of Yellow Springs. Understanding Chinese Tombs*. London: Reaktion Books.

Yasui Kozan 安居香山; Nakamura Shohachi 中村璋八 (eds) (1994). *Weishu jicheng* 緯書集成 (Corpus of Apocrypha). Shijia zhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe.

Yang Zhiyi 楊治宜 (2013). "Return to an Inner Utopia: Su Shi's Transformation of Tao Qian in His Exile Poetry". *T'oung Pao*, 99, 329-78.

Yu, D. (1981). "The Creation Myth and Its Symbolism in Classical Daoism". *Philosophy East and West*, 31(4), 479-500.

Zhou Nulu 周努魯 (2018). "Hutian yu dongtian, daojiao dui zhongguo yuanlin de yingxiang" 壺天與洞天,道教對中國園林的影響 (Pot-Heavens and Grotto-Heavens; the Daoist Influences on the Chinese Gardening). *Zhongguo zongjiao*, 3, 74-5.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
Vol. 61 – Supplement – November 2025

A Metaphorical Narrative of Outer Space in China's Diplomacy: Toward a Heavenly 'Community of Common Destiny'

Tonio Savina
Sapienza Università di Roma, Italia

Abstract Conceiving metaphors as communication tools used to frame international strategic issues, the present paper focuses on Xi Jinping's metaphorical narrative of humanity as a community with a shared future, one of the core tenets in the current PRC's diplomatic discourse. Specifically, the essay tries to shed light on a new context in which this metaphor has recently begun to be used, that is China's space diplomacy. In doing so, the essay briefly presents the concept of 'community of common destiny for humankind'; then it focuses on how this formula is being associated with outer space, seeking also to decipher its strategic function, aimed at challenging the US space leadership.

Keywords Metaphorical narrative. Community of shared future for humankind. Common destiny. China. Space diplomacy.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Metaphorical Narrative of a 'Community of Common Destiny'. – 3 Projecting the 'Community of Common Destiny' into Outer Space. – 4 Deconstructing China's Strategic Narrative of Outer Space.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2024-11-20
Accepted 2025-03-11
Published 2025-04-23

Check for updates

Open access

Citation Savina, T. (2025). "A Metaphorical Narrative of Outer Space in China's Diplomacy: Toward a Heavenly 'Community of Common Destiny'". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 61, Supplement, November, [223-246].

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2025/03/008

1 Introduction

Under the classical Aristotelian tradition, which remained dominant for many centuries, metaphors were regarded as mere linguistic acts, belonging exclusively to rhetoric and poetry (Eco 2004; Guastini 2005; Travaglini 2009).[1] It has been only very recently that the analysis of metaphorical statements has been moved away from the mere level of language, becoming the object of study of various disciplines, including social sciences. This happened thanks to cognitive linguistics, which reconceived metaphors as a way of carrying out thoughts and conceptualizations. At the beginning of the Eighties, indeed, Lakoff and Johnson introduced the notion of 'conceptual metaphors' ([1980] 2003), interpreted not as mere rhetorical figures but as 'a way of thinking', as analytical tools for structuring reality. In their view, "the locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another" (Lakoff 1993, 203). Since then, metaphor studies within the larger field of humanities and social sciences have increasingly developed, with several scholarly researchers acknowledging the central role that figurative language plays in constructing the socio-political reality (see Barnden 2006; Grayling, Wuppuluri 2022; Pikalo, Carver 2008).

Drawing on this interpretation, analysts of political communication also examined metaphors' performative function in public discourse: some authors focused on their persuasive nature, by which politicians can either gain or keep power (Musolff 2004; Otieno, Owino, Attyang 2016); others analysed their use for ideological purposes, highlighting how they can activate unconscious emotional associations that contribute to the creation of national myths (see Charteris-Black 2005; Zinken 2003).

Regarding the case of the People's Republic of China (PRC), numerous studies have emphasised the significance of figurative language in the country's political discourse, particularly for the Chinese leaders' appeal to rhetorical strategies that combine the use of *tifa* (political formulations, slogans) with metaphors or other allegorical figures, used to stimulate imaginative glimpses that fuel the patriotic pride of the population.[2] Chinese politicians indeed have always made use of metaphorical expressions in addressing domestic audiences. At the same time, however, they have recognised their effectiveness also in China's external communication. As several scholars have highlighted, metaphors are very common in the PRC's diplomatic language, where they are employed to convey particular

1 The author wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and for their suggestions for future research.

2 See Magagnin 2014; Gallelli 2016; 2018; Tian, Bo, Zhang 2021.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

representations of the Chinese state, mostly in a positive way, in line with the foreign policy goals of the central government (see Liu, Wang 2020; Zheng 2021; Wang, Chen 2022).

Continuing in this line of research, the present paper focuses on the pragmatic function of metaphors in the Chinese diplomatic discourse, looking at them not just as a form of correspondence between two domains, but as communication tools to recreate a discursive scenario that supports specific foreign policy objectives. In other terms, metaphors will here be understood as 'perlocutionary acts' (Austin 1962) that can 'do things' (Schoenhals 1992), i.e., a form of crafting practice used by Chinese representatives in international forums to frame strategic issues in a way that aligns their specific interests (Morozova 2018; Heracleous, Jacobs 2008). The focus of this study, then, is on how metaphoric images can convey strategic narratives, namely broader geopolitical discourses through which ruling elites attempt to assign a particular meaning to international affairs, and thus achieve certain political objectives (Demjén, Semino 2020, 214; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, Roselle 2018).

Specifically, this essay starts from the PRC's metaphorical narrative of the world as a 'community of common destiny' (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体), one of the core tenets in Xi Jinping's diplomatic discourse (see *Renmin Ribao* 2020; *Xinhua* 2023; SCIO 2023b, 4). It is necessary to immediately clarify that, whereas today's Chinese governmental documents translate the term *mingyun* as 'future', the present paper will recover its original official translation, used up to 2015, namely 'destiny'.[3] This choice is aimed at preserving the fatalistic sense embedded in Xi's formula, which conveys a sense of faith in the PRC's 'benevolence' that other countries are asked to blindly accept, as will be further explained in the following pages. Indeed, metaphorically equating the world to a community with a shared destiny represents a perfect example of a strategic external communication device, since, as we will see, it is a way for China to convey to foreign audiences a specific vision of the global order and its governance, allegedly more just, equitable, and harmonious. The metaphorization of humanity as a 'community of common destiny', therefore, more than being a mere correlation between two items in the PRC's diplomatic language, can be considered a *métarécit* (Lyotard [1979] 2014), i.e. a grand portrait of a world in which all countries experience an eternal peaceful coexistence under the 'benevolent' guidance of China.

3 As known, the initial English translation of *renlei mingyun gongtongti* was 'community of common destiny for mankind'. However, since the term 'destiny' could raise concerns among international audiences due to its sense of 'inevitability', in 2015, it was officially substituted with 'future', rephrasing the entire formula as 'community with a shared future for mankind'. See Chen 2021.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

In analysing this metaphorical narrative, this study tries to shed light on a newly specific context to which it has recently begun to be applied, that is, China's space diplomacy.[4] Nowadays, indeed, we are witnessing a phenomenon whereby in Beijing's diplomatic discourse, space is being metaphorically related to the 'community of common destiny' and represented as the ideal setting for harmonious coexistence among different peoples and nations. As clearly stated in 2020 by Zhao Lijian, one of the most prominent Chinese representatives who served as spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Outer space, as a global public domain, is especially a community with a shared future for mankind" (Zhao 2020).

At the time of this writing, and within the limits of the author's knowledge, no academic studies have thoroughly investigated the practice of metaphorising outer space in terms of a community of common destiny. Some Chinese scholars have highlighted the PRC's effort toward the creation of such a heavenly community, but they mostly contribute to uncritically spreading the official Chinese narrative about the creation of a new global space order, without noticing and deconstructing the strategic intent of this process (see Xu, Su 2018; Zhao 2018). The present paper, therefore, represents a preliminary attempt to address this research gap.

The absence of critical studies on this topic, after all, is hardly surprising, since the metaphorization of outer space in terms of a community of common destiny is a new and still ongoing phenomenon, which has not yet been fully embraced by international audiences and governments. Nonetheless, it is essential to assess the actual strategic significance of this metaphorical narrative, which anticipates that, in the future, outer space could be completely integrated into a 'well-realised' community of common destiny.

Considering that the metaphorical projection of the community of common destiny in outer space is only at its initial stage, the present paper will not carry out a quantitative analysis that illustrates the recurrence of this representation in the Chinese diplomatic discourse; rather, what this essay tries to do is to offer some qualitative insights into the discursive process through which this narrative is being built, deconstructing its strategic intent and revealing its limits and contradictions. Indeed, more than creating a mere linguistic correspondence between two conceptual domains – the outer space and the community of common destiny – this metaphorical narrative foregrounds some aspects of the phenomenon in question and leaves

4 Please note that the term 'space diplomacy' can be interpreted in three ways: 'space for diplomacy', i.e. the utilization of space cooperation to support foreign policy objectives; 'diplomacy for space', i.e., the conduct of diplomatic actions to support public space goals; and 'diplomacy of space', related to initiatives for the management of strategic interaction in space. See Aliberti, Hrozensky, Bataille 2020.

others in the background. Thus, as we will see, representing outer space as a realised community of common destiny has as its first consequence the evocation of a harmonious scenario, of a heavenly, peaceful state, useful for representing China as a responsible space power, open to cooperation with other countries. Instead, it leaves in the background all the more critical and analytical views of outer space that would be possible, such as, for example, its increasing military and economic exploitation.

2 The Metaphorical Narrative of a 'Community of Common Destiny'

Considered to be genealogically connected to the German term *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (Mitchell 2022; Qian 2019), and entering the Chinese language from Japan in the early twentieth century, the 'community of common destiny for humankind' is a key concept in the current diplomatic language of the PRC (Chen 2021; Mitchell 2022; Panda 2021). Although this expression became popular only during Xi Jinping's era, the shorter phrase 'community of destiny' (*mingyun gongtongti* 命运共同体) was already circulating by the 1930s-1940s, mainly to refer to the Japanese imperial project of creating a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (Mitchell 2022; Qian 2019).

In the first decades after the foundation of the PRC, the term fell into disuse, only to find new life during the reform and opening up era: at that time, among other usages (Mitchell 2022), it became common in referring to China's interactions with foreign countries, yet remaining limited to bilateral relations. When the *Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and the PRC* was formalised in 1978, it was used to praise Tokyo and Beijing's bilateral community of fate (Qian 2019). Even throughout the nineties and early 2000s, the term's geopolitical usage did not have a global scope. In 2007, for example, it was inserted in the Report to the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to highlight the commonality and mutual integration between the two sides of the Strait, based on the assumption that both of them shared the "same blood and destiny" (Hu 2007). In 2009, the *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao* 人民日报) recalled how, during Nixon's era, the then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had called on China and the US to build a 'community of common destiny' (*Renmin wang* 2009).

As time went by, however, the phrase also began to be related to China's broader contacts with foreign countries and it assumed increasingly global implications. In 2011, the slogan appeared in China's *White Paper on Peaceful Development* (*Zhongguo de heping fazhan baipishu* 中国的和平发展白皮书), where it was utilised for the first time to discuss how economic globalization influences

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, Supplement, November 2025, 223-246
e-ISSN 2385-3042

international relations. According to the document, countries with different systems and at different development stages could coexist, seeking a new path to cooperate in responding to the diverse challenges of the present time (SCIO 2011a).

However, it was only in 2012 that the full phrase *renlei mingyun gongtongti* made its first official appearance in the Report of the 18th Congress of the CCP, which claimed that win-win cooperation was at the foundation of a community of common destiny for humankind, a model of taking into account the legitimate concerns of other countries while pursuing one's own interests, thus establishing a new type of multipolar development that is more equal and balanced (Hu 2012).

Shortly after, the concept was taken up by Xi Jinping, who made it part of his own ideological contribution. In 2013, Xi employed it during a speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (Xi 2013), albeit, at that time, the 'community of common destiny' was still not considered of special significance by observers of Chinese politics. It was only in 2015 that the phrase began to attract more attention, as it spread through the official State media, particularly after two speeches given by Xi – the first one at the United Nations General Assembly, titled *Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-Win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind* (Xi 2015), and the second one, in May 2017, at the first Forum on the Belt and Road Initiative (*Xinhua* 2017). During the same year, the term was inserted within the Party Constitution, while in 2018 it was enshrined within the State Constitution, beginning to be celebrated as an integral part of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy (*Xi Jinping waijiao sixiang* 习近平外交思想) (*Xuexi Shibao* 2023).

From that moment on, the notion of a 'community of common destiny for humankind' began to be widely popular in Chinese diplomatic discourse (Zeng 2020, 111-30), often employed vaguely by Chinese official representatives as a metaphorical narrative to refer to a global vision of the world, an upcoming *ecumene* based on the fact that nowadays humanity faces a series of inevitable economic, political, cultural, environmental and security challenges. As repeatedly stated by Xi Jinping, «humankind is a community of a shared future» (*Xinhua* 2023; see also *Renmin Ribao* 2020; MEE 2021; SCIO 2023b, 4), whose realization marks the advent of an open, inclusive, beautiful world that enjoys everlasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity among all human beings.

In trying to assess the implicit meaning of the metaphor of the world as a 'community of common destiny', it is firstly important to consider how it embeds a pretentious attitude to present itself as a doctrine for the salvation of humankind. In other words, in drawing on this narrative, Xi seems to be moved by a pastoral, even hieratic impulse, that makes his proposal a universal manifesto, a Messianic

prophecy that the Chinese leader offers to humanity to solve the conundrums of modern times. As stated in the White Paper "A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions", published in September 2023 by the State Council:

> In the universe there is only one Earth, the shared home of humanity. Unfortunately, this planet on which we rely for our subsistence is facing immense and unprecedented crises, both known and unknown, both foreseeable and unforeseeable. Whether human civilization can survive these has become an existential issue that must be squarely faced. […] Ten years ago, President Xi Jinping propounded the idea of building a global community of shared future, answering a question raised by the world, by history, and by the times: "Where is humanity headed?" (SCIO 2023a)

Certainly, the quotation presented here may suggest that China is merely raising global concerns rather than necessarily assuming a leadership role in addressing them. However, the implicit claim to guide humanity toward salvation becomes more evident in other statements, such as when Foreign Minister Wang Yi, at the 19th Congress of the CCP in 2017, emphasised that the community of common destiny provides a framework for international cooperation based on mutual respect, equity, justice, and win-win collaboration, positioning China's foreign policy "on a moral high ground" (Waijiao bu 2017). In this sense, China's role is framed as a mission it must undertake, as it perceives itself as morally superior to other nations and uniquely capable of fulfilling this responsibility. After all, according to Wang, this is not only a historical responsibility that China, as a major socialist country, must undertake for the advancement of human society but also "a broader mission for CCP members to contribute to the progress of global political civilization" (Waijiao bu 2017).

It is also worth noting that Chinese diplomats find the alleged roots of the cosmopolitan attitude that informs the metaphorical narrative of the world as a 'community of common destiny' in China's millenary traditional culture (Chen 2017), especially in the *Tianxia* system (literally, all under Heaven). This was the term used to describe the Chinese Empire, but was widely applied to convey the Chinese vision and normative principles for international relations. Aimed at creating compatibility between all peoples and nations, it refers to a totality that implies the acceptance of diversity, emphasising mutual dependence, mutual improvement, and perfect complementarity (Fairbank 1968; see also Carlson 2011; Miranda 2017). By elevating 'harmony' to a 'cultural gene' (*wenhua jiyin* 文化基因) of the Chinese nation, it is underlined how this value, which had in the past underpinned relations between the Empire and its

neighbours, is unquestionably still effective today on a global level for recreating a state of 'unity of opposites' (*duili tongyi* 对立统一), a 'community of common destiny' based not on the assimilation of the other (*tonghua* 同化), but on a form of respect for socio-political and cultural diversity. Mixing 'harmony' with other Confucian principles and contents of the Taoist and Buddhist traditions, the concept of 'community of common destiny' aims to demonstrate how China has always pursued peaceful coexistence with others.

The appeal to these classical references, however, is based on a vague combination of different philosophical elements, mostly recovered in the context of the contemporary revival of Confucianism (Miranda 2022; Scarpari 2015), and often resulting in a *pastiche* of citations and allusions that, divorced from their specific historical-cultural context, end up flattening the complexity of predynastic China, as well as the evolutionary dynamics of the imperial one, with the only aim of legitimising the current Chinese foreign policy agenda (Callahan 2011; Zhang 2011; see also Savina 2022b). The Chinese Empire, indeed, is often depicted as crystallised in an ahistorical, and even mythical harmonious dimension, which is functional to ascertaining the validity of the current model of pluralist international order promoted by Beijing, i.e. of that form of Chinese cosmopolitism which supports international cooperation without abdicating the principles of sovereignty and self-determination, thus opposing the Western democratic liberal and solidaristic order favoured by the US (Dian 2021, 53-102).

Beyond its ecumenical and largely utopian ambitions, therefore, the metaphorical narrative of humankind as a community of common destiny is nothing but the latest attempt in the PRC's efforts to provide a theoretical legitimation to its foreign policy. Indeed, it can be considered as the ultimate endeavour of the Chinese leadership to present a conceptual framework for its international political actions, at a time when China has to justify its increasingly proactive, and even assertive engagement in the international arena.[5] Yet this narrative

5 After all, the practice of providing conceptual pillars to its foreign policy is a strategy that has been pursued as early as the Maoist period, when the Theory of Intermediate Zones first, and the Three Worlds Theory later, were articulated to frame the country's stance against any form of imperialism and revisionism. Furthermore, at that time, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai elaborated the so-called 'five principles of peaceful coexistence', a set of behavioural norms for regulating international relations. The practice of identifying theoretical foundations continued also in the post-Maoist period, especially after the end of the Cold War, when China predicted the advent of a multipolar system, albeit, during the Nineties, it decided to keep a 'low profile', aware that the hegemonic power of the US could not be challenged. In the following years, the PRC also enunciated the theory of 'peaceful rise', promoting a 'harmonious world' and presenting itself as a country that was not seeking to undermine the existing international order. For further references see Zhao 2022.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

marks a step further than being a mere pillar of Chinese foreign policy, since it aims to present itself as a tool for global governance, a *vade mecum* China offers to all countries to address the major challenges of our time. The community of common destiny for humankind, indeed, is presented as China's unique contribution to facing global issues, from climate change, to sustainability, to cybersecurity, and so on. To deal with these phenomena, China proposes that rights and responsibilities have to be shared among all states, ensuring that the interests and expectations of emerging market countries and developing countries are fully respected through their participation in setting governance rules. This would be fundamental, especially in nuclear security governance, maritime disputes, and health security, but also in defining the rules in the deep sea, the polar regions, the digital domain, and other new frontiers (see Freeman 2019). Indeed the new ecumene envisaged by the Chinese leadership is not limited to the sole terrestrial dimension. In this regard, the next paragraph will illustrate how it is also being projected into outer space.

3 Projecting the 'Community of Common Destiny' into Outer Space

Among the many contexts in which the metaphorical narrative of humankind as a 'community of common destiny' is being strategically applied, there is outer space. Today, indeed, alongside the national and nationalist narrative that the PRC has built around its space program (Savina 2023b), a more 'cosmopolitan' representation of outer space, particularly used in external communication is also being established, targeting foreign audiences and governments and aimed at recreating the perception of China as a country open to space cooperation and eager to use space for exclusively peaceful purposes and to the benefit of all humanity. After all, due to its intrinsic characteristics, which remind us of the fragile human condition of living on a little boat floating in the universe, outer space does indeed fit uniquely well into the ecumenical representation of the shared future conveyed by China's diplomacy, which can prefigure the building of a harmonious cosmopolis beyond the earth's atmosphere. Outer space, therefore, can be easily represented as a hotbed of the 'community of common destiny', an ideal setting for testing the possibilities of realising a harmonious coexistence among peoples and nations.

Before examining how the metaphorical narrative of humanity as a community of common destiny is being related to outer space, it is worth noting how, although this representation has become central only in the last years, similar views were produced even before Xi Jinping's New Era (Savina 2023a). Indeed, even without using the

e-ISSN 2385-3042

current official phraseology, a cosmopolitan approach to outer space was already manifested within the PRC's White Papers on space activities published as early as the beginning of the new millennium (SCIO 2000; 2006; 2011; 2016), which reassured foreign countries about the peaceful intentions of Beijing's space rise, challenging the US narrative of the Chinese space threat.[6] In fact, at the beginning of the 2000s, whereas Western experts warned of the risk that Beijing's space program posed to American national security (see Tellis 2007; Keuter 2007), several PRC intellectuals framed the extra-terrestrial dimension as a territory where to experience peaceful cooperation, hoping for a more profound ethical-moral regeneration of human beings (see Chen 2011). From their point of view, outer space constituted a place where the power politics that inform the international system would be overcome – but also a place where the universalistic momentum of Chinese diplomacy could be embodied. In the second half of the 2000s, Wang Yuechuan (Beijing University) used the term 'space civilization' (*taikong wenming* 太空文明) to define the form that humanity would take after the widespread use of aerospace technologies (Wang 2006; 2010). In his view, outer space was an arena where China could seek a relationship of harmonious and peaceful coexistence with other nations. In 2008, Professor Shi Shengxun also argued that the advent of aerospace technologies would spur a gradual redefinition of national boundaries (Shi 2008). According to Shi, the dramatic change of perspective generated by observing the Earth from above – the so-called overview effect – was leading human beings to assume a global vision, realising that the world is a place without borders, a small and fragile place compared to the sublime immensity of the universe. Faced with this awareness, the interests and particularisms of individual states would lose meaning, while outer space would become an alleged *Tianshang* 天上, a new ecumene including everything that is 'above' Heaven.

Such intellectual speculations, although not directly backed by the Party-State, seem to have been instrumental in defining the official Chinese imaginary of space, and traces of this can be found in today's metaphorical narrative of the heavenly community of common destiny. At a domestic official level, the first time the concept of 'community of common destiny for humankind' was put in relation to aerospace was in 2022, when the State Council published a new White Paper on the country's space activities, stating that:

> Peaceful exploration, development and utilization of outer space are rights equally enjoyed by all countries. China calls on all countries to work together to build a global community of shared

6 On the Chinese space threat theory see Hunter 2019.

Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale
61, Supplement, November 2025, 223-246
e-ISSN 2385-3042

> future and carry out in-depth exchanges and cooperation in outer space on the basis of equality, mutual benefit, peaceful utilization, and inclusive development. (SCIO 2022)

In presenting the contents of the paper, Wu Yanhua, the vice administrator of the China National Space Administration (CNSA) – which serves as the public international face of Beijing's space program – added how China called for all nation-states to build a 'community with a shared future for mankind' in outer space, based on conducting extensive international scientific exchanges and cooperating in an open, peaceful, and transparent way, thus advancing the progress of human civilization (*Renmin wang* 2022).

Before the publication of the White Paper, however, the Chinese narrative of space as the ideal place for realising the alleged community of common destiny had already found its primary usage in international forums, especially within the United Nations, where the phrase *renlei mingyun gongtongti* was adopted in the official space-related vocabulary as early as 2017. It was in that year that the UN General Assembly approved Resolution 72/27, No First Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, which affirmed that "practical measures should be examined and taken in the search for agreements to prevent an arms race in outer space in a common effort towards a community of shared future for humankind" (UNGA 2017a). Also in the same year, Resolution 72/250, Further Practical Measures for the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space, was passed, stressing the importance of "promoting and strengthening international cooperation in the exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purposes, with the objective of shaping a community of shared future for mankind" (UNGA 2017b). At the time of this writing, ten other space-related Resolutions that contain references to the narrative of the community of common destiny have been adopted by the UN.[7]

The integration of this notion in official UN documents is the result of effective work carried out by the PRC diplomats to promote Chinese concepts designed to be shared by the international community. This promotion is taking place not only through formal channels, but also in a 'soft' way, based on drawing on Chinese cultural products and artifacts that can convey the official narrative of outer space as a

7 All the Resolutions can be consulted at: https://digitallibrary.un.org/. Please check the following filenames: G.A. Res. 73/31, U.N. Doc. A_RES_73/31 (Dec. 11, 2018); G.A. Res. 74/33, U.N. Doc. A_RES_74/33 (Dec. 18, 2019); G.A. Res. 74/34, U.N. Doc. A_RES_74/34 (Dec. 18, 2019); G.A. Res. 75/37, U.N. Doc. A_RES_75/37 (Dec. 16, 2020); G.A. Res. 76/23, U.N. Doc. A_RES_76/23 (Dec. 8, 2021); G.A. Res. 76/230, U.N. Doc. A_RES_ 76/230 (Dec. 30, 2021); G.A. Res. 77/42, U.N. Doc. A_RES_77/42 (Dec. 12, 2022); G.A. Res. 77/250, U.N. Doc. A_RES_77/250 (Jan. 9, 2023); G.A. Res. 78/238, U.N. Doc. A_RES_78/238 (Dec. 28, 2023); G.A. Res. 78/21, U.N Doc. A_RES_78/21 (Dec. 6, 2023).

e-ISSN 2385-3042

community of common destiny. This, for example, is what happened in 2023, during a side event of the 66th Session of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, organised by the Chinese Mission and China Film Group Corporation, on the occasion of the release of *The Wandering Earth II*, the sequel of the science fiction blockbuster, which has been exploited by the Party's diplomatic machine to convey Beijing's reassuring and benevolent messages (Chen 2019; Silk 2020). The event, attended by more than 200 representatives, was a positive effort to make the narrative of common destiny go global. Li Song, the permanent representative of China to the UN in Wien, stated that strengthening cooperation in outer space and moving toward a shared future are the profound meanings conveyed by the movie (*Global Times* 2023). The Chinese envoy to the UN also stressed that the movie "tells the story of a life-and-death crisis faced by humanity on Earth, portrays a united world, where countries join forces and mobilize all of our space technologies and capabilities to drive the Earth toward a new common future" (*Global Times* 2023).

To this end, the PRC promotes the definition of a global governance of outer space, which aims, among other objectives, to monitor and handle near-Earth objects, regulate planetary protection, and manage space traffic (Freeman 2019). This is crucial, as space has become an increasingly 'congested, contested, and competitive' domain: as is known, nowadays, the number of countries and private companies pursuing their own interests in space and longing to exploit its economic potential is growing; meanwhile, the exponential increase in rocket launches, the growing number of satellites in orbit, the limited orbital real estate, as well as military experiments conducted by the major space powers, are making the problem of the sustainability of space activities more urgent (Del Canto 2023). Faced with this situation, international space law remains limited and out of date, unable to provide answers to the challenges posed by the New Space Age.[8] What is still missing is an adequate regulatory regime and a shared agreement on a new global framework to govern outer space (Kostenko 2020).

It is precisely in this complex scenario of economic exploitation, military risk, and legislative deficit that the Chinese metaphorical narrative of humanity as a community of common destiny in space is wedged. To face the new space challenges, indeed, China sustains

8 Please note that today there are five international treaties underpinning space law, all of them finalised during the Cold War. The main agreement is the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, which is the foundation of international space law; then there also the Rescue Agreement (1968); the Liability Convention (1972); the Registration Convention (1976), and the Moon Agreement (1984). Please note that the latter has not been ratified by the US and China. All the treaties can be consulted at: `https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/treaties.html`.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

the need to carry out the exploration and use of outer space for the common interests of all mankind, conducting space activities with due regard for the interests of other States and the entire international community. This narrative, however, hides the pursuit of clear foreign policy objectives, aimed at delegitimising the current US-led space regime. The final paragraph will try to deconstruct this strategic intent.

4 Deconstructing China's Strategic Narrative of Outer Space

The fact that a Chinese phrase is widely circulating in an international context and that it has been incorporated in many UN documents is of particular interest, since it marks not the mere iteration in an official forum of an empty slogan, but, more or less consciously, the adoption by an international organization of the strategic narrative of a specific state – and, in this case, of a given political Party and its paramount leader. Indeed, although the PRC has repeatedly claimed that the 'community of common destiny for humankind' should not be considered a 'Chinese concept', but a theoretical platform shareable by humanity, it is always China that, in celebrating the international adoption of this formula, has stressed how it stands at the core of Xi Jinping Thought (SCIO 2017). In this sense, its inclusion within the UN documents, rather than it being a real and neutral diplomatic effort aimed at addressing uncontrolled space militarization and economic exploitation, represents a political victory for China, a decoration for the country's ability to discursively impact the terminology of global governance and build a normative constituency which rejects American unilateralism. In other words, it serves to renew the emphasis China places on the necessity to coordinate policy with newly emerging powers, thus supporting and fostering what Beijing identifies as the trend towards a multipolar world, lined up against American hegemonism. China indeed seeks to curry favour with developing countries in international institutions, as part of an effort to 'democratize' international relations, albeit the alleged multipolarism it advocates hides what is in fact a willingness to recognize the right for illiberal and authoritarian political regimes to participate in the definition of the rules of global governance, with the ultimate aim of challenging the US regulatory power and, more broadly, the US leadership (Smith 2018).

To this end, the metaphorical narrative of space as a 'community of common destiny' is useful for integrating countries that do not have access to space, or that have begun to take the first steps towards it, in an array of nations that seek political and legislative representativity under the 'benevolent' wings of China. The goal is to establish a new global governance of space, influencing rules and

institutions that regulate space exploration, thus defining a space regime less aligned with US interests and more with Chinese ones.

This objective was evidently and proactively pursued as early as 2016, when the PRC was working on its first space station (*taikongzhan*/*kongjianzhan* 太空站/空间站) which has been portrayed by Chinese state media as a 'truly international' (*zhenzheng guoji* 真正国际) platform (*Global Times* 2022), in a different way from the ISS – the International Space Station – which, in China's view, has only been a tool for the US to assert its hegemonic space power, excluding countries such as the PRC from taking part to the project. By contrast, the Chinese space station has been open to cooperation with anyone interested in realising a 'community of common destiny' in outer space: to this end a Framework Agreement and a Funding Agreement were signed between the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) and China Manned Space Agency, working also within the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) to enable UN Member States, particularly developing countries, to conduct space experiments on-board China's space station, providing them with flight opportunities for astronauts and payload engineers (UN 2016).

These strategic diplomatic manoeuvres, aimed at fostering a positive image of China – it is worth recalling – are being facilitated by the West itself, which seems no longer able to face the challenges posed by the New Space Age. In recent years, indeed, the growing role of US private corporations that claim to be exploiting space 'for the benefit of humanity' (Rubenstein 2022) is mixing with the old divinely-inspired rhetoric of America's 'manifest destiny' (Trump 2020a). Under this paradigm, an amalgam of machismo, expansionism, militarism, and neoliberalism has assumed renewed emphasis: during Trump's era, for example, the US insisted on the need to protect US assets in space both from a defensive and offensive standpoint, through the creation of the Space Force (Trump 2020b). Meanwhile, the White House explicitly confirmed its intention not to view space as a 'global common',[9] providing operational guidelines for the exploitation of space resources by private entities. The willingness to facilitate space economic profiting, however, was already evident during the Obama administration, when the Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act was approved, and it was made even more explicit with the American Space Commerce Free Enterprise Act of 2017 and with an Executive Order of 2020,

9 According to the Executive Order (EO) No. 13914, 85 Fed. Reg. 20,38, "outer space is a legally and physically unique domain of human activity, and the US does not view it as a global common". The EO can be consulted at: `https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-04-10/pdf/2020-07800.pdf`.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

the first one signed in conjunction with the beginning of the new American lunar exploration program, Artemis.[10]

Meanwhile, China seems to be taking on the role that the US is abandoning, replacing them as a responsible power that acts as a benevolent leader who cares for the sustainability of outer space exploration (Rubenstein, unpub.). In fact, China has recognised space as 'common' (*Xinhua* 2024a), insisting on the necessity of multipolar governance to regulate the new space competition and stressing that every country must have an equal right to access and use outer space. Space exploration, therefore, should be participated in by more States, not merely as recipients of benefits but also as partners in formulating decisions that have international implications (Smith 2018). In this way, a harmonious community of common destiny in outer space will eventually be created.

What is withheld in this prophecy, however, is that, as a matter of fact, today not everyone is equal up there in Heaven, because outer space has already been subjected to the economic and military interests of the US, the Chinese state, and a few other actors such as space billionaires (Tabas, unpub.). Appealing to the metaphorical narrative of the community of common destiny in outer space, therefore, may show to the Chinese people and the international audience that the PRC has a certain degree of 'humanity', but in the end, it denies a critical understanding of the current space situation.

In terms of economic exploitation, China is in fact already in a superior position compared to the rest of the countries that do not have access to space. Seen from this perspective, the metaphorical narrative of the community of common destiny in heaven is therefore used to camouflage Chinese space expansionism[11], which however remains manifest when China bolsters the presence on the international market of its Beidou satellite positioning and navigation system, against the US GPS, or when it recognizes the

10 The US Moon plans indeed will pave the way for the exploitation of the extra-terrestrial region for commercial purposes, as also confirmed by the Artemis Accords that the US is bilaterally signing with all the allies who wish to be part of its lunar project, shaping global space governance to suit Washington's interests and preferences (NASA 2020; see also Savina 2022a).

11 Please note that economic superiority could make such a discursive justification superfluous, as economic power alone would be sufficient to exert influence internationally. Nevertheless, at a discursive level, the narrative of the community of common destiny is used to justify space expansion by constructing an image of cooperation that legitimizes a development model, aiming to present the Chinese space approach as more inclusive and shared. The author looks forward to exploring the type of space economy model proposed by China, which combines a state-driven approach with the development of private space enterprises, and how the state influences the operations of these companies, particularly in contrast to the American model. For further references see Curcio, Deville, Chen 2021.

strategic value of lunar resources (Zhao, Wang 2024).[12] After all, even the PRC experts are well aware of the economic spin-offs deriving from the Moon: between 2018 and 2019, the director of the Science and Technology Commission of the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC), Bao Weimin, proposed creating a 'cislunar economic zone' (*diyue kongjian jingji qu* 地月空间经济区), to exploit the potential of the Earth-Moon space region (Bao 2018).

In terms of military power too, the PRC is working to strengthen its capabilities, developing a wide range of counter-space technologies, from direct kinetic kill vehicles (KKVs), to directed-energy weapons, to jammers and so on (Pollpeter 2021). Furthermore, in 2024, as part of a military reshuffle promoted by Xi Jinping, the existence of the People's Liberation Aerospace Force (*Hangtian budui* 航天部队) was officially unveiled (*Xinhua* 2024b). This confirms that China is aware of the strategic value of space, as already recognised in the early Nineties, when during the Gulf War the US obtained a smooth win thanks to the widespread use of satellites, which demonstrated to the PRC how outer space had become a decisive domain in the projection and multiplication of force. In the decades that followed, as the strategic role of space became increasingly evident, Chinese leaders pushed the army to focus on new theatres of war, and in the 2010 National Defence White Paper they highlighted the PRC's need to defend its 'security interests in space' (*zai taikong de anquan liyi* 在太空安全的利益) (SCIO 2011b).

In light of the crucial role of space, therefore, neither China nor the US is willing to agree to a framework for discussion that threatens to constrain its developments and thereby limit its economic and military advantages (Botti, Greco 2023). But above all neither of the two space powers wants the other to 'play the card' of outer space to obtain a political victory. This is evident on the occasions the two powers dig their toes in when international treaties, moratoriums, or resolutions against the arms race in space have to be passed. The UN Resolutions that adopted China's metaphorical narrative of the community of common destiny, for example, have been highly criticised by the US representatives who voted against their approval because of several concerns, including that China wants to impose its national view on multilateral politics (UN 2017).[13] Similarly, China

12 Please consider that a heated debate has developed in China on the rights of ownership and use of lunar resources. The author hopes to deeply investigate these aspects in future research. For further references see Mei 2024.

13 This is not the first time the US expressed objections to Chinese proposals. In 2008, as part of the Conference on Disarmament, the PRC, in collaboration with Russia, presented the first draft of a Treaty on Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space and of the Threat or Use of Force against Outer Space Objects (PPWT), then updated in 2014. The draft treaty included commitments by state parties "not to

e-ISSN 2385-3042

voted against the 77/41 Resolution on Destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile testing proposed by the US (UNGA 2022),[14] since Beijing contended that it was only a parochial arms control initiative that favours Washington, "having already tested direct-ascent anti-satellite-missile-technology, both an offensive 'sword' and a deterring 'shield', preventing other states from gaining the defensive benefits of developing this capability" (Sooi 2023).

From this point of view, the projection into the heaven of the metaphorical narrative of humanity as a community of common destiny seems to have more to do with the attempt to politically delegitimize the US-led space regime than with the real possibility of putting an end to the process of uncontrolled military and economic exploitation of outer space. After all, it could not be otherwise, given the vagueness of the contents of this narrative, which do not specify how a human community in space should be created in reality. Beyond its flattering promise of outer space as a place of peace and harmony, therefore, it is its cloudiness and partisanship that raise serious doubts about the possibility that a community of common destiny for humankind in outer space can be truly realised and translated into norms and principles really capable of face the emerging space challenges.

Seen from this perspective, the community of common destiny, rather than presenting itself as a real new theoretical framework for global space governance, seems rather to act as a synthesis of the limits and contradictions of China's space diplomacy, promoting an instrumental and utopian eschatology, not really in line with the realpolitik of Beijing's astropolitical rise, vis-à-vis the US. Considering its anti-American and anti-Western substratum, the meaning of the community with common destiny could be fully grasped only by reversing its official interpretation: in the end, indeed, the criticism towards the West and the affirmation of the Chinese international role embedded in this metaphorical narrative, make it a paradigm that

place in orbit around the Earth any objects carrying any kinds of weapons" and "not to resort to the threat or use of force against outer space objects". The draft, however, has been accused of not explicitly prohibiting the use of anti-satellite technologies or soft kill weapons – lasers, dazzling optical sensors, radio interference, and cyberattacks. Specifically, the US objected to the draft treaty's feasibility and implications, noting that "given the dual-use nature of some space systems, it is not possible to craft a definition of a 'weapon in outer space'". The US also argued that the Treaty cannot be verified in any way (Security Council 2024). The draft Treaty can be consulted at: `https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/cd/2008/documents/Draft%20PPWT.pdf`.

14 In April 2022, as a response to the Chinese, Indian, and Russian anti-satellite tests that took place in 2007, 2019, and 2021, respectively, the US publicly announced that it would refrain from conducting ASAT tests. In the weeks following the US announcement, several US allies made similar unilateral pledges (Morin, Tepper 2023).

e-ISSN 2385-3042

seems to be kneaded with nationalism rather than cosmopolitanism. In fact, it is explanatory of China's desire to establish itself as a nation whose value and prestige are internationally recognised, and its socio-political model legitimised and considered equal to others. And this is sufficient to raise some concern as to whether the China-led heavenly 'community of common destiny' is the global future that all countries should pursue.

Bibliography

Aliberti, M.; Hrozensky, T.; Bataille, M. (2020). *European Space Strategy in a Global Context – Full Report*. ESPI Report 75. Wien: ESPI.

Austin, J.L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words the William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955.* London: Oxford University Press.

Bao Weimin 包为民 (2018). "Fazhan taikong jingji. Zouxiang diyue kongjian" 发展太空经济 走向地月空间 (Developing the Space Economy. Heading towards Cislunar Space). *Gaokeji yu chanyehua*, 270(11), 10-13.

Barnden, J.A. (2006). "Artificial Intelligence, Figurative Language and Cognitive Linguistics". Kristiansen, G. et al. (eds), *Cognitive Linguistics: Current Applications and Future Perspectives*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 431-59.

Botti, F.; Greco, E. (2017). *The Geopolitics of Space*. Rome: IAI.

Callahan, W. (2011). "Introduction: Tradition, Modernity, and Foreign Policy in China". Callahan, W. A.; Barabantseva, E. (eds), *China Orders the World: Normative Soft Power and Foreign Policy*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 6-19.

Carlson, A. (2011) "Moving Beyond Sovereignty? A Brief Consideration of Recent Changes in China's Approach to International Order and the Emergence of the Tianxia Concept". *The Journal of Contemporary China*, 20, 89-102. https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2011.520848

Chen, S. (2021). "Community of Common Destiny for Mankind". *China Media Project Dictionary*, 25 August. https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/community-of-common-destiny-for-mankind/

Chen Yuanyang 陈远洋 (2019). "'Liuland diqiu' – Renlei mingyun gongtongti de yishu chuanda" 《流浪地球》:人类命运共同体的艺术传达 (The Wandering Earth: Artistic Communication of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind). *Ningbo Gongcheng Xueyuan Xuebao*, 31(2), 33-7.

Chen Zhong 陈忠 (2011). "Waiceng kongjian (yuzhou) tansuo de fazhan lunli yanjiu" 外层空间 (宇宙) 探索的发展伦理研究 (Research on the Ethics for the Development of Outer Space (Universe) Exploration). *Ziran Bianzhengfa Yanjiu*, 27(5), 117-21.

Chen, Z. (2017). "The Chinese Cultural Root of the Community of Common Destiny for All Mankind". McAnally, E. et al. (eds), *Proceedings of 4th International Conference on Education, Language, Art and Intercultural Communication* (Moscow, 17-18 October 2017). Dordrecht: Atlantis Press, 718-22. https://doi.org/10.2991/icelaic-17.2017.166

Curcio, B.; Deville, J.; Chen, L. (2021), *New Space in Asia. Experts Views on Space Policy and Business Trends in Asian Countries*. Wien: ESPI Full Report.

Del Canto Viterale, F. (2023). "Transitioning to a New Space Age in the 21st Century: A Systemic-Level Approach". *Systems*, 11(5): 232. https://doi.org/10.3390/systems11050232

Demjén, Z.; Semino, E. (2020). "Metaphor, Metonymy and Framing in Discourse". De Fina, A.; Georgakopoulou, A. (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Discourse Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 213-34.
https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108348195

Dian, M. (2021). *La Cina, gli Stati Uniti e il futuro dell'ordine internazionale*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Eco, U. (2004). "Aspetti conoscitivi della metafora in Aristotele". *Doctor Virtualis*, 3, 5-7.

Fairbank, J.K. (1968). "A Preliminary Framework". Fairbank J.K. (ed.), *The Chinese World Order. Traditional China's Foreign Relations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gallelli, B. (2016). "Metafore di una metafora. La retorica del 'sogno cinese'". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 52.
https://doi.org/10.14277/2385-3042/AnnOr-52-16-9

Gallelli, B. (2018). "Doing Things with Metaphors in Contemporary China. Analysing the Use of Creative Metaphors in the Discourse on the Chinese Dream". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 54 – Supplemento, 595-617.
https://doi.org/10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2018/01/027

Global Times (2022). "China Space Station Attracts More with True Openness, Technology Advantages". 25 December.
https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202212/1282612.shtml

Global Times (2023). "China's Sci-Fi Blockbuster Inspires Strengthened Global Cooperation in Outer Space for a Shared Future: Chinese Envoy to UN". 3 June.
https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1291876.shtml

Grayling A.C.; Wuppuluri S. (2022). *Metaphors and Analogies in Sciences and Humanities: Words and Worlds*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Guastini, D. (2004). "Aristotele e la metafora: ovvero un elogio dell'approssimazione". *Isonomia. Rivista elettronica dell'Istituto di Filosofia dell'Università di Urbino*,
http://www.uniurb.it/Filosofia/isonomia/index.htm

Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 (2012). *Jianding buyi yanzhe Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi daolu qianjin wei quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehhui er fendou. Zai Zhongguo Gongchandang dishiba ci Quanguo daibiao dahui shang de baogao* 坚定不移沿着中国特色社会主义道路前进 为全面建成小康社会而奋斗——在中国共产党第十八次全国代表大会上的报告 (Unswervingly Advance Along the Path of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive to Build a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects – Report at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China). November 8.
https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2012-11/17/content_2268826.htm

Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 (2007). "Gaoju Zhongguo tese shehhuizhuyi weida qizhi wei duoqu quanmian jianshe xiaokang shehui xin shengli er fendou. Zai Zhongguo Gongchandang dishiqi ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de baogao quanwen" 高举中国特色社会主义伟大旗帜为夺取全面建设小康社会新胜利而奋斗. 在中国共产党第十七次全国代表大会上的报告 (Hold High the Great Flag of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects. Report to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China). 15 October.
http://www.lswz.gov.cn/html/zhuanti/17da/200710261-1.html

Hunter C. (2019). "The Forgotten First Iteration of the 'Chinese Space Threat' to US National Security". *Space Policy*, 47, 158-65.

Jonathan, C.-B. (ed.) (2005). *Politicians and Rhetoric*. *The Persuasive Power of Metaphor.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.
https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230319899

Keuter, J. (2007). "China's Space Ambitions, and Ours". *Atlantis*, 16, 7-22.

Kostenko, I. (2020). "Current Problems and Challenges in International Space Law: Legal Aspects". *Advanced Space Law*, 5, 48-57.
https://doi.org/10.29202/asl/2020/5/5

Lakoff, G. (1993). "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor". Ortony Andrew (ed). *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 202-51.
https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173865

Lakoff, G.; Johnson, M. [1980] (2003). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Liu, W.; Wang, Y. (2020). "The Role of Offensive Metaphors in Chinese Diplomatic Discourse". *Discourse, Context & Media*, 37.
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100418

Lyotard, J.F. [1979] (2014). *La condizione postmoderna. Rapporto sul sapere*, trad. italiana. Milano: Feltrinelli Universale Economica.

Magagnin, P. (2014). "'Tenere alta la bandiera del socialismo con caratteristiche cinesi': discorso politico cinese e linguaggio figurato in un'ottica traduttiva". Miller, D.; Monti E., *Tradurre Figure/Translating Figurative Language*. *Quaderni del CESLIC: Atti di Covegni* (Bologna, dicembre 2012). Bologna: Centro di StudiLinguistico-Culturali, 113-22.

Mei, D. (2024). "Integrating Outer Space as a Global Commons with Private Property Rights to Outer Space Resources". *Front. Space Technol*, 5:1351850.
https://doi.org/10.3389/frspt.2024.1351850

Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE) (2021). *Xi Calls for Joint Efforts on Climate*. 7 June.
https://english.mee.gov.cn/News_service/media_news/202106/t20210607_836682.shtml

Miranda, M. (2017). "L'attuale ascesa della Cina e il passato imperiale. Alcune reinterpretazioni contemporanee". Pellin, T.; Trentin, G. (a cura di), *Associazione Italiana di Studi Cinesi = Atti del XV convegno 2015* (Macerata, 24-6 settembre 2015). Venezia: Cafoscarina, 212-23.

Miranda, M. (2022). "Confucianesimo politico e meritocrazia confuciana: una sfida cinese contemporanea". *Mondo Cinese*, XLIX.1, 173, 21-32.

Miskimmon, A.; O'Loghlin, B.; Roselle, L. (2018). *Forging the World. Strategic Narratives and International Relations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.6504652

Mitchell, R. (2022). "The Human Community of Fate: A Conceptual History of China's Ordoglobal Idea". *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 13(3),
http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4034360

Morin, J.F.; Tepper, E. (2023). "The Empire Strikes Back: Comparing US and China's Structural Power in Outer Space". *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3(4),
https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad067

Morozova, O. (2019). "Ukraine's Journey to Europe: Strategic Macronarrative and Conceptual Metaphors". *European Security*, 28(3), 323-40.
https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2019.1648255

Musolff, A. (2004). *Metaphor and Political Discourse: Analogical Reasoning in Debates about Europe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230504516

NASA (2020) *The Artemis Accords. Principles for Cooperation in the Civil Exploration and Use of the Moon, Mars, Comets, and Asteroids for Peaceful Purposes*. 13 October.

Otieno, R.F.; Owino, F.R.; Attyang J.M. (2016). "Metaphors in Political Discourse: A Review of Selected Studies". *International Journal of English and Literature*, 7(2), 21-6.
https://doi.org/10.5897/IJEL2015.0856

Panda, J. (2021). "Xi's Post-pandemic Outlook on Asia: Between Guanxi and Mingyun Gongtongti". *China Report*, 57(1), 22-39.
https://doi.org/10.1177/0009445520984736

Pikalo, J.; Carver, T. (2008). *Political Language and Metaphor: Interpreting and Changing the World*. London; New York: Routledge.

Pollpeter, K. (2021). *China's Role in Making Outer Space More Congested, Contested, and Competitive*. China Aerospace Studies Institute.

Qian, G. (2019). "The Birth of a Foreign Policy Catchphrase". *Echo Wall*, 18 July.
https://www.echo-wall.eu/china-and-world/off/birth-foreign-policy-catchphrase

Renmin Ribao 人民日报 (2020). "Na shi yi ge zhenzheng de lishixing shike (guoji luntan)" 那是一个真正的历史性时刻 (国际论坛) (It Was a Truly Historic Moment - International Forum). 19 January.
https://www.peopleapp.com/column/30035505421-500000556186

Renmin Ribao 人民日报 (2009). "Meiguo waijiao xin kandian" 美国外交新看点 (New Highlights of US Diplomacy). 27 April.
https://www.jsllzg.cn/a/200904/t20090427_30041.shtml

Renmin Wang (2022). China Calls for Building Community with a Shared Future in Outer Space. 29 January.
http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0129/c90000-9951215.html

Rubenstein, M.J. (2022). *Astrotopia. The Dangerous Religion of the Corporate Space Race*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Rubenstein, M.J. (unpublished). "For All Humanity: Chinese Transvaluations of American Space Rhetoric". *Conference The Spirit of Space Exploration in China and the West* (Suzhou, 6-8 June).

Savina, T. (2022a). "La 'nuova corsa alla Luna' tra Cina e Stati Uniti: dibattiti e prospettive". *OrizzonteCina*, 12, (2-3), 110-20.
https://doi.org/10.13135/2280-8035/6635

Savina, T. (2022b). "La 'teoria cinese delle relazioni internazionali' e il contributo di Yu Xiaofeng al dibattito sul cosiddetto 'cooperativismo pacifico'". *Sulla via del Catai*, 27, anno XV, 137-55.

Savina, T. (2023a). "Lo spazio extra-atmosferico nell'immaginario della Cina di oggi: tra messaggi ecumenici e proiezione del potere nazionale". *Sinosfere*, 19.
https://sinosfere.com/2023/06/13/tonio-savina-lo-spazio-extra-atmosferico-nellimmaginario-della-cina-di-oggi-tra-messaggi-ecumenici-e-proiezione-del-potere-nazionale/

Savina, T. (2023b). *Tra storia e narrazione. Il programma spaziale della Repubblica popolare cinese*. Collana "Studi Orientali". Padova: Libreriauniversitaria.it edizioni.

Scarpari, M. (2015). *Ritorno a Confucio. La Cina di oggi fra tradizione e mercato*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Schoenhals, M. (1992). *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Shi Shengxun 时胜勋 (2008). "Cong Tianxia wenming dao Taikong wenming. Zhongguo wenhua weilai fazhan de kenengxing" 从天下文明到太空文明—中国文化未来发展的可能性 (From Tianxia Civilization to Space Civilization. The Future Development Possibilities of Chinese Culture). *Guizhou Shehui Kexue*, 217(1), 13-22.

Silk, M. (2020). "The Wandering Earth: a Device for the Propagation of the Chinese Regime's Desired Space Narratives?". *SFRA Review*, 50(2-3), 157-67.

Smith, S.N. (2018). "Community of Common Destiny: China's 'New Assertiveness' and the Changing Asian Order". *International Journal*, 73(3), 449-63.
https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702018790278

e-ISSN 2385-3042

Sooi, C.W. (2023). *Direct-Ascent Anti-Satellite Missile Tests: State Positions on the Moratorium, UNGA Resolution, and Lessons for the Future*. Broomfield; Washington, DC: Secure World Foundation, Swiss Existential Risk Initiative.

SCIO (State Council Information Office) (2000). *China's Space Activities, a White Paper*. Beijing, 22 November.
https://spaceref.com/status-report/chinas-space-activities-a-white-paper/

SCIO (State Council Information Office) (2006). *China's Space Activities in 2006*. Beijing, 12 October.
https://www.cnsa.gov.cn/english/n6465645/n6465648/c6477657/content.html

SCIO (State Council Information Office) (2011). *China's Space Activities in 2011*. Beijing, 29 December.
http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7145648.htm

SCIO (State Council Information Office) (2016). *China's Space Activities in 2016*. Beijing, 28 December.
https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2016/12/28/content_281475527159496.htm

SCIO (State Council Information Office) (2011). *China's Peaceful Development*. Beijing, 6 September.
https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284646.htm

SCIO (State Council Information Office) (2011b). *2010 Nian Zhongguo de Guofang* 2010年中国的国防 (Chinese National Defense in 2010). Beijing, 31 March.
https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2011-03/31/content_2618567.htm

SCIO (State Council Information Office) (2017). "UN Echoes China's Concept of Building 'Community of Shared Future for Mankind'". Beijing, 9 November.
http://english.scio.gov.cn/2017-11/09/content_41867418.htm

SCIO (State Council Information Office) (2022). *China's Space Program: A 2021 Perspective*. Beijing, 28 January.
https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202201/28/content_WS61f35b3dc6d09c94e48a467a.html

SCIO (State Council Information Office) (2023a). *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*. Beijing, 27 September.
http://gd.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zxhd_1/202309/t20230927_11151010.htm

SCIO (State Council Information Office) (2023b). *The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future*. Beijing, 10 October.
https://www.cscc.it/upload/doc/bri%20white%20paper%20oct%202023.pdf

Security Council (2024). *Vote on Draft Resolution on Weapons of Mass Destruction in Outer Space*, 23 April.
https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/04/vote-on-draft-resolution-on-weapons-of-mass-destruction-in-outer-space.php#:~:text=In%20a%20note%20verbale%20dated,concerns%20and%20not%20unduly%20or

Tabas, B. (unpublished). "The Question Concerning Technology in Outer Space". *Conference The Spirit of Space Exploration in China and the West* (Suzhou, China, 6-8 June).

Tellis, A.J. (2007). "China's Military Space Strategy". *Survival*, 49(3), 41-72.

Tian, X.; Ba, Y.; Zhang, X. (2021). "The Conceptual Metaphor of Governance". *The Governance of China*. *Open Access Library Journal*, 8, 1-8.
https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1108147

Travaglini, G. (2009). "La metafora, l'analogia e le figure dei sensi in Aristotele". *Rivista di estetica*, 40.
https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.1897

Trump, D. (2020). *Remarks by President Trump at Presentation of the United States Space Force Flag and Signing of an Armed Forces Day Proclamation*. 15 May.

Trump, D. (2020a). *Remarks by President Trump at Kennedy Space Center after the NASA Space X Crew Dragon Launch*. 30 May.
https://va.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-president-trump-at-kennedy-space-center-after-the-nasa-space-x-crew-dragon-launch/

UN (United Nations) (2016). *United Nations and China Agree to Increased Space Cooperation*. UNIS/OS/468. 16 June.

UN (United Nations) (2017). *First Committee Submits Six Drafts to General Assembly, One Calling for Immediate Start of Negotiations on Treaty Preventing Outer Space Arms Race*. 30 October.
https://press.un.org/en/2017/gadis3591.doc.htm

UNGA (United Nations General Assembly) (2017a). *No First Placement of Weapons in Outer Space*. A/RES/72/27. New York, 11 December.

UNGA (United Nations General Assembly) (2017b). *Further Practical Measures for the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space*. A/RES/72/250. New York, 24 December.

UNGA (United Nations General Assembly) (2022). *Destructive Direct-Ascent Anti-Satellite Missile Testing.* A/RES/77/41. New York, 12 December.

Waijiao bu 外交部 (2017). "Wang Yi tan Xin Shidai Zhongguo tese daguo waijiao zong mubiao: tuidong goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti" 王毅谈新时代中国特色大国外交总目标: 推动构建人类命运共同体 (Wang Yi Talks About The Overall Goal of China's Major Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era: Promoting the Building of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind). *Waijiao bu*, 19 October.
https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/zyxw/201710/t20171019_342503.shtml

Wang, X.; Chen R. (2022). "Translation of Conceptual Metaphor in Chinese Diplomatic Discourse: Based on CRP Model". *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12(10), 2062-071.
https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1210.13

Wang Yuechuan 王岳川 (2010). "Taikong wenming shidai yu wenhua shouzheng chuangxin" 太空文明时代与文化守正创新 (The Era of Space Civilization and the Innovation to Safeguard Culture). *Dong Yue Luncong*, 31(10), 170-77.

Wang Yuechuan 王岳川 (2006). "Taikong wenming shidai de Zhongguo wenhua shenfen" 太空文明时代的中国文化身份 (The Chinese Cultural Identity in the Age of Space Civilization). *Xueshu Yuekan*, 38(7), 2006, 87-94.

Xi, J. (2015). "Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-Win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind". 28 September.
https://govt.chinadaily.com.cn/s/201509/29/WS5c0627d6498eefb3fe46e133/working-together-to-forge-a-new-partnership-of-winwin-cooperation-and-create-a-community-of-shared-future-for-mankind.html

Xi Jinping 习近平 (2013). "Guojia zhuxi Xi Jinping zai Mosike Guoji Guanxi Xueyuan de yanjiang (quanwen)". 国家主席习近平在莫斯科国际关系学院的演讲(全文) (President Xi Jinping's Speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. Full Text). 24 March.
https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-03/24/content_2360829.htm

Xinhua (2017). "Full Text of President Xi's Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum". 17 May.
http://2017.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2018/0306/c25-1038.html

Xinhua (2023). "Full Text of Xi's Written Speech at Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation CEO Summit". 17 November.
https://english.news.cn/20231117/dd43ebe5dea64c6abfaf4eda9a98c3cc/c.html

Xinhua (2024a). "Chinese Envoy Urges Int'l Community to Firmly Maintain Peaceful Nature of Outer Space". 7 May.
https://english.news.cn/20240507/43209c5246324329970b4ee670fa7afe/c.html

Xinhua (2024b). "PLA's Information Support Force Is Brand-New Strategic Arm: Defense Spokesperson". 19 April.
https://english.news.cn/20240419/2b64c22c5e8742d4949e0a923f6dc68f/c.html

Xu F.; Su J. (2018). "Shaping 'A Community of Shared Future for Mankind': New Elements of General Assembly Resolution 72/250 on Further Practical Measures for the PAROS". *Space Policy*, 44-5, 57-62.

Xuexi Shibao 学习时报 (2023). "Xie shou goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti: Zhongguo de changyi, shijie de weilai" 携手构建人类命运共同体: 中国的倡议, 世界的未来 (Joining Hands to Build a Community With a Shared Future for Mankind: The Initiative of China, The Future of the World Future). 20 October.
https://theory.gmw.cn/2023-10/20/content_36906577.htm

Zeng, J. (2020). *Slogan Politics. Understanding Chinese Foreign Policy Concepts*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature.

Zhang, F. (2011). "The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations". *European Journal of International Relations*, 19(2), 305-28.
https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066111421038

Zhao, L. (2020). *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on December 9, 2020*.
http://ge.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202012/t20201209_1070329.htm

Zhao Peiyu 裴照宇; Wang Qiong 王琼. (2024) "Guoji yueqiu keyanzhan ziyuan liyong fazhan luxian zhanlüe gouxiang" 国际月球科研站资源利用发展路线战略构想 (Strategic Conception of the Development Route of Resource Utilization of International Lunar Research Station). *Yuhang Xuebao*, 45(4), 625-37.

Zhao, S. (2022). *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

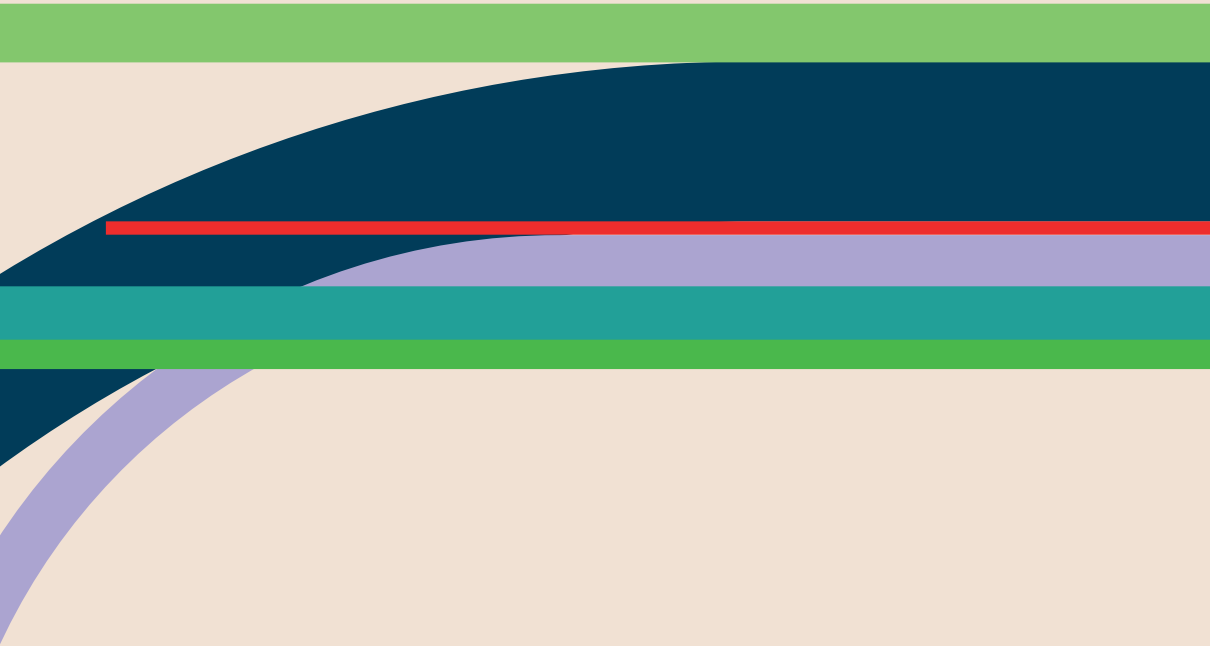
Zhao, X. (2018). "In Pursuit of a Community of Shared Future China's Global Activism in Perspective". *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 4(1), 23-37
https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740018500082

Zheng, Y. (2021). "The Effectiveness of Xi Jinping's Metaphorical Discourse in Cross-Cultural Communication". *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 12(6), 1051-55.
https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1206.21

Zinken, J. (2003). "Ideological Imagination: Intertextual and Correlational Metaphors in Political Discourse". *Discourse & Society*, 14(4), 507-23.
https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926503014004005

Rivista annuale

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici
e Culturali Comparati



Università
Ca'Foscari
Venezia