Trees, Lungs, and Gender

By Cintia Kozonoi Vezzani

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In Brazil, New Year is an incredibly special and important holiday – a moment of reflection on the previous 365 days and for marking the transition to a new cycle full of promises and opportunities. While living in Nebraska, my family maintains this celebration. It brings warmness on a winter day. Amidst the joy, my father recalls the artificiality of the calendar and the illusion of new beginnings on a certain date – for him, every day may mark a new course of actions, depending on our decision to "re-start." I agree with his rational take on calendars, while still enjoying the new numbers on the fresh agenda and the touch of a recently opened calendar. 2020, however, fell short of the promises of a happy new year. At the edge of a World War III between the US and Iran, we saw the accidental shooting of a passenger airplane. The headlines kept taking our breath away; fear and uncertainty took over. While each individual may have held their breath in suspense, waiting for the next events, the lungs of Earth were also paralyzed, with the forests in Australia aflame, just as the news cycle was moving on from the unimaginable deforestation taking place in the Amazon – where a total of ninety thousand fires burned in 2019 (Inpe). War and fire, nature and humans, violence everywhere – it could easily be a synopsis of George R. R. Martin's Game of Thrones stories. But that is when 2020 becomes even more surreal: the enjoyment of reading or watching the most violent and fantastic

adventures faded somewhat as the violence became too real, too close to our – fragile – everyday life. As in a plot twist that takes all the characters by surprise, nature intervenes again. From one animal's blood to that of another – building a genetic bridge between species – a novel virus is born. With a capitalist education, the virus is thirsty for new markets, to reproduce itself in countless selfies, replicating its RNA in as many cells as possible. With neither fear, nor sluggishness, the virus travels as a colonial enterprise who wants nothing more than the expansion of its empire. In this process, it attacks the lungs of human beings who suffer a devastating fight for oxygen. Drowning in asphyxiation, each deceased person from Covid-19 could have felt in their last moments what the burnt living beings of the Amazon felt in theirs. Is there anything sadder than imagining your lungs blooming with clots the way fires bloomed across the Amazon? As a Brazilian who has suffered pulmonary embolism in May 2017, I am one of the fortunate ones truly able to valorize the preciousness of oxygen and to understand the importance of having a planet that can breath as easily as each one of us. The Amazon is known as the lungs of our planet, and, particularly in the last year under Jair Bolsonaro's government, it has been severely damaged to open space for cattle ranching. While the trees fall down, liberating carbon dioxide and no longer producing oxygen, Brazil is now being monitored by the World Health Organization as the next epicenter of Covid-19, wherein citizens struggle to survive as much as the trees that collapse in fire. Both events are "tragédias anunciadas" under the Bolsonaro government, that incentivized the deforestation for economic profit and called the Covid-19 virus nothing more than "a flu." Indeed, this Portuguese expression, "tragédia anunciada" (literally, an "announced tragedy") describes the pandemic itself, since a number of scientists have been calling attention for years to the possibility that a new virus would come out of Chinese wet markets if nothing was done to stop the inclusion of wildlife species in this culinary economy of capture and consumption (see Webster 2004; Woo 2006; Chu 2009). With the pandemic status of Covid-19 and the lockdown established, I am suddenly living a life where, on the one hand, my routine remains largely unchanged (I continue working indoors on my dissertation), while on the

other, an invisible anxiety makes my nights become days. It is the echoing of the thrombosis suffered three years before that keeps my heart accelerated, and the knowledge of the virus's effects reminds me of the fear that arises when your lungs struggle for air. The fears are suddenly diminished when I join more Zoom and Skype events – with family and friends around the world; and classes, lectures and even community health meetings with my thrombosis doctor, who invites medical speakers to comment on the effects of Covid-19 to those who have a history of coagulation problems. One newspaper recently called Covid-19 the "thrombosis disease" (see Negri 2020). The days become busier and the nights are filled with less anxiety, but the constant feeling of living in a science fiction literary world does not leave me. While loving to vicariously feel the angst of characters facing the unknown, it is less pleasant when it is I who am the one truly unsure about tomorrow. For myself, my family, for all the citizens in countries without reliable public healthcare systems, I wonder how hard it is to be somewhere (Brazil, the US), where the leadership figure is absent or otherwise preoccupied with selfishness and exclusively economic concerns. If these leaders can so easily burn down the Amazon, incentivize coal mining – polluting the air and destroying the suppliers of oxygen – where do people with lung issues fit in their equations anyway? If atmospheric carbon and a deadly virus are invisible, ghostly characters out of a horror story, then the leaders of these two major nations are enormous monsters, like Godzilla, destroying everything within their territory. Burned trees and deceased human beings result in numbers on a chart that are interpreted by the leaders as inconsequential: "So what?" ("e daí?") said Bolsonaro when Brazil reached a total number of 5,017 deaths on April 28. He was just as dismissive during the forest fires, when Amazonia lost 970,000 hectares (2,400,000 acres) in 2019 (Gaarder). Brazil's president continued the sentence about the coronavirus victims, saying: "I'm sorry. What do you want me to do about it?" And it breaks me to see his blatant transparency. When the strongman to whom so many turned for protection – to restore law and order – admits his powerlessness in the face of the invisible enemy (the virus) that spreads across borders, we finally see the futility of such leaders.

Particularly when their attention is directed towards imminent recession – "worse" than the deaths, according to some – and the lockdown freezing the economy and completely suspending the activities of the world as we understand it. Taking a break from the news, I return my gaze to my dissertation, where I am analyzing the 1888 Brazilian novel A Carne (The Flesh) by Júlio Ribeiro, that depicts the story of Lenita, a woman with a privileged education who moves to the farm of her father's friend after his death. Lenita chooses to leave a society that she deems hypocritical; and at the farm she has a passionate affair with a local man who falls in love with her. Once pregnant, however, Lenita rejoins the same society she criticized and marries a bourgeois man. Her earlier criticisms of bourgeois society were the result of her extensive education, a rare thing for a woman to have in nineteenth-century Brazil. In 1991, the critic Eva Buena considers Ribeiro's novel a kind of propaganda against the monarchical regime (in power since its Independence from Portugal in 1822) – specifically, she claims the novel is written in opposition to the Empress Isabel, who was the natural successor of the Emperor Dom Pedro II. Bueno recalls the controversy around the year 1888, when Princess Isabel abolished slavery in Brazil. The royalist landlords who used slaves were furious with the monarchy, while the liberals demanding a republic were satisfied with the end of slavery but still refused to acknowledge any admiration towards the monarchy. The solution, according to Bueno, was to undermine Isabel's credibility – who, like Lenita in the novel, was a well-educated woman and a leader independent of male influence. Nevertheless, her rule could cause chaos in Brazil as women were susceptible to hysteria, female hormones, and irrational animal impulses. Such a reading made me breathless: in 2020 here we are, living through a pandemic and seeing how the nations that are ruled by women (Germany, Scotland, New Zealand and Iceland) are combating the Covid-19 virus with more efficiency than other nations ruled by men. The 1888 Brazilian novel raises enduring questions about gender and politics, that resonated with claims made in an article in The Atlantic titled "The Pandemic Has Revealed The Weakness of Strongmen" (May 6) by Helen Lewis. The article shows how the freedom of women to participate in politics is an index of a healthy political

system. “A woman commanding the throne of Brazil?” (Bueno 225) – in 1888 this was a rhetorical question for the liberal Ribeiro, as it was an unthinkable proposition. Still today, in early 2020, “only 15 of the 193 United Nations countries were led by women” (Lewis). The fear of women in power – particularly as educated leaders – that Ribeiro articulates in his novel may be understood as a symptom of a political disease. The virus is a disease that reveals the symptoms of this political disease; and, in doing so, shows definitively the uselessness of authoritarian figures when facing crises. The situation is particularly ironic given so many strongmen have claimed that they are uniquely qualified to fix their society’s problems (and make them great again). When thinking about the future, about what we should expect when celebrating the next New Year – presumably with social distancing measures still in effect – I hope that the heightened awareness of the virus’s travels through our air may make us more conscientious about the atmosphere, about the trees that co-create it, about the wildlife that breath it, about the pollution we cast into it so unthinkingly, and about the leaders whom we charge with its protection. The authoritarians are powerless against the virus, and they have proven powerless against the flames and seas and smoke. These are all “tragédias anunciadas,” and we can adapt and plan for them, but we should be wary of those who claim they can do it alone.

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