



Neoliberalism as violent disparity in *Distant Star* and *We, The Survivors*

Carmel Harrison

Since Goethe proposed the idea that literature can transcend cultural barriers, a strand of literary criticism has maintained the potential of world literature to represent a 'cultural totality' through the exposition of essential universality, as Siskind has observed.¹ However, many critics along with Siskind contend that literature cannot unite world cultures when Western hegemony determines the processes of production, translation and distribution.² As a theoretically totalising and universally applicable ideology, neoliberalism implies a universal view of culture: its promotion of free trade and free markets, which supposedly benefit 'everyone, everywhere', suggests a conceptualisation of world cultures as having the potential to be fully absorbed by international markets.³ But just as Goethe's *Weltliteratur* and ensuing notions of cultural totality have been criticised for failing to account for Western hegemony, the neoliberal ideal of universal opportunity is incompatible with the global wealth inequality that circumscribes market access and concentrates wealth in the West, the 'core' of the 'world-system'.⁴ Indeed, the global implementation of neoliberal policies in the late twentieth century is associated with rising inequality, exploitation and violent crime; these effects are especially pronounced in countries with less development, in the world-system's 'periphery'.⁵ In Roberto Bolaño's *Distant Star*, 1995 and Tash Aw's *We, The Survivors*, 2019, violence is a recurring theme in representations of neoliberal culture pertaining to post-Pinochet Chile and contemporary Malaysia respectively.⁶ Through depictions of the violence and disparity that attend neoliberal governments in peripheral countries, the novels challenge the notion of a global cultural totality. However, as part of the world literary system, global disparity is reinforced by the inequity of the global publishing industry, an irony that is acknowledged in the narratives.⁷

Violent crime is foregrounded in the novels in focal narrative events. *Distant Star* concerns the killings of Carlos Wieder, a military pilot and poet at the time of General Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, as well as Wieder's eventual murder in 1993 by a police detective with the assistance of the narrator, who has fled Chile due to political persecution. *We, The Survivors* centres around the murder of Mohammad Ashadul, a Bangladeshi

¹ Mariano Siskind, *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature In Latin America* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014), p. 34.

² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³ David Harvey, 'Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 610, 1 (2007), 22–44 (p. 24).

⁴ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Immanuel Wallerstein, 'World-Systems Analysis: The Second Phase' *Review (Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations)*, 13, 2 (1990), 287–293.

⁵ Victoria E. Collins and Dawn Lynnette Rothe, *The Violence of Neoliberalism: Crime, Harm and Inequality* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019).

⁶ Roberto Bolaño, *Distant Star* (London: Vintage, 2009). Tash Aw, *We, The Survivors* (London: HarperCollins, 2019).

⁷ Siskind, p. 34.

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migrant who is killed in a dispute after seemingly refusing to falsify permits for a group of refugees to work on a fish farm. Although the murders' precise narratives differ, the novels' plots are similar in that they tell of how a marginalised individual from a peripheral state becomes inadvertently implicated in violence; this comes about through their association with characters who gain from the core's exploitative neoliberalism. In this way, the novels give visibility to the experiences of marginalised people: for the victims of leftist persecution in Pinochet's Chile, as for industrial workers in contemporary Malaysia, the benefits of neoliberalism were and are systematically denied. Through such representations of profound global disparities, the novels dispute the idea that world literature is 'capable of producing a reconciled world', a view which has declined in popularity along with support for globalism since the 1990s but is nevertheless implicit in neoliberal cultural discourse.⁸

Wieder's murders of women among Concepción's left-wing student community is a fictionalisation of the 'disappearances' conducted by the junta of Pinochet's regime, to whom the deaths of at least 3216 people are attributed.⁹ This violent suppression primarily took place at the beginning of the regime to secure the new political economic order, a defining feature of which is neoliberalism: following the 1973 coup the junta introduced economic reforms such as the privatisation of national industries and the removal of price controls.¹⁰ As well as benefitting the junta, these reforms were welcomed by the U.S., whose economic and ideological interests they served. Indeed, prior to the coup, the C.I.A. funded political parties and media groups that opposed the socialist government.¹¹ Therefore, while Wieder's crimes take place within the periphery, they are inextricably connected to the neoliberal exploitation of the core. Although Bolaño does not explicitly reference U.S. influence in Chile, he conveys the regime's concern with its international standing in the narrator's description of Wieder's performances as intended to 'show the world that the new regime and avant-garde art were not at odds.'¹² Bolaño's invocation of the global and the 'avant-garde' is indicative of the peripheral state's perception of worldliness as conformity to Western culture. As a statement of a neoliberal view of art, and given the context of state violence, a violent disparity between the core culture and that of the periphery is implied through the erasure of the latter.

While political economic context is integral to the violence of the novel, Wieder's rationale for his crimes is more complex than political allegiance: he is additionally motivated by misogyny and a desire for fame. These combined factors culminate in his photography exhibition for the junta and business classes in which he displays images of his victims looking 'like broken, dismembered mannequins'.¹³ This simile renders Wieder's sadistic documentation of his crimes as a barbaric form of Western fashion photography, suggesting an underlying violence behind neoliberal notions of commerce and art. Yet since this exposure of brutality horrifies the attendees and results in Wieder's expulsion from Chile, it seems as if Wieder is not simply a personification of neoliberal oppression - he is deemed

⁸ Siskind, p. 56.

⁹ Peter Winn, Elizabeth Q. Hutchison, Thomas Miller Klubock and Nara B. Milanich, 'The Pinochet Dictatorship: Military Rule and Neoliberal Economics' in *The Chile Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 436.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 438-439.

¹¹ Jack Devine and Peter Kornbluh, 'Showdown in Santiago: What Really Happened in Chile?', *Foreign Affairs*, 93, 5 (2014), 168-174 (p. 168).

¹² Bolaño, p. 77.

¹³ Bolaño, p. 88.

too violent even by those who got into power by bombing the presidential palace.¹⁴ In this respect, it is possible to construe Wieder as representing a universal archetype: he exhibits traits which are found across literature in similarly callous, power-seeking characters. Such a reading is aligned with the view of world literature as a totality; from this stance, Pinochet's regime represents a general evil. However, Bolaño's representation of the relationship between Wieder and the junta emphasises the structural causes of violence. Although the junta ultimately reject Wieder, the consolidation of their power depends on his role in both the disappearances and the art-washing of the regime. They enable Wieder by sponsoring his sky poetry, reinforcing his role as someone who 'did not fly in a squadron' but 'alone'.¹⁵ His 'will of iron', self-sufficiency and personal ambition are encouraged until they lead to the photographs' egregious contradiction of the neoliberal fallacy of universal benefit.¹⁶ In this way, Bolaño satirises the archetype of the neoliberal entrepreneur, exposing it as a symbol of the violence that maintains a grossly unequal social order.

The murder of Mohammad in *We, The Survivors* signifies the enactment of neoliberal violence on the interpersonal level. Early in his retrospective narrative, Ah Hock states that 'the dispute was about money' and so 'that's why the man died.'¹⁷ The characters involved in the crime meet for financial reasons: Ah Hock, a fish farm manager, fears the financial implications of losing his job if he can't hire the refugees and his childhood friend Keong, a 'labour contractor', stands to profit from selling the refugees' labour to Ah Hock, if he can obtain counterfeit permits from Mohammad.¹⁸ This dire situation, in which refugees are reduced to a commodity, speaks to the exploitation of migrants in Malaysia. Migrants, which make up approximately forty percent of the Malaysian workforce, are immensely exploited: if not trafficked, they are forced to work on appalling terms due to racial discrimination, for poor, or withheld, wages.¹⁹ This state of immiseration is enabled by Malaysia's neoliberal system of loose trade and labour laws and by extension, that of the world's core, which benefits from cheap Malaysian imports.²⁰ Aw alludes to this system in Keong's description of his work as the '*international business*' of supplying 'China, the U.S., Europe' with palm oil; the emphasis on international business suggests that Keong views this characterisation of his work as validating.²¹ However, the purported prestige of global trade is juxtaposed by the grim banality of Keong's tasks which include having to 'drive around the country for days' in order to 'give them [the migrants] enough food' and 'patch them up'.²² Neither the hardship of the refugees' journey into Malaysia, nor the exploitative, unregulated nature of the jobs for which Keong prepares them are discussed by Keong, who also espouses vitriolic racism against migrants.²³ Just as the junta and capitalists enjoy the power and privilege they gain through violent suppression, but are disturbed to face the brutal reality of its implementation, Keong does not want to consider the dehumanising exploitation of the neoliberal system from which he gains.

¹⁴ Winn et al., p. 435.

¹⁵ Bolaño, p. 46.

¹⁶ Bolaño, pp. 46, 86.

¹⁷ Aw, p. 35.

¹⁸ Aw, p. 211.

¹⁹ Amnesty International, *Malaysia: Trapped: The exploitation of migrant workers in Malaysia* (2010), <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA28/002/2010/en/>>[Accessed 14 May 2022].

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Aw, p. 213.

²² Aw, p. 212.

²³ Aw, p. 211.

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Given the characterisation of Keong as avaricious and racist, his instigation of violence against Mohammad is unsurprising. However, rather than portraying violence solely through a villainous character to whom it is easy to attribute individual motivations, Aw emphasises the far-reaching implications of neoliberalism by constructing the more morally ambiguous character of Ah Hock as a murderer:

The first blow catches him squarely on the back of the head, and he falls straight to the ground. As I watch his heavy body collapse slowly I think: He's a heavy man. He tries to get up but I'm already raising my arm to strike him a second time. And a third. And it continues.²⁴

By switching between the passive and active voices, Aw implies that Ah Hock is caught between the feeling that his actions were not his and the fact that he has committed the crime. Despite the clear financial framing of the dispute, this strange testimony of the incident itself introduces a sense of ambiguity around the murder which prompts the reader to consider the role of Ah Hock's character, as it is presented in the broader narrative. Given that the narrative traces a life history of poverty and exploitation, from the generational poverty of Ah Hock's background as a Chinese immigrant in the Malaysian countryside, to his lack of security in his various jobs, it is evident that Ah Hock's personality has been shaped by structural forces. This experience of disparity foregrounds neoliberalism as a cause of violence in the novel. The idea of a cultural totality is consequently almost completely refuted: it is difficult to argue that Ah Hock's lack of empathy for Mohammad, for whom he does not feel 'anything', is a universal characteristic when the numbing impact of poverty and repeated exploitation pervade the narrative.²⁵ Simultaneously, anti-South-Asian racism is an implied factor in the murder: although Ah Hock does not use racist slurs, he is bemused or indifferent to Keong's hate speech.²⁶ According to Aw, Ah Hock has 'totally normalised [...] the discrimination, the racism' that he has experienced as a Chinese minority in Malaysia and 'absorbs', 'reproduces' and 'inflicts this on other people.'²⁷ This aspect of the murder is subtly conveyed but is contextually significant. While Malaysia's complex history of racism precedes neoliberalism, it is a continual feature of the current government, whose use of racist rhetoric excuses the continued exploitation of migrant workers.²⁸

Bolaño and Aw thus draw clear links between neoliberalism, disparity and violence. Acts of violence are not universal human phenomena but result from many factors which are rooted in the political economic structure. This interconnectedness is especially overt in *We, the Survivors* due to its realist narrative style which foregrounds first-hand experiences of labour, whereas Bolaño's satirical approach necessitates independent understanding of the novel's context to grasp its political symbolism. Moreover the novels have different social foci: Aw explores neoliberalism primarily through a representative everyman character while Bolaño's focus on marginalised artists and academics is indicative of a more cosmopolitan outlook. In this way, *We, the Survivors* reads as a more didactically anti-neoliberal novel whereas *Distant Star* is preoccupied with the relationship between neoliberalism, art and the state. Notwithstanding these distinctions, both novels ultimately give visibility to experiences

²⁴ Aw, p. 320.

²⁵ Aw, p. 15.

²⁶ Aw, p. 132.

²⁷ France 24 English, *Author Tash Aw: 'The reality for most people in Asia is that they're struggling'* (2019) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpOPvkEjHuo&ab_channel=FRANCE24English> [Accessed 12 May 2022].

²⁸ Nalini Elumalai, *Malaysia: End hateful rhetoric against Rohingya refugees* (2022), <<https://ifex.org/malaysia-end-hateful-rhetoric-against-rohingya-refugees/>> [Accessed 14 May 2022].

of violence and disparity in the global periphery; this contradicts the idea of a global cultural totality in which all the world's people and cultures are equal through the free market.

However, the novels' negative portrayals of neoliberalism are somewhat compromised by the texts' functions as commodities within the global literary market. If, according to Moretti, texts represent 'a microcosm of the world literary system' in which power differences between the core and periphery are not overcome but embodied, then the novels are ultimately symptomatic of the neoliberal system that they critique.²⁹ By drawing attention to the interrelation of literature and capitalism, Moretti, Siskind and like-minded critics emphasise the extent to which texts from the periphery are assimilated into the culture of the core in form and content. While the novels depict global disparity, their violent divisions are ultimately reinforced through the centring of Western exploitation, a narrative subject which is now acceptable and comprehensible to a global readership. Paradoxically, the resultant similarities between the novels, such as their plots and accessible, detached narrators, create the false impression of a cultural totality. However, this is not the liberating transcension of cultural barriers Goethe envisioned, but indicative of the homogenising effect of forcible Western hegemony. In this way, the novels contribute to an illusory sense of cultural totality which allows the reader to feel as if they can understand the experiences of marginalised people in the periphery, while simultaneously reinforcing Western conventions.

The authors' consciousness of this contradiction is infused in the narratives: within both, there is an awareness of the ethical problem of rendering neoliberal violence palatable to the global reader, which is addressed through metafictional devices. Bolaño seems to mitigate the commodification of the disappearances by emphasising the literariness of the novel, through the use of an alter-ego, 'Arturo B.', as a narrator.³⁰ Through the narrator's clear resemblance to the author, as someone who managed to escape Chile for the West, Bolaño foregrounds his perspective of relative privilege and distance in comparison to those who are unable to tell their stories, thereby lessening the extent to which other people's deaths and suffering are reduced to a plot device or gratuitous entertainment for a global readership. Moreover, descriptions of the photographs' contents are hedged by Arturo's disclosure that he is discussing events second-hand, through over twenty references to the General from whom he has sourced the information, e.g. 'Muñoz Cano claims' and 'according to Muñoz Cano'.³¹ This has the effect of drawing attention to the unreliability of the narrator, and therefore to that of the author, thereby emphasising the murders' fictitiousness and downplaying their historicity. This technique still facilitates the aestheticisation of historical violence for the global literary market, but does so in an unconventionally distanced way which lessens the extent to which historical violence in the periphery is harmoniously integrated into the conventions of Western literature.

Similarly, Aw uses metafiction to indicate the problematic ethics of representing the violence of worker exploitation and racism in Malaysia. Ah Hock's narration is mediated through the voice of his transcriber, Su-Min, a wealthy Chinese Malaysian graduate student who is writing a book: the characters symbolise two parts of Aw's identity, as a Malaysian

²⁹ Franco Moretti, 'World-Systems Analysis, Evolutionary Theory, Weltliteratur', *Review - Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations*, 28, 3 (2005), 217–228 (p. 227).

³⁰ Bolaño, p. 1.

³¹ Bolaño, pp. 84, 88.

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who studied abroad in the West.³² This perspectivisation allows Aw to communicate Ah Hock's parochial identity to the global readership through the use of a cosmopolitan voice. The difficulty and contradictions of this narrative perspective are not disguised but often highlighted through metafiction. For example, Aw appears to speak through the voice of Su-Min, through the voice of Ah Hock in his discussion of the difficulty of discussing peripheral violence with people from core cultures: 'at first I wanted to protect her from these stories, but [...] I realised I wanted her to be a part of that pain, to make sure that it seeped into her world'.³³ This reads an authorial insertion of Aw's difficulty in representing neoliberal exploitation in a non-sanitised way through the medium of a literary commodity. Again, while addressing this contradiction does not resolve it, a view of literature and culture as a global totality is at least made less likely by making the reader aware that their apparent understanding of marginalised experiences through literature is only partial or even illusory.

In summary, comparison of the texts shows that neoliberalism is a common denominator in their depictions of violence and disparity between the core and periphery, which contradicts the notion of a global cultural totality in either neoliberalism itself or in world literature. However, given the constraints of the global literary market, disparity can only be conveyed by universalising, and therefore distorting, experiences of neoliberal marginalisation. This situation is indicative of the contradictory nature of world literature, which most critics within world literary studies acknowledge and observe, but for which literature itself offers few answers besides drawing attention to its own contradictions.

³² Lisa Allardice, *Tash Aw: 'It used to be that Asia was poor. "Asians are rich" is the new cliché'* (2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/13/tash-aw-malaysian-author-shining-light-on-immigration-stories>> [Accessed 16 May 2022].

³³ Aw, p. 306.

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