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I Don't Live Here – But I Will Tell the Story: A Cultural Poetic Approach to *I Live Here* by Mia Kirshner

In 2001, Mia Kirshner, actress and writer turned journalist, embarks on a seven year quest to compile stories (read experiences) from areas of conflict. *I Live Here*, a 2008 publication, is an anthology of little narratives, some fiction, others non-fiction. Following the cultural poetic approach, this article illustrates that the nature of anthology *I Live Here* asks for an analysis that puts the personal in the foreground, as each segment – be it fiction or non-fiction – was inspired by a direct contact with the issue discussed. The project is capturing a glimpse of the Western mentality mirrored in the stories told in the anthology. The arrays of voices, those that belong to the Western world, are extracted as a result.

Introduction

2001 is a year that will forever occupy an important place in history; more specifically, 9/11—the date that put terror on the map. I remember visiting with a friend, I was fifteen at that time, and all of a sudden, her mother came into the room and changed the channel to CNN. She had received a call from a friend, telling her that a tragedy had just happened. For the following days, CNN devoted their airtime to following up on any updates on the victims of the tragedy, those who were in the aircrafts that hit the World Trade Center, the people inside the Twin Towers, but their families also. Mia Kirshner, well-known Show Time actress, says in an interview that the event triggered a wave of harsh feelings in her, that she was "shocked by her own ignorance [and that] [she] had had enough" (Caldwell 123). 9/11 forced her to see a different world than what she

knew before, one that needed help. Between 2001 and 2008, Kirshner researched and wrote a four-part anthology, focusing on four different areas of conflict. Thus, Kirshner travels to Ingushetia, to visit the Chechen refugee camps, to Burma, to interview the displaced Karen women in the brothels on the Thailand-Burma border, to Juárez, Mexico, to speak to the families of some of the four hundred murdered *maquiladora* workers, and to Malawi, to meet the children displaced either by disease or being unjustly incarcerated. Kirshner collaborates with various artists to create this piece, notably with the writer J.B. McKinnon, and artists Paul Shoebridge and Michael Simons. Kirshner is interested in having the *paper documentary* focus on the *survivors* of the various conflicts in the above stated areas. The reason behind this premise is that her own grandparents, who are Holocaust survivors that lost many of the members of their family, were not able to have their stories heard, hence the subtitle "There are too many untold stories."

Elizabeth Goldberg and Alexandra Moore assert that the genre of the anthology, namely a *paper documentary*, "raises a specter of cinematic conventions" (Goldberg and Moore 235). The point of view is ambiguous, who is filming and who is being filmed, they ask. Kirshner wants to "remove" herself from the story, she does not want sympathy, she tells Catherine Caldwell in an interview. However, this is not a direct claim to objectivity. The type of journalism that Kirshner engages in, demands a *testimonio*—a witness testimony, which she communicates in both fictional and non-fictional manners. Goldberg and Moore also point out that this renders the classification ambiguous, as *I live here* can be considered a "reportage, a memoir, a *testimonio*, a story, witness literature, a metatext" (Goldberg and Moore 234), all of which are generic, traditional classifications. The content and form combined form a

collage of mixed emotions and styles of writing. Kirshner and her associates combine journaling with poetry and news reports, police documents, short stories and folktales, all of which are juxtaposed with equally varied media – photographs, painting, drawing, fabric art, collage and graphic novel. This type of juxtapositions creates a discrepancy. Consequently, the intended readership is also ambiguous. The format says "young readers," while the content disagrees. The only characteristic of the reader that we do know, is that they are part of the North American society. The lack of page numbers and the "faux-hand-writing font," says journalist Matthew Behrens, are confusing, and the constant shifts in voice make it hard to follow the faux-story line. Behrens continues by stating that *I live here* seems like "the print version of a World Vision infomercial." However, it is my belief that this represents the very nature of this type of writing, that is, the transcription of raw thoughts and feelings of individuals with little or no education. The subjects of Kirshner's study cannot speak for themselves, let alone in a "proper" manner. They share their information with her, allowing her to weave it together in a style that is consistent, given that the style is hers alone. As Matthew Behrens points out, this causes their voices to blend together, but, in my opinion, their perspectives do not.

That said, I propose a Cultural Poetic analysis of *I live here*, since it is my belief that this anthology demands an approach that is, first of all, sensitive to a first-person account, and secondly, sensitive to cultural difference with a minimal political content. As Judy Battaglia and Erica Solomon—heads of the *I live here Projects*—state, *I live here* focuses on providing the tools that motivate improvement instead of imposing Western ideologies. I plan to show that this piece in itself subscribes to a Cultural Poetic 'mentality' with the ultimate goal of catching a glimpse at the North American

society. Thus, I will use Kirshner's narrative as a mirror into her own society. In describing an alien culture, a tension between the rhetoric and the subject is only natural: the imagery juxtaposing a refugee's story might seem too 'professional'. For example, the language of a child might seem significantly ornate for their age. I will use this tension to piece together elements of the dominant ideology under which Kirshner and her associates are working.

I will open my study with an overview of the approach employed, with focus on arguments pertaining to this topic, as I will be applying these principles later on in the analysis. I would like to devote some space to comparing New Historicism with its British counterpart, Cultural Materialism, as it is pertinent to my choice of approach. The main source of information regarding these methodologies is John Brannigan's *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*.

New Historicism

Traditionally, historicism recounted events in a linear fashion, creating a story of elements causally related to each other. Historians put their trust in binaries, generally favouring one side, the privileged one. In reaction to this claim of objectivity, New Historicism deconstructs the binary of fact and fiction to achieve a panoramic view of an event. New Historicism focuses on the stories not yet told, the minority perspectives that have been ignored. Aram Geertz proposes the strategy of *thick description*—paying attention to the details, elements of the *personal* realm that underline the very characteristic that New Historicism brings to the foreground—subjectivity. New Historicism describes any account, real or fictional, as a representation of experience. In this context, Lois Tyson points out that critics must always position themselves in

relation to the subject, a process that she calls *self-positioning*. This is an important step in the process, as the biases of the critic influence the analysis.

New Historicism recognizes that the individual and the milieu are mutually influential and, therefore, influenced. At play in the milieu is the governing ideology, a Marxist influence, which helps produce the culture we live in. Critics generally complain that a New Historical approach "confirm[s] dominant ideologies rather than confront them" (Parker 248). However, Gordon Wood asserts that "history will cause change […] not in a ways Post-Marxist and deconstruction critics intended it to" (104). Furthermore, John Brannigan tells us, the term *ideology*, although having a negative reputation, does not imply a negative situation. Associated with *ideology* is *power*, an elusive term borrowed from Michel Foucault. In Foucauldian fashion, New Historicism sees *power* as "hover[ing] between oppressive and productive" (Brannigan 15). *Power* is not static and "it does not originate at the top" (Tyson 284). New Historicism evaluates these power relations to surface the limitations via which the dominant ideology operates by pointing out the contradictions and discrepancies in a text. "New Historical methods are useful ways of constructing exchanges between diverse texts in a given historical period" (Brannigan 11).

Shift to Cultural Poetics

Various critics identify Stephen Greenblatt as the "core" of New Historicism. Greenblatt's work focuses on the Renaissance period, specifically on William Shakespeare, asserting that the individual and the milieu shape each other. Greenblatt refuses to accept the postulation that literature is a passive reflection of history, but he

also refuses to have a political agenda, which Kiernan Ryan sees as a deficit in New Historicism and Cultural Materialism altogether, Brannigan informs us. This mentality is what spurred a general disagreement with New Historicism in the New Historicist community. Louise Montrose "attributes the success and appropriation of New Historicism with its own 'eclectic and empiricist tendencies'" (Brannigan 86). Consequently, in the late 1980's, Greenblatt declares a shift to Cultural Poetics, drawing away from the label *New Historicism,* which implies a "replacement of the old" (Brannigan 91). Brannigan explains, "the study of genre is an exploration of the poetics of culture" (Brannigan 84) in which Greenblatt "challenges the assumptions that guarantee distinction between literary foreground and political background, between artistic production and other kinds of social production" (Brannigan 87). Greenblatt is devoted to personal perspectives and experiences that shape and are shaped by collective identities. Cultural Poetics shifts analysis towards "a formalist approach to culture" (Brannigan 91), as *poetics* implies formalism. Greenblatt's poetics further accomplishes "[to obscure] the 'make-upness' [of fictions] to reveal their realness" (Laden 61). He cuts down the distances in time and space, between the reader and the subject by surfacing "conceivable" representations, as Sonja Laden puts it, of a reality. Laden points out Greenblatt's deliberate use of "rhetorics" as sound patterning and repetition, as well as his strive to build a connection with the reader by evoking previous knowledge of the subject in question. Greenblatt's premise is that "what we call data are really our constructions of people's constructions of what their compatriots are up to" (Laden 70).

I Live Here

In Greenblattian fashion, Mia Kirshner's project presents *perceivable* representations, in Laden's terms, by "highlight[ing] the problematics of representing human sufferings—and humans suffering—rather than the "truth" of suffering" (Goldberg and Moore 237). I am aware that the cultural distance between the interviewer and the interviewees asks for a Cultural Studies approach; however, it is only due to the controversial New Historicism that the limitations of Cultural Poetics obscure its strengths. The advantage to Greenblattian poetics, as presented in the previous section, is that it calls for a non-linear, succession of events and voices, which are at the center of *I live here*. The "cinematic conventions" that Goldberg and Moore mention in their analysis, are present not only in form, but in content also. Kirshner acknowledges her position in relation to the subject without necessarily realizing it. The vocabulary Kirshner uses is clearly superior to the demographic she interviews—individuals who have not had access to an education. This discrepancy exposes the nature of the *historian* behind it. Kirshner is not really concealing her identity to leave room for the identity of the subject to unfold, as she planned. Besides the vocabulary used, Kirshner creates scenes inspired by Hollywood productions. For example, the rooms she rents in cheap hotels of small towns are somehow "romantic, the type of room where you meet a lover and watch the snowfall, that rare kind of encounter where silence pounds heavy on your heart," as Kirshner describes in *Moscow*. *The Ukraina Hotel* is a part of the *Ingushetia* section. Throughout this anthology, Kirshner combines cultural artifacts—elements of the alien culture—filtered through her North American *hollywoodesque* lens.

In the following sections, I will select certain parts out of each of the four 84-page volumes and look at them in greater detail. Lois

Tyson asks the New Historian: what do these representations tell us about the culture they come from? I will apply this question in my analysis of the North American society as the culture of origin, using the writer's *slips of the tongue* in the subject's narrative as markers of their own cultural affiliations.

Ingushetia

As journalist Dann Dykas suggests, the cover of this section has a "familiar" feel, "a scratched out cover of a […] composition book" (Dykas 58). Before even opening this first "notebook" of the anthology, it evokes a *personal* collective memory of journaling. As a North American reader, Dykas is comforted by this image. I was too when I first saw it, and even though I did not grow up in this society, I was able to recognize this "familiarity." The name, however, is unfamiliar—Ingushetia. Upon closer inspection, the caption on the pocket of the cover tells us that Ingushetia is a Republic bordering Chechnya, where Chechens found refuge following the 1994 conflict between Russian troops and Chechen Suni Muslim rebels.

The Ingushetia volume opens with a story entitled *This is what I know*, which centers around a nine-year-old boy searching for his grandfather, Izhou—"a boy who might look like [his] father." Goldberg and Moore inform us that Izhou was Kirshner's grandmother's son, lost in the Holocaust. Kirshner is minimizing the temporal and spatial distance between the two situations—her dead great-uncle's displaced history and the generic displaced Chechen child, both thrown out of their contexts. As Kirshner suggests to many of her interviewers, survivors need to have their stories heard. Yet her only way into this world that is alien to her is a potential connection to her own experience. She performs this action in a Greenblattian manner, as she is modeling her inherited memory into

a story geographically and temporally separated. She manages to "obscure" the fictional character of the piece by imagery, since she places an exaggeratedly pixilated picture of a boy adjacent to this story. *This is what I know* and the following journal entry, *Moscow. The Ukraina Hotel*, form Kirshner's statement of purpose, namely that she is forced to create this piece.

> [M]y father begged me not to go. […] He asked the obvious question. Why are you doing this? […] Because sometimes I think that the world is dying, melting, and forgetting. And why doesn't anyone send handwritten letters anymore?

Kirshner's testimony tells me that the world is "dehumanized"—we have lost our ability to be human with each other. Handwritten letters are intimate artefacts, generally shared between two individuals, an intimacy that we have traded for isolation. Kirshner declares in many of her interviews that she writes *I live here* with the purpose of raising awareness; calling for action and this quote supports that postulation. However the subsequent part to this quote is more telling in regards to her personal gain.

> I need to tell the man in the lobby bar that these problems gather and one day might overwhelm you… maybe you stop eating meat, quit your job, go to India and live in an ashram; or you take drugs, spend too much money, fuck too many random strangers, or just disconnect from your life.

The humanitarian nuance is somewhat obscured by the author's emotional "profit." Kirshner hints to an emotional, psychological boredom that she aims to regain in following through with her research plans, even though she admits to a constant fear of what will happen next.

The story of Ruslan, a twelve-year-old refugee from Chechnya's capital Grozny is told by J. B. McKinnon. Ruslan's story is brief yet sharp. "His father had been, in his words, exploded by a bomb, and

his mother had been hit by a car. The night his mom died, he didn't tell anyone, and he went to sleep on the floor of the train station" (Caldwell 126). Kirshner speaks to her interviewers of the solitude attached to the status of refugee, and she also mentions Ruslan as the story that affected her the most. There are two parts to Ruslan's story with some repetitive sections. The ability of Ruslan and other boys like him that "hang around the train station" to laugh and distance themselves from the horror of war and hunger, marvels the authors, as children have the reputation of being innocent and weak. Mark Walsh explains in his news report on Chechen refugees' status that after having seen their father being killed in front of them, a widow's children are provided with counseling by Médecins Sans Frontières. Generally in news articles, reporters talk about treating Post-traumatic Stress in Chechen refugee camps. This high level of understanding psychology and applying it is a mentality that is typically Western.

The Daycare Lady seems to be the anti-hero in the Tanzila refugee Camp. While the author recounts how the first floor of Tanzila Café became a "school, a daycare, two clinics, four little stores, a games room, [and] a billiard room," the story relies on The Daycare Lady's "infamous lifestyle"—her make-up habits. She uses Max Factor foundation and mascara, and Lancôme's Magie Noire perfume. The obvious question is: Where does she get the money for such luxuries in a refugee camp? This seems very close to a critique of the West's consumerism. The authors end her story mockingly saying that "she is not too sure that she would like to fall in love again," as her husband was killed, shot in the head, or died of "an unnamed illness." The items described in this story are common in a North American household, however, they are luxuries in a Chechen

refugee camp where the numbers of people change from one newspaper report to another—ranging between 200,000 and 400,000.

The graphic novella, at the end of *Ingushetia* is told from the perspective of Joe Sacco, a renowned "cartoon journalist," who travels to the Chechen refugee camps, where he is inspired to draw the story of Zura, a woman who fell for the ruse orchestrated by Russian authorities. Scott Petersen supports this story. In 1999, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, declares a restoration of "law and order" in Chechnya, meaning that the Chechens are to return to their homes in full-war without knowing it. *Chechen War, Chechen Women*, follows Zura's account in black and white format that allows Sacco's mastery of detail to pop out. A whole pallet of expressions accentuated in the facial wrinkles, though cartoony, humanizes the very facial expressions.

The newspapers focus on the same type of intimate connection as in the story. Journalist Fred Weir writes about kids drawing the war as if it were a mundane occurrence; which in their case is true. Reporters enumerate data, each time a discrepancy of hundreds of thousands. As depicted in the anthology, refugees want to return home but they fear for their safety. Furthermore, they have nowhere to live, as tent camps are scarce and housing even more so.

Burma

According to the caption on the cover, after 1962, Burma turned into a prison—the Myanmar, controlled by the State Peace and Development Council. "The Burmese government recognizes one hundred and thirty five distinct ethnic groups," one of which are the Karen, numbering six million individuals. The Karen flag appears on the cover, almost engulfed by the claws of a giant hand coming out of the ground. Flags are symbols of a collective identity, which in the

North American societies is seen as a struggle. Given that immigration is still very common into Canada and the United States, both nations still search for a unified whole, much like the Karens. I believe there is a tension created in the use of such artefacts in this volume as there is a visible effort to maintain the consistency in the style of imagery, which is largely provided by Kamel Khélif, a French-Algerian writer and artist. The drawings and paintings are emotionally bound to the stories, since the raw imagery coincides with the fragmented thoughts expressed.

The focus, however, is on the sex workers of Mae Sot, a community which Mayt Mon informs is 80% Karen refugees, bound by this profession by the fear of deportation. The language in Kirshner's journals becomes increasingly violent and explicit in this volume. In *Mae Sot. Thailand. Hotel room. Night.* she places her own memories on the background of the Karen sex-worker testimonials.

> I can't help but recall my own first encounter with the sexual underworld. The illicit thrill of going to the sex shows and strip clubs. Sitting in the porn arcade giving a hand-job to the guy who sat in the back of my Russian Lit class.

She writes this as she is surrounded by a "sepia flurry of sound and image" of "MTV Asia on mute." Kirshner is attempting to romanticize the shift from compassion to a violent identification with the sex workers of Mae Sot, which alludes to the critique of the Western ever imposed taboos on sex. Kirshner reaffirms parts of herself that persist, memories that shaped her world-view and that she is using to shape her readership.

> We are sitting against the wall of the brothel. [...] She is 17 and terrified. [...] Her eyes. I recognize those eyes. Eyelashes, which protect you from seeing too much, and keep others from doing the same. I was 17 when the man handed me the joint. [...] There is nothing unusual about my story. But it

> was the last time until now, that I examined these things so closely.

Goldberg and Moore maintain that the self-reflexive turns that Kirshner takes, "betray a certain self-recrimination that may read as disingenuous" (Goldberg and Moore 236). Here, I want to recall my assertion that the humanitarian is sometimes obscured by Kirshner's own emotional profit.

The section *This red string is for you, Mama* is arguably the most humbling story in this volume. It is a collage sort of account "of a girl's life in the camps, inspired by the people of Tham Hin and Don Ban Yang," written by Chris Abati. The story is a letter her mother further divided into three letters, one to the mother, one to a nameless young soldier who spared her life, and the last one to her rapist. *Dear Mama* opens with a confession of having been raped and feeling shamed. The girl is seeking for forgiveness from her dead ancestors.

> This is the kind of letter, though I am writing most of it in my heart, for you, for me, for a time when I can speak of it. This torn and bloodied sheet should be enough, but words bring clarity.

The girl explains how her first reaction was to take the sheet and wash it, as a symbolic act of erasing the rape. With the rain coming down, she dives into melancholy, calmly remembering her protected childhood. Unlike a Western counterpart who would have the option of support groups and an overall mentality of compassion towards victims, the story of this survivor expresses solitude, isolation. The author makes clear mention of the geographical whereabouts—Thailand—and the status of the victim—an outsider. This conditions the understanding of the Western reader, who is unaware of the unspoken cultural strains Karen girls endure.

Dear boy traces Karen ancestry, a people who "crossed the Gobi, the river of running sand," in parallel to the painful memory of having lost her parents to a village fire. By creating this situation, the author illustrates a strong spirit of community, which perhaps is lacking in the West. This is a letter of gratitude, towards a soldier without an enemy label, one that represents the possibility of a peaceful cohabitation in recognition of the Karens' humanity. The girl concludes by returning to nature and song, alluding to a tranquil past, one that the West is attempting to recover via humanitarian acts.

Dear Rapist depicts the constant threat publicly known and feared in the Karen camps. The sense of community is lost in this third part of the letter to the mother. The girl expresses further isolation from her own, which she intends to forget through song. The lack of community support evokes a loss of identity in the girl; she feels but a "ghost" passing by "a line of women bent in the rain like a long sad caterpillar […] searching for food."

This collection of opposing images means to leave the reader feeling uneasy. The language is westernized yet the depictions are raw—the authenticity of the experiences gathered is translated into a form familiar to the Western reader as to minimize the geographical and cultural distance between the subject and the audience.

In terms of human rights, the United Nations is concerned with the status of Burmese refugees in Thailand. The harsh regulations on immigration in Burma, following the coup of 1962, are what paved the way to such a large number of Karen women winding up in the sex trade. Myat Mon explains that in 1996, Burma implemented restrictions on immigration for women under twenty-five, leaving young Burmese women exposed to being undertreated. Minority

Burmese women, such as the Karen are at an even larger risk, which is why, as mentioned, 80% of the sex trade community are Karen women.

Ciudad Juárez

Border town between the United States and Mexico, Ciudad Juárez is economically attracttive to many Mexicans who migrate north to become *maquiladora* workers. The privileged geographical position is equally attractive to drug-traffickers, who now dictate the local economy. What is particularly frightening in this area, though, is the large number of femicides that started in 1993. Police officials are still investigating, while girls are still found dead in the desert, displaying clear signs of physical abuse. In her interview with Catherine Caldwell, Kirshner recounts that the day before leaving Juárez she visited a site where eight women were found, assumed to have been murdered a month before.

The volume opens with the story of Erika, "one of the missing," whose mother is still hoping to recover. *Erika* is arguably one of the most "authentic" stories in the anthology. I use this word in lack of a better one, since there is no reason why I should doubt the truth value of the story, nor why this should be of concern. Yet, in this story, the reader is allowed back stage access to Kirshner's interview with the mother—via a series of six polaroids with hand-written captions by the mother. Polaroids are by nature raw art. They cannot be edited, and furthermore, the ashy colours evoke sadness. The mother's hand-written *testimonio* is, as mentioned, a series of captions accompanying the photos that are translated for the reader. They illustrate a person with little education, who is perhaps overly aware of her limited capacities. Most of her words lack accents—as the Spanish language employs them to mark an irregular

accentuated syllable—yet she intends to compensate for them by adding extra accents to other words. The captions are emotionally charged, simple and almost poetic. The Western reader inevitably perceives them as such, since the mundane nature of the information communicated in the captions—is placed parallel with the message of the story—that the girl will not return home. Here, I would like to underline the double juxtaposition. As a westernized reader, I see this as raw art, while the message of the story clearly hints in another direction. Yet this is precisely the reaction that Kirshner is searching for, since she as well uses a Western lens to view and collage these images with their messages.

In this volume of the anthology, it is clear that Kirshner does not have to perform the cultural leap seen in previous volumes. The geographical proximity allows Kirshner to enter a world where American cultural artefacts such as 7-Elevens and The Backstreet Boys are present. In the journal entry entitled *Juarez*, Kirshner alludes to sharing memories with her translator, a Juárez local. The song "As Long as You Love Me" by Backstreet Boys, allows the two to have a common past, and, therefore, a more personal topic of discussion. However, despite this common interest, Kirshner signals cultural overlap.

> She gave me this look, like "dumb-ass," and she said she was hungry, couldn't I see that we had worked through her break and she needed to eat? And anyway, whatever, she's heard this story before.

This quote comes as another critique to North American consumerism as an obsessive drive to maximizing production, characteristic of a capitalist society. Yet, Kirshner and her translator are not factory workers, as originally described by Marxists. This obsessive drive is for personal gain, which has a persistent presence

in this story. Kirshner is, again, trying to connect with the victims by drawing from personal memory.

> Later, in my hotel room, I study the pictures of the missing and murdered girls who might have had their lockers next to mine at Oakwood Collegiate. The ones who shared Finesse hair spray as they teased their bangs in the mirror, talking about their first kiss in the basement at a house party, trading secrets about the boy they had a huge crush on OH MY GOD THERE HE IS HE'S WALKING PAST YOUR LOCKER DID HE LOOK AT ME? Girls making late night phone calls, acting older, skipping school to get a second ear piercing, swearing forever pacts with best friends, wanting to be smarter, to get along with their mothers, trying to be better.

This quote contains some cross-cultural elements, as "having a crush" or "trying to be better." Out of the items on Kirshner's list, the more general ones can be considered points of intersection between the two cultures. Yet, I would like to argue that the *locker* is a cultural artefact that evokes a *hollywoodesque* scene rather than a memory shared between Kirshner and the murdered Mexican girls of an inexistent past. Coming from a non-Western background, namely Romanian, I do not share this memory with Kirshner on an emotional level. My memories of lockers stem out of Hollywood productions—they are images borrowed from lives of fictional American high school students. The movie-like imagery is further enhanced by the collage of a locker containing drawings of Biology and History textbooks in Spanish and the pictures of the missing girls accompanied by short bios. The juxtaposition is clearly manufactured and Kirshner is not hiding this fact as the image is a collage. However, Kirshner achieves a geographical proximity by using this method of collaging—she shortens the spatial distance by juxtaposing not only images, but words also.

The technique of collaging is borrowed by Mia Kirshner's sister, Lauren Kirshner, in writing the section *Twenty poems about Claudia*.

> Claudia, you came into my life last summer in a twenty-five-kilogram FedEx box. I carried it up to my room and shut the door. There was no music, no sound from outside. I took a penknife, slit a line in the top of that box, and opened it carefully, peeling back the cardboard. Inside were notes by your family and friends.

Lauren Kirshner manages to breech the temporal and spatial distance between herself and Claudia, a girl that she has never met, by increasing the level of intimacy of this moment in which Claudia was never present. Following this first encounter, Lauren Kirshner, as Mia Kirshner previously did, compiles a list of cultural artefacts, only that this list is more centered around the Mexican culture than the North American one, since elements as "Betty La Fea"—Hispanic soap opera character, and the "Virgin of Guadalupe"—Mexican version of Virgin Mary, are present. Despite the title addressing Claudia in the third person, the author is attempting to appropriate Claudia's personality and lifestyle, and implicitly the lifestyle in Ciudad Juárez, so that in the third poem, it is Claudia speaking, explaining what one can do with $55 dollars in Mexico's Juárez. Lauren Kirshner, in a Cultural Poetic fashion, acknowledges her position as a *writer*.

> Claudia, I've written your story five times, scrapped every one of them. I was trying to explain things that I had no way of knowing. Now I know what the problem was. I was thinking of myself instead of you.

Similar to a Historian trying to recount objectively, the author is trying to adopt a voice that is not naturally hers, in order to write the testimony of a girl who is no longer able to speak for herself. To achieve this level of personal identification with the subject, Lauren

Kirshner writes about the most intimate details of Claudia's life, such as getting her period. Yet, her strive to not make false assumptions is a recurring theme in the section *Twenty poems about Claudia*. She translates Claudia, literally and figuratively, as best she can, drawing from her own adolescent memories to create a present account, as opposed to a past one, that she hopes will bring Claudia back to life, just as she portrays it in the opening poem by personalising the box in which Claudia walked into her life. Lauren Kirshner's apologetic remarks leave a different impression of the appropriation she is performing than her sister, yet, the humanitarian nature still has a shade of personal gain, visible in her opening conversations about personal heroes—Kurt Cobain, and more intimate moments—curling up while crying.

Ciudad Juárez ends in a graphic novella by Phoebe Glockner. The novella combines fabric art with photography, producing a one-of-a-kind *comic*. *La Tristeza*—The Sadness traces a collection of newspaper articles complimented by imagery juxtaposing fabric dolls with human faces.

In a period of 30-year time, the number of *maquiladora* workers grew from a little over 3,000 to almost 250,000 in the year 2000, Volk and Schlotterbeck inform us. The decreasing interest in finding those responsible for the femicides urges Alicia Gaspar de Alba to ask "where are the academics?" (Alba, de 10). Not having yet found the source of these tragedies is detrimental for many.

Malawi

Malawi is described as a refugee crisis caused by disease, in which *repatriation* can only mean death. The pocket in the cover informs us that "a single district in Lilongwe is home for forty-one coffin shops. The demand for coffins is deforesting Malawi, stripping it of soft

pine." The graphic novella is a story created by J. B. McKinnon and illustrated by Julie Monstad. The novella is a pleasure to read and to see, and, at a closer look, proves itself more intricate than expected. The thematic thread corresponds to that of the volume, namely "the wasting disease" and the extraordinary number of characters renders the story line complex. I will make an inventory of characters in the order in which they appear: Bunda, the mountain that bears witness to everything that happens, opens the novella. Enter Mama, who is HIV positive and pregnant. Following Mama, is a list of parentless children, orphaned either by death or by distance. Lazarus is the first – he lives in the same town as Mama. Love, a rather mythical boy, is a deaf-mute that chases minibuses never managing to catch them – a gift, Love's sister, love to spin, amusing passer-byes. Doubt, is burdened with raising her younger brothers and sisters, while her sister, Blessing "is fed up with" her sister's constant worries. Sugar, the coffin builder, is building his own coffin with mirrors in it. Ali Baba is a boy who sleeps under a bench in the market having fled abuse from his uncle. Krystal, a blonde, blue-eyed woman who rides a black horse, is Mama's employer. Oscar is the friend who "drives" Mama to the hospital on his bicycle.

These characters are connected via their relation to Mama's baby, who they are all scheduled to "come see." However, these guests do not arrive at the celebration. Lazarus lets himself get carried away in the forest. Love, cannot get on the bus. Gift, also gets carried away following beautiful music into a plain where she is defeated by the music—it overwhelms her. Blessing and Doubt encounter a danger that takes Doubt away. Blessing encounters a boy named Topher, whom she eventually marries. Ali Baba steals a cassava root on his way and is thrown in jail. Meanwhile, Oscar is trying to arrive at the hospital with Mama, but he encounters a lot of obstacles—funerals

generated by the "wasting disease." Krystal, the party girl, manages to corrupt Lazarus and Gift to join her at the party. Having both managed to come back on the right track to see the baby; they ride away with Krystal instead.

In the final section of the novella, we are informed that Lazarus is dead and that Mama did not arrive at the hospital, and instead, gave birth in a graveyard to a child named Hope.

I was particularly keen on including this piece, to illustrate the enormous blend of generic global references: Lazarus—the dead who comes back to life, as part of Christian mythology, Ali Baba—an oriental honest man, and Krystal—similar to a Nordic goddess. These references bridge the gap between global understanding and the African culture. This novella, in particular, is the perfect example for the type of creative writing available nowadays, in which artistic beauty contradicts grim emotions—here, the writing and imagery perform this action, since the characters generally have black eyes and are either in tears or are expressing great sadness. The style of the drawings is telling in regards to the general impression that the West has of African cultures—it is very simple, yet expressive; and it is non-commercial, yet catchy. The words compliment this visual image with a musicality present in the words, which display the same expressive simplicity, but that are repeated—alone or in groupings—to build an extended track of sounds as to complicate their simple meaning.

Studies show that Malawi citizens still do not have easy access to the appropriate knowledge to prevent HIV infection in their communities. Women are especially restrained by religious beliefs. Religion also prevents the members of community from using contraception to protect themselves and the very community. The stigmas associated with HIV infection, however, are harsh. There is

a high degree of embarrassment involved in being HIV positive or even so much as knowing someone else who is. The blame falls on prostitutes and God, yet never on a lack of knowledge. Malawi literature even spurred a "formula," according to writer Steve Chimombo, one that renews the classical love story "but with the virus in between" (Lee 39).

Conclusion: "Literature" Today

In his analysis of Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties*, Gordon Wood points out a "deliberate violation of conventions of history" (104) to achieve a better story. This encourages the reader to question the truth-value of the story, Wood says. However, nowadays, the North American society stresses on the non-fiction character of any piece of art. The public craves something real, authentic, genuine, rather than a piece that "follows protocol". In pop culture, nothing is more appreciated than something *inspired by a true story*. In this respect, a non-prescribing literary theory as Cultural Poetics is useful when looking at *texts* similar to *I live here*, texts that follow a style of patchwork of images and words that I see becoming increasingly popular. What I have done here is but a small part of an analysis that would require much more space than what I have devoted. The pieces in the anthology that I have chosen to work with might appear random, yet surely they are not. I chose the stories presented here not necessarily because my analytical self asserted that they best show the discrepancy between the voice telling the story and the voice represented, but because my emotional self found that discrepancy more obvious. As an immigrant coming into the Western society from a small country in Eastern Europe, it was important that I let myself guided this way, in order to capture the essence of what this anthology is—its content and its form ask for it. To be

clear, my analysis does not intend to criticize the *I Live Here* project, it intends quite the contrary, that is, to show its immensurable artistic value in terms of conveying cultural richness; a cultural richness achieved not only via the voices that speak and whisper—indirectly included—and the stories that unfold or revive from a silent past as we read, but also via the relationship between these voices and the stories we discover.

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