

**A Dance of Deaths: Gender Violence in *Mulheres empilhadas***

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“The real must be fictionalized in order to  
be thought.”

—Jacques Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics* (34)

In her novel *Cassandra*, Christa Wolf, through the voice of the prophetess, reflects on publicity as a means of validating truths that can be invented. She notes that “o que se torna público, torna-se realidade” (91) (what becomes public, becomes real).<sup>1</sup> Patrícia Melo’s novel, *Mulheres empilhadas* (2019), moves toward such an affirmation by materializing through fiction the extremes of violence against women and the massive rates of femicide throughout Brazil since 1990s, rendering these as unexceptional occurrences that are not properly discussed in the public domain.

The author takes a neo-naturalist approach as she composes, in a style that is decisively brutalist and which measures up to the violence it elaborates, a fiction with strong documentary-like tendencies, which unfolds the exhaustive compilation of real cases of murder in an experimentalism that is engaged in the denouncement of the scandalous contingent of silenced victims. The dialogism between culture and barbarism in the characterization of the style, which, as has been pointed out by Alfredo Bosi, is shaped by the “enigmatic and elusive element of violence” (Schollhammer 7–8), is also developed through the binomial Amazon rainforest/Cruzeiro do Sul in *Mulheres empilhadas*.

In this fluid and busy narrative, gender-based violence is embodied through a chorus of femicides that are researched and compiled by a protagonist–narrator, who is a criminal defense attorney. The narrator is involved in a spiral of feminist learning and emotional self-knowledge, triggered by the aggression of an ex-boyfriend, Amir, who, in an outburst of possessive fury, slaps her in the face. From that point on, the conflict is structured as the protagonist’s defense strategy against the ex-partner’s actions. While Amir continuously makes efforts to re-establish the relationship, she delves into research regarding the country’s femicides for her boss, who is concerned with writing a book about the state’s responsibility to “sancionar a assimetria nas relações de gênero” (Melo 24) (sanction asymmetry in gender relations).

The character’s departure from São Paulo to Acre occurs so that she may be able to witness and document the trials of murdered women. The state of Acre is at the very top of the list for such occurrences. The trip reveals itself to trigger the character’s formation process, as it enables the character to reconnect with her own past, amidst the experience of working with trauma. After Amir’s aggression, she recalls:

Era exasperante admitir que meu pensamento operava em modo circular nos últimos dias. Do tapa ao tapa. A verdade é que um tapa no rosto tem o mesmo efeito que um projeto expansível. Guardadas as devidas diferenças, ele provoca na sua parte imaterial algo parecido com o que a bala dundum faz na sua carne: em vez de transfixar o corpo, toda aquela energia destrutiva implode dentro de você, ampliando o ferimento . . . Todavia, em mim, aquele tapa criou uma espécie de efeito dominó ao contrário, ele levantou uma peça que estava caída, uma peça interior, morta, uma peça que, alçando-se, alavancou outra, e assim sucessivamente, até chegar à última, a mais caída de todas, quase já enterrada, chamada “mãe.” (Melo 22–23)

(It was exasperating to admit that my thoughts operated in a circular mode the last few days. From one slap to another slap. The truth is that a slap in the face has the same effect as an expanding projectile. Differences aside, to your immaterial part, it provokes something that is akin to that which a dum dum bullet does to your flesh: instead of transfixing the body, all that destructive energy implodes inside you, amplifying the wound . . . However, for me, that slap created some kind of backwards domino effect, it

lifted a tile that was down, the one before it, dead, a tile that, as it lifted itself, lifted others, and then successively, until it reached the very last one, the one which was the most downward, nearly buried, called “mother”.)

As a matter of fact, the protagonist witnessed the murder of her mother by her father during her childhood. Thus, it is possible to argue that this set of injunctions, fueled by the nature of her profession and area of research, set out to form a sort of thesis novel, a type of novel in which both style and plot are applied as means to defend a specific stance, and to convince the reader of its fairness by lining up well-established data and arguments.

The hypothesis is certainly valid: the novel’s architecture is skillful in its construction of ambience and its search for intense ways of capturing alterity. The presentation of the colors, the sounds, and the aromas of the forest is poetic and sensorial, as is the description of the forest’s dense vegetation and the fruits and food of *Cruzeiro do Sul*. The pregnancy of the language relies on the clearness and sharpness of the images, enumerations, and comparisons. The creation of this effect is deepened by the rendering of nature’s mightiness and the vivacity of its elements, as well as by the constant, agile procedure of diverse enumerations: deaths, weapons and professions, fruits, the names of women and their murderers, etc.

The novel is structured into three groups of chapters. In a shocking unveiling, the initial sequence of Arabic numbers signals the series of femicides that occurred in the country in a concise, objective, and laconic manner. Here is a sample from the first account, which opens the book:

MORTA PELO MARIDO

Elaine Figueiredo Lacerda / Sessenta e um anos, / foi abatida a tiros / na porta de sua casa, / num final de tarde de domingo. (Melo 9)

(KILLED BY HUSBAND

Elaine Figueiredo Lacerda / Sixty-one, / was shot down / by her door, / at the end of a Sunday afternoon.)

Then, the sequence of the plot, which is narrated in the first person, is organized according to the capital letters of the Roman alphabet. Finally, the plot is organized according to the mythic sequencing of the Greek alphabet. The final section takes place in the Amazon rainforest, where the protagonist–narrator encounters the Ch’asca Native village and, through their rituals, has hallucinogenic experiences that produce dreams and visions inhabited by the

Amazon warriors, the Icamiabas, in their vengeful fight against the murderers of women:

E então aquela coisa quente no meu peito se transformou numa voz cálida, *até chegar à Virgem Maria*, e depois numa cabeleira farta, e depois numa moça com tanto cabelo quanto poder, munida de arco e flechas, sem o seio esquerdo, que me falou com muita clareza: olha lá o nosso bonde se formando no meio da floresta. Nós, disse ela, nós, mulheres, icamiabas, mães, cafuzas, irmãs, amazonas, negras, Marias, lésbicas, filhas, indígenas, mulatas, netas, brancas, nós brotamos do chão, tremelicando de ódio, vingadoras, enchemos o meu Exu-caveirão e avançamos sobre a cidade, carregando pirocas, caralhos de borracha, com poder de fogo, vamos atrás de você, homem mau, homem de bosta, explorador, abusador, estuprador, espancador de mulheres. (Melo 26, emphasis in original)

(And so, that warm thing in my chest transformed into a mellow voice, *then the Virgin Mary*, and then into full-bodied hair, and then into a lady with as much hair as possible, equipped with a bow and arrow, without her left breast, who spoke to me with plain clarity: behold, our little group getting in formation in the forest. Us, she said, women, Icamiabas, mothers, cafuzas, sisters, Amazons, Black, Marias, lesbians, daughters, natives, mulatas, granddaughters, white, we sprout in the earth, flickering with hatred, vengeful, we fill up my Exu-caveirão ride and go about the town, loaded with dicks, dildos, with firepower, we come after you, bad men, shitty men, explorers, abusers, rapists, women beaters.)

This sequence is permeated by lyrical expansions, emotions, and hallucinogenic visions, which are crowned by the magic of the woods, as well as by an account of Native myths and experiences, which are connected to the culture of the Native villages, such as Santo Daime and the cipó ritual from the shamanic tradition. The protagonist's attraction to the Amazonian rituals is crucial to her process of curing the traumatic violence of her ex-boyfriend as well as her repressed suffering over the killing of her mother, before her very eyes, when she was a little girl.

On the one hand, the intensity of the forest fills the narrator with a magnetic and powerful aura. It also infuses the style of the narrative with an

impressive force through comparisons and images, which are highly synesthetic and sensual. As Melo writes, “Ao caminhar pela mata, antes de chegar à comunidade, fiquei maravilhada com o ar da floresta que, de tão denso, parecia uma fruta carnosa, a ser comida em gomos” (64) (As I walked through the woods, before reaching the community, I marveled at the air of the forest which, in its thickness, reminded me of a juicy fruit, to be eaten in slices). On the other hand, the protagonist’s visceral experiences, little by little, lead to her physical cure, after developing malaria during her stay in Acre, and, above all, her spiritual cure in relation to the successive and increasing offenses by her boyfriend and the trauma of her mother’s murder. Through Marcos, the son of the owner of the hotel where she originally stays, she meets Zapira, the shaman of the Ch’asca village where Marcos’s Native mother lived. Thus, she experiences trances and successive visions of forest beings, of the dead, and of spirits, who, at last, rescue her from bitterness and trauma.

During her time in Acre, all through the trials and after, the lawyer faces problematic situations that derive from both the increasing violence inflicted by her boyfriend after the sudden end of their relationship and the violent death of Txupira, a young Native woman in the village of the Kuratawa who is murdered by three millionaire playboys, the sons of the state’s most powerful and rich men. With the compromising evidence of the involvement of jury members with the men’s defense attorney, as well as the strong friendship she forges with Carla, the prosecutor in charge of the trio’s accusation, the lawyer is placed at the very center of a potentially deadly imbroglio.

The progressive complication of the intricate plot brings the two friends closer. With the evidence of the secret nocturnal and festive group meeting, in the form of a photograph taken by the protagonist without the men noticing her presence, the lawyer secures a new trial after the men’s first absolution. So begins a dance of deaths: first, the death of Rita, the journalist who had denounced the scheme in a news report; then, the killing of Txupira’s three murderers; and, finally, the homicide of Carla by her boyfriend, in a kind of passionate trance, in her house. It so happens that Paulo, a local young man, who is claiming to defend Carla and the protagonist, decides to kill the three men and, finally, driven by jealousy, his own girlfriend.

However, the protagonist’s suffering climaxes with the progressive spiraling of her boyfriend’s aggressions. She is notified that Amir has published on pornographic sites their intimate moments, which were filmed without her knowledge:

E então Denise me contou. Ela estava realmente chocada: o escritório recebera alguns vídeos com imagens minhas. Íntimas. Eu nua. Eu fazendo sexo.

Mesmo antes de vê-los, eu sabia que só podia ser coisa de Amir.

– Os americanos até já têm nome para essa prática: revenge porn – explicou Denise.

– Você pode me mandar tudo isso? perguntei.

Acho que foi naquele telefonema que entendi o que significava sororidade.

– Tenho que dizer duas coisas – afirmou Denise antes de desligar: – Primeira, vou defender você neste caso. Pro bono. É sempre difícil, mas às vezes conseguimos levar um idiota como esse ao tribunal. Vou precisar da sua ajuda, claro. Segunda: não quero saber, a não ser que queira me contar, a razão pela qual você sumiu, me deixando na mão. Suponho que esteja passando por um momento delicado. Por isso quero que saiba que, quando quiser, as portas do escritório estão abertas para você. Quero que volte a trabalhar conosco.

Eu realmente não sabia o que dizer. Nem sei como acabou o telefonema.

Só me lembro de estar na varanda de casa vendo toda a merda que Denise me encaminhou. (Melo 157–58)

(And so, Denise told me. She was really shocked: the office had received some videos in which I was featured. Intimate videos. I was naked. I was having sex.

Even before seeing them, I knew it could only be Amir.

“Americans already have a name for such an act: revenge porn,” Denise explained.

“Could you forward it all to me?” I asked.

I think it was in that very phone call that I came to understand what sorority meant.

“I have to say two things before hanging up,” said Denise. “First, I will defend you in this case. Pro bono. It’s always hard, but sometimes we can take an asshole like him to court. I will need your help, of course. Second: I don’t want to know, unless you want to tell me, the reason why you vanished, bailing on me. I suppose you must be going through a delicate moment. This is why I want you to know that, whenever you want, this office’s doors are open for you. I want you to work with us again.”

I really did not know what to say. I don’t even know how that phone call ended.

I can only remember being on the porch watching the steaming pile of shit that Denise had forwarded to me.)

The violence suffered by the character is measurable as “re-action,” as in the case of self-defense. However, violence loses its *raison d’être* when it morphs into strategy, when it is rationalized into a theory of action, as Hanna Arendt observes (8). According to Benjamin, the violence of the law arises as it interferes with ethical relations, in the sense that the legal order tries to establish limits through the historic acknowledgement of its ends. Thus, violence as a means both establishes and maintains the Law (Benjamin 136). The establishment of frontiers, according to Benjamin, is the original phenomenon that establishes the violence of the law in general. The disregard of the body’s frontiers—both in the episode of the slap and in the exhibition of the character’s sexual intimacy on the Internet—was the element that set in motion the violence of the law.

According to essayist Byung-Chul Han in *Topology of Violence* (2019), in contemporary times, the phenomenon of violence has gone through mutations and has come to manifest itself in different modalities. It goes from visible to invisible; from frontal to viral; from direct to mediated; from real to virtual; from physical to psychological; and from negative to positive. Finally, it withdraws to sub-communicative and neuronal spaces in ways that give the less attentive observer the impression that it has diminished.

From the old violence of negativity, characterized by the polarity between victim and executor, the phenomenon becomes interiorized in a way that is simultaneously insidious and psychic, making up for a “fundamental topological dislocation” (Fávero 636) through interior conflict and self-aggression, in a psychic spiral that is highly destructive. The philosopher Han, like Benjamin, also recognizes a profound unity between violence and law.

When discussing contemporary society, Han describes it as a society of hyper-exposure and communication, pointing to what he calls positivity violence—that is, the current imperative of self-exposing, seeing-it-all, and showing-it-all. In this sense, we can observe the deep aggression of the post published by the protagonist’s ex-boyfriend, in a type of aggressive revenge impulse, one which is violently detrimental to the dignity and public image of his ex-partner. Following this line of thought, we can signal what Han qualifies as the “ascetic space of positivity, [which] by eliminating the effect of the other’s immunological negativity, develops new forms of virality, a new pathology” (138). So, when Han analyses the violence of transparency, he underlines the idea that transparency points to other current trends, such as “hyper-communication, hyper-information, and hyper-visibility” (138). This way, the philosopher emphasizes that “the permanent demand of transparency is based on an idea of the world, an idea of man as free from all types of negativity. However, only machines are absolutely transparent” (150–51).

Han goes on to diagnose that this transparency is violent as it makes “the other completely disappears under *the light of the identical*. . . . The violence of transparency expresses itself as a leveling of the other toward converting them into *identical*, as a suppression of *alterity*. The politics of transparency is a *dictatorship of the identical*” (151). That way, the ex-boyfriend, as he exposes the protagonist in her intimate scenes, filmed without her consent, reduces the complexity of the protagonist from a person to that of a woman who has sex and broadcasts it on the Internet. That is, he relegates her to the role of a pornographic movie actress.

As he concludes the chapter on the subject, the philosopher demonstrates that “pornographic exhibition and panoptical control morph into one,” and he denounces how, through social media, the society of control is consummated when users, without fearing the loss of their own intimate sphere, expose themselves “indecently.” Therefore, the philosopher ponders how the current panopticon of the society of productivity and consumerism “no longer has chains, fortifications, or closed spaces” but that “Google and other social networks like Facebook” have transformed into “digital panopticons of secret services,” due to one’s own willingness to expose oneself and not by coercion (156).



Before Han, the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard had already pointed to the total positivity of society in the new millennium through the phenomenon of the excess of exposure and through the change from “growth to ex-crescence,” or “from change to stasis.” In this sense, Baudrillard enumerates the “chain reaction of the ecstasies” and its accumulation: the hyperbole of the social in the masses, of the body in obesity, of the information in the simulation, of the time in the transitory, of the real in the hyper-real, of sex in pornography, and of violence in horror (52). This chaotic expansion of the hyper-exposed social, political, informational, economic, aesthetic, and sexual spheres—which infiltrate one another and disappear—is a product of the generalized use of digital technology. It generates an obscenity that, as a “saturation of an unlimited space,” constitutes the “contrapuntal figure” of the contemporary world (51). This hyper-saturated reality creates a state of “unconditional realization, of total positivity,” in which “community was liquidated and absorbed by communication” (Baudrillard 53). In *Topology of Violence*, Han calls this the “massification of the positive” because it “arises from the mass of the equal” (160).

In this sense, the broadcasting of the protagonist’s intimate images embodies this contemporary drift of hyper-communication, as a kind of parodic and virtual action that complements the aggression she suffered as a result of her virtual murder, the murder of her image. Ultimately, in the world of information “ek-stasis,” there is the “simulation,” which is “truer than the truth” (52). In Baudrillard’s understanding, “This low, exhausted form of primary events” illustrates the “context of a History in decline” (54–55). The impossibility of true action leads to a kind of “specific impotence” that characterizes not just our times but also the situation of the aggressive and resentful character, who is prevented from re-establishing a relationship with his ex-girlfriend.

In capitalist society, the value of exposure displays everything as goods to be consumed. In these terms, exposure “defiles Eros to convert him into pornography” (Han 27)—that is, de-ritualizes Eros and de-sacralizes him. In this progressive process of explicitness, the level of transparency of the world increases (Baudrillard 51). The result is the “agony of Eros,” the disappearance of the fantasy in relation to the other (Han 33).

The close link between pornography and virtuality comes from the parodic nature of excess, deformation, amplified exposure, dehumanization, and the de-realization of events. According to Baudrillard, “Today the function of the virtual is to proscribe the real” (56). In turn, the function of pornography is to pervert the atmosphere of seduction—which may culminate in the sexual act—and to proscribe, with its immediatism, the mystery and suspense of the process of falling in love. That is why, in *The Agony of Eros*, Han starts

the chapter on pornography with the following ponderations, which go on to Baudrillard:

As imagens pornô mostram a mera vida exposta. O pornô é o antípoda de Eros. Aniquila a sexualidade mesma. Sob este aspecto é, inclusive, mais eficaz que a moral: “A sexualidade não se desvanece na sublimação, na repressão e na moral. Desvanece-se com muito mais segurança no mais sexual que o sexo: o pornô.” (25)

(The porno images show mere life exposed. Porno is Eros’s antipode. It annihilates sexuality. It is also, in this aspect, more effective than morals: “Sexuality doesn’t fade with sublimation, repression, and morals. It most certainly fades in that which is more sexual than sex: porn.”)

In this sense, the novel’s clear stance, its feminist postulation, is deeply rooted in this process of pain the character endures in the publicizing of her intimacy, as well as in her reflections after watching the trials in Acre:

É claro que eles não nascem, assim, com desejo de matar mulheres. Alguns até nascem, os psicopatas. Mas os psicopatas são a elite dos assassinos. Já nascem prontos. A grande maioria operária de assassinos, digo, a maioria, tem que aprender o ódio, antes de sair matando por aí. Meu pai aprendeu muito bem. Nada mais fácil do que aprender a odiar as mulheres. O que não falta é professor. O pai ensina. O Estado ensina. O sistema legal ensina. O mercado ensina. A cultura ensina. A propaganda ensina. Mas quem melhor ensina, segundo Bia, minha colega de escritório, é a pornografia.

Esses matadores de mulheres, eu aprendi, tem um vocabulário próprio. Você tem que saber traduzir o que eles dizem quando eles dizem “eu te amo”. Quando eles dizem “eu te amo”, saiba: eles estão dizendo que você tem dono. Quando eles falam que sentem ciúmes, você tem que entender que eles estão falando de direito de uso de propriedade. Você é como o carro dele. O celular dele. A casa dele. O sapato dele. Ele é o senhor do

engenho. Você é a escrava. Ele é o fazendeiro. E você, o gado. Ele é o proprietário. E você, o produto. E seu casamento, seu namoro, seu vínculo são sua desgraça, sua condenação à morte. Quando ele pede desculpa, quando ele pede pra voltar, ele está avisando: sua contagem regressiva já começou. Então é bom você ser esperta. Fuja desse homem. Desapareça. Apague a mensagem. (Melo 88–89)

(It is clear that they are not born with the desire to kill women. Some may be, the psychopaths. But psychopaths are the elite of murderers. They are born ready. The vast majority of murderers, I mean, the majority, they have to learn hatred, before they start going around killing. My father learned all too well. Nothing easier than learning to hate women. There's no lack of teachers. The father teaches. The state teaches. The legal system teaches. The market teaches. Culture teaches. Advertising teaches. But the one who teaches the best, according to Bia, my office coworker, is pornography.)

These woman killers, I learned, have a vocabulary of their own. You have to know how to translate what they mean when they say, “I love you.” When they say, “I love you,” they mean: you have an owner. When they say they are jealous, you have to understand that they are talking about their right to own property. You are like his car. His cell phone. His house. His shoes. He is the landowner. You are the slave. He is the farmer. You are the cattle. He is the proprietor. You are the product. And your marriage, your relationship, your bond, are your disgrace, your death sentence. When he says he is sorry, when he asks you to return, he is saying: your countdown has begun. And you'd better be smart. Run away from this man. Disappear. Erase the message.)

In fact, the direct correlation between pornography and violence against women—or, in the words of the author, “pornografia como gatilho para a matança de mulheres” (30) (pornography as a trigger for killing women)—is one of the most important stances that the novel takes:

À tarde, no plenário, além de mim, só havia a mãe e irmã da Scarlath, a vítima, uma negra de 26 anos, para quem Fares, um borracheiro, emprestou

dez reais. O calvário de Scarlath começou no dia em que ela foi devolver o dinheiro na borracharia. . . . Nas paredes da oficina de Fares, havia vários calendários do ano em que ele matou Scarlath e de outros anos anteriores, com fotos de mulheres lindíssimas, nuas, mostrando os peitos . . . com a boca entreaberta, os dentes maravilhosos mordiscando os lábios perfeitos, o olhar convidativo, naquele clima de vem-me-comer, e Fares gostava de praticar tiro ao alvo usando aqueles calendários. (Melo 90)

(In the afternoon, in the plenary, beyond me, there were only the mother and sister of Scarlath, the victim, a 26-year-old black woman, to whom Fares, a tire fitter, lent ten Brazilian reais. Scarlath's calvary began the day she went to give back the money at the tire shop. . . . In the walls of Fares's garage, there were many calendars of the year that he killed Scarlath and of previous years, featuring beautiful naked, topless women . . . with semi-open mouths, glorious teeth nibbling their perfect lips, tempting glances, in that come-fuck-me kind of way, and Fares liked to practice target shooting using those calendars.)

On the other hand, as the narrator goes on about her friend Bia's theory regarding the distortions provoked by pornography, she emphasizes how to think about the contradictions and mythifications of capitalism:

Bia vinha estudando o assunto . . . Adorava explicar, de forma muito didática . . . que a pornografia foi criada “pelos mesmos caras que queimavam bruxas. Quando eles não puderam mais se divertir com bruxas e pirotecnias, eles inventaram uma outra forma de matar mulheres: a pornografia. Entendeu?” (Melo 92).

(Bia had been studying the subject . . . She loved to explain, in a very didactic way . . . that pornography was created “by the same men who burnt witches. When they could no longer have their fun with witches and pyrotechnics, they came up with another way to kill women: pornography. Got it?”)

In her beautiful book *Caliban and the Witch*, researcher Silvia Federici studies the bond between capitalism's primitive process of accumulation in the beginning of the Modern Age and the mass extermination of witches. In her analysis of more than five hundred years of exploration and inequality, Federici demonstrates the implication of the male dominance on the female body and its reproductive function. This domination reaches its ascension with the nuclear family, which constitutes "femininity" "as a work-function . . . under the cover of a biological destiny" (14). In this sense, Federici demonstrates how "the hierarchical categorization of the human faculties and the identification of women with a degraded concept of corporeal reality was historically fundamental for the consolidation of patriarchal power and . . . for the implementation of power techniques and relations." That is why she argues "the history of women is the history of classes" (31–32) and "the body is for women what the factory is to salaried working men: the main terrain of its exploration and resistance" (34).

In *Mulheres empilhadas*, the frontier of the female body is disrespected by physical and symbolical aggressions as well as by mass extermination, as demonstrated by the narrator's investigation of femicides. So, finally, the reader encounters a fiction that is filled with real ghosts:

Foi Alceu quem matou Eudineia & Heroilson matou Iza & Wendeson matou Regina & Marcelo matou Soraia & Ermício matou Silvana & Creso matou Chirley & mais ainda, Degmar foi morta por Ádila & Ketlen foi morta por Henrique & Rusyleid foi morta por Tadeu & Juciele foi morta por Itaan & Queila foi morta por Roni & Jaqueline foi morta por Sinval & Daniela foi morta por Adalberto & Raelé foi morta por Geraldo, e todos esses crimes, que aconteceram havia sete, dez, doze anos, não demoraram sequer três horas, cada um, para ser julgados. (Melo 71)

(It was Alceu who killed Eudineia & Heroilson killed Iza & Wenderson killed Regina & Marcelo killed Soraia & Ermício killed Silvana & Creso killed Chirley & furthermore, Degmar was killed by Ádila & Ketlen was killed by Henrique & Rusyleid was killed by Tadeu & Juciele was killed by Itaan & Queila was killed by Roni & Jaqueline was killed by Sinval & Daniela was killed by Adalberto & Raelé was killed by Geraldo, and all these crimes, which had happened seven, ten, twelve years ago, did not even take three hours each to be judged.)

The character's suffering because of the virtual murder merits a reflection on the nature of the evil that was inflicted on her. In a way, this creates the opportunity to bring her even closer to the Ch'aska village, where her boyfriend Marcos's mother was born, and also to Zapira, the community's shaman:

A morte virtual, de certa forma, é mais perversa que a morte real. É você, cadáver, que tem que lidar com a borra da sua vida extinta. É você que tem que lidar com o processo burocrático. E eu não conseguia me mexer. Então Marcos me arrancou da cama, me enfiou no carro, “porra, princesa, vamos pintar o seu corpo”, disse, me contando no caminho como foi a primeira vez que pintaram o corpo dele, “você só entende o que é fazer parte do planeta quando tem seu corpo pintado.” (Melo 163)

(Virtual death is, in a way, more cruel than real death. It is you, as a corpse, who has to deal with the remains of your extinct life. It is you who has to deal with the bureaucratic process, and I couldn't move. So, Marcos took me out of bed and into the car, “fuck, let's paint that body, princess,” he said, telling me about the first time he had his body painted, “you can only understand what it is to be part of the planet when you have your body painted.”)

As it was, the character's retaliation after her public humiliation was also virtual. She decides to transform her journal of the accounts of femicides into “*mulheresempilhadas.com*, uma página pública online, com uma descrição dos fatos” (*mulheresempilhadas.com*, an online public page, with a description of facts) and into an exhibition of the film that Amir had released online. “Eu usaria o vírus do Amir para me inocular da doença do Amir. Minha página seria um ataque primoroso, uma guerra exemplar, um modelo de assassinato virtual de ex-namorado, um projeto que eu não estragaria de jeito nenhum” (Melo 88–89) (I would use Amir's virus to inoculate myself from Amir's disease. My page would be an exquisite attack, an exemplar war, a model for ex-boyfriend virtual murders, a project that I would in no way ruin).

The counterpart to the traumatic virtual aggression that the protagonist experiences is precisely the culture of the forest, with its magic smells and sounds, where she comes into contact with the Native inhabitants and where their rituals take place. Having tried Santo Daime, the cipó ritual, and having finally painted her body, as well as having come into contact with the myths

and stories of indigenous resistance to their decimation, the heroine is reborn. She “vomita a morte” (vomits the death) of her mother and finds the strength to “começar uma guerra” (start a war) against the ex-boyfriend (Melo 75, 166).

In the words of Marcos, the boyfriend from Acre, the magic of the forest comes to materialize a new physical reality:

“Não temos minério, nem pedra, somos uma realidade vegetal no quarto estado da matéria. Temos o sólido, o líquido, o gasoso e o Acre”. Nos meus passeios cheguei à conclusão de que o quarto estado da matéria era a mistura do sólido vegetal com gasoso vegetal. Você sente o ar como se ele fosse pastoso, ligeiramente sólido, uma massa compacta de oxigênio, muito densa para ser considerada gasosa, com perfume de musgo, de terra, de flor, de mato, de estrume, de pimenta, de madeira podre, de bicho, de brisa, cujo frescor eu jamais havia experimentado, e que permanece na sua boca por horas, como quando bebemos bom vinho. (Melo 79)

(“We have neither minerals nor stones; we are a vegetable reality in the fourth state of matter. We have solid, liquid, gas and Acre.” In my wanderings I came to the conclusion that the fourth state of matter was the mixture of vegetable solid and vegetable gas. You feel air as if it were pasty, almost solid, a compact mass of oxygen, too dense to be considered gas, with the perfume of moss, of earth, of flowers, of grass, of manure, of pepper, of rotten wood, of animal, of breeze, that oozes a freshness that I had never experienced, and that remains in your mouth for hours, like when we drink good wine.)

On the other hand, the hardships of the climate are also merciless. The rain, “um trailer do fim do mundo” (a trailer for the end of the world) and the relentless sun produce a “calor de estufa, pegajoso e fumeguento” (58–61) (greenhouse warmth, sticky and steamy).

However, if the woods may be welcoming and refreshing, the Native people of the forest are not respected nor are their lives valued even minimally. Regarding Txupira, the Native woman who was murdered by three men of the Cruzeiro do Sul elite, the narrator declares: “A vida dos indígenas, no nosso sistema de castas, tem o mesmo valor que a vida dos loucos em hospícios ou

das crianças que ficam paradas em semáforos pedindo esmola. Estamos cagando para os nossos índios” (Melo 166) (The life of the natives, in our caste system, has the same value as that of madmen in a psychiatric hospital or of children who beg for money at traffic lights. We don’t give a damn about our natives).

The decadence of the Kurotawa ethnic group, of which the girl who was murdered was a member, is described in pungent terms by the narrator:

—Se vierem, nós lutamos— disse o pajé ao tomar ciência do que ocorria. Olhei os indígenas ali, ao redor do cacique, de pé, encostados nas árvores, tão destituídos, os braços cruzados, as mãos presas sob as axilas, acorados, sentados no terreiro, absortos, mortificados pelo calor, cercados de escombros, de plástico, de lixo, de lata. Não conseguia imaginá-los resistindo. Pareciam vítimas resignadas, vacas seguindo o curso do mata-douro. Moscas zumbiam ao nosso redor. (Melo 182)

(“If they come, we fight,” said the pajé as he became aware of what happened. I looked at the natives there, around the cacique, standing, leaning on trees, so destitute, crossed-armed, hands under the armpits, squatting, sitting on the ground, deep in thought, mortified by the heat, surrounded by rubbish, plastic, garbage, tin. I could not imagine them resisting. They looked like resigned victims, cows on their course to the slaughterhouse. Flies buzzed around us.)

In that regard, the novel’s documentary-like approach, amalgamated with fiction ingredients, invites the reader to confront elements of Brazilian social life and the problems of the Amazon region with a kind of creative hybridity, at once harmonic and coherent. This permeability between history and fiction is radically spread throughout the novel, as the femicides and its many trials—“vinte e oito julgamentos, dezenove condenações, oito absolvições e uma anulação de julgamento por contaminação do júri (104) (twenty-eight trials, nineteen condemnations, eight absolutions and one annulment for jury tampering)—were accompanied by the novel’s highly credible narrator.

Aristotle observes that, by differentiating between fiction and history, the poet is concerned with what would possibly or probably happen; meanwhile, the historian should only be concerned with what actually happened in the past. In turn, contemporary historiographic metafiction openly states that



“there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others’ truths” (Hutcheon 109). So, the correlation of the historiographic with the metafictional does not just accept the “claims of . . . ‘authentic’ representation” and “inauthentic copy”; moreover, it mistrusts the celebration of “artistic originality” as well as the “transparency of historical referentiality” (Hutcheon 110).

According to Paul Veyne, history can be seen as a true novel, because both genres share the same conventions: “selection, organization, diegesis, anecdote, temporal pacing, and emplotment” (qtd. in Hutcheon 111). In this sense, as Hutcheon argues, historiographic metafiction considers the opposition between history and fiction and blurs their line of separation (152). The fact that the novel is constituted as a first-person narrative materializes the “textualized accessibility” (114) of the absorption of the factual data of the murders and the theories about the learning of hate between men and women (105).

In this regard, *Mulheres empilhadas* constitutes a novel that, although fictional, is based on documentary-like narratives and the use of an argument about a real problem in contemporary Brazilian society: gender-based violence. The news of femicide is made poetic as it is presented through short, concise, sharp, and dry language. The feminist brutalism of the text follows both the narratives of the real cases and the accounts of the narrator’s convoluted adventures in Acre to attend the trials. The sequences numbered by the letters of the Greek alphabet contain the lyrical counterpart to the brutalist plot, the narrator’s learning and moral and existential growth amidst the “beleza viva, pulsante” (Melo 234) (lively, pulsating beauty) of the woods and the villagers’ rituals.

Certainly, beyond violence against women, the other major theme in the book is the struggle of the Native villagers against their own extermination and against the combined aggressions and attacks from the so-called “civilized” society:

Resistir ao descaso do governo, às queimadas criminosas, às investidas das madeiras ilegais e do agronegócio são tarefas diárias e extenuantes do povo da onça, do sol, da pupunha, do buriti, do sapo, e de tantos outros da Amazônia que há séculos vivem em perigo de extinção. No entanto, era raro eu abrir os olhos e não ter alguém ao meu lado. Diariamente os homens me traziam peixes. As mulheres cozinhavam para mim, me preparavam chás, velavam minha agonia. (196–97)

(Resisting the neglect of the government, the arson, the attacks of the illegal lumber companies and the agribusiness are daily, exhausting duties of the people of the jaguar, the sun, the pupunha, the buriti, the frog, and of so many others native of the Amazon who have run the risk of extinction for centuries. However, it was rare for me to open my eyes and not to have someone by my side. The men brought me fish daily. The women cooked for me, made me tea, watched over my agony.)

This frank, documentary-like approach to the Amazon region's grave problems spreads to comments about the country. These comments are attributed to one character, a forensics expert in charge of the investigation of one of the femicides:

Brasileiro é assim: acha que sabe tudo. Brasileiro é técnico de futebol, é médico, é comentarista político, é dono da verdade, e quer resolver tudo na carteirada. Brasileiro não aceita regras. Não respeita sinal. Na hora de pedir *impeachment* é o primeiro a levantar a mão. Fora corrupto! Mas depois vai estacionar na fila do deficiente. Depois vai furar fila de supermercado. Vai burlar o fisco. Vai ultrapassar pela direita. Vai fumar maconha. Brasileiro é muito escroto. E os coitados dos meus amigos têm que atender o telefonema do deputado que diz: “Vai chegar um corpo aí, amigão, por favor, me passa esse cadáver ilustre na frente dos outros. E sem necropsia”. Assim é o brasileiro. Você tem que explicar: deputado, crime por morte violenta, crime por morte suspeita tem que ter necropsia. O senhor não assina laudo, não é verdade? Então deixa eu fazer o meu trabalho em paz. (Melo 152–53)

(Brazilians are like that: they think they know it all. They are soccer coaches, doctors, political commentators, they know what is true and they want to get things done by pulling rank. Brazilians do not accept rules. Or respect traffic lights. When it's time to ask for an impeachment, they're the first ones to raise their hands. Out with the corrupt! But then, they park in spaces reserved for the disabled. And after that, they cut in line at the supermarket. They evade taxes, pass on the right, smoke marijuana. Brazilians are assholes. And my poor friends who have to take the call from the congressperson who says, “a body is coming up, buddy, please, make

this illustrious body a priority. No necropsy.” That is the way Brazilians are. You have to explain: Hey congressman, a suspicious crime resulting in violent death must have a necropsy. You don’t sign those reports, do you? So, just let me do my job, please.)

During the protagonist’s process of growth, amidst the difficult context of contemporary Brazil, the plot functions as a sort of *Bildungsroman*. According to Annis Pratt, the novel’s *Bildung* refers to the emotional, psychological, and intellectual development of the female narrator–protagonist, which, in a sense, goes beyond the traditional idea of the genre. Many theorists argue that, in the adult age, “the social integration of the woman traditionally excludes any chance of self-integration and accomplishment” in traditional novels. Therefore, Pratt proposes the existence of another classification, which she names the “novel of rebirth and transformation” (qtd. in Pinto 15; my translation) and designates to this genre a type of heroine who “is willing to let go of a sense of ‘social integration’ to be able to reach something more valuable and satisfactory: the integration of the I” (qtd. in Pinto 16; my translation).

*Mulheres empilhadas* constitutes *écriture féminine* because it revolves around the broad “reflection on the condition of the woman and is concerned with situating her, in registering her presence in reality as a Subject and not as the object of another (of the Other)” (Pinto 20). In her book about the female *Bildungsroman*, Pinto takes note of the fact that this concept of *écriture féminine*, which comes from French criticism, may designate a literature “made by both women and men” (20). This concept, she observes, elaborates a type of discourse that does not exclude the “male,” in that it illuminates the female injunction and looks to subvert the traditional expectations in relation to the behavior of women.

Thus, through the rupture of limitations and the search for her own destiny, self-affirmation, and independence from male domination, the protagonist adopts a combative point of view aided both by the law firm in which she works and, above all, by the positivity of the woods. In that way, the novel also has a profound ecological message. It highlights the beauty and the strength of the Amazon as well as the fragility of, the difficulty faced by, and resistance of its Native inhabitants.

The violence of the law is the civilized force of the will for justice, whereas the forest composes its counterpart as the ancestral nature and the appreciation of its resources and original Native traditions. Yet, the character’s femininity, which is initially placed in a brutal situation with her ex-boyfriend, is well marked and not just by its marginal situation or nonconformist and subversive stance. Freud thinks of femininity as the “source of a psychic experience marked by horror”; it bonds concept to adventure, to enigma, to

the “non-control over things,” and to a sense of helplessness “that marks the difference of a subject in relation to any other” (Birman 10–11). According to Birman, “femininity tragically condenses in its figure the problematic of sexuality in psychoanalysis” because “it’s the crucial way of being of the subject, for without anchoring in the mirages of phallic completeness . . . fragility and human incompleteness are the primordial forms of being of the subject” (53). The surpassing of the phallic logic decisively marks the trajectory of the narrator on her way to an awareness of her past trauma and to her recovery from her ex-boyfriend’s abusive attacks. So, in the protagonist’s final scene at the party, after meeting Amir’s new girlfriend in the bathroom and revealing her history of violence with him, there comes, both suddenly and intensely, the will to dance.

In *Cartografias do feminino*, Birman signals the crucial difference between hysteria and hystericization, acknowledging that the latter “implies, for the subject, the setting in motion of a sterilized and frozen will that lies within the being of hysteria.” That way, “in hystericization eroticism is not just placed in the inaugural scene of a subject’s existence, but also assumed in the ritual *mise-en-scène* of one’s acts” (95–96). Because the appreciation of “erogenous mobility” and “inventive potentiality” mark this “clinical figure,” the greatest performance will be that of Carmen, the mythical character who, through the “flare of her unceremonious desire and the moving sculpture of her fragile body,” radically manifests “the essential shattering of her being and its incompleteness” (Birman 99). In *Mulheres empilhadas*, through the sudden will to dance and in her recognition of her helplessness toward that desire, the protagonist–narrator can definitively reclaim “the femininity of eroticism” and cross the “frontier of phallicness” (Birman 100):

Lá fora, Paul começava os primeiros acordes de “In spite of all the danger”.

Me lancei na multidão em direção aos meus amigos, sentindo o meu coração pulsar como se fosse o baixo da banda.

De repente, me bateu uma vontade irresistível de cair na pista e dançar adoidado. (Melo 236)

(Outside, Paul started with the first accords of “In spite of all the danger.”)

I threw myself among people towards my friends, feeling my heartbeat as if it were the band's bass.

And suddenly, an irresistible will to get on the dance floor and go crazy came over me.)

## Notes

1. All translations into English are my own.

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