

Barbara Kingsolver's Short Story "Homeland"

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In a 1993 interview with Donna Perry, Barbara Kingsolver unravels her long-lasting obsession with her Cherokee great-grandmother – the figure behind Gloria's great-grandmother in Kingsolver's eponymous short story "Homeland," which partly seeks to do justice to the writer's ancestor. Kingsolver recalls, "My Cherokee great-grandmother was quite deliberately left out of the family history for reasons of racism and embarrassment about mixed blood" (Perry, 148). Fascinated with her ancestor, Kingsolver wrote a poem about her¹ as well as the short story at hand. Such commitment turned out to be no easy task however, as Barbara Kingsolver relentlessly struggled to find the exact right tone and voice for her story, which she confesses to having rewritten every year for fifteen years. She remembers how "there was still something badly wrong with it." She explains that "the big problem was that it was too autobiographical." She realized her story should be "more distant," "more legendary in tone":

So I went to the library and read nothing but Cherokee legends for about three or four days, from morning till night, till I got a rhythm and a tone of voice in my mind. Then I went back and wrote the sentence, "My great-grandmother belonged to the Bird-Clan." And I kept that high note all through the story, as far as I could (Perry, 158).

The resulting story, in Russell Banks' words, is "pure poetry." In his eyes, "because the quality of the language is so exquisite, no synopsis can do it justice."

¹ "I have guarded my name as people / in other times kept their own clipped hair, / believing the soul could be scattered / if they were careless. / I knew my first ancestor. / His legend. [... He] stole a horse, / rode over the mountains to marry / a leaf-eyed Cherokee. / The theft was forgiven but never the Indian blood. / He lost his family's name / and invented mine, gave it fruit and seeds. / I never knew the grandmother." "Naming Myself" in *Another America/Otra América*. 1992. Seattle: Seal Press, 1998: 61.

The homodiegetic narrator, Gloria Saint Clair, tells the story of her great-grandmother, Grean Leaf, and reminisces over the teachings she has received from the latter. The narrative is divided into four parts, each headed by Roman numbers. In Part I, the narrator gives a historical account of her great-grandmother's Cherokee clan and of their resistance to the removal orchestrated by General Winfield Scott. The language and tone, however, tend to give a poetical and legendary quality to Gloria's account of historical facts, thus setting the narrative in between fiction and actual history. Part II focuses on the privileged relationship between Gloria as a child and her great grandmother, while deepening the illusion of truth grounded in the first-person narrator. Her singled out voice and irony lend much verisimilitude to the memories she relates of chosen episodes and dialogues, as told from the young protagonist's point of view, and involving both her parents and her two brothers as well. Dramatic irony and cross-characterization are activated mostly in the crucial episode where the family undertake a trip to Green Leaf's homeland, but where the journey is aborted because of the take-over of the land by the tourist industry. Part III comes as a short diptych with, first, the faithful rendering of the Cherokee creation myth of the Waterbug, followed by a dialogue between Gloria and Green Leaf as the child tries to make sense of conflicting stories of Genesis. Finally, part four ends with Green Leaf's burial, thus completing the portrait of Gloria's ancestor. Nevertheless, the structure of the story combines with heteroglossia and prose poetry so that, in the end, "Homeland" is not so much about the great grandmother's character as it is about story telling itself.

The short story seems to prompt the reader to analyze the multicultural interweaving of fiction, history and myth which metaphorically points to literature as a territory for reclaiming one's sense of self, one's cultural identity, history, and spirituality. I will first argue that Gloria's voice serves to deconstruct the noxious myths embroidered about American Indian identity. Then, I will show how Gloria, as a narrator, replaces such forgeries

by telling the tales she has heard in her childhood and that she has in fact inherited her Cherokee great-grandmother's role of story teller. Finally, I will focus on how Gloria's written narrative glorifies a strategy of survival through story telling.

Deconstructing Noxious Myths about American Indian Identity.

Located between the Judeo-Christian, White American values of her mother and those she discovers through her relationship with her Cherokee relative, the protagonist of "Homeland" represents the problematical sense of schism typical of biculturalism. Through suggestive characterization, Gloria's mother embodies racist prejudice against American Indians: "My father [...] had thick black hair, no beard stubble at all nor hair on his chest, and a nose he called his Cherokee nose. Mother said she thanked the Lord that at least He had seen fit not to put **that** nose on her children." [emphasis mine] (10) Moreover, the mother's rejection of her husband and children's Indian blood finds support in their school and TV programs, which are implicitly held responsible for serving as vehicles for false representations and damaging stereotypes: "According to Papa we all looked like little Indians, I especially. Mother hounded me continually to stay out of the sun, but by each summer's end I was so dark-skinned my school mates teased me, saying I ought to be sent over to the Negro school." (14) On becoming aware of the phoniness of so-called "genuine Cherokees" (17) performing mock dances so as to allure tourists, the narrator confesses, "They looked like Indians to me. I couldn't imagine Indians without feathers." (18) Accordingly, she seems confused, as a child, by her great-grandmother's ordinary dress, and comments: "To look at her, you wouldn't have thought her an Indian." (4) The educational system is furthermore blamed for teaching history in a perfidious, hateful way, all the more pervasive since children integrate these roles by dint of re-enactment in supposedly playful, innocent games: "My brothers were playing a ferocious game of cowboys and Indians [...]" (11) "[Nathan] pretended at great length to scalp me with his tomahawk, until the rubber head

came loose from its painted stick and fell with a clunk.” (19) The deriding irony here at play obliquely strips bare the void in the racist caricatures which the children are fed by mainstream culture.

Incidentally, the family undertakes a trip to their ancestor’s homeland, only to find it has been totally plundered by American Capitalism. The territory itself has been redrawn, as ironically shown in the Texaco map tracing recent highways and state lines, and thus redesigning the configuration of the land by the modern standards of the United States’ supremacy: “The Hiwassee Valley’s got a town in it now, it says ‘Cherokee.’ Right here.” (8) Implicitly, Green Leaf’s reaction to the modern, Texaco map of her home place points to the absurdity of the new lines invented to redesign the United States territory:

“Great Mam looked down at the colored lines and squinted [...]. “Is this the Hiwassee river?” she wanted to know.
“No, now those lines are highways,” [Papa] said. [...]
“Well, what’s this?”
He looked. “That’s the state line.”
“Now why would they put that on the map? You can’t see it.” (8)

On reaching the entirely fabricated town, it turns out everything is mere simulacrum conceived to attract tourist dollars, selling cheap clichés of Cherokee culture.

There were **more signs** after that, with **pictures of cartoon Indian boys urging us to buy** souvenirs or stay in so-and so’s motor lodge. The **signs were shaped like** log cabins and teepees. Then we saw a **real** teepee. It was **made of aluminum** and taller than a house. Inside, **it was a souvenir store.** (Underlining mine, 17)

Kingsolver’s sarcastic irony reaches a climax with the sham dance performed by the clownish Indian couple, unscrupulously claiming their genuineness. Their public performance betrays the fraud of those so-called “genuine Cherokees” (sic [17]), showing how most tourists get swindled by “Chief Many feathers” and his wife (17). For they take picture shots of the couple without even questioning the patchwork of clichés offered by their mock outfits and “welcoming dance”:

A man in a feather war bonnet danced across from us in the parking lot. His outfit was bright orange, with white fringe trembling along the seams of the pants and sleeves, and a woman in the same clothes sat cross-legged on the pavement playing a tom-tom while he danced. (17)

The ridicule of the scene reaches a climax as the woman's tom-tom is perverted and turned into a money-collector, "Chief many Feathers hopped around his circle, forward on one leg and backward on the other. Then the dance was over. The woman beating the tom-tom turned it upside down and passed it around for money." (18) Great Mam summarizes the shameful usurpation of Cherokee identity and rituals when she tells Gloria, " 'I don't know what they think they're doing. Cherokee don't wear feather bonnets like that,' " and dryly concludes, " 'I've never been here before.' " (18)

The trip ends when the family goes to "Cherokee Park" for a picnic. Pathetically, the natural landscape Green Leaf knew in her childhood has been soiled even on this patch of ground called "park," which might let one expect some kind of sanctuary for wild life: "Sycamore trees grew at the water's edge, with colorful, waterlogged trash floating in circles in the eddies around their roots." (18) The gaudy-colored waste thus becomes an icon of U.S. consumer society, trashing the Cherokee's natural and cultural patrimony ("their roots"), in contrast with the way the Cherokee relate to Nature:

Those few who escaped [General Winfield Scott's] notice moved like wildcat families through the Carolina mountains, leaving the ferns unbroken where they passed, eating wild grapes and chestnuts, drinking when they found streams. [...] And] in autumn they went down to the streams where the sycamore trees had let their year's work fall, the water steeped brown as leaf tea [...] (1)

The system of echoes in the narrative thus offers a negative picture of the same landscape, now spoiled by American Capitalism.

The symbolic value of the park is made worse by the pathetic old buffalo exhibited in a pen: "One of its eyes was put out. [...] There were flies all over it and shiny bald patches on its back, which Papa said were caused by the mange." (18-19) To the reader familiar with Indian tradition, the park episode draws on the symbol of the buffalo, whose central role among Indian tribes as integral part of their food is epitomized by the Blackfoot legend. When told, the legend used to help transcend the sacrifice of buffalo life, by encouraging belief in the resurrection of those animals which offered themselves up to feed the otherwise starving

people.² The sight of the old buffalo in Kingsolver's story is all the more depressing because it has lost all magnificence. Instead, it has become the pitiful "park's principal attraction [...] identified by a sign as the Last Remaining Buffalo East of the Mississippi."³ (18) Caged, sick, and one-eyed, the disempowered buffalo turns from a symbol of survival and redemption into a tragic symbol of extinction, thus metonymically representative of the Indian genocide. As a result, Green Leaf can return to her homeland only if the term 'homeland' is to be understood in its South African acceptance, where it is simply a euphemism for 'reservation' for Native Africans.

The defacement of Cherokee territory furthermore questions the location of one's sense of belonging, as Great Mam's true homeland has been erased from the America remapped by US economics and politics. Kingsolver's story suggests that, consequently, a more abstract, cultural territory must be dug out as a substitute for the physical one – a reclaiming which can be achieved by means of the underground spreading of memory. The fruit-and-stone image describing Cherokee survival in the opening suggests that the fertile soil of literature shall allow the ancestors' quintessence to grow again and bear fruits for the generations to come, "They called their refugee years The Time When We Were Not, and they were forgiven, because they had carried the truth of themselves in a sheltered place inside the flesh, exactly the way a fruit that has gone soft still carries inside itself the clean, hard stone of its future." (2) Significantly, Gloria's name echoes the town of Morning Glory, metonymically described in terms underlining the parallel between Cherokee resistance against so-called 'civilization,' and the ongoing reclaiming of the earth by Nature:

² Campbell, Joseph, *Myths to Live By*. 1972. New York: Penguin Arkana, 1993: 38-43.

³ As Barbara Kingsolver first wrote the earliest version of her story, she had entitled it, "The Last Remaining Buffalo East of the Mississippi." (Perry, 158) She would later change the title to "The Waterbug's Children," which her publisher then made her give up on, for fear that the collection of stories would not sell with such an obscure title: "The title 'Homeland' I really don't like. It's the only title of all my books that I didn't choose. The title *story* I chose. I mean that story that's called "Homeland" in this collection is the one I wanted to be the title story, but when I wrote it, I called it "The Waterbug's Children" which is disturbing. I mean it's a Kingsolver title. [...] But I was a new author at the time, I didn't have any power and when I submitted the manuscript they

We lived in Morning Glory, a coal town hacked with sharp blades out of a forest that threatened always to take it back. The hickories encroached on the town, springing up unbidden in the middle of dog pens and front yards and the cemetery. The creeping vines for which the town was named drew themselves along wire fences and up the sides of houses with the persistence of the displaced. (2)

Implicitly, the Cherokee compare with Nature itself in their capacity to thrive and peacefully fight back against encroachment. "Homeland" thus breeds faith in the resilience of oral cultures, possessing the power to endure, in spite of the removal and so-called 'domestication' carried out by a more modern civilization, which is represented here via metonymy by the dog pens, front yards, cemetery, wire fences, and by the houses.

Finally, the impossible return to the land of the past triggers a new, corrective awareness on the part of the child character: "We parked in front of Sitting Bull's genuine Indian Made Souvenirs [...]. I had a sense of something gone badly wrong, like a lie told in my past and then forgotten, and now about to catch up with me." (17) As evidenced by her progression from "narrated I" to "narrating I," Gloria's character inherits the story-telling role so as to ensure faithful preservation of the past.

Inheriting the Role of Story-Teller

Destroying the myth of authenticity conferred on written data, Gloria's voice reveals how writing has often been the tool for setting lies in stone. The legitimacy of written history is humoristically debunked by the devious proceedings involved in Great Mam's death:

...her true name was Green Leaf, although there is no earthly record of this. The gravesite is marked Ruth. Mother felt we ought to bury her under her Christian name in the hope that God in His infinite mercy would forget about the heathen marriage and stolen horses and call her home. It is likely, however, that He might have passed over the headstone altogether in his search for her, since virtually all the information written there is counterfeit.(4)

She is thus re-christened with a name and by a god that mean nothing to her. Gloria's narrative thereby rehabilitates the truth while casting light on how simple it is to distort facts and dispossess one of her very identity and beliefs. Throughout the story, the mother's obsessions with cleanliness and godliness are associated with hypocrisy. Her pejorative view

said 'Pfff! This won't work! People hate bugs and they don't like children. So you just have to make a new title,' and they sort of suggested to call this 'Homeland.'" (Meillon, 365)

of dark skin is ironically counterbalanced by the bland description Gloria gives of her: “The primary business of Mother’s life was scrubbing things, and she herself looked scrubbed. Her face was the color of a clean boiled potato.” (10-11) In contrast with the Cherokee, compared earlier with fruits enclosing the “clean, hard stone of their future,” the mother is assimilated to a – stoneless – potato, which may imply her substantial inner void – her nothingness to carry into the future. Far from adopting a simplistic equation between men and abusive, white patriarchy, the story subtly shows how some women – and even some of the Indians themselves – participate in the victimization and exploitation of certain ethnic groups. Hence the contrast between the positive portrait of her father, whom Gloria affectionately calls “Papa,” and her forbidding, authoritative mother referred to as “Mother” throughout:

[Mother] exercised over all matters a form of reverse censorship: she spoke loudly and often of events of which she disapproved, and rarely of those that might have been ordinary or redemptive. She told us, for instance, that Great-Grandfather Murray brought Great Mam from her tribal home in the Hiwassee Valley to live in Kentucky, without Christian sanction, as his common-law-wife. According to Mother, he accomplished all this on a stolen horse.”(3)

Gloria thus sets about clearing the cultural landscape handed down to her: “My knowledge of her life follows an oddly obscured pattern, like a mountain road where much of the scenery is blocked by high laurel bushes, not because they were planted there, but because no one thought to cut them down.” (3) In so doing, she inherits her great-grandmother’s role as “one of the Bird Clan’s Beloved Women.” The name of the clan draws from the bird as a symbol of liberty and transcendence, while the title of Beloved Woman designates the person in charge of “keeping tracks of things,” in other words, of passing on the stories to the next generations (3). Great Mam insists on the necessity of remembering, and thus entrusts Gloria with the Cherokee’s true patrimony. Great Mam’s repetitive injunction, “Remember that,” becomes a kind of leitmotiv underlining Gloria’s essential mission of story telling: “ ‘You will have children. And you will remember about the flowers,’ she said, and I felt the weight of these promises fall like a deerskin pack between my shoulder blades.” (12) The comparison here echoes Gloria’s ancestors’ struggle for freedom and survival while peacefully resisting

capture by General Winfield Scott, “When the people’s hearts could not bear any more, they laid their deerskin packs on the ground and settled again.” (1) Similarly, Gloria’s laying down of words sets the foundations for the rebuilding of community.

Indeed, her narrative recuperates the oral tradition, thus handing down the pastoral, Indian vision of the natural world as a sacred hoop of interrelated beings, all of equal value. As non-Indian readers, we therein benefit from a perspective different from that of mainstream culture. We learn, for instance, of flowers perceived as our living cousins, and which therefore should not be picked for our pleasure, of animals as relatives whose lives should be taken only when needed for survival, of the legendary star people walking invisible among us and always by our side, and how smoking a pipe stands as a thanks-giving ritual to the “Beloved Old Father who gave us tobacco.”(4) As Paula Gunn Allen explains, tobacco “is used to evoke spirits as well as a sense of well-being and clear-headedness.” Quite significantly, “its property is clear thought” (Allen, 24), which coincides with Green Leaf’s pipe smoking during her story telling rituals with Gloria, through which the child benefits from her ancestor’s greater lucidity. Finally, we learn of the Cherokee creation story about the waterbug discovering the earth.

In redeeming the beauty inherent to the oral tradition, the bicultural narrative moreover underlines its superiority in terms of respect for life – a recurring feature in Kingsolver’s ecologically-minded and often mystical writings. Besides, Kingsolver’s implicit ideological struggle for multicultural tolerance is revealed in her choice of ‘Ruth’ as Green Leaf’s Christian name, which ironically backlashes against the flat character of the mother. Significantly, the short Book of Ruth tells the story of family loyalty, and it is one of the first books in the Bible to claim that the Lord’s concern extends to people of every nation of the world, thus calling for universal, ethnic tolerance.

Mostly, Gloria's retelling of her ancestor's stories symbolically repeats the waterbug's gesture, after which Gloria earns the nickname of 'Waterbug.' According to the myth, the waterbug volunteers to dive under the surface of unknown waters. It brings back a tiny ball of mud that eventually grows before the star people's eyes to be populated by "all the voices and life that now dwell on this island that is the earth." (20) Analogically, the implicit author's reappropriation in writing pins down the Cherokee stories, forever hung in the sky of story telling by her four-part narrative, just as "[the] star people fastened [the earth] to the sky with four long grape vines so it wouldn't be lost again."(20)

Glorifying a Strategy of Survival through Story Telling

The dialogues between Great Mam and Gloria help reconcile philosophies and myths originally perceived as antagonistic. When Gloria is at pains to integrate both Genesis and The Waterbug creation story, Great Mam's discourse provides a syncretic solution allowing for a new harmony – and congruence – between the two cultures: “ ‘But if that's how the world started, then what about Adam and Eve?’/ She thought about that. ‘They were the waterbug's children,’ she said. ‘Adam and Eve and the others.’ ” (20) Previously to editorial revision, the eponymous short story was to be called “The Waterbug's Children,” instead of “Homeland.” This enigmatic, original title obliquely pointed to the cross-cultural lineage of all symbols and myths as traceable through a diachronic study of the recurrence and remanence of universal archetypes. Great Mam, it turns out, is but a postmodernist persona for the Great Mother Earth, or the Great Goddess found in legion myths, and she often reappears in Kingsolver's stories under a variety of masks. She also reads as an ironical, feminine version of the modern myths of Superman – as indicated by her nickname of Great Mam – and Spiderman – the latter which himself descends from mythical figures such as Spider Woman, or Thought Woman, in American Indian mythology, or from Ananzi the Spider in Ashanti legends. Interestingly, Ananzi the Spider explicitly appears in Kingsolver's

story “Jump-Up Day,” in the same collection. Moreover, Ananzi the Spider reads as a double for the Cherokee waterbug, in that, according to the story, it is he who first brought the Gods’ stories to the earth. By referring to such avatars of the Great Goddess of Creation, “Homeland” draws attention to the artifice of myth and brings to the front the primary status of creation stories as, first and foremost, *created* stories. Additionally, it highlights the short story’s potential for mythopoeia, welcoming cosmogonies as well as – in their metatextual dimension – mythogonies (i.e. stories about the creation of myths).

Besides, the text plays with onomastics so as to point to the final victory won by Great Mam in spite of her death. Faithful to her name, Gloria St Clair indeed succeeds in clearing and glorifying her cultural heritage. With her healing narrative, she thus takes part in the recuperating struggle of the displaced, in concord with the Morning Glory vines: “ Even the earth underneath us sometimes moves to repossess its losses: the long deep shafts that men opened to rob the coal veins would close themselves up again, as quietly as flesh wounds.” (2) The poetic ending indeed redeems Indian lore, while bringing into the light the transcending power of literature: “As soon as we turned our backs, the small people would come dancing and pick up the flowers [from Great Mam’s grave]. They would kick over the jar and run through the forest, swinging the hollow stems above their heads, scattering them like bones.” (21-22) The repetition of the modal “would” – here used in its epistemic value and bearing a narrative preterit – gives these closing sentences a proleptic value, while the final simile (“scattering them like bones”) analeptically refers to the beginning of the story and to the “scattered-bone time” of the Bird Clan’s “refugee years.” (1) In a brighter light of hope, however, the image now points beyond suffering and death, in that it implicitly conveys sound belief in the eternal power of regeneration contained in Nature. In a manner reminiscent of Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings⁴, all forms of organic life are indeed brought together in an

⁴ Many of Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings bring together animal bones and flowers, as in “Cow’s Skull with Calico Roses” for instance, painted in 1932 and exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago, or in “Summer Days”

oxymoronic reunion of life and death, of human, animal and vegetal, all feeding on the same metaphor for universal rebirth. Great Mam, her ancestors and their stories then compare with fruits and flowers: “ ‘[Flowers] ought to be left where they stand [...], for the small people to see. When they die they’ll fall where they are, and make a seed for next year.’ ” (11) The magical ending thus recycles Great Mam’s teachings to Gloria, to “ ‘give [the flowers] back to the ground” because, “The small people will come and take them back.’ ” (12) The story eventually holds the promise that, similarly, the marrow inside the ancestors’ bones will dissolve into the ground to later be born again. Pointedly, Great Mam’s Indian name, Green Leaf, symbolically draws from the color green –traditionally associated with hope – and it may also suggest an analogy between the pages where the stories are given life anew and the evergreen, regenerating power of Nature.

For the reviving power of literature itself is implicitly inscribed in the *mise-en-abîme* structure of the short story, with each of the four parts opening up onto the next, until the last part, which loops back to the beginning. Indeed, the first promise of hope in the future at the end of part one is fulfilled immediately after, by the shift of focus, in the second part, onto the homodiegetic narrator (“My name is Gloria St Clair, but like most people I’ve been called many things” [2]). The written “I” here textually embodies the continuation of the ancestors through their descendants. From the first paragraph, this second, pseudo-autobiographical tale mostly paves the way for again another story, central to the understanding of the overall tale: “When I was a child myself, my great-grandmother called me by the odd name of Waterbug. I asked her many times why this was, until she said once, to quiet me, “‘I’ll tell you that story.’” (2) Yet the actual waterbug story is delayed, and comes only in section III, which thus once again fulfills the promise of the previous section. Finally, section IV ends with the great grandmother’s death, which has been built as part of the reader’s expectations from sections I

Painted in 1936, and exhibited at the New York Whitney Museum of American Art. It turns out Georgia O’Keeffe’s work happens to be a source of inspiration for Barbara Kingsolver. Whether coincidentally or not,

and II, while the last tableau takes up the images of the bones and fruit stone from the opening section, later repeated in the flower seed motif in section II. Gloria's sense of storytelling in this last section also indicates the new harmony she now represents, resolving the former conflict – central to section III - between the two visions of life offered by her bicultural heritage. Her resistance against Christian monologism comes through as both peaceful and powerfully deliberate, and the “mystical realism”⁵ in the closing paragraph testifies to the fact that Gloria has willfully embraced a philosophy of life and the cosmos closer to the Cherokee one than that of White Christian Modern America.

The overall structure of the short story thus consists of a series of embedded narratives, which in the end blurs the borders between frame and core stories. Finally, the closing section transcends linear progression in looping back to the opening section. “Homeland” thereby abides by the circular pattern typical of American Indian stories. The final vision indeed breathes new life into Cherokee lore, thus remaining faithful to the oral tradition, whereby stories are not linear and fixed narratives, but, to the contrary, circular, open-ended, and allowing for the story-teller's weaving of additional thread into the main fabric, according to the needs of every listener's times.

Insidiously, a mandala motif emerges from the story structure, superimposing the four parts of the narrative that buckle up from end to beginning – thus forming a square – with the circular pattern of the text, which stands for the endless cycles of death and rebirth at work in

the painter has achieved several oil paintings of morning glory flowers.

⁵ I am here using the term “mystical realism” as some might use “magical realism” when it loosely applies to seemingly impossible events occurring in an otherwise realistic narrative, as defined by David Lodge in *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin, 1992). The widespread use of the term “magic realism” turns out to quite ambiguous and it has been used in many different and contradicting ways since it was first coined by Franz Roh to speak of painting in his book *Nach-Expressionismus. Magischer Realismus*, published in 1925. A thorough history of the term and its variations was retraced in the compelling study directed by Jean Weisberger in, *Le réalisme magique: Roman. Peinture et cinéma*. Centre d'Etudes des Avants-Gardes littéraires de L'université de Bruxelles. Editions l'Age d'homme, 1987. An interesting distinction was also made between “magic” and “magical realism” by Maggie Ann Bowers (in *Magic(al) Realism*, published by Routledge in 2004). This is why I would prefer to use the term “mystical realism” which not only seems more accurate when discussing Kingsolver's fiction, but is moreover less likely to sound Eurocentric when dealing with non-Western beliefs. For “mystical realism” addresses the representation of the mysteries of life in a way that may seem realistic to

Nature as well as in the stories of mankind. As the mandala symbol suggests, the narrative carefully prepares for moments of revelation, or in Nadine Gordimer's words, for "flashes of fearful insight." as implied by Great Mam's – and, in turn, the narrator's – withholding of specific stories: " 'Tell me the waterbug story tonight,' I said, settling onto the swing. The fireflies were blinking on and off in the black air above the front yard. / 'No, I won't,' she said. [...] 'I'll tell you another time.'" (9-10) Here, Barbara Kingsolver's short story may read as an intertextual allusion to Nadine Gordimer's definition of the short story genre, " as a kind of creative vision," "inherently truer to the nature of whatever can be grasped of human reality [...] where contact is more like the flash of fireflies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness" (Gordimer, 264). According to Nadine Gordimer the short story is "a fragmented and restless form, a matter of hit or miss, and it is perhaps for this reason that it suits modern consciousness – which seems best expressed as flashes of fearful insight alternating with near-hypnotic states of indifference" (Gordimer, 265). Obviously, "Homeland" insists on the ideological role of story telling, both in terms of cultural memory and absolute awareness. Eventually, it also points to the earth as our true home, and, in so doing, abides by Indian philosophy and reinstills meaning into the dead metaphor, "Homeland". The polysemic, eponymous expression becomes an oxymoron anew, reconciling civilisation (home) with nature (land), thus allowing for hope in the perpetual rebirth of cultures more respectful of, and closer to nature.

As one of Kingsolver's biographers puts forward, "She is a writer of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction, but [...] if she had to categorize herself by genre, she would pick story telling" (Woods, 181). As a matter of fact, as exemplified in "Homeland," the formal distinctions between genres lose ground as they are brought together in one single narrative that oscillates

some, and unrealistic, or "magical" to others. With "mystical realism," the point is to find sense in mystery, which therefore casts rational realism as something quite beside the point.

between the respective characteristics of historical nonfiction, autobiography, fiction, myth, and poetry. The autobiographical part is utterly important in that, to a certain extent, Kingsolver has herself inherited from the story teller vocation handed down through her Cherokee female ancestor. As a matter of fact, she confides to Donna Perry, “I hope that story tells the burden and the joy and the responsibility of holding on to the voices that are getting lost” (Perry, 158). In conclusion, the circular pattern of “Homeland” brings about an oxymoronic revelation of the death-accepting, yet life-affirming faith in the eternal power of recreation universally shared by nature in the rebirth of life, but also by humans in their endless potential to recreate stories in meaningful ways. Eventually, Barbara Kingsolver’s dialogic narrative reminds us of Thought Woman, thinking creation and singing people into life, or of a postmodernist Spider Woman, inter-weaving the stories of mankind, and resisting monologism or any notion of a unique truth.

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