



## NO BOX FOR YOU TO MARK ON THIS APPLICATION: AN UNSUCCESSFUL DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE ADMINISTRATION IN GLEYVIS CORO MONTANET'S "ODIAR EL VERANO" AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S "THE AMERICAN EMBASSY"

BU UYGULAMADA SENİN İŞARETLEMEN İÇİN KUTU YOK: GLEYVİS CORO MONTANET'İN "YAZDAN NEFRET ETMEK" VE CHIMAMANDA NGOZİ ADICHIE'NİN "AMERİKAN BÜYÜKELÇİLİĞİ" ADLI YAPITLARINDA BİREY İLE YÖNETİM ARASINDA GEÇEN BAŞARISIZ BİR DİYALOG

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### Abstract

The non-cooperation with the institutional authorities constitutes a powerful resistance weapon when it comes to undermining the authority of the nation-state. This theory is informed in the works of Reece Jones (2012) and Frederick Mayer (2014), who point at bureaucracy and institutionalism as pillars of the nation-state and understand institutions as devices that constrain individuals' choice. In this article, I will examine the short stories "Odiar el Verano" (Hating Summer) (2013) by Gleyvis Coro Montanet, and "The American Embassy" (2009) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Basing myself on Douglas North's definition of formal institutions as a compendium of rules, laws, and constitutions, I will support the argument that these characters challenge formal institutions for the purpose of expressing a different point of view to that of the nation-state. I suggest that these two short stories depict an unsuccessful dialogue between the individual and the administration, recognizing the former's challenge to institutions as an act of empowerment that provides citizens with a voice, since the non-cooperation with the institutional authorities represents one of the most striking features of non-violent resistance. By refusing to dance to bureaucracy's tune and confronting security guards, these characters break with the implicit collaboration with the State by deciding to stop complying with its administration, for the authority of the State finds its expression in juridical codes and institutional organizations. Therefore, this comparative analysis points to these literary accounts as a revealing point of view on the lack of recognition that many asylum seekers and displaced individuals experience on behalf of some national institutions.

### Öz

Kurumsal otoritelerle iş birliği yapmamak, ulus-devletin otoritesini baltalamak söz konusu olduğunda güçlü bir direniş silahı oluşturur. Bu teori, bürokrasi ve kurumsalcılığı ulus-devletin temel direkleri olarak gören ve kurumları bireylerin seçimini kısıtlayan araçlar olarak gören Reece Jones (2012) ve Frederick Mayer'in (2014) çalışmalarına dayanmaktadır. Bu yazıda Gleyvis Coro Montanet'in "Yazdan Nefret" (2013) ve Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie'nin "Amerikan Büyükelçiliği" (2009) adlı kısa öykülerini inceleyeceğim. Douglas North'un kurallar, yasalar ve anayasaların bir özeti olarak biçimsel kurumlar tanımından yola çıkarak, bu karakterlerin ulus-devletten farklı bir bakış açısını ifade etmek amacıyla biçimsel kurumlara meydan okuduğu argümanını destekleyeceğim. Bu iki hikâyenin birey ve yönetim arasında başarısız bir diyalogu tasvir ettiğini öne sürüyorum. Kurumsal yetkililerle işbirliği yapmamak şiddet içermeyen en çarpıcı özelliklerden birini temsil ettiğinden birincisinin kurumlara meydan okumasını vatandaşlara ses veren bir yetkilendirme eylemi olarak kabul ediyorum. Bürokrasinin emirlerini yerine getirmeyi reddeden ve güvenlik güçlerine karşı çıkan bu karakterler, devletin otoritesi yasal kodlarda ve kurumsal örgütlerde ifadesini bulduğundan, artık onun yönetimine uymamaya karar vererek devletle örtülü işbirliğinden kopuyor. Bu nedenle, bu karşılaştırmalı analiz, birçok sığınmacı ve yerinden edilmiş kişinin bazı ulusal kurumlar adına yaşadığı tanınma eksikliğine ilişkin anlayışlı bir bakış açısı olarak bu edebi anlatımlara işaret ediyor.

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## Introduction

The non-cooperation with the institutional authorities constitutes a powerful resistance weapon when it comes to undermining the authority of the nation-state (Rendón Corona, 2011, p. 79). In his article “What are institutions?” (2006), Hodgson revisits some of the most relevant approaches to the concept of institution and encompasses organizations, social structures, socially transmitted normative rules, and inherited behaviors or dispositions under this term. In this regard, Max Weber remarks that modern States legitimize their monopoly on violence through various ways among which he highlights “*a body of rationally created rules we call the law*” (Weber, 1991, p. 79). This theory is informed in the works of Reece Jones (2012) and Frederick Mayer (2014), who point at bureaucracy and institutionalism as pillars of the nation-state and understand individuals as “*embedded in institutions that constrain their choice*” (Mayer, 2014, p. 37).

In this article, I will examine the short stories “Odiar el Verano” (Hating Summer) (2013) by Gleyvis Coro Montanet, and “The American Embassy” (2009) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. These narratives contain a literary depiction of anti-institutional individuals who refuse to dance to bureaucracy’s tune and confront security guards. I will draw on North’s definition of formal and informal institutions, understanding the former as “*rules, laws and constitutions,*” and the latter as “*norms of behavior, conventions, self-imposed codes of conduct*” (North, 1994: 360), to suggest that these literary voices challenge formal institutions for the purpose of acquiring self-autonomy and freedom. The characters in both stories break with the implicit collaboration with the State by deciding to stop complying with some of its formal institutions since, according to scholars such as Max Weber or Reece Jones, the authority of the State finds its expression in juridical codes and institutional organizations (Weber, 1991; Jones, 2012). The nonconformity that the characters express to security guards, custom officers, and officials constitutes an act of empowerment that turns them into resistant subjects, for the non-cooperation with the institutional authorities represents one of the most striking features of non-violent resistance (Rendón Corona, 2011, p. 79). Indeed, the legal authority can be questioned by civil disobedience and points at the non-cooperation as a protest directed towards anything humiliating for the human being (Rendón Corona, 2011, p. 79). Even though the characters in “Odiar el Verano” and “The American Embassy” are presented in a position of inferiority with respect to institutional authorities, they defy them at the end of both stories. In “Odiar el Verano,” after

suffering the misunderstanding and mistreatment by the custom personnel, the couple points to such officer as one more victim of the State when describing him as a being trapped in a cabin and wearing a uniform that must be suffocating him with heat. In “The American Embassy,” encouraged by how badly other immigrants are treated in the cabins next to hers, the Nigerian woman decides to stop talking with the office worker and step out of the embassy without completing her asylum request. Thus, these characters carry out a subtle attack to formal institutions when showing their displeasure towards bureaucratic processes and rebelling against them, and it is by not complying with humiliating bureaucratic practices that they erode political impositions.

“Odiar el Verano” (2013) is a short story written by the Cuban writer Gleyvis Coro Montanet and included in the Cuban anthology *Nuevarrativa Cubana*, published in the online magazine *Sampsonia Way* in 2013. *Sampsonia Way* is a digital literary magazine produced and edited by Guatemalan journalist Silvia Duarte and sponsored by the City of Asylum/Pittsburgh. It was founded in 2009, five years after City of Asylum put down roots in Sampsonia Way, a neighborhood on the Northside of Pittsburgh, USA. This organization provides stipends and housing to persecuted writers in exile for two years, offering them sanctuary and “a wide range of literary programs in a community setting to encourage cross-cultural exchange” (City of Asylum). Just as the physical Sampsonia Way provides a home for exiled writers, the literary magazine aims to be a virtual refuge where freedom of literary expression is fostered, as well as the sense of community that arises from the common goal of defending freedom of expression. On August 6, 2013, the online magazine published an anthology that compiled sixteen short stories written by sixteen Cuban authors. This anthology was directed by Cuban writer Orlando Luís Pardo Lazo, who began working as a freelance writer, photographer, and dissident blogger around the year 2000. In the anthology’s prologue, he claims a certain visibility for the new Cuban narrative, approaching Coro Montanet’s literature, as well as the rest of the authors’ contributions to this project, as an act of resistance towards a still claustrophobic island where the Cuban authorities continue, to this day, to repress all forms of dissent, not respecting freedom of expression and imprisoning political leaders, independent journalists, and artists (Staniland 2014).

“Odiar el Verano” constitutes a very accurate portrayal of the authoritarian power that Cuban institutions exert on the citizens. It adopts the form of a dialogue between, presumably, a mature married couple, who goes to a custom office to ask

for asylum due to the high temperatures of their country. The officer behind the pane does not accept that the reasons why they are requesting the asylum are climatic, instead of political or economic. After some humorous discussion that starts calmly but ends up aggressively, the woman tells her husband to give up as “*sunk in that booth and in that uniform, he must be more annoyed with the heat than we are*” (Coro Montanet, 2013)<sup>1</sup>.

Adichie’s “The American Embassy” was published in print as part of the short-story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* in 2009. She is the author of successful and popular books such as the novel *Half of the Yellow Sun* (2006), in which she narrates the experiences of her parents during the Nigeria-Biafra war, or *Americanah* (2013), a novel that revolves around the theme of migration and the cultural and social struggles of an African immigrant in the United States. “The American Embassy” depicts a Nigerian woman who is queuing in the American embassy in Lagos because she needs to get a visa to leave the country. Her son and her husband, a well-known journalist, have been killed due to the opposition the latter showed towards the General Abacha’s regime. The narration alternates the description of the mistreatment the Nigerian people received by the North American administration in the embassy with flashbacks of the traumatic moment when three men in black trousers burst in her house in Nigeria looking for her husband and killed their son.

Even though the differences between these stories are evident with regard to the language in which they were originally written, the geographical contexts they depict, the fact that Coro Montanet’s story was published online and Adichie’s in print, or that they come from different continents (America and Africa), the comparison of these texts can reveal interesting similarities in their themes and motifs and the ways in which both authors tackle institutions and bureaucracy as devices that limit individuals’ free agency. In this sense, this study builds on the ongoing discussions that comparativists in ACLA (American Comparative Literature Association), such as Michael Swacha, are having about the state of comparativism today. They remind of the comparative literature’s duty to transcend national and linguistic boundaries (Saussy, 2017, p. 24; Thomsen, 2017, p. 119), within what Jessica Berman calls a “trans” orientation, that is, the need for transdisciplinary scholarship to become “*importantly transnational by examining texts outside national or imperial circuits of travel, nonprivileged migrations of people and texts, or*

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<sup>1</sup> Translations of “Odiar el Verano” from Spanish to English are my translations.

*trajectories outside the usual metro-centric routes of travel*” (Berman, 2017, p. 106). Some scholars within the field believe that comparatists should support “*the members of the profession who [...] fit together unaccustomed bodies of work*” (Saussy, 2017, p. 28) and suggest approaching literature as a window that can “*reveal specific types of content beyond the literary*” (Swacha, 2015) while highlighting the need for expanding the scope of literary analysis by considering other disciplines and domains of knowledge at the same level of the literary text.

In fact, in my comparative analysis, the narratives work as a launching point since it is through the application of social and political theories about institutions and nationalism that my literary corpus *speaks*. The interdisciplinarity and planetary character of this study illustrates Michael Swacha’s and other comparativists’ point of view, because although literature has a fundamental role in my research, I also “*consider[s] various disciplines and domains of knowledge*” at the same level of importance (Swacha, 2015), and thus “*the study of literature is not necessarily for the sake of literature itself*” but it also addresses some larger socio-political questions (Swacha, 2015) that contribute to a better understanding, in this particular case, of the non-recognition that many asylum seekers and refugees suffer on behalf of some national institutions.

Focusing on the two stories analyzed in this article, both depict characters who are asking for asylum and that are unable to establish a proper dialogue with very negatively depicted national authorities. They also share some criticism towards institutional rigidity, the employment of similar metaphors to address the walls in the form of panes and booths that impede a mutual understanding between governmental authorities and individuals, and the way characters confront institutions at the end of both stories. Thus, by comparing two texts written in different languages and whose authors have different national and political backgrounds, this article aims for a broader and more accurate approach that matches the new mandate in literary studies for a “*planetary thinking*” (Friedman, 2007, p. 261) and the ultimate challenge to parochialism, “*even the enhanced parochialism of Eurocentric comparative literature*” (Bush, 2017, p. 172). As Julia Borst (2017) and Juliane Tauchnitz (2017) suggest, to approach a comparative analysis from a transnational perspective can provide revealing insight (Tauchnitz & Borst, 2017). In this light, the comparison between “*Odiar el Verano*” and “*The American Embassy*” challenges the traditional ways of approaching humanities (specifically literature) through its regionalization. While the most conservative

academic studies in humanities regionalize the history and politics of particular spaces (such as “the Middle East,” “America” or “West Indies,”), my research provides revealing and enriching insight by fostering “*a contemporary revision and reconstruction of regions based on new political and cultural realities*” (Wilson, 2002, p. 248) that better reflects “*the new globalization (...), the effects of deterritorialization, new modes of travel and communication, and the issues of national borders and citizenship*” (Friedman, 2007, p. 267).

Both Adichie and Coro Montanet portray some of their personal background in their writing and share the depiction of their own migratory experiences as a recurrent theme in their literature. Despite enjoying certain literary reputation after publishing some books in Cuba, Coro Montanet herself told me in an interview I did with her in 2015 that she had to leave her family and Cuba in 2009 due to the non-acceptance of her gender identity. Importantly, she also asserts that her story “Odiar el Verano” was born as an allusion to the struggle of the individual against a community that relies on bureaucratic and national barriers to nullify the former (Personal Interview 2015). She also adds that:

lived badly in Cuba, like everyone else -and in some aspects more badly than many-, but [she] had notable professional and literary recognition, a certain know-how in more than one field, things that gave me happiness in life and determined my roots ; but it happened that everything fell apart and became unfeasible and unlivable to the point that a person who had never entertained the slightest intention of emigrating, ended up in Spain, as an emigrant (Personal Interview to Coro Montanet, 2015).

Likewise, a big amount of Adichie’s literature is impregnated with her vision of the United States as an outsider and the identity, bureaucratic, and racial struggle that an African immigrant like herself may encounter once they arrive in the American country. In the same way, she has used her literature to account for personal and family experiences as she has claimed that her novel *Half of the Yellow Sun* (2006) focuses on the Biafran War and the affliction it caused on her grandparents and parents. She wrote this novel because

both [her] grandfathers were killed in the Nigeria-Biafra war, and [she] wanted to engage with that history in order to start a conversation about the war – which is still hardly discussed in Nigeria (...) It is a personal issue – my father has tears in his eyes when he speaks of losing his father, my mother still cannot speak at

length about losing her father in a refugee camp (“Interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie about *Half of a Yellow Sun*”, 2007).

When approaching both texts, one of the most striking similarities is the negative depiction of the security and administrative staff. Focusing on “Odiar el Verano,” the officer’s authoritarian and inflexible attitude is reinforced through the rigidity that his words convey: “*the variants are ‘economic’ or ‘political’. Nobody asks for asylum for climatic reasons,*” (Coro Montanet, 2013), “*But..., are you stupid?! – the officer squeezed the template.*” (2013), or “*You messed up the form- said the officer and offered them a new one-You wrote ‘climate’ and this is a survey of mere crossings, which does not admit calligraphies*” (2013). Coro Montanet’s narrative constitutes a criticism towards institutionalism and the officer, epitomizing national institutions and the rigidity of national borders, has the power to limit the couple’s free agency by blocking their entrance into the new territory. The whole text adopts a humorous tone when showing the impossibility of reaching an agreement because the officer does not believe their climatic reasons for asylum. In this sense, the discussion between the couple and the officer symbolizes the dialogue between the individual and the State, which encompasses the struggle for mutual understanding due to the rigidity of the latter. The two individuals participate in a brief argument with the officer, in which any attempt to convince him about their climatic reasons for the request of asylum fails. Thus, the couple remains imprisoned in a bureaucratic cage where their free will is subdued to the State apparatus that the official embodies. In this regard, the superiority of the official and the power that he exerts over the couple is evidenced when, already showing a feeling of resignation, the wife tells her husband to mark political reasons on the template as “*it must be the government’s fault*” (Coro Montanet, 2013).

Likewise, the officers and visa interviewers in “The American Embassy” (2009) represent the institutionalism that, according to Frederick Mayer, enhances the nation-state. While the officer in “Odiar el Verano” (2013) shows an authoritarian attitude by keeping a strict point of view and even disrespecting the couple, the visa interviewers, and the soldiers in “The American Embassy” (2009) are depicted similarly, as they behave in the same way when exerting their power over the immigrants who apply for a visa:

At the next window, the American visa interviewer was speaking too loudly into his microphone, “I’m not going to accept your lies, sir!”

The Nigerian visa applicant in the dark suit began to shout and to gesture, waving his see-through plastic file that bulged with documents, "This is wrong! How can you treat people like this? I will take this to Washington!" until a security guard came and led him away (Adichie, 2009, p. 141).

As this excerpt reveals, both figures act as tyrannical forces that oppress visa applicants while serving the State. The interviewer shouts at the solicitant and the security guard expels him from the embassy. In fact, the negative image of the soldiers is further developed as the main character finds similarities between the Nigerian soldiers who killed her child and those at the door of the American embassy:

Sometimes I wonder if the American embassy people look out of their window and enjoy watching the soldiers flogging people, the man behind her was saying. (...) She looked across the street again; the soldier was walking away now, and even from this distance she could see the glower on his face. The glower of a grown man who could flog another grown man if he wanted to, when he wanted to. His swagger was as flamboyant as that of the men who four nights ago broke her back door open and barged in (2009, p. 131).

In this way, the narrative voice establishes a connection between the killers of her son and the soldier who works for the embassy in terms of the "*glower on his face*" and his flamboyant swagger. This explicit parallelism, as well as the action of flogging people, accentuates a negative portrayal of the guards. Sentences such as "*if he wanted to, when he wanted to*" show the soldiers' superiority and power, who at some points in the narration are explicitly referred to as tyrants who use their power to patronize Nigerian visa applicants: "*see how the people are pleading with the soldier, the man behind her said*" (Adichie, 2009, p. 129).

In a similar vein, visa interviewers appear as oppressive figures in control. Following Reece Jones' idea of bureaucracy as a fundamental pillar for the nation-state (Jones, 2012), I argue that in both stories the administrative worker is also depicted in authoritarian terms. In "Odiar el Verano" (2013), the sentence "*you messed up the template (...) this is a survey of mere crossings, which does not admit calligraphies,*" (Coro Montanet, 2013), uttered by the guard, poses the administration's inability to understand the real reason why the characters want to request asylum. In this sense, the author uses humor (since asking for asylum due to climatic reasons is clearly a humorous device) to expose the uselessness of

bureaucracy when it comes to meeting people's needs. Other sentences in the story further support this point: "*but it is a very closed question, if only it had lines where one could explain*" (Coro Montanet, 2013) or "*I already told you that it is a survey of mere crossings...*" (2013). The authority that the template emanates becomes more obvious when, eventually, the characters give up in their attempt to request asylum since the box for climatic reason simply does not exist.

This criticism towards institutionalism is also present in "The American Embassy" (2009) from the first lines, when the narrator describes the main female character standing "*in line outside the American embassy in Lagos*" while holding "*a blue plastic file of documents tucked under her arm*" (Adichie, 2009, p. 128). As in Coro Montanet's story, we approach the character as unmovable, fixed in a line while awaiting her turn, and the words "*tucked under her arm*" seem to depict the paperwork as an extension of her body. Accordingly, the supremacy of visa interviewers is evidenced through the atmosphere of tension that the narrative voice portrays among those who stand in line. The fact that they all regard the interviewer as the person who holds the power and accepts or refuses their requests, is made clear when the narrative voice claims that most of them have not slept at all thinking that they had to arrive earlier, for they were afraid "*that the American embassy might decide not to open its gates today, and they would have to do it all over again the day after tomorrow since the embassy did not open on Wednesdays...*" (2009, p. 130). This sentence carries a strong criticism of institutionalism in terms of its slowness and lack of empathy, thus placing the institution over people with words such as "*might decide not to open its gates today*" (2009, p. 130).

Furthermore, the atmosphere of tension that emerges from the confrontation between individuals and the administration is perceived in the words of the man who stands in line behind the main character, who claims that "*they don't give our people immigrant visas anymore, unless the person is rich by American standards*" (2009, p. 134) or when, after asking her for the reasons why she is there, he answers: "*Asylum? That will be very difficult to prove*" (2009, p. 134). The clash that takes place between the main character and the woman behind the pain at the end of the story emerges precisely from the fact that she needs some piece of evidence which demonstrates that her child has been killed due to political reasons if she wants the asylum:

“Can you prove it? Do you have any evidence to show that?”

“Yes. But I buried it yesterday. My son’s body”

“Ma’am, I am sorry about your son”, the visa interviewer said. “But I need some evidence that you know it was the government. (...) I need some evidence of the government’s involvement and I need some evidence that you will be in danger if you stay on in Nigeria” (Adichie, 2009, p. 140).

This conversation points at the administration as an accomplice of government and an entity unable to help the Nigerian character. Also, it suggests the superiority of the bureaucratic evidence and paperwork over any kind of humanity. As it happens in “Odiar el Verano” (2013), the tyranny of the civil servants is highlighted by their yelling against the requesters: “*at the next window, the American visa interviewer was speaking too loudly into his microphone, ‘I am not going to accept your lies, sir!’*” (Adichie, 2009, p. 141). Significantly, at the end of the story, pushed by this mistreatment that she witnesses, the main character decides to leave without completing her request, in a clear parallelism with the couple in “Odiar el Verano” (2013), which shows that both narratives attack national formal institutions, that is, administrative obstacles based on local “*rules, laws and constitutions*” (North, 1964, p. 360) by deciding not to collaborate with them.

Thus, I claim that both authors give shape to literary voices who confront the social and political constraints resulting from formal institutions (North, 1994) that appear in the form of security forces (the officer behind the cabin and soldiers at the embassy), and administrative spaces (the American embassy, a custom office). Accordingly, I argue that the negative image used to depict these institutions constitutes an effective attack to the nation-state and its political and territorial impositions on individuals since, as previously exposed, institutionalism represents the empowerment of the State (Jones, 2012; Mayer, 2014).

Significantly, this uncooperative depiction of formal institutions in these stories leads to an indirect attack towards the national governments and creates a negative propaganda of the State apparatus. In “Odiar el Verano” (2013), full of desperation because of the official’s inflexibility, the woman tells her husband to blame the high temperatures on the government, which may reveal the couple’s real source of affliction. Similarly, the female narrative voice in “The American Embassy” addresses the Nigerian government as the cause of her affliction when mentioning it as “*such a big label, it was freeing, it gave people room to maneuver and excuse and*

*re-blame. Three men. Three men like her husband and her brother or the man behind her on the visa line. Three men*" (Adichie, 2009, p. 140). The narrative voice makes a reference to the three murderers of her husband and son, three "government's agents" (140) as she explains to the visa interviewer. This excerpt allows the reader to access the character's reflection upon the word "government," which is thought as an excuse for evil and as a weapon that can have a devastating impact on people's lives. The moment in which they killed her son stalks the main character as an omnipresent ghost while awaiting her turn at the embassy. This traumatic memory remarks the fatality of killing people in the name of political power. Thus, once again, the figure of the agents is epitomizing the nation, which places the Nigerian government as the ultimate murderer of her family.

No less importantly, the American government also fails her, and encouraged by the violent scene that she witnesses against one of the men asking for asylum, she decides to leave the American embassy without carrying out her request:

Was she imagining it, or was the sympathy draining from the visa interviewer's face? She saw the swift way the woman pushed her reddish-gold hair back even though it did not disturb her [...]. Her future rested on her face. The face of a person who did not understand her, who probably did not cook with palm oil, or now that palm oil when fresh was a bright, bright red and when not fresh, congealed to a lumpy orange (Adichie, 2009: 149).

As shown in the last lines of the narrative, the female protagonist does not feel understood by the American interviewer who shows a patronizing attitude. The author mentions the palm oil to remark the cultural differences between the two, pointing at them as the cause of their misunderstanding. As the couple in "Odiar el Verano," the Nigerian character remains in a political threshold, where neither her country or origin nor the United States provides her with political recognition.

Consequently, the narratives accentuate the inability of political institutions to protect and meet some asylum seekers' needs. Rather, they represent the cause of their affliction, and its existence is mainly based on the lack of understanding, the impossibility of a fluid dialogue between the individual and the institution. Such misunderstanding is triggered by physical or social borders in the form of gates, pains, territorial and social lines, which act as powerful metaphors in the narratives and problematize any possible dialogue between the institutional forces and the characters. In "Odiar el Verano" (2013), the metaphorical depiction of national

borders as fixed and inflexible is showed by the pane that separates the officer from the couple. The symbolism that Coro Montanet shapes in the narrative allows her to convey her ideology regarding national borders, focusing on the fictional pane (or barrier) that condemns the characters to their misunderstanding, as it is shown in the following extract:

"Of course I think so," the officer put his mouth close to the hole in the glass. He made a mysterious sign to them, as if asking them to also approach, by his side, the glass of the cabin. For what real reason are they asking for asylum?" (Coro Montanet, 2013).

Indeed, the pane that separates the officer from the couple can be analyzed as the tenor of a metaphor, whose vehicle is the frontier that dichotomizes the immigrant and any nation, and whose ground is based on its inflexibility. Metaphors constitute an effective device to convey our views of the world because, as social constructivism argues, "human behavior is fundamentally a form of symbolic expression" and "*human experience of reality is heavily meditated by symbolic constructions*" (Mayer, 2014, p. 44). Thus, the extract shown above exposes the impossibility for reaching an agreement and by means of her fiction, Coro Montanet spreads a negative image of the authoritarian political force and ridicules the claustrophobic and unmovable institutional borders that constrain the couple.

Likewise, the windows and the gates constitute powerful images of borders in "The American Embassy" (2009). The embassy, epitomizing the U.S.A, is addressed as a fort that characters find difficult to trespass: "*the American embassy might decide not to open its gates today*" (130), "*sometimes I wonder if the American embassy people look out of their window and enjoy watching the soldiers flogging people*" (131). The gates and the windows are used as tenors of a metaphor that points at borders as the vehicle and their rigidity as ground:

The embassy gates swung open and a man in brown uniform shouted, 'First fifty on the line, come in and fill out the forms. All the rest, come back another day. The embassy can attend to only fifty today'

"We are lucky, abi?" the man behind her said (Adichie, 2009, p. 138).

This excerpt shows the inhuman treatment of the people waiting outside by the embassy workers and highlights the differences between the two spaces divided by the wall of the American building. It can be asserted that the dichotomy of inside / outside is present throughout the narrative as an outstanding device to intensify

the frontier that separates two realms. On the one hand, within the embassy, the workers are depicted as stable and in power: “*she looked at the next window for a moment, at a man in a dark suit who was leaning close to the screen, reverently, as though praying to the visa interviewer behind*” (139), or “*she saw the swift way the woman pushed her reddish-gold hair back even though it did not disturb her, it stayed quiet on her neck...*” (141). The first sentence describes a shocking image, in which a man in suit, apparently a high-class Nigerian, is regarded in a begging position, while the interviewer adopts the figure of the dominant, almost sacred figure. The second sentence makes a reference to the calm attitude that the visa interviewers enjoy, which contrasts with the applicants’ uneasiness. The words such as “stayed” or “quiet,” and the fact that her hair does not disturb the employee, remark the comfort which their positions provide them with. Meanwhile, the outside world is described as chaotic and suffocating, with “*air hung heavy with moist heat*” (128), “*beggars who walked up and down holding out enamel plates*” (128), and people queueing under a sun which is “*not gentle at all*” (138).

Nevertheless, I argue that despite the disrespect that the characters in both narratives experience, they manage to directly confront the oppressive institutional powers. Even though the official in “*Odiar el Verano*” holds control all along the argument as the pane behind which he stands acts as a kind of a tyrannical shield, the final line of the narration is uttered by the wife, who, after preventing her husband from using violence as an answer, claims “*-Leave it (...) Sunk in that cabin and with that uniform, he must be more annoyed with the heat than us*” (Coro Montanet, 2013). Thus, although not achieving their goal, the couple hold the last word in the narration and point at the officer as another victim of the government. Despite the couple is kind of victimized along the dialogue, they eventually become empowered individuals in a final and unexpected shift at the end of the story, when the wife directly confronts the officer by pointing at him as a prisoner, locked up in a cabin and underneath his uniform.

In the same way, the Nigerian main character in “*The American Embassy*” (2009) decides not to request asylum at the end of the narrative, , encouraged by how badly other immigrants are treated at the cabins next to hers:

She turned slowly and headed for the exit.

“Ma’am?” she heard the interviewer’s voice behind her.

She didn't turn. She walked out of the American embassy, past the beggars who still made their rounds enamel bowls held outstretched and got into her car (Adichie, 2009, p. 141).

As it happens in "Odiar el Verano" (2013), there is an unexpected shift at the end of Adichie's story. The behavior showed by the Nigerian character when ignoring the interviewer and stepping out of the embassy constitutes a rebellious act towards the national institution, in the sense that she dissociates herself from the power, potentially meaning that she is not going to sacrifice herself and principles in favor of governments. In this way, both short stories are stripping national institutions of their honorable status, and contain valuable examples of passive resistance, since Adichie and Coro Montanet might be suggesting that these characters (despite being in an underprivileged position) are freer than the officers and the interviewers, both entrapped behind cabins, and the fact of turning their backs on the administration and leaving works as a liberating act in both cases.

To conclude, both "Odiar el Verano" and "The American Embassy" contain some outstanding criticism towards the institution, represented in the form of security forces and administrations that do not meet the characters' needs. This misunderstanding is caused by the dividing lines between citizens and political powers that act as borders whose fixity and rigidity creates a space of confrontation between the two and encourages the rebellion of the literary voices against different institutional sources of constraint. The limitations that impede them from developing as self-autonomous individuals are denounced and questioned through the raising of their voices and their agency and, for this reason, they can be understood as resistant subjects at a narrative level. Therefore, this comparative analysis transcends national and linguistic boundaries within what Jessica Berman calls a "trans" orientation, that is, to become "*by examining texts outside national or imperial circuits of travel, nonprivileged migrations of people and texts, or trajectories outside the usual metro-centric routes of travel*" (Berman, 2017, p. 106). The comparison of these two stories regardless their differences has revealed specific types of content in and beyond the literary, as the close analysis of both texts has shown similar ways of approaching the lack of empathy that asylum seekers may receive on behalf of national institutions, offering valuable insight not only to literary studies but also to some larger socio-political questions that contribute to a better understanding of some of the ongoing issues in the world today.

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## Summary

The non-cooperation with the institutional authorities constitutes a powerful resistance weapon when it comes to undermining the authority of the nation-state (Rendón Corona, 2011: 79). This theory is informed in the works of Reece Jones (2012) and Frederick Mayer (2014), who point at bureaucracy and institutionalism as pillars of the nation-state and understand individuals as “embedded in institutions that constrain their choice” (Mayer, 2014: 37). In this article, I will base myself on Douglas North’s concept of formal institutional constraints, that is, “rules, laws and constitutions,” (North, 1994: 360) to argue that in the short stories “Odiar el Verano” (Hating Summer) (2013) by Gleyvis Coro Montanet, and “The American Embassy” (2009) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, characters challenge the formal institutions for the purpose of expressing a different point of view to that of the nation-state. More specifically, I suggest that these two short stories depict an unsuccessful dialogue between the individual and the administration, recognizing the former’s challenge to institutions as an act of empowerment that provides citizen with a voice, since the non-cooperation with the institutional authorities represents one of the most striking features of Gandhi’s passive resistance (Rendón Corona, 2011: 79). By refusing to dance to bureaucracy’s tune and confronting security guards, these characters break with the implicit collaboration with the State by deciding to stop complying with its administration, for the authority of the State finds its expression in juridical codes and institutional organizations (Weber, 1991; Jones, 2012; Mayer, 2014). Therefore, this comparative analysis points to these literary accounts as a revealing point of view on the lack of recognition that many asylum seekers and displaced individuals experience on behalf of some national institutions.

The misunderstanding between the asylum seeker and the national institution that both stories depict is caused by the inflexibility of the former, which embodies a bureaucratic border whose fixity and rigidity creates a space of confrontation between the two and encourages the rebellion of the literary voices against different institutional sources of constraint. The limitations that impede them from developing as self-autonomous individuals are denounced and questioned through the raising of their voices and their agency and, for this reason, they can be understood as resistant subjects at a narrative level.

Even though the differences between these stories are evident with regard to the language in which they were originally written, the geographical contexts they depict, the fact that Coro Montanet’s story was published online and Adichie’s in print, or that they come from different continents (America and Africa), I argue that their comparison can reveal interesting similarities in their themes and motifs and the ways in which both authors tackle institutions and bureaucracy as devices to limit individuals’ free agency. In fact, both texts depict characters who are asking for asylum and that are unable to establish a proper dialogue with very negatively depicted national authorities. They also share some criticism towards institutional rigidity, the employment of similar metaphors to address the walls in the form of panes and booths that impede a mutual understanding between governmental authorities and individuals, and the way characters confront institutions at the end of both stories.

Therefore, this comparative analysis transcends national and linguistic boundaries within what Jessica Berman calls a “trans” orientation, that is, the task of “examining texts outside national or imperial circuits of travel, nonprivileged migrations of people and texts, or trajectories outside the usual metro-centric routes of travel” (Berman, 2017: 106). The comparison of these two stories regardless their differences reveals specific types of content in and beyond the literary, as the close analysis of both texts shows similar ways of approaching the lack of empathy that asylum seekers may receive on behalf of national institutions, offering valuable insight not only to literary studies but also to some larger socio-political questions that contribute to a better understanding of some of the ongoing issues in the world today.