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Research Article

Vibrant Matter, Actants and the Limits of Human Agency in Saramago's *The Stone Raft*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on José Saramago's novel *The Stone Raft*, set during an imaginary geo(il)logical event, the separation of the Iberian Peninsula from the European mainland. This event brings together a group of human and non-human protagonists, who seem to have mysterious connections with this event. The novel follows the group, which arguably forms a mini-community, as they travel around the former peninsula. It also explores the political disruptions which this event, directly and indirectly, provokes at various levels from the local to the international, including, for instance, closer relations between Portugal and Spain the souring of relations between the Iberian countries and Europe, widespread protests in Europe and the occupation of hotels by slum-dwellers across the Peninsula. In this context, the novel is explored from the perspective of Jane Bennett's vital materialism, as put forward in her 2010 book "Vibrant Matter". For Bennett, humans tend to overestimate their agency, while viewing matter as simply inert. In her view, however, material things may be important 'actants', particularly when they act as part of a human/non-human assemblage. Saramago's narrator, like Bennett herself, constantly questions the human tendency to over-attribute agency (and responsibility) for events to humans alone, suggesting that matter, and human/non-human assemblages, may also be important actants.

Keywords: Saramago, vital materialism, Jane Bennett, assemblage, actant

Introduction

Portuguese novelist and Nobel prize winner José Saramago frequently pointed out that he was, at heart, an essayist who needed to write novels because he was unable to write essays (cited in Salzani & Vanhoutte, 2018a, p. 3). Thus, his novels can be understood as forms of political action, in that they present and debate "ethico-political questions and ideas" (Salzani & Vanhoutte, 2018a, p. 6). On this basis, this paper posits that, in common with political theorists such as Jane Bennett, Saramago, in *The Stone Raft* tries to bear witness to "the vital materialities that flow through and around us" (Bennett, 2010, p. x).

The Stone Raft is set in a world which mirrors our own, where, in a "geo(il)logical event"[1] (Varela Alvarez, 2018, p. 65) the Iberian Peninsula inexplicably breaks off from the rest of Europe and floats, seemingly aimlessly, towards the South Atlantic. Thus, on one level, the novel can be read in the context of the accession of Spain and Portugal to the European Community, which was impending at its time of publication. In other words, it can perhaps be understood in terms of an Iberianist "counterdiscourse" to Portuguese EEC membership (Sabine, 2005, p. 79) a pre-accession allegory of a putative "Portugexit" (and "Spexit") *avant la lettre*, in which Portugal would draw closer to Spain as well as to its former colonies in South America and Africa. Saramago himself describes the novel as an expression of resentment: "For centuries and centuries you shunned us ...Europe ended at the Pyrenees ...very well, then, we're leaving" (Vakil, 2000, p. 16).

However, importantly, and perhaps in contrast to a country's choice to leave the European Union, the splitting off of the Iberian Peninsula from the European continent in *The Stone Raft* is not a decision which is made by supposedly rational human subjects. Instead, it is a geological event which nevertheless profoundly affects geopolitics, the lives of the inhabitants of the Peninsula, and, more specifically, the group of protagonists whose lives are uprooted by the event, and who manage to create "an authentic community full of meaning(s)" (Varela Alvarez, 2018, p. 64). However, the Iberian Peninsula's physical separation from the European continent clearly cannot be easily attributed to human agency or will. Indeed, "nobody is trying to separate the peninsula from the continent, nobody is fighting against anything whatsoever" (Seixto, 2001, p. 210).

1 Geo(l)logico' in the original Spanish (Varela Alvarez, 2018, p. 65).

In this way, a (seemingly) impossible and inexplicable geological event sets into motion a series of political – and personal – events and crises. As Daniel suggests, in the novel lives and events interpenetrate each other and overlap "at all levels" (2005, p. 20). Thus, for Daniel, each human act potentially possesses a cosmic significance, even when it is apparently a random occurrence (2005, p. 20). However, non-human acts, most notably the geological event which converts the peninsula into a stone raft, also have an enormous impact on the lives and (geo)politics of the human characters in the novel. Therefore, the novel suggests a de-centering of human agency in that political events, ranging from changes in international relations to local political conflicts, are provoked by the interaction of human and non-human agents. At another level, the lives of the five human protagonists are deeply affected and even overhauled not only by the geological event, but by other non-human *actants* too, including, among others, a dog, an elm branch, a flock of starlings, a piece of string and a stone.

As Salzani and Vanhoutte argue, then, while Saramago may have been "consciously and explicitly" committed to humanism, his art subverts his humanist project. Their argument is connected to the depiction of the dogs in Saramago's novels, which are often "humanised" while the human characters are "animalised" (Salzani & Vanhoutte, 2018b, p. 201). However, *The Stone Raft* can arguably be read as posthumanist in a broader sense, in that the novel emphasises the importance of the agency not only of animals but of other non-human things (including material as well as organic things), and, especially, of human/non-human *assemblages.* On this basis, this study attempts to read the novel through the lens of Jane Bennett's vital materialist approach.

As set out in her 2010 book *Vibrant Matter,* Jane Bennett's political/philosophical project is to rethink the modern tendency to "quarantine" the world into dull matter on the one hand, conceived of as passive and inert, and vibrant life on the other. For Bennett, this tendency to view matter as inert or dead is part of a vicious circle, in that it is both the consequence of and continues to feed "human hubris" and our "earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (Bennett, 2010, p. ix), thus impeding the emergence of modes of production and consumption which are more sustainable and ecologically viable.

In this context, influenced by many philosophical ideas, perhaps primarily Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and Gilles Deleuze's concept of the assemblage, Bennett argues that objects possess "thing-power", the "curious ability of inanimate things to

animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (2010, p. 6), provoking open-ended change via their complex interrelationships and entanglements with humans, plants and other animals, and other objects. In an earlier paper, *The Force of Things,* she explains "thing power" as a combination of Lucretian physics, the "non-Newtonian picture of nature as matter-flow ... as ... developed in the thought of Gilles Deleuze" as well as Spinoza's idea that bodies "have a propensity to form collectives" (2004, pp. 348-9) Thus, as Braun argues, Bennett's description of matter as "*vital*, *energetic*, *lively*, *quivering*, *vibratory*, *evanescent*, *effluescent"* speaks of;

> an 'eventful' world, a world in which becoming is privileged over being, where the pre-individual takes priority over the individual, and where a complex non-linear causality interrupts our commonsense assumption of a mechanistic world'. (Braun, 2011, p. 390)

Such an eventful world, as is argued further below, resonates with that created by Saramago in *The Stone Raft,* where human agency is constantly put into question, and where non-human *actants* interact with humans in assemblages to cause upheavals in human lives at the individual and collective levels.

Bennett's Vital Materialism

According to Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter", which draws on and synthesises a wide variety of concepts and ideas from thinkers including, among others, "Lucretius, Spinoza, Adorno, Latour, Thoreau, Bergson, Dewey and Deleuze and Guattari" (Lemke, 2018, p. 33), non-human things as diverse as "edibles, commodities, storms, metals" can be actants in their own right (Bennett, 2010, p. viii). She thus argues that agency can be attributed to a wider range of "ontological types" (Bennett, 2010, p. 33), challenging the traditional Western conception of a dichotomy between a deterministic nature and human societies characterised by free will (Lemke, 2018, p. 33). Thus, in Bennett's view, non-humans have the ability to "animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett, 2010, p. 6).

Importantly, as discussed further below, for Bennett, taking the vitality of matter seriously has political as well as philosophical implications. Such material powers may have a variety of effects, both positive and negative, on humanity; thus, they deserve our respect and have important implications for "*human* survival and happiness"

(Bennett, 2010, p. x). Consequently, vital materialities such as "stem cells, electricity, food, trash, and metals" play an all-important, and frequently disruptive, role in political life. However, the human tendency is to represent these material forces as "human mood, action, meaning, agenda or ideology", thus maintaining the fantasy that we humans are really "in charge of all those 'its'" (Bennett, 2010, p. x).

On this basis, Bennett's project has several aims; first to depict a positive vibrant materialist ontology, secondly to dissipate onto-theological binary oppositions such as "life/matter, human/animal, will/determination and organic/inorganic", and finally to propose a form of political analysis which can better account for the contributions of both human and nonhuman actants (Bennett, 2010, p. x). Here then, through "bracketing" questions of the human (Anderson, 2011, p. 393), Bennett conceives of matter, using Bruno Latour's term, as an *actant*. For Latour, an *actant* can be defined as "something that acts, or to which activity is granted by another" (Latour, 1996, p. 373). Notably, as suggested by the ending –ant, which is intended to counter the subjectivity and teleology implied in the term "actor", *actants* are not necessarily human. Indeed, as Latour explains, anything can be an actant as long as it is the source of action (Latour, 1996, p. 373).

In this context, Bennett introduces the concept of distributive agency, according to which effects cannot be directly attributed to subjects; instead there are always "a swarm of vitalities at play" (Bennett, 2010, pp. 31-32). Therefore, importantly, it is difficult to pinpoint any single actor, or *actant*, as the root cause of an event as an actant never really acts in isolation. Instead, its agency is dependent on the interaction and collaboration of many different bodies and forces (2010, p. 21). Notably, in the context of globalisation, the contemporary world has become a space of events which are both intimately connected and highly conflictual, making up a volatile but somehow functioning whole. Thus, the organicist model, according to which each part serves the whole, clearly falls short. Bennett instead prefers Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage, which can be described as more or less temporary, ad-hoc "living, throbbing confederations" composed of diverse elements which , in spite of the friction between their constituent parts, are able to function (Bennett, 2010, p. 23).

Assemblages can be described as "heterogeneous groupings that do not subsume the independence of the parts to a higher unity" (Anderson, 2011, p. 393). As DeLanda explains, component parts of an assemblage may be detached from it and reattached

to a different assemblage, in which its interactions will be different (2006, p. 11). Thus, assemblages may be relatively long or short lived. Their components are also involved in processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, which stabilise and destabilise their identities respectively through increasing or decreasing their spatial boundaries and/or internal heterogeneity (DeLanda, 2006, pp. 13, 19), while processes of (linguistic or genetic) coding or decoding also serve to consolidate the identity of the assemblage or render it more flexible respectively (DeLanda, 2006, p. 19).

Assemblages, then, are not controlled by any kind of central authority, as no member is able to dominate the others and consistently be in charge of the trajectory or impact of the group. Instead, as Bennett points out, the effects generated by an assemblage are emergent properties; while each (proto)member of the assemblage has its own vital force, which may be slightly "off" from that of the assemblage as a whole, the assemblage as such also possesses its own agency. Bennett proposes the electricity grid as a good example of an assemblage (made up of human and non-human *actants* including electrons, trees, wind, fire and electromagnetic fields). While these individual elements affiliate and work together, they do not constitute an organism, as the jelling of the components of the grid takes place alongside "discordant" energies which fly out and disturb it from within (Bennett, 2010, p. 24) so that, rather than being provoked by an individual agent or doer, the deed is done or effected by a human/non-human assemblage (Bennett, 2010, p. 28).

Thus, as Lemke points out, Bennett's disturbance of linear accounts of causality not only means that the effects of action are frequently unpredictable, but also complicates the attribution of blame (Lemke, 2018, p. 36). While this conception of vibrant matter acting in human/non-human assemblages attenuates human agency, and therefore human responsibility, to a significant extent, Bennett considers that human responsibility instead lies in noting the effects of the assemblages in which we participate, and then working experimentally to minimize or compensate for any suffering they cause (Khan, 2009).

In this context, Bennett seeks to explore the implications of a (meta)physics of vibrant materiality for political theory, and questions the anthropocentric underpinnings of current democratic theory (Lemke, 2018, p. 37). She avails herself, primarily, of John Dewey and Jacques Rancière's theories of democracy. First, she explores Dewey's theory of *conjoint action*. For Dewey, a public is a confederation of bodies pulled together by a shared experience of harm which coalesces into a problem; a public does not, then,

pre-exist its particular problem, but rather emerges in response to it. Thus, many different publics exist simultaneously, at different stages of emergence and dissolution, in response to different problems (Bennett, 2010, p. 100). Importantly, Dewey's publics do not act according to a specific, rational plan. Moreover, all action produced by a public immediately becomes emmeshed in a web of connections leading to further connections and problems, which in turn create their own publics (Bennett, 2010, pp. 100-101).

For Bennett, given the constant enmeshment of human culture and agency and non-human agencies, such publics necessarily consist of non-human as well as human *actants,* democratic theory should not focus exclusively on humans, whether at the individual or collective level. Instead, its appropriate unit of analysis is "the (ontologically heterogenous) 'public' coalescing around a problem" (2010, p. 108).

The second theory of democracy which Bennett draws from, that of Jacques Rancière, was originally designed to open up democratic participation to excluded humans. In *Disruption,* for instance, Rancière focuses on a potentially disruptive force that exists within the people of the *demos,* but which is not recognised by the prevailing order – the "police" order in Rancière's terms. Thus, in his view, actions by the demos which expose the arbitrariness of the dominant "partition of the sensible", according to which some members of the *demos* are politically visible (or audible) while others are not (Bennett, 2010, p. 105), constitute democratic acts *par excellence*. These disruptions are neither intentional nor random, but instead result from usually spontaneous polemical scenes, so that what had previously been perceived as "noise" begins to sound like "argumentative utterances". As Rancière argues, publics come into existence when those who were not counted as speaking beings make themselves "of some account" by constructing a community based around a common wrong, namely the encounter "of two worlds in a single world: the world where they are and the world where they are not" (Rancière, 1999, p. 27).

Thus, while Rancière himself denies that non-linguistic beings could disrupt the police order (Bennett, 2010, p. 106), Bennett posits that human/nonhuman "publics" can disrupt the partition of the sensible which, for Rancière, is "the quintessentially political act" (Bennett, 2010, p. xix).

Vibrant Iberia: Vital Materialism in *The Stone Raft*

The Stone Raft begins with a series of seemingly inexplicable and perhaps unrelated events, involving combinations of human and non-human participants. In Cerbère, on the French side of the Pyrenees, the town's famously silent dogs suddenly begin barking *en masse* despite apparently possessing no vocal cords, leading the villagers, maddened by the barking, to attempt to poison them. One of the dogs, Ardent, discovers the first, pencil-thin, crack in the continent, and "with one jump" leaps over the abyss to Spain, as, "he preferred the infernal regions" (Saramago, 1986, p. 11). As Salzani and Vanhoutte point out, *The Stone Raft* is the first of Saramago's novels to feature a canine protagonist (2018b, p. 195), and Ardent later plays an important role in the novel, when he brings together and acts as guide to the five human protagonists. As Saramago's narrator notes, there is a human tendency to overestimate the importance of human agency, so that many people claim responsibility for the barking of the previously silent dogs and the ensuing events "because they slammed a door, or split a fingernail, or picked a fruit, or drew back the curtain, or lit a cigarette, or died, or, not the same people, were born" (1986, p. 14).

Meanwhile, a woman called Joana Carda, recently separated from her husband, makes an indelible line in the ground with an elm branch. Ironically given the importance of non-human *actants* in the novel, she is a graduate in the humanities from the prestigious University of Coimbra (Ferreira, 2018, p. 177). Elsewhere in Portugal, a teacher, José Anaiço, is constantly followed by a flock of starlings, while a physically rather weak man called Joaquim Sassa manages to throw, to his own astonishment, a heavy stone an enormous distance out to sea. At that precise moment, a Spanish pharmacist called Pedro Orce rises from his chair, having experienced an otherwise undetectable earth tremor. At the same time, a Galician woman, Maria Guavaira, finds an old sock which, no matter how much she unravels it, does not get any smaller. The fates of these five human characters, along with that of the dog, are gradually brought together in the novel, while, as Daniel points out, "the leitmotivs of stone, elm wand, blue thread, dog, starlings, and trembling earth recur alone and in concert as in a musical composition" (2005, p. 18).

The extraordinary and seemingly unlinked events surrounding these characters are all, it is suggested, somehow connected with what is arguably the strangest event of all: the physical splitting off of the Iberian Peninsula from the European mainland.

However, while, in the words of Saramago's narrator "it is common knowledge that every effect has a cause", the exact order of events is unclear. While the narrator posits that, in spite of appearances, all of these things are connected (Saramago, 1986, p. 20), and that it was Joana Carda's scratching the ground with an elm stick which provoked the dogs of Cerbère to bark (Saramago, 1986, p. 124), the precise sequence of cause and effect remains a mystery. Saramago's narrator himself appears to question the limits of human agency when he asks if the division of the continent had taken place just because "someone had thrown a stone into the sea, a stone that exceeded the strength of the person who threw it?" (1986, p. 91). Elsewhere, the narrator notes that humans are not the only source of cause and effect, and non-human *actants* can create their own worlds, and tries to imagine a world where human beings, and the events they apparently provoke, no longer exist. He posits that such a world "will be quite sufficient for some tiny animals, some insects, to survive for there still to be worlds … the only great truth is that the world cannot die" (Saramago, 1986, p. 15).

Later in the novel, when Joaquim Sassa blames his extraordinary feat of strength for the impending submergence of Venice, José Anaiço responds "Don't overestimate yourself to the point of thinking you're to blame for everything" (Saramago, 1986, pp. 86-87). This perhaps echoes one of the key insights of Bennett's vital materialism; its emphasis on the interconnection between persons and things attenuates blame because, as human individuals are not the only actants, they can no longer bear full responsibility for the effects of the assemblages of which they form part (Bennett, 2010, p. 37).

Whatever the forces, magical, geopolitical, climatic, geological or otherwise, that trigger the separation of Iberia from Europe, it is clear that the rupture of the continent itself constitutes an *actant* in Latour's terms. It is certainly able to alter the course of events, affecting humans and non-humans, animate beings and inanimate things, alike, creating assemblages, whose parts hold together in shifting combinations of harmony and discord. Indeed, as Saramago's narrator points out, if the story were the libretto of an opera, it would comprise twenty human and non-human voices "of every timbre, one by one, in chorus, in succession", including, among others:

> The joint sessions of the Spanish and Portuguese governments, the total disruption of the electric transport system … the flight of tourists in panic … the agitation of the bulls in Spain, the nervousness of the horses in

> Portugal … the disturbance of tides, the flight of the rich and their fortunes. (Saramago, 1986, p. 41)

In this context, the human protagonists, whose extraordinary feats and experiences make the news in both Spain and Portugal, begin to seek each other out. Firstly, Joaquim Sassa looks for José Anaiço, who is still followed by the starlings, and the two head to Spain in Sassa's old Deux Chevaux car in search of Pedro Orce, who continues to experience otherwise undetectable earth tremors. As Sassa and Anaiço set out on their journey, the starlings follow relentlessly, forcing the two men to stop frequently as the birds appear unable to fly in a straight line. As well as arguably belonging to a broader human/non-human assemblage, the flock itself resembles an assemblage in that it is a "living, throbbing" confederation which, despite the confounding energies at its heart, is able to function as a whole (Bennett, 2010, pp. 23-24). Thus, despite their attachment to the flock, the starlings' individual desires disrupt, without destroying, the progress of the flock as "some would prefer to rest, others to drink water or to peck at berries, and until their desires coincide the flock will be scattered and its itinerary upset" (Saramago, 1986, p. 81).

The starlings nevertheless accompany the travellers to Spain and back to Portugal. On their return to Portugal, the travellers, now accompanied by Pedro Orce, pass through Albufeira, where local slum-dwellers have occupied the hotels following the departure of the tourists, highlighting another gap in the institutional response to the crisis. The squatters' leader implores the military and police, summoned to make them vacate the premises, to think of their own families, offering to pay rent and take good care of the hotel. His suggestion is rejected, and a battle thus ensues between the squatters and the armed forces, from which the occupiers emerge victorious (Saramago, 1986, p. 80). However, in Rancière's terms, there is a new "partition of the sensible". Like the plebs in Ancient Rome, who, through their imitation of the patricians' speech acts, become recognised as beings capable of making promises and drawing up contracts (Rancière, 2004, pp. 22-26), the occupiers are finally able to make themselves heard as speaking beings, disrupting what Rancière calls the "police order". The squatters thus become well-organised, forming democratically elected committees and subcommittees for everything from hygiene and maintenance to sport and education (Saramago, 1986, p. 126) and, by the time Orce, Sassa and Anaiço leave for Lisbon the movement has spread across the border to Spain.

Following the three men's arrival in Lisbon they are sought out by a mysterious woman carrying a stick, who turns out to be Joana Carda, eager to share her concerns that she was responsible for the splitting of the continent by drawing an indelible line in the ground. In the absence of Sassa and Orce, José and Joana, who will eventually become lovers, decide to meet in a park; it is only then that, presumably having fulfilled their mission, the starlings decide to depart for good (Saramago, 1986, p. 159). Joana persuades the others to accompany her on a journey to see the line she drew. On their arrival, she points out that the stick had appeared to be as alive as the tree from which it was cut (Saramago, 1986, p. 179). When she draws a new line with the same stick, however, the line is easily erased, so that it is neither the branch itself nor Joana Carda who were responsible for the indelible line; it was rather a product of the specific moment (Saramago, 1986, p. 128). This, then, suggests a short-lived human/non-human assemblage, acting as a whole but with no clear leadership or sovereignty. As Bennett points out, the effects - "a blackout, a hurricane, a war on terror" - generated by an assemblage are not the result of one of its parts directing the others. They are, rather, properties which emerge from the assemblage as a whole, as distinct from the sum of properties of its individual members (Khan, 2009, p. 92).

As the travellers attempt to leave in the Deux Chevaux, Ardent, a large dog from Cerbère, impedes their journey by lying down in front of the car until they follow him. Thus, the humans agree to follow the dog, subverting the traditional hierarchy between man and beast (Salzani & Vanhoutte, 2018b, p. 201).

Meanwhile, the loss of the peninsula, now at a distance of more than 200 kilometers from Europe, provokes an identity crisis on the European continent. This "psychological and social convulsion" is, however, apparently easily overcome, as Europeans of all classes become accustomed to the situation, and are perhaps even secretly relieved (Saramago, 1986, p. 192). Thus, without the diversity of the peninsula and other potential renegade and breakaway regions, Europe will become a reflection of its quintessential spirit, a kind of Switzerland writ large (Saramago, 1986, p. 194).

However, this sense of relief is contested by other Europeans, mostly young "restless nonconformists", who, perhaps anticipating Twitter and its hashtags (Varela Alvarez, 2018, p. 65), scrawl the saying "We are Iberians too" in various languages on walls across Europe, so that the literal deterritorialisation of the European southwest provokes a deterritorialisation, or indeed a decoding, of the European identity construct. This

movement, which started as "the futile gesture of an idealist", thus gradually becomes "an outcry, a protest, a mass demonstration" (Saramago, 1986, p. 196) proclaimed against institutions "designed for and despite the people" (Varela Alvarez, 2018, p. 65). Thus, the "pro-Iberian" movement arguably becomes an attempt at a new partition of the sensible. Similarly, Rancière, giving the examples of Eastern bloc dissidents' appropriation of the word "hooligan", and the Parisian May 1968 protestors' declaration that "We are all German Jews", connects the occurrence of politics to the appearance of communities able to argue and construct metaphors (1995, pp. 59-60).

In a mockery of the (supposed) European tradition of democracy and free speech, however, European governments respond to this movement of "solidarity" with the Iberian Peninsula with clearly biased debates on TV, in which only those who are heavily critical of the perceived rebellion of a "wayward, backward European periphery" are invited to participate (Sabine, 2005, p. 81). The situation eventually deteriorates to one of civil unrest which results in hundreds of injuries and several deaths, culminating in the shooting of a handsome young Dutchman, whose last words are "At last, I'm Iberian" (Saramago, 1986, pp. 198-200).

In the meantime, the four human protagonists continue to pursue the dog, who leads them north, towards the Spanish region of Galicia, in the northwest corner of the Iberian Peninsula. However, as Saramago's narrator points out, it is not clear if even the dog is the main *actant* here, as there is always the possibility that they are all being attracted "by some magnet to the north or being pulled by the other end of a blue thread" (1986, p. 215).

Having led the travellers to Galicia, the dog eventually stops at an old farmhouse, owned by a widow called Maria Guavaira[2]. She instantly recognises the dog who, hungry, tired and injured after a seemingly long journey, had once turned up at her farmhouse, seeming to ask silently for help and a place to rest. Maria Guavaira shows the travellers the source of the blue thread; an old sock which she had unravelled but which produced an enormous quantity of wool (Saramago, 1986, p. 227).

2 As Ferreira points out, Maria Guavaira's unusual name is suggestive of the protagonist of the first literary Portuguese text, the thirteenth century *Cantiga de Guarvaia,* who, like Saramago's Maria Guavaira, is the focus of 'farcical, financially interested love' (2018, p. 178).

Here again, it is difficult to pin down the *actant* or *actants* who bring the travellers, in pursuit of the dog, to Maria Guavaira in distant Galicia. On one level, the dog appears to take the initiative, but he is arguably following the dictates of the blue thread, which apparently seeks to be reunited with the rest of the wool. In this case, Maria Guavaira would seem to be the source of the action, albeit indirectly, as it is she who unravelled the sock which produced the blue wool. However, the blue wool itself appears to be controlled by a mysterious source, possibly connected with the extraordinary geological events underway. Thus, it appears that the action is the result of distributive agency, in Bennett's terms, in which an action cannot be linked to a single subject, instead appearing to be motivated by a human/non-human assemblage. In other words, while Maria Guavaira may resemble "an Ariadne of sorts" (Ferreira, 2018, p. 178) in that her thread serves as a guide to the travellers as Ariadne's threat helped Theseus to navigate his way out of the labyrinth, she arguably lacks the agency of an Ariadne as the thread acts outside her will or control.

As a result of the situation provoked by this assemblage Maria Guavaira and José Anaiço soon become lovers, and the five humans and the dog decide to stay together. Meanwhile, the peninsula has changed course, and appears to be headed for a collision with the Azores islands. While Spain, with the exception of Galicia, is relatively safe, the coastal areas of Portugal are in danger of being hit by the islands. The apparently impending collision also has political repercussions, at both the national and international levels. The Portuguese President, for example, criticises the European Community for attributing responsibility to the Portuguese and Spanish governments, in a situation for which humans, whether at the individual or national level, are clearly not directly to blame, and which is largely outside their control. Thus, according to the President, the European Community has made scapegoats of the Iberian countries, blaming them for Europe's own internal issues, and absurdly demanding that they put a stop to the peninsula's movement (Saramago, 1986, p. 257).

For the USA, however, despite the death and destruction it would cause, the impending disaster is a potential opportunity to increase its geopolitical clout still further, as the new island's mid-Atlantic position, and its proximity to the USA, would supposedly benefit "World Peace and Western Civilization" (Saramago, 1986, p. 258).

The situation prompts a third, and possibly fourth, wave of exodus from the peninsula, particularly from the coastal regions of Portugal and Galicia. Following the departure

of the foreign tourists and, then, the rich and powerful, it is the poor who, fleeing in fear of their lives, form the bulk of the migrants, together with those of the wealthy who had held out so far (Saramago, 1986, p. 283). Our group of protagonists, both human and non-human, also set out on a journey together, and eventually decide to head towards the Pyrenees mountains, now divided into two ranges due to the separation of the peninsula from the continent. The Deux Chevaux having finally broken down, the group decides to replace it with a wagon drawn by real horses, Maria Guavaira's old grey horse, supplemented by a younger, chestnut horse which they steal on the way. The travellers thus live a gypsy-like existence, inhabiting the "socio-economic margins" (Sabine, 2005, p. 87), challenging, for instance, established patriarchal norms, as the two women are now in control of their destinies (Sabine, 2005, p. 86).

Thus, in the midst of impending "death and destruction, millions of corpses, half the peninsula going under", Saramago has constructed a temporary "oasis, where two women, three men, a dog, and now also a horse, live in perfect harmony" (Bloom, 2005, p. xv). In this time of chaos and anxiety, Sassa's radio, which plays popular Portuguese and Spanish songs with their well-known refrains also offers some relief, making the protagonists feel that "death has yet to be announced, the Azores are not yet in sight" (Saramago, 1986, p. 293). Notably, for Deleuze and Guattari, the refrain, or *ritournelle,* has a territorialising function, bringing order out of chaos, in that it is linked to the spatio-temporal delineation and organization of a territory; it can therefore be compared to the song a child sings in the dark to comfort him or herself (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 299-300, 311). The refrains of these Spanish and Portuguese songs therefore give the protagonists a comforting sense of home, even when that home seems to be floating towards its destruction.

In the meantime, however, the peninsula suddenly changes course; while its new direction is unclear it seems that collision with the Azores will, after all, be avoided. Like many of the migrants, however, the group of human and non-human protagonists continue on their journey towards the now divided Pyrenees, buying and selling clothes on the way in order to earn their keep. While they suffer discomforts and privations on the road, as they gradually relax the pace of their journey, they enjoy their newfound freedom, their new intimacy with nature and with each other.

They are also freed from the time pressures normally associated with contemporary life, and are able to enjoy long, leisurely conversations (Saramago, 1986, p. 326). During

one of these, Pedro Orce posits that, rather than being the focus of agency, he and the other human characters are merely the "last link in this chain of movements within movements", part of an enormous human/non-human assemblage in which;

> We're on a peninsula, the peninsula is sailing on the sea, the sea goes around on its own axis but also goes around the sun, and the sun also spins around, and the whole thing is heading in the direction of the aforesaid constellation. (Saramago, 1986, p. 327)

As life gradually returns to normal on the peninsula, various theories are aired by scientists regarding the peninsula's sudden aversion of catastrophe. The first considers the peninsula's new course to be entirely random, ruling out "an act of volition" (Saramago, 1986, p. 305), at least an act of human volition. As Saramago's narrator sardonically notes;

> To whom could such an act be attributed, since no one is likely to suggest that the incessant swarming, on an enormous mass of stone and earth, of tens of millions of people could somehow be added or multiplied to engender an intelligence or power capable of acting with a precision one can only describe as diabolical. (Saramago, 1986, p. 305)

The second theory suggests that the peninsula may, following a series of displacements, end up exactly where it started, and the third posits the existence of a magnetic field on the peninsula which effectively caused it to skid, in a manner perhaps similar to Lucretius' pieces of matter which, without warning, suddenly swerve from their downward path (Bennett, 2004, p. 358).

However, it is the fourth theory which is the most popular. According to this theory, collision was averted by a vector constituted by the Iberian population's "sheer terror and the desire for salvation" (Saramago, 1986, p. 306). As the narrator continues, despite the incongruity of this position, it became fashionable to propose that problems concerning any aspect of human existence, psychology or spirituality should be put down to strictly physical causes (Saramago, 1986, p. 306). From the perspective of vital materialism, this reflects people's deep cultural attachments to the idea that only humans possess real agency while matter is conceived of as inanimate (Bennett, 2010, p. 119) even where, as in the case of the peninsula's separation from mainland Europe, it seems exceedingly unlikely that a particular event was the direct result of human volition.

The new island now seems to be heading towards the frost and cold of Canada (Saramago, 1986, p. 342), which has potentially huge geopolitical amifications, suggesting the potentially powerful effects of this new human/non-human assemblage. Both Canada and the USA agree that it would be best if the peninsula could be arrested half way between Europe and North America in order to minimise both European influence and damage to American and Canadian interests (Saramago, 1986, p. 344). Finally, the peninsula changes course again, heading towards the South Atlantic between South America and Africa. Given its new destination, the Americans withdraw their promise of aid, although they fear that the arrival of the former peninsula in the South Atlantic "could cause more insubordination in the region" (Saramago, 1986, p. 255).

As the peninsula continues to descend towards the South Atlantic, it revolves, leading a Portuguese poet to compare it to a child moving in its mother's womb (Saramago, 1986, p. 388). While admiring the simile, Saramago's narrator nevertheless deplores "this yielding to the temptations of anthropomorphism … as if nature had nothing better to do than to think about us" (Saramago, 1986, p. 388). For Bennett, in contrast, anthropomorphism can be a useful tool in appreciating the vitality of matter, in that it helps to emphasise similarities between supposedly natural and cultural forms (Bennett, 2010, p. 99).

In the meantime, the five human protagonists continue on their journey towards the Pyrenees. Both Maria Guavaira and Joana Carda fall pregnant, and both are unsure of their baby's paternity as, one night, both slept with the ageing, lonely Pedro Orce out of pity. However, the two women's pregnancies are just the first of an overwhelming wave of pregnancies that will affect all the women of childbearing age across the Peninsula. As Saramago's narrator points out, after so many strange and seemingly inexplicable events, the mass pregnancy is not astonishing, and is apparently mysteriously linked to the movement of the former peninsula, with the possibility that the new creatures are the offspring not of men but of the gigantic stone raft itself (Saramago, 1986, p. 290).

Finally, as the peninsula comes to a halt, Pedro Orce, who can no longer feel the earth move, lies down and dies. The remaining protagonists, accompanied by another Spaniard, Roque Lozano and his donkey Platero, having wept and howled (in the case of the dog) for Pedro finally decide to return to Orce in order to bury him in his home town.

The future of the two couples, and indeed of the Peninsula itself, is, however, still uncertain (Sabine, 2005, p. 88). They leave Lozano in his home town, and the howling dog, Ardent, refuses to leave his master's grave. The two couples, like the Peninsula itself, face an uncertain future; "Who knows what future awaits them, how much time, what destiny" (Saramago, 1986, p. 403). At the end of the novel, however, Joana Carda plants her elm branch, which has turned green, on Orce's grave. Like the "rebirth" of the peninsula and the mass pregnancies, the elm branch does not promise a Utopian future[3]. However, it is, like them, a modest symbol of hope; "Perhaps it will flower again next year" (Saramago, 1986, p. 403).

Conclusion

Throughout *The Stone Raft,* Saramago's narrator questions the human characters' tendency to attribute agency and moral responsibility to themselves (and/or to other humans) for the Iberian Peninsula's splitting off from the European mainland, and for its sudden change of course. Instead, Saramago's world is not a world of subjects and objects but instead is characterised by "various materialities constantly engaged in a network of relations" (Bennett, 2004, p. 353).

The novel thus draws attention to the human/non-human assemblages which are created as a result of the peninsula's separation from the continent and its ensuing epic voyage. These geo(il)logical events have complex effects on the lives, societies and politics of the human characters in the novel. The splitting and movement of the peninsula has, for instance, varying effects on international relations, as its relations with the European continent, the USA and Canada, and between the two Iberian countries themselves shift together with the movement of the peninsula. However, while human agency is certainly limited by these human/non-human assemblages, human behaviour, while obviously affected, is not determined by them. In a sense, both in the Iberian countries and in Europe, the events provide an opportunity for questioning the established political order at the (supra)national and local levels too, sometimes resulting, in Rancière's terms, in new "partitions of the sensible", as previously silenced voices, such as those of the squatters or, perhaps, the European pro-Iberians succeed in making themselves heard as speaking beings.

At a different level, the agency of the five human protagonists is questioned. While they each seem to feel responsible for the fate of the peninsula – whether through

3 For contrasting interpretations of the ending of the novel see, for instance Daniel (2005) and Sabine (2005).

drawing a line with an elm stick, throwing a rock, or unravelling a woollen sock – there is no evidence that any of these humans is responsible for the event. Instead, while there appears to be a connection between these objects and the movement of the peninsula, the precise sequence of cause and effect is unclear, as is the agents' – or *actants'*- precise identity. Rather, again, agency apparently belongs to the mysterious and complex assemblages formed by the various human and animal protagonists, objects and geological events. However, the human protagonists are not simply passive recipients of these events. Instead, they use the opportunity to question and reshape their ways of life, creating a new mini-community where, at least temporarily, they are freed from conventional ideas about love, gender roles and work.

However, while Saramago's human characters are certainly not passive objects, they do tend to overestimate their agency, and particularly their power over things. In this way, he seems to agree with Bennett, who, at the end of her book, posits that, by emphasising the common materiality of everything that exists, and positing a wider distribution of agency, a vital materialist approach can help to challenge our delusions of human mastery (2010, p. 122). Saramago's narrator thus arguably acts as an advocate for vibrant matter, denouncing human hubris and emphasising the interconnectedness of human and thing power;

> Dear God, how all things in this world are linked together, and here we are thinking that we have the power to separate or join them at will, how sadly mistaken we are, having been proved wrong time and time again, a line traced on the ground, a flock of starlings, a stone thrown into the sea, a blue woollen sock, but we are showing them to the blind, preaching to the deaf with hearts of stone. (Saramago, 1986, p. 400)

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