HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM, PRECARIOUSNESS, AND ECONOMY OF SAMENESS IN JOHN LANCHESTER'S *THE WALL*

JOHN LANCHESTER'IN *THE WALL* ROMANINDA İNSAN İSTİSNACILIĞI, KIRILGANLIK VE TEKDÜZEN EKONOMİSİ

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Abstract

John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019) presents a dystopic world where climate change in the form of extreme rising sea levels has caused the majority of the landmasses to be inundated and millions of people to lose their homes, transforming them into environmentally displaced people who try to survive in the open seas. In the novel, miraculously affected by climate change only in a limited way, Britain builds a ten-thousand-kilometer-long wall that circumscribes all its borders to keep not only the water out but also the environmentally displaced others. Given this double function of the wall, this article aims to discuss this image of the wall, first, as a reflection of human exceptionalism which gives off the false impression that even a climate disaster at that scale is still somehow tractable. Second, it further argues that the wall acts as a catalyst for perpetuating an economy of sameness or self-identity that deliberately ignores and increases the vulnerability and precarity of others by creating an impassable divide between insiders (i.e. those inside the wall) and outsiders (i.e. the environmentally displaced people)—a divide that not only maximizes the precarity of the latter group but also casts their lives as disposable.

Keywords: John Lanchester, *The Wall*, Human Exceptionalism, Precariousness, Precarity, Economy of Sameness

Öz

John Lanchester'ın *The Wall* (2019) adlı romanı, aşırı yükselen deniz seviyeleri şeklinde tecelli eden iklim değişikliğinin, büyük kara parçalarının çoğunluğunun sular altında kalmasına ve milyonlarca insanın evlerini kaybetmesine sebebiyet vererek onların açık denizlerde hayat mücadelesi veren çevresel olarak yerinden edilmiş insanlara dönüştüğü bir distopik dünya sunmaktadır. Romanda, iklim değişikliğinden mucizevi bir şekilde sadece kısıtlı bir biçimde etkilenen Britanya, sadece suyu değil aynı zamanda çevresel olarak yerinden edilmiş insanları da dışarıda tutmak için on bin kilometre uzunluğunda tüm sınırlarını çevreleyen bir duvar inşa eder. Duvarın bu iki işlevi göz önüne alındığında, bu çalışma, bu duvar imgesini, ilk olarak, bu ölçekte bir iklim felaketinin dahi hala bir şekilde kolay başa çıkılabilir olduğu yanlış izlenimini veren insan istisnacılığının bir yansıması olarak tartışmayı hedeflemektedir. İkinci olarak ise, duvarın, içeridekiler (duvarın içerisinde olanlar) ve dışarıdakiler (duvarın dışında kalan çevresel olarak yerinden edilmiş insanlar) arasında aşılmaz bir bölünme yaratarak – ki bu bölünme sadece ikinci grubun güvencesizliğini azami seviyeye çıkarmakla kalmaz aynı zamanda onların yaşamlarını elden çıkarılabilir kılar – başkalarının kırılganlığını ve güvencesizliğini kasıtlı bir şekilde göz ardı eden ve artıran bir tekdüzen ekonomisinin sürdürülmesinde bir katalizör görevi gördüğünü tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: John Lanchester, *The Wall*, İnsan İstisnacılığı, Kırılganlık, Güvencesizlik, Tekdüzen Ekonomisi

INTRODUCTION

In his Booker-longlisted novel *The Wall* (2019), John Lanchester presents a precarious dystopic/post-apocalyptic world ravaged by climate change in the form of an extreme rise in sea levels that have already inundated many countries and islands and caused most of the landmasses across the world to be fully submerged under water, leaving almost no land intact. Although there are apparently other effects of "the Change," as it is referred to throughout the novel, in addition to rising sea levels, it seems that Britain where the narrative takes place is only affected in a rather limited way by the singular event of sea level rise whose effects Britain managed to fend off by building a huge long wall that circumscribes all of its coastline. As Kavanagh, the protagonist of the story through whose perspective the reader witnesses the new world order, says, "[t]he Wall is ten thousand kilometres long, more or less…It is three metres wide at the top … On the sea side it is usually about five metres high; on the land side the height varies according to the terrain" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 14). However, the wall's function in the novel goes beyond merely keeping the water out because it simultaneously keeps the environmentally displaced people out, too. In this respect, from a political reference point, "it is hard not to read the novel as a riff on Brexit and the US under Trump, as well as a chilling ecological dystopia" because a wall after Trump's wall has become "shorthand for ugly political and ideological division …" (Allardice, 2019, para. 3). Although Lanchester does not completely dismiss out of hand such a potential political reading of his novel, he nevertheless proposes a more neutral way of evaluating the wall in his novel. As he maintains in an interview with Lisa Allardice, "it is not a metaphor for anything else ... We had this period when walls were coming down around the world and now, just as an empirical fact, they are springing up all over the place" (2019, para. 3). Although his take on the meaning of the wall still has an implicitly political spin to it, he insists that the wall "was much more than a metaphor" and that "[i]t was an image, a country with a wall round it" (Allardice, 2019, para. 4). However, the storyline surrounding the wall is still embroiled within the wider context of an environmental catastrophe that has ravaged the world. In this article, I propose to read this "image" as a reflection of human exceptionalism with its relentless assumption that environmental problems, or rather any problem for that matter, can be overcome by humans themselves. I further argue that the wall in the novel acts as a catalyst for perpetuating an economy of sameness or self-identity based off of such exceptionalism through the formation of an impassable divide between insiders (i.e. those inside the wall) and outsiders

(i.e. the environmentally displaced people)—a divide that not only maximizes the precarity of the latter group but also casts their lives as disposable.

THE WALL OF/AS HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Human exceptionalism, in its simplest form, designates "[t]he view (paradigm) that humans are different from all other organisms, all human behaviour is controlled by culture and free will, and all problems can be solved by human ingenuity and technology" (Park, 2012). This paradigm creates a rift between *anthropos* and nature as if the former were separable from the latter. The chasm between the two has further established a hierarchy of beings that dates back to the classical antiquity, hence falsely attributing a superior position to humans over against nonhumans or nature in general. And at least since the Age of Enlightenment, this position of *anthropos* has been strengthened with such attributes as "Factor X" which makes *anthropos* special and accordingly separates him from all other living beings (Fukuyama, 2002, p. 171). Put differently, the prioritization of reason and rationality has engendered the assumptions that, no matter what the circumstances or problems are or could be, humans are capable of, as it were, defeating nature and keeping it under control with their advanced technologies. Indeed, many solutions to environmental problems have been (and continue to be) proposed in the last couple of decades. It is especially the case with the development of (geo) engineering that envisions interfering with and manipulating the climate processes of the Earth to mitigate the effects of climate change. Or, in the case of a pressing concern such as storm surges or rising sea levels due to climate change, geoengineering might as well develop engineering solutions to protect the inhabited lands. As Charlier, Chaineux, and Morcos state, although "[c]onstruction of coastal defenses can be traced back to remote times," in the face of climate change, "[c]oastal protection against an advancing sea became increasingly a concern for governments during the last century and a half" (2005, pp. 79, 82). The engineering solutions to rising seas generally include the construction of seawalls or surge barriers as the 2006 EEA Report emphasizes that "[p]rotecting coastal zones against sea level rise and other climatic changes would involve increasing long term investment and the robustness of infrastructural designs …" (p. 51). The vision for such coastal protection structures is apparently underlined by the will and power of *anthropos* to encounter the natural forces that defy or threaten *his* existence. The implication is that with enough investment and proper engineering techniques, there is always a solution to external natural threats.

The (sea) wall in Lanchester's novel could be seen as an extension and implementation of coastal defense solutions which are generally characterized by "[m]assive engineering works" (Charlier *et al*., 2005, p. 82). The wall, officially called "National Coastal Defence Structure" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 21) in the narrative, is an extreme form of any existing seawall, measuring about three hundred times the length of the longest existing seawall in the world, namely, Saemangeum Seawall in South Korea, which is only thirty-three kilometers. In this regard, Lanchester takes his cue from the existing technologies only to exponentially magnify their scale by making the wall in the novel stretch all along the perimeter of the British island. This wall, as Kavanagh notes upon his conscription, gives the impression of "a long low concrete monster. It stretches into the distance. Although the Wall is completely vertical, when you stand underneath it, it feels as if it overhangs. As if it could topple over onto you. You feel leant on" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 4). Briefly after the start of the construction of this enormous structure on the east coast of Britain, engineers had to make a couple of changes to it: "[A]s the Change progressed, engineers realized that the Wall needed to start further out, so the river mouth was concreted over and the direction of the Wall had been reshaped" (Lanchester, 2019, pp. 83–84). Hence, the meticulous work of engineers with their well-implemented engineering solution helped redress a potential problem that the wall's previous design might have posed in time, and prevented Britain from being inundated unlike many other unfortunate places across the world.

One of the problems with the presentation of such an effective solution is that it not only downplays the reach and extent of climate change but also gives off the false idea that even a climate disaster at that scale is still somehow tractable because, apparently, Britain has overcome its vulnerable position which makes it sound relatively easy with the construction of the wall along its coastal perimeter. This position is further strengthened through the discourse adopted by the political figures in the novel. Although one of the politicians reveals in his talk given to the "defenders" who do their military service on the wall that "the Change was not a single solitary event," he nevertheless adds that "[w]e speak of it in that manner because here we experienced one particular shift, of sea level and weather, over a period of years" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 110). Characterizing climate change as a watershed event, he further maintains that "it felt then and when we look back on it today still feels like an incident that happened, a defined moment in time with a before and an after" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 110). In a sense, reducing climate change simply to a defined catastrophic moment in history indicates that Britain has managed to handle the situation at hand, and remained implausibly unaffected by the continuing

process of climate change elsewhere. Its timely response to the Change with its impenetrable wall is accordingly presented as the ultimate solution Britain successfully implemented and thus presumably solved the problem of sea level rise once and for all. As the politician further emphasizes, "the Wall has been here for years … This country is the best in the world. We have prevailed, we do prevail, we will prevail" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 112). Although it is intended to give some information about the position of Britain and the rumors about "others" who will try to get over the wall, this speech is, by implication, founded on and reinforces the misguided assumptions of *anthropos* as having the edge in the face of natural forces. The wall proves to be, after all, a paradigm of defense as well as victory against nature in the form of increasing sea levels and weather changes. The triumphant attitude of the politician is, therefore, fundamentally predicated on human exceptionalism that irreparably operates on and further perpetuates binary categories like human/nonhuman and culture/nature.

Such constructed ontological divisions lead to the false sense of immunity to and independence from nature to the extent of invincibility, thereby failing to acknowledge our inextricable situatedness or embeddedness in the natural world. Highlighting the impossibility of abstraction from nature, Donna Haraway proposes the term "nature culture" to designate the "implosion of nature and culture" and to emphasize our "co-habitation, co-evolution, and embodied cross-species sociality" (2003, pp. 16, 4). This approach problematizes and annuls the possibility of, what Elaine Graham calls, "ontological hygiene" (2002, p. 11) that we have tried hard to maintain because it revises our assumed unilateral relations with nature by reconceptualizing them into that of reciprocal entanglement and becoming. As Haraway further notes, "becoming is always becoming *with*—in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world is at stake" (2008, p. 244). In this respect, existence is always already co-existence based on interdependence and connectivity between the human and nonhuman world. As such, Haraway's "natureculture" fittingly contests "dualisms" by offering "a synthesis of nature and culture that recognizes their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed" (Malone & Ovenden, 2016, para. 1). And the epoch we are living in today attests to the significance and urgency of rethinking our ecological relations without falling into the fallacy of human exceptionalism. Due to the reach and extent of our extremely destructive practices, Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer have come to label the current geological epoch as "the 'Anthropocene'" (the epoch of *anthropos*) in that it marks a new phase in the geomorphological structure and processes of the planet Earth (2000, p. 17). Given the

anthropogenic changes caused by human practices at least since the Industrial Revolution and their (un)predictable aftereffects most prominently in the form of climate change, the Anthropocene forcefully reminds us of our inextricable entanglements with the natural world. However, in *The Wall*, the political leaders fail to see the Anthropocene for what it really is in that they put up an act of triumph over nature with their impermeable wall which has kept them intact from the rising seas. There are two glaring problems with this position: first, nobody knows how long the wall will last despite its robust structure, and second, one can never know if the Change will resume affecting Britain again. At any given moment, the circumstances might deteriorate and shatter the sense of false security Britain has constructed around its image. In this respect, the wall in the novel functions as an emblem of human separation/ abstraction/ independence that fail to acknowledge interdependence.

PRECARIOUSNESS AND PRECARITY: VULNERABLE LIVES

Environmental disasters starkly expose that not everyone is equally subjected to or affected by the damage they inflict upon occurrence. As environmental justice scholars have drawn our attention, "low-income communities, people of color, and migrant communities" as well as those that geographically inhabit vulnerable positions are generally the first to face and suffer the imminent consequences of environmental cataclysms and "climate injustice" (Anguelovski *et al.*, 2019, p. 26139). In this respect, environmental disasters ultimately reveal how many communities might be instantly rendered vulnerable at any given moment in the face of, say, storm surges, erosion, floods, and rising seas. In Lanchester's *The Wall*, the Change has had devastating effects for the majority of people around the world, causing them to lose their homelands to rising seas and to lead their lives under terrible conditions on boats in the open seas with almost nowhere to land. These environmentally displaced people who seek shelter and refuge in Britain which remains considerably untouched by the aftermath of the Change, apparently with the help of their concrete wall, and thus seems to be a safe haven for these people, are, however, not welcomed. To the contrary, Britain protects its borders at all costs to keep these people out. Therefore, in this section, I advance the argument that the wall that exemplifies an instance of human exceptionalism is revealed to have a further and more insidious role in that its huge concrete structure prevents those living inside the wall from seeing the precarious conditions of the environmentally dispossessed, and makes them oblivious to the latter's vulnerability.

Lanchester ingenuously constructs his plot around the linear outward journey of Kavanagh who starts as an insider only to end up an outsider or simply "other." In a sense, the protagonist moves in the course of the novel from the relatively reassuring position of living as a subject of the wall-protected Britain to a precarious one outside the wall. The wall in this equation not only draws a thick line that sets insiders and outsiders apart but eclipses the precarity of "Others," as the outsiders are referred to in the novel (Lanchester, 2019, p. 11). Critically conceptualizing the idea of precarity, Judith Butler, whose work triggered a large body of work to be produced on this issue in the last two decades, introduces a significant distinction between "precarity" and "precariousness." In her view, precariousness denotes "a shared condition of human life" (2009, p. 13) that points to "a 'common' corporeal vulnerability" (2004, p. 42). It is revealed to be a unifying thread that binds all humans to each other (as well as to nonhuman animals) in that human and nonhuman animals are by nature vulnerable beings. Butler's conception of precariousness is "premised on the vulnerability that flows from the contingency of life itself and the social interdependence that necessarily and always underpins life" (Vij, 2019, p. 13). Put differently, life in any of its forms is always already exposed and as such is inevitably open to injury and death. As Butler further notes, "[l]ives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed" (2009, p. 25). Precariousness, therefore, characterizes all life in general. On the other hand, as opposed to the rendition of precariousness as "a universal human condition" (Ruti, 2017, p. 94), precarity figures rather as a politically saturated concept in Butler's work that pertains to the social, economic, and political conditions of certain lives, groups, or populations. Highlighting the particular living conditions of certain lives, the concept "[p]recarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler, 2009, p. 25). In this sense, in lieu of a universal shared condition, precarity points to a particular set of (not so favorable) circumstances that certain groups are more susceptible to find themselves in. Despite our common vulnerability, "precarity as the politically induced condition … den[ies] equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence" (Butler, 2009, p. 28). And to these racially and nationally conceptualized populations can be surely added the environmentally displaced populations given the looming threat coming from global warming which is predicted to displace millions of people in the near future.

Precarity is prominently "experienced by marginalized, poor, and disenfranchised people who are exposed to economic insecurity, injury, violence, and forced migration" (Kasmir, 2018, para. 4). This exposure—unequally distributed because people from the wealthier parts of the world are not so exposed to these conditions as those from the poorer ones—inevitably includes environmental problems because, as Sharryn Kasmir puts it, "neoliberalism, war, and climate crises render these inequalities especially acute" (para. 4). In this respect, Lanchester's novel sheds light on the potential state of our world saturated with inequalities and terrible social, economic, political, and environmental conditions that await the majority of human as well as nonhuman populations. As Lanchester himself notes in an interview, his book, *The Wall*, is "not the future, but it's a version of a future, and it feels a lot like a version of the future that we are heading for" (Allardice, 2019, para. 2). Lanchester's take on his novel as such can be interpreted on various levels one of which pertains to the inextricable relationship between the concrete wall and the precarity of "Others." Butler writes that "[t]here are ways of distributing vulnerability, differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others" (2004, p. xii). The differential distribution of precarity is felt more acutely by certain groups than others and is corroborated in the novel through the persistent exclusion of environmental refugees from Britain. In this analogy, the wall is not only an epitome of human exceptionalism as argued in the previous section, but also, more importantly, the literal and metaphorical separator that perpetuates the inequitable distribution of precarity and turns the outsiders (environmental refugees) into a vulnerable population or what Guy Standing calls, "the precariat" (2011, p. 8, also see p. 93).

The horrible living conditions of the precariat beyond the wall are insidiously hidden from the eyes of the British public, and accordingly people inside the wall have only a rough estimate of what life is like outside the wall. The invisibility of the extremely vulnerable situation of others occasioned by the overbearing wall is conducive to the failure of evoking an ethical response from insiders. Formulating the intersubjective relationships as fundamentally and primarily ethical, Emmanuel Levinas argues that vulnerability which is written all over the face (*visage*) of the other inevitably elicits a response from the self, and responsibility originates in the face of the other (1982/1985, p. 97). In other words, for Levinas, we are bound from the very beginning to respond to the other in an ethical manner because the other's face makes a call to us—a call that we cannot not hear but may not heed. In this regard, the call of the other is always already there, summoning and beckoning to us to be responsible for the other. In the novel,

however, such potential connection cognizant of the vulnerability of others is immediately severed with the military precautions taken by the government against others. Drawing attention to the significance of recognizing vulnerability, Butler states that "[m]indfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war" (2004, p. 29). Failing to be 'mindful' of its precariousness, the British state in the novel opts for military solutions and imposes precarity on others by waging a war against them. And this is ultimately an attempt girded by a desire to instantiate an economy of sameness that is not tolerant of otherness or alterity.

ECONOMY OF SAMENESS AND SELF-IDENTITY

Implementing a series of precautions and measures in the novel against others, Britain deliberately fails to recognize the precarity of the outsiders and instead increases their vulnerability so as to establish an economy of sameness or self-identity which is made possible only by keeping alterity out and by placing others outside the frames of intelligibility and recognizability. This situation is concretized by the fact that the wall is at all times manned with "defenders":

> A Defender for every two hundred metres: fifty thousand Defenders on duty at any time. Another fifty thousand on the other shift, so a hundred thousand on duty, day in day out. Plus it's two weeks on, two weeks off. Half of the Defenders aren't on the Wall, they're on leave or on training or waiting for their two weeks' turn of duty. So two hundred thousand active Defenders at any given moment. Add support and ancillary staff, officers and administrators, add the Coast Guard and the air force and the navy, people off sick, whatever, and it's more than three hundred thousand people involved in defending the Wall. That's why everybody goes to the Wall, no exceptions. That's rule. (Lanchester, 2019, p. 34).

Every single citizen has to serve on the wall for two years but despite the fact that they serve on the border, there is no way for these people to get into a meaningful contact with others because the British territorial waters are also overseen by "the Guard" and "the Flight" units:

> [T]he Wall isn't the only form of border and coastal protection. The Flight scans the seas for Others, locates them, sometimes 'takes them out' then and there. It's funny,

only Defenders on the Wall talk about 'killing' Others: we're the ones who do it face to face, and we're the only ones who don't use euphemisms for it. The Flight consists of some people in planes and many more people operating drones. Sometimes the Flight marks their location for the Guards, full name Coast Guards ... They patrol the coast and the seas and their job is to sink the Others' boats. (Lanchester, 2019, p. 36)

The strict military measures taken against others protect the boundaries between the British citizens and others to the detriment of the latter. Such a militarist position points to an ignorance regarding one's own vulnerability which is concealed by the maximization of others' precarity (Butler, 2009, p. 25) by forcing them to live under insecure and harsh environmental conditions far from the British citizens. As Janell Watson puts it, "disavowing vulnerability creates political inequalities resulting in precarity …," and disavowal can easily lead to "[i]immunization [that] takes the form of violence directed at the perceived threat" (2012, para. 2). In this equation, others emerge as the ultimate threat for Britain in that by virtue of their sheer number they can disrupt Britain's self-identity and self-sufficiency in the face of the [Climate] Change. One of the politicians in the novel reveals how "the unfortunates," namely, the environmentally displaced others, are perceived as a danger to the British community: "the Change did not stop. The shelter blew away, the waters rose to the higher ground, the ground baked, the crops died, the ledge crumbled, the well dried up. The safety was an illusion. So the unfortunates must flee again …" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 111). He further cautions that because of the worsening conditions outside the wall, there are more and more "others" who will try to make it into the British territory: "Big numbers, dangerous numbers … The Others are coming … You will be busy. The things for which you have been training: you are likely, more likely than for some years, to do them for real" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 111). The failure to empathize with others and accept its own precariousness precludes Britain from taking a responsible action and, to the contrary, precipitates it to turn to extreme violence in the form of euphemistically "taking them out" or, in the case of defenders, simply "killing them" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 36). Therefore, the fight against others is a fight against the dissolution of the integrity of Britain's selfsameness and is problematically justified in the name of self-protection and self-immunization.

The attempt to cement selfsameness inevitably brings about an immunization through reactionary violence against others. Self-preservation as such might easily give way to the

adoption of a violent attitude towards others who pose a risk for the self-identity of a community. Drawing on Butler's detection of "an 'ethical violence' in the demand for 'self-identity' and 'complete coherence,'" Janell Watson argues that "[s]elf-identity is violent because it only becomes possible with the destruction of that which exceeds the bounds of the subject …" (2012, para. 14). In this respect, the economy of sameness operates on the premise that self-perpetuation of a community is to be favored and encouraged at all costs, that is, at the expense of others who do not exactly fit into its norms or normative structure. This approach invites as well as sanctions violence through a rendition of others as less than human. As Butler argues, violence is made possible with "[t]he derealization of the 'Other'" which "means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral" (2004, pp. 33–34). This liminal position at the interface of life/death emanates, in Butler's view, from the fact that

> certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, that they fit no dominant frame for the human, and that their dehumanization occurs first, at this level, and that this level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture. (2004, p. 34)

Indeed, dehumanization occurs extensively throughout the novel and is meticulously exploited when needed by the British government. For instance, "[u]ntil about ten years ago, Others who showed they had valuable skills could stay, at the cost of exchanging places with the Defenders who had failed to keep them out" (Lanchester, 2019, pp. 46–47). However, since the word spread about Britain's self-interested pragmatic welcome of those with 'valuable skills'—which "became known to Others and started to act as a 'pull factor'" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 47)—it became a center of attention for the environmentally displaced who wanted to make it into their potential safe haven, namely, Britain. This much interest by others in Britain formed the basis of a fear in the community and triggered the implementation of extensive measures in the form of new deterrent laws.

According to the new laws that Britain passed following the increasing interest from others, as Kavanagh expresses, "Others who get over the Wall have to choose between being euthanised, becoming Help or being put back to sea" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 47). The highly restricted three options offered to those who manage to find a way to the other side of the wall reveal to what extent their lives do *not* matter, and illustrate the insidious dehumanization at

work. And this dehumanization corresponds to "the systematic erasure of those who do not qualify as fully human, an erasure which makes violence invisible to us …" (Ruti, 2017, p. 97). Indeed, the first and third options for others, that is, euthanasia and being put back to sea, indicate more or less a similar outcome for others in that death is immediate in euthanasia whereas it is imminent—for lack of food, shelter, and land in the open seas—in being put back to sea. In this respect, these two options are equivalent to leaving these people to die mercilessly. The only less (but still) violent option left for these people is to opt for the second one: "Almost all of them choose to be Help" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 47). Help indicates a role that others have to accept without any protest unless they want to be killed or put back to sea—a role that turns them into "the property of the state" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 148), strips them of any human rights, and places them at the behest of the British citizens who can afford to have Help as their personal modern-day slaves. As Kavanagh says, "We aren't rich enough to have Help—Help is free but you have to feed and clothe and house it so the costs still add up" (Lanchester, 2019, pp. 57–58). The way Help is framed and talked of in the British society is indicative of dehumanization *par excellence* as clearly seen in the use of the third-person singular (impersonal) pronoun, "it," to refer to Help. For instance, Kavanagh mentions how he and his friends got Help for a camping adventure during their off days as follows: "I had thought it might be awkward for us, from the human point of view, getting used to Help when we weren't the kind of people who had it in our private lives" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 70). Kavanagh later ponders on their experience with Help during their camping in the following manner: "I'd never really thought about Help before, either having it or being it …" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 80). In a similar vein, when Kavanagh and his girlfriend Hifa visit her mother, the manner Hifa's mother talks about Help is quite telling:

> If you had said when I was younger that I would have Help, not that it existed in those days, but had explained to me what it is and that I would one day be making use of it, I would not have believed you. Another human being at one's beck and call, just by lifting a finger, simply provided to one, in effect one's personal property … though of course they are technically the property of the state, there are all sorts of monitorings and safeguards, it isn't at all like such arrangements in the benighted past, it is a form of providing welfare and shelter and refuge to the wretched of the world—but no, still, I would not have believed you. (Lanchester, 2019, p. 148)

As humanity is denied to these people within the framework of the British state, their lives fail to matter and be cherished *as* lives. From the very beginning, they cannot enter or are not accepted into the domain of what counts as life or human. Dehumanization, in Butler's view, leads to "a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as 'destructible' and 'ungrievable'" (2009, p. 31). "Such populations," Butler further argues, "are 'lose-able,' or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited" (2009, p. 31). In a sense, others in the novel lead "'unlivable lives' whose legal and political status is suspended" (Butler, 2004, p. xv). They do not legally exist nor are recognized as citizens in Britain. In this regard, others who are stripped of their humanity upon their so-called inclusion in the British society as Help are in fact excluded by the same stroke from the frame of the normative human. Therefore, their inclusion in the society is fundamentally an exclusion because it fails to crack open the established ontology of self-identity that Britain perpetuates.

The British state further cements its self-identity through the decisive implementation of biochips into the bodies of its citizens. This practice introduces a physical demarcation that separates the rightful citizens from others, and thus decidedly marks people or lives as insiders and outsiders. It is essentially a regulatory measure that makes possible for the British state to decide on whose lives are sanctioned and are worthy of being considered as lives. Kavanagh says that "[t]here's no escape and no alternative, now that everybody in the country has a chip: without one, you'd last about ten minutes." (Lanchester, 2019, p. 47). With the tightening of surveillance, everybody is policed and easily monitored through their biochips which enable the state to check and confirm the status of its citizens. Accordingly, others who manage to get in have a hard time hiding from the repressive state forces: "So even if they get over the Wall and then get away, they're always caught and offered the standard choice [of becoming Help]" (Lanchester, 2019, p.47). In this respect, biochips function as a strategic maneuver to preclude any potential "breach of the regulative ideal and anthropology of self-mastery" that Britain embodies in the novel (Vij, 2019, p. 3). The significance of biochips as a marker is further illustrated when many others succeed in getting into Britain during Kavanagh and his fellows' watch. Such breach constitutes a serious crime according to the state law and thus calls for a serious punishment: "One in, one out: for every Other who got over the Wall, one Defender would be put to sea" (Lanchester, 2019, pp. 36–37). However, before being put back to sea, Kavanagh and his friends are stripped of their biochips which earlier qualified their lives as valuable lives. As Kavanagh solemnly reveals, "one by one were brought to the medical centre

and put under general anaesthetic while we had our chips removed. No biometric ID, no life. Not in this country. No turning back" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 182). Kavanagh ruefully understands how their political existence in the British state is revoked and how they no longer exist as citizens with socio-political rights. The removal of their chips annuls and, more importantly, "derealizes" as well as "dehumanizes" their existence (Butler, 2004, p. 33) by suspending their rights of citizenship.

In Giorgio Agamben's words, the state determines "the threshold beyond which life ceases to be politically relevant, becomes only 'sacred life,' and can as such be eliminated without punishment" (1995/1998, p. 139). Agamben further argues that "[e]very society sets this limit; every society—even the most modern—decides who its 'sacred men' will be" (1995/1998, p. 139). Sacred men or *homo sacer* indicate those who are expunged from the society/state, resulting in the loss or suspension of their political rights and existence. In this regard, the hollow feeling that Kavanagh and his fellows experience in their bodies upon the removal of their biochips attests to the transformation of their previously recognized real existence into an unrecognized spectral one: "After the operation … I could feel an itch deep in my arm where the chip had been and when I asked the others said they had the same feeling. A phantom chip." (Lanchester, 2019, p. 182). The biochips in their bodies used to concretize and affirm their existence as part of the British society and as the subjects of the British state. Upon their removal, though, they only leave an empty sensation in their bodies which are immediately deprived of their significance and value, and as such their existence is rendered spectral and ghostly, that is, an existence that is "in a state of suspension between life and death," and an existence that is not recognized as life (Butler, 2004, p. 36). Eliminating any potential threat that might endanger the sustainability of the political state, these political sanctions and practices determine who is eligible to be included in the community and who can be discarded for the operation or perpetuation of the political body. Therefore, asself-identity and self-preservation "rel[y] on exclusionary immunitary boundaries" (Watson, 2012, para. 12), the obsession of the repressive British state in the novel with the demarcation of insiders from outsiders through biochips reifies the construction of an economy of sameness that Britain attempts to retain with its establishment of a community that introduces rigid boundaries against others and help protect its integrity and uniformity.

CONCLUSION

John Lanchester's *The Wall* lays bare the workings of human exceptionalism that creates an unsurpassable gap between humans and nature, presenting the former as all the more powerful and even invincible in the face of the latter. The concomitant effect of such exceptionalism embodied by the impenetrable wall that the British state prides itself on is revealed to be the constitution of an economy of sameness or self-identity that characterizes and unifies a community. This economy of sameness constructs boundaries that separate those eligible "to be on the inside" (Lanchester, 2019, p. 71) from others who are refused entry to the community in question. Exclusionary politics adopted as such supports exclusionary norms that determine the parameters and frames of recognizability. If one fails to meet the norms and standards set by a community, he/she simultaneously fails to be part of that community which, in turn, makes his/her life disposable and expendable. This situation accordingly causes certain populations and groups to be more vulnerable because the preservation of an exclusionary community that admits of no otherness is proportionally bound to the debilitation of other(ed) groups. In other words, those communities that constantly police the boundaries between insider and outsider simultaneously impose precarity on others and maximize their vulnerability in order to maintain their own immunity and selfsameness. In this regard, in addition to bringing to light, among others, "our present anxieties about rising sea levels, anti-refugee populism, post-Brexit scarcity and intergenerational conflict" (Thomas-Corr, 2019, para. 2), Lanchester's novel, more importantly, sheds light on the urgent need to recognize our vulnerability that we share with all human and nonhuman others because the failure to do so obscures our vision to see our otherwise inextricable interdependence and interconnectedness and also exacerbates the already precarious conditions of certain human and nonhuman groups.

As part of the cluster of what Jean-Michel Ganteau variously calls "vulnerable narratives," "vulnerable fictions," and "vulnerable text[s]" which "give visibility and a measure of articulacy" to vulnerability/precariousness and "help re-define ethical engagement and political commitment" (2015, pp. 168, 172–73), Lanchester's *The Wall* issues an ethical call as well as a timely warning against the perpetuation of violence towards others that renders their lives invisible. In so doing, it draws attention to the ethical repercussions of establishing barriers or walls that pigeonhole various communities and eradicate their potential contact zones, thereby blinding insiders to the atrocities they inflict on outsiders. Exposing the operation as well as the

dangers of such a behavior bent on excluding such populations as the environmentally displaced others through a process of marginalization and an imposition of precarity, Lanchester's narrative has the potential of "promoting a vision of literature and culture as care for and love of the other and of the world …" (Ganteau, 2015, p. 172). We need these 'vulnerable narratives' today more than ever precisely because we are living in a world whose precariousness is becoming more and more visible with environmental and climate disasters abounding each passing day. And, in such a world, these dystopic vulnerable fictions that always already remind us that they are on the verge of becoming our new reality might hold a pivotal place in encouraging us to adopt a more egalitarian and inclusive politics (as opposed to discriminatory and exclusionary) that is not only repellent to human exceptionalism and selfsameness but also cognizant of our shared vulnerability.

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EXPANDED SUMMARY

In *The Wall* (2019), John Lanchester presents a precarious dystopic/post-apocalyptic world ravaged by climate change in the form of an extreme rise in sea levels that have already inundated many countries and islands, and caused most of the landmasses across the world to be fully submerged under water, leaving almost no land intact. Although there are apparently other effects of climate change than just rising sea levels, it seems that Britain where the narrative takes place is only affected in a rather limited way by the singular event of sea level rise whose effects Britain managed to fend off by building a huge long wall that circumscribes all of its coastline. Given that the storyline surrounding the wall is embroiled within the wider context of an environmental catastrophe that has ravaged the world, in this article, I propose to read this "image" as a reflection of human exceptionalism with its relentless assumption that

environmental problems, or rather any problem for that matter, can be overcome by humans themselves. I further argue that the wall in the novel acts as a catalyst for perpetuating an economy of sameness or self-identity based off of such exceptionalism through the formation of an impassable divide between insiders (i.e. those inside the wall) and outsiders (i.e. the environmentally displaced people)—a divide that not only maximizes the precarity of the latter group but also casts their lives as disposable.

Human exceptionalism, in its simplest form, designates "[t]he view (paradigm) that humans are different from all other organisms, all human behaviour is controlled by culture and free will, and all problems can be solved by human ingenuity and technology" (Park, 2012). This paradigm creates a rift between *anthropos* and nature as if the former were separable from the latter. The prioritization of reason and rationality that accompanies human exceptionalism has engendered the assumptions that, no matter what the circumstances or problems are or could be, humans are capable of, as it were, defeating nature and keeping it under control with their advanced technologies. In Lanchester's novel, the presentation of the wall as an effective solution to climate change is indicative of such exceptionalism at work in that it not only downplays the reach and extent of climate change but also gives off the false idea that even a climate disaster at that scale is still somehow tractable because, apparently, Britain has overcome its vulnerable position which makes it sound relatively easy with the construction of the wall along its coastal perimeter.

The wall that exemplifies an instance of human exceptionalism in the narrative is revealed to have a further and more insidious role embodied by its huge concrete structure which prevents those living inside the wall from seeing the precarious conditions of the environmentally dispossessed, and makes them oblivious to the latter's vulnerability. The differential distribution of precarity is felt more acutely by certain groups than others and, by drawing a thick line between insiders and outsiders, the wall in the novel perpetuates the inequitable distribution of precarity and turns the outsiders (environmental refugees) into a vulnerable population. The invisibility of the extremely vulnerable situation of others occasioned by the overbearing wall is conducive to the failure of evoking an ethical response from insiders.

Implementing a series of precautions and measures in the novel against others, Britain deliberately fails to recognize the precarity of the outsiders and instead increases their vulnerability so as to establish an economy of sameness or self-identity which is made possible

only by keeping alterity out and by placing others outside the frames of intelligibility and recognizability. The attempt to cement selfsameness inevitably brings about an immunization through reactionary violence against others. Self-preservation as such might easily give way to the adoption of a violent attitude towards others who pose a risk for the self-identity of a community. In this respect, the economy of sameness operates on the premise in which self-perpetuation of a community is to be favored and encouraged at all costs, that is, at the expense of others who do not exactly fit into its norms or normative structure. This approach invites as well as sanctions violence through a rendition of others as less than human.

To conclude, Lanchester's novel sheds light on the urgent need to recognize our vulnerability that we share with all human and nonhuman others because the failure to do so obscures our vision to see our otherwise inextricable interdependence and interconnectedness and also exacerbates the already precarious conditions of certain human and nonhuman groups. As such, it further issues an ethical call as well as a timely warning against the perpetuation of violence towards others that render their lives invisible. In so doing, it draws attention to the ethical repercussions of establishing barriers or walls that pigeonhole various communities and eradicate their potential contact zones, thereby blinding insiders to the atrocities they inflict on outsiders.