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## Negative Solidarities, the Perils of “Reading” and the Acts of Resistance of Books and Artworks

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Over the centuries and across different cultures, books and artworks have been objects of acts of vandalism, violence or hate, ban and censorship. In those different forms, biblioclasm and iconoclasm are often caused by the fear of the oppositional force that specific books and artworks may pose to consolidated power structures, cultural tenets (which are often complicit with those structures), and moral frameworks of individuals and social groups. In this article I discuss contemporary examples of different forms of book- and art-hate to focus on how the “objects of hate” have in turn offered resistance to the acts of violence against them.

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CIMITILE, *NEGATIVE SOLIDARITIES AND BOOKS' AND ARTWORKS' ACTS OF RESISTANCE*

*That was only a prelude  
Where they burn books  
In the end, they will burn people too.  
Heinrich Heine, Almansor, 1823<sup>1</sup>*

*When the Regime  
commanded the unlawful books to be burned,  
teams of dull oxen hauled huge cartloads to the  
bonfires.  
Then a banished writer, one of the best,  
scanning the list of excommunicated texts,  
became enraged: he'd been excluded!  
He rushed to his desk, full of contemptuous  
wrath,  
to write fierce letters to the morons in power —  
Burn me! he wrote with his blazing pen —  
Haven't I always reported the truth?  
Now here you are, treating me like a liar!  
Burn me!  
Bertolt Brecht, The Burning of the Books<sup>2</sup>*

**Biblioclasm, iconoclasm**

Books and artworks are special objects, which in their *textual* dimension carry ideas and inspire critical thinking, interpellating us as active readers and invoking our aesthetic response, through which we become co-producers of “their” meanings. So when books and artworks are objects of acts of violence, ban, destruction or even censorship, the material attack is first and foremost aimed at annihilating ideas. In this article, I shall deal with the topic of banned, censored, unlicensed books and artworks, and of books and artworks that, not being officially banned, have been the target of individual or group hate. I am also interested in items on which censorship has sometimes befallen in less evident ways – for example, through avoidance or ostracization of the translation of books from other languages, or through the removal of works of art from public spaces. More specifically, I am interested in how books and artworks can resist all those forms of suppression.

Different as they are, the mentioned forms of biblioclasm and iconoclasm are contiguous with, and have often proved to be an expression of, violence against people in its different forms: from war (between different countries or between ethnic or other groups, as in civil wars) to terrorism (“the systematic use or threat of violence to communicate a political message”; Knuth 2006, 10) and acts of extremism (see Knuth

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<sup>1</sup>“Das war ein Vorspiel nur, dort / wo man Bücher verbrennt, / verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen.”

<sup>2</sup>“Die Buecherverbrennung”. [1938]. Translated by Michael R. Burch. From allpoetry.com.

2006), to “negative solidarities” or the anger of some groups against others (for example, the anger expressed against certain minorities), to individual anger. The reasons lying behind violent behaviours are often the background for the hate of books and artworks too. For negative solidarities and individual anger, Pankaj Mishra mentions a newly-shaped “will to power”, an excessive “longing” striving “between feelings of impotence and fantasies of violent revenge” (Mishra 2017, 340). In a similar way, the dream of supremacy advanced by various populisms, racisms, nationalisms and religions is often the other side of a sense of inferiority and of the anxiety for a perceived threat to one’s status; in those cases, violent actions against the more or less hypothetical “threateners” are envisaged by the perpetrators to be legitimate and morally justified. Even as we are aware of the “complex topography and history” of violence, and of the relevance of the “specificities of history, place, and population” for interpreting violence (Miller 2021, 2), it can be said – and it should not be read as a generalisation – that often attacks on books and artworks, from state censorship down to the deliberate actions of individuals, are expressions of the fear of losing power and control, and a reaction to the threat to the “superiority” of someone’s or a group’s “moral framework” (Knuth 2006, 10).

At different times and in different places, violent reactions have been triggered by specific written or visual texts, be they public actions legitimised by official orders or the autonomous prerogative of individuals or groups of people. Consider the acts of book burning; many were ordered, like the one wanted by Chinese emperor Qin Shi Huang in 213 b.C., in which most copies of the Confucian classics were destroyed, or that of Mayan texts ordered by Catholic bishop Diego de Landa in Yucatán in the 16th century, or the all-too notorious burnings of books by university students in Germany, starting on 10th May 1933, not actually ordered by the Nazis but inspired by their ideology; and there have also been book burnings by either individuals, like Frederick Tatham’s burning of selected books by William Blake in the 19th century, or groups of people, like the recent burning of the Law library at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa during the students’ protests on 6 September 2016.<sup>3</sup> As for artworks, one could mention their destruction or defacing due to religious beliefs. Here are a few examples: the centuries-long Catholic Church censorship against nudity, from Pope Julius II, who, in the 16th century, having commissioned Michelangelo to paint the Sistine Chapel, was scandalized by the naked figures and attempted to force the artist to repaint them, to Pope Innocent X, who in the following century had Roman statues defaced through the chiselling of fig leaves to replace the exposed genitalia (and one could go on with similar examples); the iconoclasm of the Protestant Reformation in Great Britain during the 16th century; and, in our century, the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in Afghanistan, in 2001. As for non-religious censorship, one interesting example is the official act issued against Andy Warhol’s *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*, a work commissioned to decorate the façade of the New York State pavilion at the New York World’s Fair in 1964. The work comprised enlarged, black and white mug-shot

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<sup>3</sup>More examples could be added. For a recent study of persecution and/or censorship of books, see Cummings 2022. About my last two examples: Frederick Tatham was an artist and disciple of Blake’s; although he appreciated Blake’s visual works, he deemed his poems to be “mostly unintelligible” and “more rude than refined, more clumsy than delicate”; for him, “[Blake’s] blank verse is prose cut in slices, & his prose inelegant, but replete with Imagery” (Frederick Tatham quoted in Bentley 1996, 7 and 8). As for the South African example: in 2015 and 2016, the students’ movements “FeesMustFall” and “RhodesMustFall” protested over the announced increase in university fees; the protests turned violent and the UKZN Law library was burnt. In the burning, rare books dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century were also destroyed.

portraits of the thirteen most wanted men in the State of New York at the time (mainly Italian-American gangsters); within 48 hours from its installation and before the opening of the Fair, on 15 April 1964, the city administrators and the architect of the pavilion had the artwork painted over with silver paint.<sup>4</sup>

Attacks on artists can be violent, too. From Iran comes the example of censure leading to imprisonment: the young artist and activist Atena Farghadani was jailed on 13 April 2024 and sentenced to six years “for trying to display one of her drawings on the wall of Avenue Pastor” near the presidential palace in Tehran (see *Cartooning for Peace* 2024). At the same time, it is sometimes the case that negative reactions to artworks, including moving pictures, are not content-related, yet they affect the reception of the work, as testified, for example, by the negative treatment, in the Iranian press, of film director Abbas Kiarostami upon his winning at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival with *Taste of Cherry*; as reported by Shiva Rahbaran: “Catherine Deneuve kissed Kiarostami while presenting him with the *Palme d’Or* trophy. The press in the Islamic Republic reacted violently to this, as the Sharia strictly forbids all physical contact between unrelated men and women” (Rahbaran 2016, 253, fn 3).<sup>5</sup> Although Kiarostami had generally had a good reception in his country, the artistic value of *Taste of Cherry* was for some time overlooked because of the “scandal” of a kiss. Fortunately, in this specific case the “incident” did not have any permanent consequences on either the national reception of Kiarostami’s work or his following productions.

As this brief but inevitably varied excursus shows, for books and artworks alike there can be different reasons behind the attacks on them. Critical studies, political reasons, extremism and fundamentalism, but also secular fanaticism or vandalism are some of the causes underpinning biblioclasm. In related ways, iconoclasm can be political, nationalist or theological in character; it can be provoked by the symbolical status of the artwork, or even by a dislike of its aesthetic dimension.<sup>6</sup> Whichever the causes, as a literary and cultural critic I would like to ask: if books and artworks have been the targets of censorship as well as of acts of hate and anger – be they in the form of individual actions or collective acts originating in negative solidarities – how can literature and art address those very specific acts?

The *representation* of the violence is one way of doing it.<sup>7</sup> But, besides representations that are clear denunciations of the act, sometimes texts can be more opaque in their aims. Representations of book- or art-hate may vary, to the point of alluring us into agreeing with the “hate”. My example for this comes from TV. In the second episode of *Foodie Love* (2019), a TV series created by Isabel Coixet, produced by HBO Europe-Spain and broadcast by Arte Channel and, in Italy, Raiplay, the two protagonists, a young man and a young woman sharing the same passion for food, meet for a second date at a cocktail bar; here they find that they share the same hate (*verbatim*)

<sup>4</sup>See Anon., “Most Wanted: Andy Warhol *13 Most Wanted Men* New York, USA 1964”, Archive of Destruction website, <https://archiveofdestruction.com/artwork/most-wanted/>.

<sup>5</sup>For 10 years or so after the event, Kiarostami did not give interviews to be released in Iran; the interview in Rahbaran’s book was in fact the director’s first one after a very long time; at Kiarostami’s request, it was not recorded, and Rahbaran had to rely on written notes for the publication (see Rahbaran 2016).

<sup>6</sup>For cultural analyses, see Knuth 2006 and Adams 2020.

<sup>7</sup>In this respect, the 2021 special issue of *Anglistica AION, Living in the Age of Anger. Representing ‘Negative Solidarities’ in Contemporary Global Culture*, co-edited by Rossella Ciocca and Sabita Manian, contains insightful readings which, in their different ways, address the representation of “negative solidarities” and related topics. For a critical introduction and an overview see Ciocca and Manian 2021.

for the same things. The episode is entitled “Breakfast in Kentucky”, and among the things they both hate most are the novels by Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård (six autobiographical novels titled *My Struggle* and completed in 2011, and an autobiographical series of four books, *The Seasons Quartet*, 2015–2016). The female character in *Foodie Love* works for a publisher, and part of her job is to read Knausgård novels, which she deems unbearable; the male character received one or two of his books as a gift from his sister, started reading one of them but could not finish it, because he thought it was utter shit on the sublimation of everyday life. She hates the genre the writer has divulged, “auto-fiction”, and the fact that people now emulate him and try to do the same – as she says, he has created “monsters”. In a metatextual moment, she looks at the camera and comments that Ove is so popular because he is a beautiful man; were he “stout, fat and bald”, nobody would care to read his stuff. The couple then consider that they despise the same things and she comments that this is good, because *hate unites*. This remark is made in a TV series that is not particularly violent but that stages two thirty-something characters who do not seem to get on well with the world, lead their lives in solitude, and come up with other lists of hated things (including food prepared in certain ways). As viewers can easily agree with some of their “hates”, one could ask: what is the aim of including those lists as well as the hate of a book in the series? How are viewers expected – or led – to perceive the protagonists’ “hates”? And what are the implications of provoking understanding/sharing/getting along with the represented feeling of hate? *Foodie Love* shows that representations of (book) hate can be a slippery terrain.

This paper is related to my ongoing research in book history, part of which is also to look at books that have counteracted censorship or book-hate. As the present times are not immune from those forms of violence, in this article I am going to refer to some contemporary instances of book- and art-hate in order to report on the respective “counteracts”. I bring together state censorship, negative solidarities and individual acts against written and visual texts; they are different practices – for example, censorship is rarely associated with “anger”, which is discussed in association with negative solidarities or individual violence<sup>8</sup> – but, when the targets of negative solidarities are texts and artworks, a common ground is shared with censorship. Both are against the objects while aiming at the annihilation of specific ideas, perceived to be potentially dangerous for the integrity of either state rule and national identity or, on a smaller scale, the values and identity shared by a group of people; similar reasons are often at the basis of individual acts, too. Once more, the threat to one’s power and/or identity is a starting point for all.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, what Gayatri Spivak has recently stated about

<sup>8</sup>Several recent studies address the topic of “anger”, mainly in a sociological or psychological perspective. See, among the others: Mishra 2017; Barnhart 2020; Rosenwein 2020.

<sup>9</sup>This has been discussed as one reason for anger in general, and it is one point of contact of book- and art-hate with negative solidarity against specific groups of people. Analysing the growth of large-scale violence in contemporary societies and addressing the negative aspects of globalisation, Arjun Appadurai has singled out two causes: firstly, the dangerous idea of a “national ethnos” that is always “behind the very idea of the modern nation-state”; and, secondly, the idea of “social uncertainty”, or the perceived condition, in a globalised context, of losing one’s identity and values, which he also associates with “the anxiety of incompleteness”. About “social uncertainty” Appadurai writes: “This species of uncertainty is intimately connected to the reality that today’s ethnic groups number in the hundreds of thousands and that their movements, mixtures, cultural style, and media representations create profound doubts about who exactly are among the ‘we’ and who are among the ‘they’. The speed and intensity with which both material and ideological elements now circulate across national boundaries have created a new order of

the hate of books, and about the ideas or critical approaches propounded in them, is relevant. In her talk “The New Task”, delivered at the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair in 2022, she told an anecdote about the reception of her thought and of how once a student had reacted to a colleague teaching her texts with “I hate her” (Spivak 2022, n.p.). As Spivak explained, the student’s hate proved the great impact of her work: the reaction meant that the student could not go on with his career and way of thinking after he had come across her vision of the world.<sup>10</sup> Those who are not prepared to reconsider their assumptions and tenets must feel that the only way to preserve their space and boundaries as they are is a powerful suppression – be it state censorship, or collective or individual acts of violence.

### Books and/as acts of resistance

If we consider books in English banned in the UK in modern times, the list is long and it includes Joyce’s *Ulysses* (from 1922 to 1936), D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (from 1928 to 1960, for violation of obscenity laws),<sup>11</sup> and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (from 1955 to 1959 for being “obscene”). Other texts originally written in English have also been banned around the world, or they have been objects of bonfires — from George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945), banned in the Soviet Union and US as well as in UK,<sup>12</sup> to, more recently, J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007).<sup>13</sup> Counteracts to the banning of books are most likely *acts of reading* or actions favouring them. For example, in our century, in defiance of Iranian censors, Joyce’s *Ulysses* was translated into Persian by Akram Pedramnia, apparently for the first time uncut and uncensored, for illegal distribution in the country. And, Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), a great success written in English and translated into 32 languages, if not properly banned, appears to have never been officially translated into Persian for sale in Iran, the country of origin of the author<sup>14</sup> (I shall come back to Nafisi’s novel).

The examples of Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita...* in Iran are revealing of what readers – and, before them, translators – can do with books in order to resist book-hate. But I am interested in forms of resistance that are *of* the books, in other words I am interested in exploring the *textual engagements* with book-hate. Again, the first form that comes to mind is the *representation* of the violent act and of its effects as a form of denunciation. Are there other forms of resistance “enacted” by books?

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uncertainty in social life.” He argues that projects of ethnic cleansing can be driven by social uncertainty. (See Appadurai 2006; the long quotation is on page 5).

<sup>10</sup> She also spoke of how she once loved to be hated, because that meant that she had gotten through mentalities of people like that student; but, she added, she no longer aspired to being hated, because she had realized that “this is all one world, that it’s the same swing in the same sky and the same winds all over”. For this reason, today she tries, “counterintuitively” (her word) to “win as many people as [she] can, to do this thinking, rather than inhabit an individuated and nationised opposition analogy...” (Spivak 2022, n.p.).

<sup>11</sup> The novel was also banned in Canada, USA, Australia, India and Japan.

<sup>12</sup> But, interestingly, in the 1950s the CIA funded an animated film version of *1984*, to be distributed throughout the world, as a form of propaganda against Communism.

<sup>13</sup> Alongside other books, Rowling’s fantasy novels were publicly set on fire by fanatic Christians in Tennessee as late as 2022. Pastor Greg Locke encouraged his congregation to burn targeted books, then live-streamed the event. “See Tennessee pastor burn *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* books”, video on CNN: <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/us/2022/02/06/pastor-holds-bonfire-burning-books-harry-potter-and-twilight-orig-as.cnn>.

<sup>14</sup> There are, however, rumours that unofficial translations were made.

Before turning to contemporary examples, I would like to recall John Milton's definition of books and his argument against censorship in *Areopagitica*. The seventeenth-century text is still relevant today, and here I recall it for its powerful figurative language, which is even more effective in its cultural distance from our times. In Great Britain, *Areopagitica*, a speech addressed to the Parliament against preventive censorship and published in 1644, in its printed form ironically became the object of the act it criticised and was consequently banned from that year until 1695 – a proof, one may say, of the recognition of the power of its argument. Milton's speech was a reaction to the *Order of the Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament. For the regulating of printing*, issued in 1643.<sup>15</sup> Before explaining why books should not be censored, the English poet acknowledged that it was important for the Church and Commonwealth to keep “a vigilant eye” on books as well as on men, and in doing so he offered a suggestive definition:

*Books* are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as alive as that soule was whose progeny they are. [...] I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragons teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. (Milton 1868, 35)<sup>16</sup>

Milton's dense metaphorical language helps us see why the “objects” have been liable to being attacked throughout the centuries. Books are perceived to be of both the mythological and the human space; their “potencie” lies in the almost magical power of their written words to produce action – indeed, to turn into action, like the dragons' teeth in the classic stories of Cadmus or Jason, which, if planted, would grow to become fully armed warriors. And, books are easily planted: one only needs to read them, *i.e.* treat them as soil to be cultivated (“sown up and down”). Milton envisaged meaning as lying in the encounter between the written text (what comes out of “those fabulous Dragons teeth”) and our reading (compared to the act of “sow[ing]” fertile soil – an association that makes reading a technology for survival). Then, in a most effective sentence, he defined “Licencing” as an unjust *act of killing* and stated the sacredness of books:

who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye. [...] slaies an immortality rather then a life. (Milton 1868, 35)

Milton deemed censorship to be wrong because, instead of suppressing the scandalous books at which it is aimed, it perilously hinders the advancement of knowledge:

this Order avails nothing to the suppressing of scandalous, seditious, and libellous Books, which were mainly intended to be suppressed. [...] it will be primely to the discouragement of all learning, and the stop of Truth, not only by the disexercising and blunting our abilities in what we know already, but by hindring and cropping the discovery that might bee yet further made both in religious and civill Wisdome. (Milton 1868, 34)

<sup>15</sup> The text of the Order is contained in Milton 1868, 25-28. The full title of Milton's text is *Areopagitica: A speech of Mr John Milton for the liberty of unlicensed printing to the Parliament of England*.

<sup>16</sup> In this and the following quotations, the original spelling of the text has been retained. Only the “long s” character has been substituted with the regular “s”.

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The incisive statement that all actions implemented to oppose the production and circulation of dangerous books (or, to adapt the expression to our times, of books that are deemed to be dangerous) will have as an effect “*the discouragement of all learning, and the stop of Truth*”, even “*by hindring and cropping the discovery that might bee yet further made*” (my emphases) is a most valid argument that can be applied to the effects of censorship up to this day. Indeed, in the 20th century, Bertolt Brecht also addressed violent censorship as being an act against “the truth” in his poem “The Burning of the Books”, which tells of a poet who, having found that he is not among the excommunicated authors, writes a letter to the people in power (“morons in power” in the English translation) asking that his books be burnt alongside the others, on the grounds that he has always told the truth: “Haven’t I always reported the truth? / Now here you are, treating me like a liar! / Burn me!” (Brecht 1938, n.p.).

To go back to the question: how can books – meaning written texts, literary ones as well as essays – oppose book-hate? In Brecht’s poem, the defiant invitation addressed to the destroyer is a firm statement against the ideologies of those in power, flaunting in their face one’s despise of their control and oppression. Another way is the representation of *the-act-of-reading-as-one-form-of-resistance* through which the survival of the books – as both material objects and ideas – is guaranteed. The intimacy that characterises the act of reading turns into secrecy or clandestinity in such representations. For example, in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), in a society where books are outlawed and firemen burn those that are found, the old woman reads only the printed books secretly stored in her attic, and the Book Men tenaciously learn by heart the classics of world literature to preserve their immaterial life. Bradbury’s dystopia exposes the wrongness of the values and ideologies underpinning book-hate and denounces the mass culture desire for simplicity as well as the state apparatuses that operate to satisfy it. In our century, Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is also about the secret reading of books – those that are not on the accepted list in Iranian universities. The last chapter of the book (subtitled *A Memoir in Books*) is on Jane Austen (the others being “Lolita”, “Gatsby”, “James”), and, if one may legitimately wonder about what, in Austen’s novels – and, therefore, in Nafisi’s *memoir* about the clandestine reading of those – could possibly upset Iranian society, the first two opening paragraphs of the “Austen” chapter make it clear:

‘It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife.’ So declared Yassi in that special tone of hers, deadpan and mildly ironic, which on rare occasions, and this was one of them, bordered on the burlesque.

‘Or is it a truth universally acknowledged,’ Manna shot back, ‘that a Muslim man must be in want not just of one but of many wives?’. She *glanced at me conspiratorially*, her black eyes brimming with humor, knowing she would draw a reaction. Unlike Mahshid, Manna had a way of *secretly communicating* with the few people she liked. Her chief means of contact were her eyes, which she focused or withdrew from you. We had developed a *hidden code* between us and only when she felt offended—and she could easily be offended—would she lower and divert her gaze to one side, the playful inflections wiped from her words. (Nafisi 2007, 257. My emphases)

These lines repeat, ironically adapting it to the Muslim space, the famous opening of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813): “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen 1990, 1).



Nafisi's passage reveals the reasons why Austen's book was better read and commented in secret: the irony of the narrative voice in the novel, which targets western patriarchal societies of the nineteenth century, becomes even more effective when it is read against Muslim contemporary patriarchal rule. The "threat" represented by Austen's book for Muslim values is *conspiratorial*, i.e. subtly dangerous, as obliquely suggested by the account of Manna's ability to communicate with her eyes and instate a complicity of the minds with the people she likes. Manna's gaze – and its description – defies the oppression of women who are asked to wear the hijab in the name of "morality".<sup>17</sup> A character with an ironical gaze, who seldom averts her eyes from you – in some respects reminding us of Austen's Elizabeth Bennet – and the positive description of such attitude cannot really be welcome in the "gender apartheid" state of Iran (the definition is by Amnesty International). *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is an "open secret" that proves clandestine reading to be at once caused by and a form of resistance to Iranian censorship; reading creates a space for the oppressed to be active agents and *be* their own selves.

I have one last example, which also contains another. It is often the case that book hate is provoked by misreading. African-Canadian author Lawrence Hill's *Dear Sir, I Intend to Burn Your Book: An Anatomy of a Book Burning* (2013) is a response to the violent reaction to his 2011 novel *The Book of Negroes*.<sup>18</sup> In 2011, less than a month after the launch of the Dutch edition of *The Book of Negroes*, Hill received an email which announced the burning of his book. The email read:

Dear Sir Lawrence Hill,

We, descendants of enslaved in the former Dutch colony Suriname, want let you know that we do not accept a book with the title "The book of Negroes." We struggle for a long time to let the word "nigger" disappears from Dutch language and now you set up your book of Negroes! A real shame! That's why we make the decision to burn this book on the 22nd of June 2011. Maybe you do not know, but June is the month before the 1st of July, the day that we remember the abolition from the Dutch, who put our ancestors in slavery.

Sincerely,

<sup>17</sup> The hijab is a high stake in Muslim culture, and on 20th September 2023 the news came from Iran of a new bill approved in Parliament, under which women face up to 10 years in prison if they continue to disobey the country's mandatory hijab rules. As *The Guardian* reported: "the draft law also intends to identify those who [...] 'mock' the rules in a virtual or non-virtual space. [...] The approval of the hijab bill comes four days after the first anniversary of the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, 22, who had been detained for allegedly wearing the Islamic headscarf incorrectly" (Parent 2023, n.p.). Earlier in 2024, a follow-up on the Iranian bill came from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; as we read on their website: "On 21 April, the Tehran head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) announced the creation of a new body to enforce existing mandatory hijab laws, adding that IRGC members have been trained to do so 'in a more serious manner' in public spaces. Reports indicate that hundreds of businesses have been forcibly closed for not enforcing compulsory hijab laws, and surveillance cameras are being used to identify women drivers not complying with the laws. Our Office is also very concerned that a draft bill on 'Supporting the Family by Promoting the Culture of Chastity and Hijab' – which imposes even stricter punishments – is nearing final approval by the Guardian Council" (Laurence 2024).

<sup>18</sup> The book won many prizes, among which: the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the Roger's Writer's Trust Prize, and CBC's Canada Reads (CBC is the national public broadcasting service Canadian Broadcasting Corporation). See Ted Bishop, "Introduction", in Hill 2013, xiii-xvii.

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Roy Groenberg, Chairman Foundation Honor and Restore Victims of Slavery in Suriname. (Quoted in Hill 2013, 3-4)

A handwritten poster attached to the email summoned all “Afro-Surinamese-Dutch people to come to Bookburning in Oosterpark near the monument” (Hill 2013, 4).

Hill replied to the letter with another letter, in which he tried to persuade the man from burning the book by politely explaining that his was a historical novel, and that the title was therefore “used historically, to shed light on a forgotten document and on a forgotten migration (that of thousands of Blacks from the USA to Canada in 1783)” (Hill 2013, 5). In the novel, the woman protagonist, together with other 3000 blacks, has to register her name in the ledger called “The book of Negroes” so that she can flee American slavery and sail to Canada. As Hill wrote in his letter:

“The Book of Negroes” is the name of a British military ledger, that documented the exodus of 3,000 African Americans from New York City to Nova Scotia, Canada at the end of the American Revolutionary War. It is a very important genealogical document, as it provides a great deal of biographical information about the Blacks who migrated from the USA to Canada in 1783. The original copy of this document is kept in the National Archives in the UK. (Hill 2013, 4)

The man, unpersuaded by Hill’s reply, on the fixed date burned not the book but copies of the cover of the book while being filmed by Dutch TV. Hill’s publisher defended the book, for which defense she received a death threat. As a matter of fact, the title of the novel was an issue even for publication outside of Canada: in the US, it was published as *Someone Knows My Name*, on grounds that “US bookstores were refusing to place advance orders for [...] [the] novel because the word ‘Negroes’ was in the title”; and in Quebec and in France the title was *Aminata* – the name of the protagonist. But, as Hill observes elsewhere in his response, “there is sometimes room to use painful language to reclaim our own history” (Hill 2013, 31).

Hill’s *Dear Sir...*, by reporting on a personal case, shows that: 1. the language of hate or despise, which includes the word “Negro” today, is not always used to polarize societies; in Hill’s novel, it was used “historically”, repeating in the title the actual name of the ledger; and, therefore, 2. it may at times be the case that bans, censorship and collective vandalism against books are responses to a certain outrageous character or violence, which is perceived to be *of* specific books but which is in fact only *represented* there and by no means endorsed – it is repeated or reported in order to make, in fact, a statement *against* violence. Hill mentions an interesting case of a banned book in Canada: Deborah Ellis’ *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* (2004), a non-fiction book for children. In Hill’s account:

It contains the real monologues in the voices of real children – some Jewish, other Palestinian – who are caught up in the tensions and hatred of living in what is essentially a war zone. Some of the children express fear and hatred of the other. Many lack opportunities to get to know children on the other side of the divide. One of the children interviewed was the sibling of a suicide bomber. This inflamed the Canadian Jewish Congress, and the next thing you knew was this incredibly thoughtful and insightful book – in the voices of the children, about their very lives as children in the Middle East – was removed from the hands of children in the Toronto District School Board. Apparently, Palestinian and Israeli children are old enough to live through hell, but children in Canada are not old enough to read

about it. [...] [I]n the uproar over whether the book was appropriate to be read by children in school, nobody had thought to ask the opinions of children. (Hill 2013, 19-20)

In Ellis' book, the exposure of the Middle Eastern children's everyday reality and language is not meant to promote conflict or reciprocal hatred; even so, in Canada it was deemed that the book would be dangerous for the minds of young children. The crudeness of reality (and of the language of violence some use at times) cannot be presented *as it is*; the book was seen as a representation that would have negative effects on the Canadian children, and not as a denunciation of a violent reality. Ellis's book, as cited by Hill in his response to book hate, reminds me of Pasolini's film episode *La rabbia* ("The Rage", 1963), in which anger and violence are also shown to be the reactions of the dispossessed, of the "wretched of the earth", to use Franz Fanon's definition, to their own condition of oppression, in the name of a much desired and fought for *freedom*. To counteract an announced, then effected, act of violence on his own text, in *Dear Sir...* Hill recalls, among the others, the reception of Ellis' *Three Wishes* in Canada, and offers an explanation of the misreadings of both his text and hers. Directly engaging with the attack on books, *Dear Sir...* proceeds by way of a *reading* of texts which have been objects of book hate, and, in doing so, it promotes more readings on our part... Acts of resistance.

#### Artworks and/as acts of resistance

Not only books can be agents of resistance to attacks on them. Artworks, too, have often been objects of negative solidarities, state censorship or vandalic acts by individuals or groups of people. In some cases, the vandalic act by an individual is likely to be the tip of the iceberg of a wider discontent. At the same time, the hate of specific artworks may be provoked by *misinterpretation*. In July 2023, yet another remake of the famous *Venere degli stracci* ("Venus of the Rags", 1967), by Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, was set on fire in Piazza Municipio, the square where it was installed in Naples. The reason for the vandalic act was not known at first, but the act naturally aroused the curiosity of people. Only a couple of days after the event, on a train I overheard a conversation on the topic: someone said he felt the man had done the right thing, since in the artwork he himself detected an overt offence to the Neapolitans, an insult to the local people, whom the public exhibition of a giant version of *Venere...*, with its huge pile of rags, defined, he felt, as all ragamuffins. The burning of the artwork had already one "follower". The comment was revealing of how differently, depending on the cultural context, an artwork can be read; in Naples, where there is a high rate of indigence among the inhabitants, *Venere degli stracci* was interpreted at least by one person as an offensive statement on the local community. Later on, the investigators found that the fire was inadvertently caused by a clochard. In no time, the local authorities and Pistoletto agreed that *Venere...* would be re-installed in Piazza Municipio, to be inaugurated in January 2024. This was done thanks to crowdfunding and Pistoletto's personal funding of the project. As the artist stated: "Venus is regenerative, so we regenerate it to *heal society*, in a city that seeks balance and harmony. We are moving on to the *phase of care*, not only of the work, but of the city. The *Venus of the Rags* [...] is a work of communal [shared] responsibility" (Translated from Pistoletto quoted in Montagnoli 2023). *Venere degli stracci* came back to life after the attack; like the Phoenix, it sprang anew from the ashes of its old self.

My second example is Anselm Kiefer's *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce* (Andrea Emo) ("These writings, when burnt, will finally cast a

little light [Andrea Emo]). It was created for the Doge's Palace in Venice in 2020-2021 and exhibited in Sala dello Scrutinio from 26th March 2022 to 6th January 2023. The installation comprised huge paintings and burned books, and took its title from a text by Venetian philosopher Andrea Emo Capodilista (1901-1983), who wrote in solitude and secretly for a lifetime and used the sentence to refer to his unknown work. Sala dello Scrutinio is decorated with paintings by great artists of the past, Tintoretto, Palma il Giovane, Andrea Vicentino, whom the Senate of the Republic of Venice commissioned to repaint the walls of the room after the fire of 1577; their works were to be in praise of the glory of Venice, by sea and land. Kiefer's installation of huge canvasses stood, for the time of the exhibition, as a third layer of painting on the walls of Sala dello Scrutinio; it combined iconic references to the history of Venice – “the recurring lagoon landscapes, the memory of Doge Marin Faliero, the presence of Saint Mark from the saint's zinc sarcophagus to the Basilica, to the majestic flag with the Lion of St Mark's flying in the wind” (Settis 2022, 151) – with other features, such as a ladder climbing skyward and a goddess handing the painter his palette. Without being about censorship or book- or art-hate, the installation is relevant to this discussion to the extent that it takes on the notion that all that exists must die: we have to come to terms with the fact that, like the texts of Emo's philosophical reflections, the value of art may not be recognised by all. Kiefer's installation can be cast against book- and art-burning, the impact of which it somehow preventively diminishes through a stoic acceptance of the transience of life, thus defusing their violence and aims in what Salvatore Settis has called a “logic of inversion” (Settis 2022). Indeed, Kiefer believes in the surviving power of art, as testified by the title of his lectures at the Collège de France in 2010-2011: *L'Art survivra à ses ruines*.<sup>19</sup>

My last example of an artwork counteracting art-hate is related to the 2007 theft of the copy of Rodin's *The Thinker* held in the Museum Singer Laren in Holland. Here is an account of the event:

In [2007], on a January night in Laren, a small town in North Holland, two thieves drove a truck through the fence of the Singer Museum's sculpture garden. The Singer Museum houses a medium-sized collection of 20th century art, and in [2007] it had no alarm system, so over the course of the night the thieves were able to load seven bronze statues into their vehicle, including the museum's copy of Rodin's *The Thinker*, and drive off before the museum employees arrived the next morning.

None of the iron statues in the garden had been touched, an indication that the thieves likely intended to melt down the stolen statues for bronze, which was valued at an unusually high price that year. [...] Within two days, *The Thinker's* disappearance had made international news – a commotion that was strategically orchestrated by the Singer Museum and Dutch police – shortly thereafter, the police found *The Thinker* half buried and abandoned in an alley in a nearby neighborhood. It was the only statue not yet melted down. They soon caught the thieves as well [...]. (DeFazio 2018, n.p.<sup>20</sup>)

*The Thinker* was luckily found, but it was heavily damaged: “the thieves had begun to dismantle it with a grinder and sledgehammer [...] One of the lower legs was completely gone, the forearm was cut off, and the top of the head was severed, sliding

<sup>19</sup> See also the OpenEdition Book containing the Inaugural lecture at <https://books.openedition.org/cdf/386?format=toc>.

<sup>20</sup> All information about the event is from this source.

slightly off the face. There were also large gashes across the face and on the intact foot” (DeFazio 2018, n.p.). The statue was stolen with the intention to melt it and sell the bronze. The reasons behind the vandalic act were far more prosaic than an aesthetic or ideological dislike of the artwork. Once the statue was back in the Museum, it was briefly put on display in its vandalised state; then a debate started about what to do with it: restore it, or, if it were allowed, cast a new statue from Rodin’s original mould? Whichever the choice, the “new life” of the statue would stand as a symbol of art’s defiance of all forms of attacks against it. The unacknowledged question was, I think, whether the symbol was to obliterate what had passed (by making a new cast of the statue) or to retain its memory (for example, by leaving the statue as it was found after the theft, or by restoring it in a way that would make *readable* to the viewers the difference between the newly moulded parts, which would replace what was missing or defaced, and the old ones). Frits Scholten, Head of the Department of Sculpture at Rijksmuseum, is reported to have said in a public statement: “*The Thinker* in his crippled state has been engraved into the collective memory of our country [...] We believe that this sign of violence against the arts must be respected as an undeniable fact. [...] Restoration may deny that fact, but cannot turn back history” (quoted in DeFazio 2018, n.p.).

The decision was finally taken for a restoration of the artwork. Before it started, photographer Gert Jan Kocken took a picture of the damaged statue. At the time he was collaborating with Arnoud Holleman on a project on Dutch iconoclasm; the picture of Rodin’s statue was Kocken’s own new project, *Destroyed Thinker*, and it soon became the originator of yet another project, *BrokenThinker*, an online, open access site, finally created in 2016 and comprising 12 essays as well as a series of artworks inspired by Kocken’s picture, which had been reproduced and sent out to twelve among writers, curators and artists with the invitation to react to the vandalism of Rodin’s artwork.<sup>21</sup>

Pistoletto’s *Venere degli stracci* in Naples, Kiefer’s *Questi scritti...* in Venice, *BrokenThinker* on the web represent three different ways in which artworks can counteract art-hate. If *Questi scritti...* annihilates the destructive power of attacks on art by embracing the transience of artworks, *Venere degli stracci* relies on the endless reproducibility of the artwork “in the age of mechanical reproduction”, as Walter Benjamin would have it, and *BrokenThinker* somehow combines those two, as it first freezes, in Kocken’s photograph, the mutilations effected by the attack on Rodin’s statue – a sort of *memento* of the fragility of art; and, secondly, it brings together a series of artworks that are created *because of* the attack on the statue and that reinterpret *The Thinker* to give it a second life. In all three the *survival* of the artwork is the stake.

The works discussed in this article offer their own counteracts to destructive exploits against books and artworks – exploits of which they were, in some cases, the very targets; in their different ways, all engage the violence straightforwardly; they do

<sup>21</sup> See the website of the project: *BrokenThinker*, <https://www.brokenthinker.nl/nl/credits/>. The project is presented in these terms: “image in exchange for image interpretation. With in mind the legal restriction according to which only twelve copies of each Rodin can be cast in bronze, we are using the photographic work *Broken Thinker* to initiate a collaboration with twelve writers and artists. We are offering the photo as a work of art in all respects, that is, framed and with a certificate of authenticity in which the exchange is also formally declared to be part of the project. Writers, artists, scientists and others who inspire us receive the work of art in exchange for their interpretation. In this way, the image and the interpretation of the image acquire equal intangible value. The dimensions of the work, including the frame, are 68x88.5 centimeters, so the destroyed *Thinker* is depicted in life-size. The project has no time limit.” (Translated from Dutch).

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not offer solutions in any explicit way; rather, they stubbornly carry on with their “being” and with what provoked the violence in the first place: reading banned texts; reproducing the artwork which was the object of destruction, or restoring the mutilated one; or, more defiantly even, invoking destruction or embracing the transience of art as strategies of survival (Brecht and Kiefer). Spivak has stated that “[where] the literary [and, we may add, the artistic] is cherished, protected, advanced [...] there is no room for hatred” (Spivak 2022, n.p.). Against book- and art-hate, the discussed written and visual texts offer themselves as singular examples of cherishing against hatred... Acts of resistance as *remedium*.



"Protest", screenshot from: webpage of the *BrokenThinker* project, at <https://www.brokenthinker.nl/nl/protest/>

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