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Do Be Afraid: Folk Horror, Monstrous Sacred and Divine Terror in *The Silt Verses* Podcast

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ABSTRACT: The article analyzes contemporary folk horror podcast series *The Silt Verses* (2021–ongoing) in order to theorize how horror as a genre conveys the relationship with the sacred in contemporary culture, with the characteristics and functions of the sacred described by Roger Caillois in *L'homme et le sacré*. First, the article focuses on the folk horror aspect of the series, how it alters the sub-genre conventions and how it presents the monstrous sacred which leads to notion of "divine terror" or "sacred dread" and fear as a primordial response to the sacred and, therefore, the role of religious horror as reminiscent of the religious experience within contemporary society. Lastly, the article will argue that the interchangeability of the sacred and capitalism within the fictional world of the podcast poses the question of what has taken the place of the sacred in the contemporary culture and points at the inviolable status of the capitalistic economy, in the name of which we commit contemporary human sacrifices.

KEYWORDS: folk horror, podcasting, religious horror, the sacred, The Silt Verses

Introduction. This Is Gospel

Douglas E. Cowen argues in *Sacred Terror. Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* that "religiously oriented cinema horror remains a significant material disclosure of deeply embedded cultural fears of the supernatural and an equally entrenched ambivalence about the place and power of religion in society as the principal means of negotiating those fears" (Cowen 2008: 9). The notion of religious dread will be crucial for this paper, as it aims to go a step further than Cowen's argument and theorize how horror as a genre (especially religious

horror) conveys the relationship with the sacred in contemporary – rational, secular – culture. To that end, I will refer to the characteristics and functions of the sacred described by Roger Caillois (1959) in *L'homme et le sacré* and analyze through close reading (or, in this case, close listening) how faith, the ontology of the sacred and religious experience are represented in *The Silt Verses*, a contemporary folk horror podcast.

The Silt Verses constitutes a unique example of folk horror, wherein the construction of the fictional world and character arc are mostly opposed to typical characterizations of this sub-genre, as they are recognized and discussed in the field of horror studies. Moreover, it provides an interesting concept of the sacred and the human relationship with it, based on fear, religious dread that the sacred inspires in humans, which stands in direct opposition to contemporary understanding of religion's function in society (Cowen 2008: 15–16). The podcast also captures the dread of living under capitalism and shows how the market and social forces of late capitalism replaced the traditional sacred as the deterministic, omnipresent and omnipotent force of social order.

The Silt Verses is a podcast written by Jon Ware and produced by Muna Hussen (known for their previous work on the podcast *I am in Eskew*; see Kobus 2022b), with sound design from Espii Proctor (Chapters 1 and 2) and Sammy Holden (Chapter 3 onward). It is an ongoing show with episodes (named Chapters) released regularly since January 2021 and it is free to listen on the dedicated website, audio streaming services (e.g. Spotify) and specialized apps (e.g. PodcastGo). Season one includes 15 Chapters with running time of between 40–60 minutes. For the purpose of this article, I am going to analyze the first season of the show, as it contains a complete story arc that can be summarized as:

> Carpenter [Méabh de Brún – A. K.] and Faulkner [B.Narr], two worshippers of an outlawed god, travel up the length of their deity's great black river, searching for holy revelations amongst the reeds and the wetlands. As their pilgrimage lengthens and the river's mysteries deepen, the two acolytes find themselves under threat from a police manhunt, but also come into conflict with the weirder gods that have flourished in these forgotten rural territories.
> This is a world where divine intervention takes place through prayer-markings scratched into stumping-posts, and offerings are left squirming to die in the flats of the delta.
> This is a world of ritual, and hidden language, and sacrifice.
> This is folk horror, and fantasy, and a dark road trip into the depths of unusual faith (The Silt Verses, n.d.).

The Silt Verses takes place in an alternative world, divided into "territories" (such as Linger Straits and Ignathian Peninsula), where many gods exists, powerful and dangerous, as they all demand human sacrifices; additionally, saint-

hood can be achieved in life as a result of divine intervention causing horrific bodily modification. Instead of a pantheon there are "licensed" and "unlicensed" faiths, the former of which can be practiced in public with government's mandate allowing human sacrifices, and the latter that are outlawed and whose believers are wanted criminals, even though the difference between them is arbitrary at best and political at worst, as the unlicensed faiths tend to spread among the country folks and licensed faiths are practiced in the cities and highly commercialized. Unlike in many popular contemporary fantasy texts, gods in *The Silt Verses* are not anthropomorphized as in the Greco-Roman pantheon, i.e., not only do they have human-like bodies, but also their motivation cannot be understood in terms of human experience or emotions (anger, desire, love etc.). However, as stated by the authors in the post-season 1 Q&A episode, the "trans-figuration" of human flesh into "sainthood", which equals body horror in the series, is inspired by Greek mythology, "the arbitrary cruelty of deities" and Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (Ware, Hussen 2021–present). The concept of sainthood here also represents the core of Christian beliefs that traditionally tie sainthood with martyrdom, as early saints died being tortured and sainthood is awarded posthumously. In the series, saints do not die but continue to live in a horrific, perverted form, as Ware noticed that "a god's definition of a gift that is bestowed upon us might be so alien to us that it is something horrible and monstrous" (Ware, Hussen 2021–present). I will argue further that the gods are only the concretization of the sacred, omnipresent within the fictional world of the podcast, and *The Silt Verses* is not a fantasy story of gods and humans relation, but a quasi-testament of the experience of the sacred.

The form of the podcast interestingly supports its quasi-religious tone with its meaningful title, since "The Silt Verses" is the name of the holy book of the Trawler-man (river god) believers, such as Carpenter and Faulkner. It suggests that the story we hear in the podcast is a part of the gospel. Indeed, in the second season, a highly curated version of the events from the first season is included into "The Silt Verses", as they are apparently an ongoing project, just as the podcast itself. Therefore, the episodes are named "Chapters" and the cast is introduced in the order of appearance in every Chapter as "disciples". "Verses" and "Chapters" are also associated with the division of the Bible, strongly maintaining the status of the podcast as a "holy" script. The word "verses" also brings to mind the notion of poetry, of the lyrical rhythm that is supposed to be read out loud and heard by the audience, as the genesis of poetry in western culture is a song. As a podcast is an audio form, it seems to be predisposed to convey this type of cultural texts. It is also worth mentioning that the priests of the Trawler-man are called "Katabasians", which evokes "katabasis" as a term used to described the descent into underworld in Greek mythology and "katabasia", a hymn chanted in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Various musical, sonic religious practices are brought into focus in the first season as we hear sermons, prayers and parables of the Trawler-man's gospel from Carpenter, Faulkner and other characters.

A podcast is an audio program in digital format for streaming or downloading from the Internet; the earliest use of the word "podcasting" was traced to Ben Hammersley's article from 2004 entitled *Why Online Radio Is Booming*. The title indicates that radio remains the most common point of reference for podcasting as the new medium intercepted forms historically accomplished via radio broadcasts, such as talk shows, new programs and audio dramas. Two decades later, podcasting has become a well-established medium with ever-growing popularity. In 2015 Richard Berry proposed the idea of "Golden Age of podcasting" (Berry 2015, 2016), which remains an enticing concept, especially within emerging podcast studies. Within this field of studies, Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann (2019: 22) proposed eleven major podcasting features and concepts that "can be categorized as modes of consumption (intimate listening via earbuds or headphones, on the move and on demand, which requires active engagement on the part of the listener) and modes of production (appealing to the niche interests, using social media, operating on 'freemium' model, the everlasting supply of content, the possibility of editing all podcast content and the lack of gatekeeping and constraints characteristic for broadcast media)" (Kobus 2022a: 8). The notion of intimacy of listening is especially interesting with regard to the audio drama, where the fictional world of medium becomes the soundscape of the listener. As Farokh Soltani notes, "podcast becomes the entire content of the listener's world – experienced through direct perceptual encounter within the auditory field, rather than through deliberative focus" (Soltani 2018: 203). Therefore, in fictional podcasting sounds often replace literary descriptions, especially those of character's action, which marks fictional podcasting as more ambiguous, equivocal medium that heavy relies on listener's imagination for full actualization.

Unlike many popular horror podcasts (e.g. *The Magnus Archive*, *Tanis*, *The Black Tapes*, *The White Vault* etc.), *The Silt Verses* does not rely on any plot device that justifies the recording, which is to say – it does not justify itself as a media text (e.g. found footage, metatextuality, pseudo-documentary, tape recorder etc.); therefore, it is an audio drama (radio drama, radio play) in the traditional sense of an audio performance quintessential for the Golden Age of Radio (1920s to 1950s). As the "listening device" works as a means for controlling the listenership (by including diegetic – model – listenership) and emulating non-fiction podcasting "in order to establish their [...] position within the podcast market" (Kobus 2022b: 51), the lack thereof signals the maturing of the format and its audience. The intimacy of the medium is emphasized by the mode of articulation of the main characters' statements as they are narrating their action and thoughts in confession-like manner. That is to say, Faulkner and Carpenter are talking to their god, Trawler-man, which makes their statements a form of prayer. In a similar manner, Paige is talking to her absent father. Listening to characters' intimate confessions marks the audience as eavesdroppers rather than listeners, intruding on others' privacy. At the same time, it positions the audience in the place of silent, indifferent god who

is witnessing the suffering of believers; although ideally, we forge emotional engagement with the story and character to empathize with their suffering, powerless to help, unlike the Trawler-man whose existence and motivation remains mystery.

With the excellent execution of the folk horror convention, in *The Silt Verses* the landscape itself becomes the source of terror – on the textual level through the Wither Mark and on the formal level as the soundscape (the sonic equivalent of landscape in podcasting) of the series creates the disturbing and unsettling environment of the riverside. Splashing, wet noises "sonically render the rural as Other" (Holloway 2024: 286) and the presence of the Saint is signified by disconcerting, uncanny, high-pitched sounds that may be produced by him in an indiscernible manner (Chapter 2). Isabella Van Elferen stated that in horror films the invisibility of sound produces and enhances the sense of fear (Van Elferen 2016: 167), which is even more true for horror podcasts, where "the soundscape of the podcast becomes the soundscape of the listener" (Kobus 2022b: 49). Van Elferen defined sound in horror as "that which is behind our back: the invisible, sinister presence" (Van Elferen 2016: 167). In *The Silt Verses,* the presence of the river and other threatening entities is signaled through the background noises. An interesting use of sound is employed in Chapter 10 with the character of Whisper, the Saint victim of "the great god Babble", reduced to whispered noises that are audible to the listeners but not the other characters; therefore, the noise becomes the "sinister presence" that threatens Carpenter and Faulkner.

"Country People Just Take Their Gods Too Seriously". Folk Horror of *The Silt Verses*

As Katy Soar (2024: 32) noted, "[a]lthough many hallmarks have been offered, a firm definition of what constitutes the [folk horror] genre remains elusive", which often undermines the distinction of folk horror as a horror subgenre; in that sense, folk horror is less a subgenre and more a marketing label for the horror texts that share themes of superstition, folk religion, paganism and human sacrifice. Recently, folk horror evoked a fair share of academic interest. The subgenre supposedly pioneered in the 70s with such movie titles as *Witchfinder General* (1968), *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) and *The Wicker Man* (1973), made in the context of 1970s counter-culture and pagan revival. Nowadays, the term "folk horror" is applied retrospectively to horror literature and movies made before the production of so called "Unholy Trilogy" and outside of the original British context. The most known indicator of the subgenre remains Adam Scovell's theory of the "folk horror chain": "a linking set of narrative traits that have causational and interlinking consequences" (Scovell 2017: 24). The first and key element in the chain is the landscape, "where elements within its topography have adverse effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants" (Scovell 2017: 26). The landscape in folk horror is connected to the past or, rather, its function is to connect the past with the present as

"notions of the landscape and the past are intertwined" (Soar 2024: 32). Soar called it "the temporality of the landscape" and added that in folk horror "narratives are often set in motion through the merging of the past in the present" (Soar 2024: 32). Andrew Michael Hurley argued that folk horror is defined by "brutality [that] emerges from places with violent histories that still linger, ghost-like, in the landscape" and "the part of [sub-genre's] role is to unearth forgotten barbarities and injustices and make us look at ourselves afresh" (Hurley 2019). Thus, the landscape in folk horror is deeply hauntological – not only in the sense of a supernatural presence haunting the landscape, which is often the important element of the subgenre narratives (Soar 2024: 32) – but also as a returning of the past, an un-earthing the past, the past-present modality of the landscape's temporality. David Southwell summarized the role of the landscape in the folk horror TV series *Black Spot* (2017–2019) when he wrote "the forest is trauma. The forest is mystery. The wild as not only beyond compass and charting, but temporality" (Southwell 2019: 43). In this context, Scovel's remark that "folk horror treats past as a paranoid, skewed trauma" (Scovel 2017: 24) becomes quite significant: in folk horror both the environment and the past become synonymous with trauma and with each other. Landscape is the past everlasting. Folk horror seems to be "rooted in place" – what happens in its narratives "could not happen anywhere else" – however, Dawn Keetley noticed that the core of this subgenre is the "undoing of place: the unsettling or wrenching of people from place" (Keetley 2023: XI).

The pivotal role of landscape in *The Silt Verses* is signified from the first Chapter, which starts with the sound of running water of the nameless river. Carpenter and Faulkner are shouting to each other as they are wading through the water, looking for the signs of worship of the Trawler-man. The very first utterance in the podcast belongs to Carpenter, as she narrates: "I have spent my life in the shadow of this great and winding river. I have always dwelt in the shadow of my god" (Chapter 1)[1]. When Carpenter addresses the Trawler-man, she calls him "my river". Therefore, it is a sacred river, a place within the landscape where the Trawler-man resides, his underwater garden, as well a physical embodiment of the god. For Carpenter, her grandmother, and many river god worshipers, the river and the god are one. Moreover, for this character, the sacred pilgrimage up the river is also a road through the memories, as she is returning to the place of her childhood, where her family was part of the Trawler-man parish of Flesh and Tide, prior to the delegalisation of their faith. The return is physical – going back up the river – as well as psychological, as she recalls memories of home and is forced to confront her trauma:

> Carpenter: My parents were dragged in shackles to the Saint's hydroelectric dam, a year after I was born. They were dragged there, they were

1 All bibliographic references marked as "Chapters" refer to appropriate episodes in the series (Ware, Hussen 2021–present).

> sentenced, and they were tossed off the side into the churning waters, and the last words they ever heard were that they were to be devoured by something they did not understand [...] I will not hear that the world is a better place than it was, because now there's process. I won't, and I can't (Chapter 12).

The choice of river – running water – presents a great example of the "undoing of place" in folk horror, as well as of the temporality of landscape. Going up the river amounts to going back in time and the river is far from stillness, cannot be described as a fixed point on the map as it floods and changes all the time, its flow is being changed by the worshipers of the Trawler-man so as to destroy towns of non-believers (Chapter 13). The river is a threat that can be used to bring about the final aim of the Trawler-man's religion upon the world: the deluge (Chapter 2). Carpenter's whole family died in service of the Trawler-man and by the end of the first season, she seizes the means of revenge upon the world: the Wither Mark, a sigil that can change the flow of the river and submerge entire cities.

The discovery of the Wither Mark occurs concurrently to Carpenter's growing crisis of faith. Becoming so close to achieve her faith's final purpose, she hesitates:

> Carpenter: [...] if you want us to fight, I'm ready to fight. If you want us to tear all of this horrid shit down about us or die in the attempt, then there's nothing I've ever longed for more. And if this leads to harm, even undeserved harm, along the way... well, I can weather that. I've learnt to weather as much as I need to. But I need to know that you can shape something better, once you've swept away all that came before [...] I won't die a fool, still waiting and hoping for you to show me what's past all of this (Chapter 10).

Carpenter's inner struggle connects to the second link in the folk horror chain, which is isolation – "[t]he landscape must in some way isolate a key body of characters, whether it be just a handful of individuals or a small-scale community" (Scovell 2017: 27). Max Jokschus commented upon the fact that "horror in folk horror suggests pandeterministic, omnipresent and invisible forces to be (and always have been) at work" (Jokschus 2024: 343), as landscape causes isolation – physical and/or social – that produces another, unarguably the most important, link in the folk horror chain, which is the skewed belief system and morality (Scovell 2017: 27). Those elements of folk horror's conventions are interestingly altered in *The Silt Verses*.

As Scovell noticed, the connection between isolation and abnormal belief system is rooted in "post-Enlightenment perspective that assumes folklore, superstition, and even to some extent religion, form through [...] physical but also psychical isolation" (Scovell 2017: 18). Folk horror builds upon the duality

of the urban and the rural, juxtaposing them with each other, where the urban represents the modern, rational and "normal" society and the rural becomes the irrational, backward Other. As a result, folk horror works against the idyllic, bucolic portrayal of the countryside and could be understood as a revenge of the rural upon the patronizing and dismissive city folk. As Vic Pratt wrote, folk horror is a sub-genre where "remote, regional community, and ancient customs and archaic superstitions, dismissed or marginalized by clever-clogs city folk, wreak havoc upon modernity, order and authority" (Pratt 2013: 29). However, in the world of *The Silt Verses,* the difference between the city and the countryside is highly arbitrary, as "the skewed belief system" provides the social norm, i.e., every religion is a monstrous one, practicing human sacrifice. The horrific forces are omnipresent and so are depravities that the worshipers in all territories willingly engage in, killing ritualistically for their gods and pointing the followers of an outlawed "false religion" out to the authorities, knowing that they will be sacrificed. The characters have a choice between knowingly participating in ongoing exploitation or standing aside and observing it as silent accomplices; speaking against the social order based on human sacrifice leads to one's death as an outlawed heretic. The "skewed belief system" in the folk horror chain makes sense only in a cultural context of a mainstream "norm" that functions outside of isolated and morally perverted community within the fictional world – in *The Silt Verses,* the mainstream cultural and social order is skewed, but only according to our, extra-textual knowledge.

The discovery of the Wither Mark is also the fourth and last element of Scovell's "folk horror chain" – the happening or summoning. Unlike the burnt offering of *Wicker Man* or village orgies in *Blood on Satan's Claw*, summoning of Wither Mark is a rather anti-climactic event. Carpenter and Faulkner discover a city already sunken and the Mark in the process of destruction; they hesitate to use the power of the river as the pilgrimage through the river changed their understanding of faith. It is the emotional climax of the season, as Carpenter starts to value connection to the other humans more than her relationship with the sacred.

To function in the world of *The Silt Verses* requires certain levels of psychological dissociation. Some great examples of this can be found in the police officer Hayward (Jimmie Yamaguchi) and the corporate worker – a "devoted servant of commerce" (Chapter 7) – Paige (Lucille Valentine). As Hayward investigates the illegal worship in the countryside, he narrates: "If there's a wider societal problem out here that needs to be addressed, for me it comes down to this: country people just take their gods too seriously. I suppose it comes naturally with being so exposed to the elements" (Chapter 3). Narration connects the environment with the radicalization of belief system, which is faithful to the folk horror convention. Nonetheless, Hayward would accept murder as long as it is a part of legal religion practice (Chapter 9); his morality is based on legality, which is to say, he has none. Hayward is not devoted do any god outside of social requirements of the signs of religious practice: he is sworn

to the Clock, the god of police force, and asks for "hosanna of determination" (Chapter 3) from his dispatch. However, those are superficial practices, as he lacks faith and, therefore, is incapable of understanding the faithful folk of the Peninsula:

> Hayward: Myself, I get up and I go to the coffee machine every morning, and it's already stamped with a prayer for the Saint Electric, beseeching her for a coffee that's nice and hot. And most days it's good coffee, but some days it's not, and I just spare her a thought and think, 'That's OK. You probably had other things going on.' But out here? You'd think it'd kill them to show a little insincerity (Chapter 3).

Hayward treats religion practices, no matter how gruesome, as they function in society of *The Silt Verses* – objective social institutions – and not an expression of genuine faith. He practices without faith, i.e., a personal relationship with the sacred. The same can be said of Paige, who works in religious marketing, creating new religious practices and advertising campaigns for brands "sponsored" by various deities. The traumatic body horror of human sacrifice is a part of her everyday routine, just like for everyone else in the city. Travelling by train comes with the obligatory sacrifice for every coach, which Paige accepts and even treats the saints with in dismissive manner:

> Arms pinned back, legs removed, an unhappy and no longer human face goggling desperately forward. The prayer-brand of the Saint Electric stamped upon both of his cheeks [...] I make sure to thank him and wish him a good day, because we always need to be kind to those people who are worse off than ourselves (Chapter 7).

Her own company goes through a "conversion program" (Chapter 7), changing its sponsor and the process has a price. The sight of her colleagues being sacrificed in the name of Crawling-In-Extasy, a centipede god, becomes a breaking point for Paige, who can no longer pretend that everyday monstrosities are justified, cannot distance herself from it.

> Paige: "There will be sacrifices". I know they don't mean that literally, of course. The same bosses who provide croissants and fruit for us in the kitchens every morning out of their own pocket aren't actually going to push for sacrifices [...] You have to believe that there's a plan here, or you could lose your mind (Chapter 7).

In the Chapter that introduces this character, Paige repeatedly calls one of her co-workers "my friend, Vaughan" to the point it becomes an eerie chant or invocation, a means of anchoring herself in a weirder social reality. As Vaughan is sacrificed, Paige is forced to confront the horrid reality of human dispensability

in the corporate capitalism that serves and uses the sacred at the same time. In the world of *The Silt Verses*, isolation and loneliness are the social norm. Carpenter, Faulkner and Paige experience them from the beginning of the series and – in contrast to the folk horror convention – overcome them over the first season. Usually, the "folk horror narrative centers upon an isolated community into which an outsider, or an interloper, is introduced" (Kattelman 2024: 131); as Matilda Groves noted, "folk horror is the tragedy of a protagonist being displaced within an environment and thus encompassing the horror of being 'other'" (Groves 2017). In *The Silt Verses,* the main characters start as outsiders: Carpenter is a worshiper who is losing her faith, Faulkner – a converted zealot who has not even known the sacred river before the pilgrimage, both belonging to outlawed religion, and Paige is deeply anxious about her place in society, tormented by the sense of non-belonging as she cannot accept the reality based upon human suffering. Their queerness also plays a role in the social isolation they experience, as Carpenter is aromantic and Faulkner and Paige are both transgender. The "otherness" is a starting point of their journey, caused by social maladjustment; upon meeting each other, they build a small community of outsiders, accepting each other and their deviation both from the social norms and community expectations (Chapter 12). Carpenter's inner struggle with faith is equated with overcoming social isolation: the farther she is from the Trawler-man, the closer she becomes with other people. Her betrayal of the Trawler-man's religion is caused by the sense of responsibility towards others, as she wants to better the world and not to destroy it. Still, Carpenter's crisis of faith comes from the incomprehensible nature of the sacred itself: "[o]ur god runs from us all the time. He keeps his back turned to us, he lurks in shadow. Every angle he comes at us different. He answers when we call him, but only to bring us old bones and debris from the garden, and he never stays to show us his face" (Chapter 15). Hayward demands from country folk that they should "keep [their] gods on a lash" (Chapter 14), but throughout the first season of *The Silk Verses*, gods prove time and time again that it is not possible, precisely because of the nature of the sacred itself.

The Monstrous Sacred and the Divine Terror

Caillois started *Man and the Sacred* by stating that "every religious conception of the universe implies a distinction between the sacred and the profane" (Caillois 1959: 19). The definitions of these two notions are inherently intertwined, as they are usually defined in opposition to each other: the profane is that which is not sacred and *vice versa.* Caillois admitted that theorizing about the sacred is doomed to failure as the sacred is an affective category. The statement itself is indebted to Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of Holy* which explored the relationship between a believer and the sacred, "the unseen order of things" (Cowen: 2008: 22). The sacred is only available to the believer as a "unique feeling response" (Otto: 1950: 6), the peculiar sensibility, an affective mood of perception of the world. As a result:

> religious man is, above all, one for whom two complimentary universes exist – one, in which he can act without anxiety or trepidation, but in which his actions only involve his superficial self; the other, in which a feeling of deep dependency controls, contains, and directs each of his drives, and to which he is committed unreservedly (Caillois 1959: 19).

The most general definition of the sacred states that it is "a dangerous force, incomprehensible, intractable but eminently efficacious" (Caillois 1959: 23). All major characteristic of the sacred are based upon this: everything can become the vessel for the sacred and everything sacred can lose its special status by an unsupervised contact with the profane; all contact with the sacred is dangerous; it is taboo; one cannot interact with the sacred without putting oneself in danger; "[i]t stimulates feelings of terror and veneration"; it "is always ready to escape, to evaporate like a liquid, to discharge like electricity" (Caillois 1959: 20–21). The sacred is ambiguous and dialectic – it consists of "antagonistic and complementary elements to which can be tendered, respectively, feelings of awe and aversion – feelings of desire and fervor that are inspired by its completely equivocal nature" (Caillois 1959: 37). Interactions with the sacred are dangerous and forbidden, "[t]he individual cannot approach it without unleashing forces of which he is not the master and against which his weakness makes him helpless. However, without their assistance, his desires are doomed to frustration. In these forces resides the source of all success, power, luck" (Caillois 1959: 25). Therefore, every contact with the sacred is a calculated risk.

The construction of the fictional world of *The Silt Verses* exhibits meticulous understanding of these characteristics, as an immediate presence of gods poses a danger to everyone. It could be said that the world of *The Silt Verses* lacks the *profanum*, the space where one can act and behave freely, without experiencing awe and terror. The everyday routine is overflowing with gods: there are prayer-stamps of Saint Electric on every mechanical device; blessing machines on every corner (not unlike Tibetan prayer flags and wheels), even ordering food in a chain restaurant is a prayer, as every restaurant is a chapel and might require "a fleshy sacrifice" from customers in exchange for the food (Chapter 12). Early in the series, Carpenter summarizes the state of world by saying "I'm drowning in gods. A god in the woods. A god in the radio. A god in the water. Everywhere you look, that glut of thought and meaning and purpose. And there's a god in your pain, as well" (Chapter 5). Therefore, gods in *The Silt Verses* are a form of concretization of the sacred, a force acting with "meaning and purpose" as they come into being spontaneously, born from an uncontrolled thought or idea that is used by the sacred to shape reality (Chapter 3) as the social announcement of radio warns citizens of Peninsula: "[d]o you know what your children are speaking to, late at night?" (Chapter 5). It gives meaning to the religious laws, as they could be understood as means to control the unsteady nature of the sacred, and its ability to shift and change reality. Because of the lack of the profane, the world of *The Silt Verses* is unstable and, therefore, dangerous to its inhabitants:

> Paige: This was pre-regulation, of course, when they were rolling out the new gods, the chemical gods and the heaving iron Cormorants and the propaganda gods that were dropped onto cities from above, and the entire landscape was choking in faith, and nothing could be trusted not to shift. And when the soldiers met each other in the desperate and violated places, and did not want to fight, they wouldn't dare speak the name of any god in their greetings or their goodbyes, in case they called something down upon themselves (Chapter 12).

The Silt Verses illustrates that the nature of the sacred is inhuman, dangerous and, thus, monstrous, as it has the ability to change people into something else – the saints in the series are metaphors, they exemplify the infectious and transformative nature of the sacred. The most common response to the presence of a god is fear (religious dread, sacred terror), which is not limited to the fictional world of the podcast, but, rather, is a genesis of all religion (Cowen 2008: 24). Indeed, the fundamental text of Western religions, *The Bible*, states multiple times that the immediate interaction with the sacred (angels, revelations) must be preceded by the sacred being demanding from the human: "do not be afraid". Fear is a natural response to the presence of the sacred. In the case of *The Silt Verses*, the sacred demands the opposite: people should be afraid but cannot make their reaction visible, even as the monstrous view of a saint aspires dread in them: "We cannot scream. We cannot give any indication that the sight before us is anything but divine" (Chapter 2).

In the contemporary culture, the ambiguous nature of the sacred is often overlooked because of "good, moral and decent fallacy" (Cowen, Bromley 2008: 10–11), "the popular misconception that religion is always (or should be always) a force for good in society and that negative social effects somehow indicate false or inauthentic religious practice" (Cowen 2008: 15–16). The sacred is contemporarily understood as a source of "absolute goodness" (Otto 1950: 6) and its dangerous dimensions are ignored or deemed to be misinterpretation (the so-called "fire and brimstone" preaching). *The Silt Verses* emphasizes the other side of the sacred dialectic: to worship a god is to fear it, as presented in the Carpenter's narration about her religious experience (her "coming to faith"):

> That was the first time in my life I knew what terror really was. The first time I truly believed in you, my river [...] my Trawler-man, my faint whisper in the night, my divine terror that leaves me awake at three in the morning in every sodden hotel room, sweating and gasping, my eyes wide after each new visit to his deep and drowning garden... (Chapter 1).

A similar sentiment can be found in Paige's confession: "I've been on this earth thirty-one years, and I never found a god I could love more than fear" (Chapter 11). Awe and dread, love and fear are equally important parts of the sacred dialectic. The characters of Nana Glass, who "knew what it meant to fear the

thing you loved" (Chapter 1), and especially Faulkner are counterpoints to Paige and Carpenter, as Faulkner sees himself as a prophet of the river, a chosen one, who loves and is "loved in turn" (Chapter 2) by the Trawler-man, unlike Carpenter. Over the first season of the series, he learns to fear the power of the sacred and to be cautious about it (Chapter 15).

The Silt Verses reminds contemporary audience of the "sacred terror" and the choice of the horror genre is not an accidental means to achieve this, as it was already Otto who noticed that although "primordial dread has long passed into systematic theology" (Cowen 2008: 24), "divine terror" is still present in humans "exercised by the element of horror and 'shudder' in ghost stories" (Otto: 1950: 16). The sacred terror changed into the fear of supernatural, omnipresent and unexplainable forces that are now the domain of horror as the genre conveys the remains of original relationship with the sacred.

Conclusion. The Ritualistic Sacrifices in the Name of Capitalism

Ubiquitous religious practices within the world of *The Silt Verses* at the first glance could be interpreted as a banalization of religion itself. There are such examples as Chitterling's Chapel, Humble Host of Hogs, a chain restaurant in the Chapter 12 that is nothing but grotesque, as well as Sweet Jolly Crunchtooth, a corn god that is also a cereal mascot, praised "for the gift of a nutritious breakfast" (Chapter 3). Monetization of religious beliefs in *The Silt Verses* is the analogue for the "skewed belief system" in the folk horror chain in the sense that it is a perversion of religious function; instead of giving people the sense of order and purpose, it exploits them: physically, spiritually and financially. The power of the sacred could be granted, but only to those who can afford it. The dangerous aspects of the sacred are used by government as the means of control – the monstrous abilities of gods are weaponized for mass destruction. Most importantly, the Trawler-man teaches its followers that they are "a vessel, no more than that; to be anything else would be in excess of your own nature" (Chapter 6). In the world of *The Silt Verses* people are means to an end, tools for the inexplicable forces that can use them at any time as every worker in the series is under a contract that implies the possibility of them becoming a sacrifice one day. The sacred terror of *The Silt Verses* is a metaphor for the existential terror implicated by late-stage capitalism "that something so much greater than you is destroying your world and it couldn't care less about you yet you're still forced to give your life to it" (dumbass-is-my-default 2024). This kind of existential horror is distinctive for Ware-Hussen's work, as it was the core of their previous podcast, *I am in Eskew*, concerning the powerlessness of people trapped in the city where the metaphorical meaning of "hostile architecture" is taken literally (Kobus 2022b: 56–60). In the case of *The Silt Verses*, the implicit critique of capitalism comes from the interchangeability of the sacred and economic and political forces within the fictional world. Even though the supernatural horror of the podcast comes from the application of the sacred characteristic within the construction of its world, all

the powers within the series are accumulated in one oppressive state as there are no priests in the world of *The Silt Verses,* and the role of administrators of the sacred is given to the elite class of the rich and the politicians, the only ones who can afford safety from the transformative, cruel forces of the sacred (or so they think). *The Silt Verses* poses the question of what has taken the place of the sacred in the contemporary culture and points at the inviolable status of the capitalistic economy that demands ongoing human sacrifice to sustain itself and generate profit. The context of human sacrifice in the name of capitalism within the world of *The Silt Verses* remains rather vague, fitting into anti-capitalism critique that is prevalent in contemporary podcast culture, as the critique of capitalist economy can be found in *Welcome to Night Vale*, *The Magnus Archives*, *Archive81*, and other popular fictional horror podcasts. The critique of capitalism as an omnipresent, deterministic force of social life that produces inequalities and suffering seems rather existential: the saints are metaphor for exploitation, physical and emotional alike, the practice of human sacrifice illustrates how workers are replaceable. The "oppressive state" of *The Silt Verses* does not point in any particular direction towards the extra-textual context (although one can argue that "sacrificing human life for profit" is a quite accurate description of the American health care system), and, rather, expresses the growing fear in contemporary Western society rooted in the increasing social inequalities, shrinking middle class and rapid globalization experienced through the economic crises.

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