

We speak the same language: A conversation between Nikoleta Kerinska and Kapka Kassabova¹

Falamos a mesma língua: Uma conversa entre Nikoleta Kerinska e Kapka Kassabova

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ABSTRACT

A few years ago, while strolling through the Latin Quarter and looking at the bookshop windows, my gaze was attracted by a cover: an expressive line drawing depicting hills covered in wild herbs, with a birch tree in the foreground, then a village nestled in the mountains and the horizon – an irregular curve cutting across the pale blue sky, above which I read *Elixir*. All of it felt familiar to me, almost intimate, and that feeling was confirmed when I noticed the author's name: Kapka Kassabova. I didn't know her, but I was certain – she was Bulgarian. For a few moments, I let my eyes wander again over the book's cover, then I went in and bought it. That was my first encounter with Kapka Kassabova's writing. From the very first pages, I was immersed in a magical world where nature, animals and humans coexist like organs of the same body, like elements of a single organism. *Elixir* is a poetic cure, a dream and a revelation, a journey from which we emerge transformed and renewed, inspired to seek true happiness. This journey led me to the publication of this issue of *Estado da arte* and to the dialogue that follows.

KEYWORDS

Kapka Kassabova; Nature; Literature

RESUMO

Há alguns anos, enquanto passeava pelo *Quartier Latin* e olhava as vitrines das livrarias, meu olhar foi atraído por uma capa: um desenho de traços expressivos retratava colinas cobertas de ervas selvagens, com uma bétula em primeiro plano, depois uma aldeia aninhada nas montanhas e o horizonte – uma curva irregular cortando o céu azul claro, sobre o qual li *Elixir*. Tudo isso me pareceu conhecido, quase íntimo, e essa sensação foi confirmada quando percebi o nome da autora: Kapka Kassabova. Eu não a conhecia, mas tinha certeza – ela era búlgara. Por alguns instantes, deixei meu olhar vagar novamente pela capa do livro, depois entrei e o comprei. Esse foi meu primeiro contato com a literatura de Kapka Kassabova. Desde as primeiras páginas, mergulhei num mundo mágico onde natureza, animais e humanos coexistem como órgãos de um mesmo corpo, como elementos de um único organismo. *Elixir* é uma cura poética, um sonho e uma revelação, uma jornada da qual saímos transformados e renovados, inspirados a buscar a verdadeira felicidade. Essa jornada me levou à publicação deste volume da revista *Estado da arte* e ao diálogo que se segue.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Kapka Kassabova; Natureza; Literatura

Nikoleta Kerinska: Your books invite us to look at nature from an inner perspective, in the sense of inhabiting nature's place, replacing anthropocentrism with another way of thinking and seeing the world. Among the many questions your readers face, one is perhaps the most difficult and the most important: Has the human species

¹ I am immensely grateful to Kapka for her availability, sincerity, and humanity; I also thank her assistant, Dona, and her agent, Jessica Bullock, for their help and professionalism.

lost its connection with the environment and with its roots? Does modern humanity live in a mirrored world that preaches a dichotomy between culture and nature, in which vanity and simulacra triumph? And if that is the case, do you believe that a return to nature and a “human/nature” symbiosis is still possible?

Kapka Kassabova: In my view, the question you raise is the great question of our era – this era in which anthropocentrism, built upon the industrial-military system, is collapsing. This industrial-military civilisation we live in is in the process of disintegration, and we can see it everywhere. I believe this is the most important question both for society and for everyone. I think change begins with the individual, and that we cannot speak of large processes or global problems without speaking of ourselves and of how each of us lives. Change begins within us, not somewhere outside. As you very aptly largely mentioned, the mirrored world – indeed, we live in a mirrored world.

We live in a world of *correspondences*, or rather, of *resonances*. The reason for this is that we create our reality from the inside out. It is we who create the reality in which we suddenly find ourselves living. We also create each one of us. I want to avoid grand generalisations. For me, as an individual, my books are an immersion into microcosms, where the focus is always the small person, who is in fact an entire planet, just like each of the characters in *Anima* and *Elixir*. I, as the narrator, am also an entire planet. Let us say that we are all planets that meet, and miracles can happen in these encounters. I am interested in these small miracles, and it is there that my hope resides, both as a person and as a writer who writes what she lives. For me, writing and living are one and the same – I do not separate writing from life. This theme excites me because the lives of writers are becoming increasingly academic. I think it is important to return, as you said, to real things – it is important to return to life. There is hope there; this is the healing process. *Elixir* is a book about healing, about revitalisation, about returning to life, which in this decaying civilisation is under threat. In our anthropocentric civilisation, where there is no place for other species, in truth there is no place for life.

You raise the question of the culture/nature dichotomy. Since I returned to living close to nature and far from large cities, which happened about fifteen years ago, I have undergone a personal revolution. That is how I embarked on the journey of writing these four books of the Balkan tetralogy: *Border*, *To the Lake*, *Elixir* and *Anima*. If I had not come to live here in Scotland, close to nature, I would not have been able

to follow the paths of these books, because they are peripheral paths. They are not books about urban vanity and central places; they are books about peripheral places, and it is these places that interest me. Since *Border* (2017), I began to perceive these peripheral places clearly – I always use the word in quotation marks, because for me the periphery has become the centre. I live in one of these “peripheries” in the north of Scotland and, for me, it is the centre. It is here that the important things happen. It is here that the natural resources and the untold stories are. It is here that the unnamed bones are buried; it is here that the alternative history lies, the one that does not appear in official sources; and it is here that everything city-dwellers truly long for is found... and it is here that citizens will come when the cities implode (speaking futuristically, of course).

European alchemists called it the quinta essentia, the fifth element. Plato called it the soul and intelligence of the world. The soul of the world is an animating force that runs through all living things in a web of interconnection. The world – as – a – machine does not have a soul. To reconnect with the fifth element, you must perceive the world – as – garden. This is the invitation of the Gaia paradigm – to step out of our mechanical isolation and step into a world of wonder.

When the ecopsychologists of the 1960s realised that ‘the core of the mind is the ecological unconscious’ they described in modern language the ensouled universe in which Gaia is mysteriously but undeniably a player.

‘There is a certain truth in natural things which is not seen with the outward eye, but is perceived by the mind alone, and of this the philosophers have had experience, and have ascertained that its virtue is such that it performs miracles,’ wrote a fifteenth - century Belgian alchemist. I found this in Carl Jung’s Aion, an enquiry into the phenomenology of the whole self. Sometimes, the world’s soul is winged like a bird. Sometimes, it is spherical, like the metaphysical fish first mentioned in an alchemical text: ‘There is in the sea a round fish.’ Jung calls it the alchemical fish. This spherical creature from the primordial ocean stands for the dragon’s lapis, or philosopher’s stone, or al- iksir. It is both inside and outside of the self. It is supposed that the outward eye cannot see any of this. But there are places where the eye becomes inward and the soul of the world becomes outward. Places where something is collectively alchemised. The bottom of the ocean and the

*desert exist at the same time in the same place. There, the soul of the world roams free.*²

K.K.: I will share with you a question that was put to me: “Should we protect the last shepherds?” or: “Why write about the last shepherds?” I do not want to call them the last; perhaps they are not. Perhaps there will be a return. We hope they are not the last. It has become fashionable to call this or that “the last”, because we all have the feeling that we are losing... that we are losing things of great value, and indeed we are on the verge of losing them. Why do we need to preserve these indigenous breeds of sheep, goats, horses, dogs? The very question shows how far we have lost contact with reality. I would frame the question differently: why do we need to preserve the museums and art galleries in London? Why are they so important when we do not have drinking water? That is the inverse question! Why do we need the fashion industry when we know it is entirely based on exploitation? Let us take as an example the seamstresses in Bulgaria, whom I write about in *Elixir*, from villages such as Breznitsa and Mesta, who earn 600 leva (the minimum wage in Bulgaria) to produce Hugo Boss clothing.

I hope we will see the collapse of some of these industries, and a return to more equal conditions, because all our industries, and our entire industrial-consumer system, are based on enormous inequalities, and we Bulgarians know this better than many people in Western Europe. I live in a village in the north of Scotland, which allows me to observe the growing rupture between rural life and urban life. I see this as an ever-widening gap between the urban way of life (I would not call it “civilisation”) and life outside the big cities. This gap is not like what we used to call Eastern Europe and Western Europe – those differences no longer exist.

N. K.: What I see is that we are in the big cities because there is the idea (perhaps the illusion) that in these places we are more valued : there are jobs and salaries and our labour is needed. This phenomenon is not only European – it happens in America, in Latin America and in Asia. We therefore find ourselves in a closed circle from which we cannot escape. I know many people who say: “As soon as I find some

² Excerpt from the book **Elixir: A Voyage into Alchemy**, Ed. Jonathan Cape – London, Penguin Random House – UK, p. 321.

means of subsistence outside the big city, something I have studied and can do, I will leave immediately!"

K. K.: Since the pandemic, this refrain has become increasingly common. You describe it very well: "a closed circle from which we cannot escape". This is the military-industrial system in which we live, even if we do not feel it all the time. This is the system that operates in Gaza, where genocide goes hand in hand with ecocide. Not only in Palestine, but also elsewhere, ecocide and genocide – the destruction of life, human and non-human – are global phenomena that are accelerating. And all of us, even when we are in Paris, Edinburgh, the north of Scotland or in Pirin, where *Anima* takes place, are to some extent victims of this system, because it is extractives. It operates on the principle of extraction. That is what my new book, not yet published, is about.

The extraction of all kinds of natural resources, including the intellectual extraction of everything a person has and can offer intellectual property, energy, time, health. This is extraction. And the big cities are like centrifuges for extracting human resources, and in return they give us (as you said) a sense of reward, of some importance, let us say, some validation. I have the impression that more and more people are seeing through the illusion, and that we all see that the price is very high, and at the same time our cities are changing. Every time I go to a large city in Europe, I find it negatively transformed compared with the previous visit. Whether Venice or Paris, it does not matter. The last time I was in Barcelona, I hardly recognised it; I hardly recognised the character of the centre of Barcelona. It is as if the hearts of cities have been torn out by the phenomenon of mass tourism: another industry that extracts. Mass extraction and mass standardisation of everything, everywhere, including in the animal world. We see and experience this standardisation globally.

In *Anima*, as you may remember, I write about different breeds of animals. In Bulgaria, and in the Balkans in general, industrialisation arrived late, fortunately. But even so, in two generations industrialisation managed to destroy entire breeds of animals, creating more productive hybrids, and that is why this story – the pastoral story – is so important. It is real, made of flesh and bone, and extremely symbolic. It is important for people in the cities, because it tells how species of animals disappear, and indeed how species of people also disappear, ways of life disappear, ecosystems disappear. To tell the story of these disappearances, I undertook the ordeal that is *Anima*. Because I saw how important these people are, I saw all the work they do. The

shepherds and cattle breeders in the mountains are true revolutionaries. They are “resistance fighters”. They are on the front line! For me, they are more important than the intellectuals in various institutions who are, in fact, “chewing old poisons”, as Eugenio Montale wrote, one of the favourite poets of my youth in Sofia. That is why our civilisation is dying, because we are chewing old poisons – I quote Eugenio Montale. And that is why, as an author, I am drawn to places and people who, instead of chewing old poisons, give something to the world, something real, something new, something alive, something that grows. It is not only an external process, but also an internal one. And in truth, we all seek these places, these experiences, these people and these moments. It is this that keeps us moving.

N. K.: Since you mentioned livestock and extinct species, I want to share something with you that is also an indirect way of asking the original question. I spend the summer in a Bulgarian village near Lukovit, called Dermantsi. In my childhood memories, countless herds of buffalo, sheep and goats would flood the streets at night, returning from pasture. Those herds no longer exist; they have disappeared. Last summer, I spoke with a resident of Dermantsi, younger than me, but who remembers those times. He is one of the few who still keeps some animals. He told me: “You cannot imagine how difficult it is nowadays to have the right to look after animals! They have to undergo inspections, they must be vaccinated, registered. There are so many requirements, and even the municipal official who came here to deal with it said to me: You’ve chosen a very expensive hobby!” These words shocked me, because in my childhood, looking after animals was something ordinary. Everyone kept animals in their yards, and not only was it not expensive, it wasn’t even a hobby – it was simply normal.

K. K.: It should be normal. In fact, this too is a great distortion and perversion. These are the blows of the industrial-military system. And I always say it together, because for me industrial civilisation sustains military civilisation. We see how the genocide in Gaza enriches weapons manufacturers. Just as industrial agriculture enriches various investors while impoverishing small producers, and destroys our ecosystems and our very souls. We are on the verge of losing our soul as a species, after having lost all our animals. I quote the couple of goat shepherds in *Anima*, who work with Kalofer goats. The protagonist, Andrea, always speaks of “the little animals”, “our little animals”, “we must look after them in the morning, during the day and at night”. She is fully aware of everything we are talking about. She has made a sacrifice

and invested everything in the animals, because without them we will perish, if not immediately, then soon. Everything is interconnected. Those who work with animals know how everything connects. And so, the fact that I managed to write *Anima* and *Elixir*, these two books about human ecology, was for me a supreme personal achievement. First, for having lived all of that with dignity, even though it is not literally my life, since my life, in many ways, mirrors the lives of the people portrayed in these two books. I do not literally live there, but I live in a similar place in the north of Scotland. So it was a supreme achievement for me to enter those worlds and create these two books. To tell the story of these people to our contemporaries, but also to future generations. For me, these books are monuments for precisely that reason.

N. K.: Your books are true hymns to nature: plants, animals and people, far from modern life, are the protagonists of these stories, which you define as “non-fiction literature”. Is this definition important to you? Why is it important to specify the documentary axis of your stories? Let me clarify my question: I have always thought that fiction (and more specifically fictional literature) allows us to analyse and understand the world, providing us with certain models through which access to reality becomes more direct, and even easier. Your position is that you write a documentary narrative, in the sense of a narrative that reflects lived life, and what you have experienced. And although we, the readers, read it in that way, it transports us to other times and other spaces. At a certain moment we are irreversibly immersed in it, experiencing a true fictional adventure, despite the elements that, from time to time, bring us back to reality. Is there any boundary between fiction and non-fiction in your books?

K. K.: That is a complex question. Allow me to approach it without entering literary theory. We could, but it is not interesting. Let us speak about my practice, specifically with examples from the books I write, and also about my view as a reader, because every writer is, above all, a reader. For me, there has never been a great difference between fiction, non-fiction, and I would even say between fiction, non-fiction and poetry. All the literature I love has been for me a living world in which you can immerse yourself and live; and consequently, that world, no matter how distant it may be in time and space, is connected to your life. So, for me, these categories do not exist, and I think for most readers it is the same – we read out of passion and necessity. We read in the same way we breathe fresh air – to live better, to be healthy,

to be happy. That is what I write about; because otherwise, I do not know how I would cope with the situation... or what I would do.

This question of categories is secondary for me. I have had to confront it because in the publishing industry my books must be categorised in some way. It often irritates me that my books are called “travel writing”, “travel accounts” or “documentary literature”. In Bulgaria we also have this strange division between “fictional” and “non-fictional” literature, which seems absurd to me. For me, literature, whether documentary – that is, based on experience – or entirely imagined by the author, is art. Therefore, the concept of fiction does not suit me. Nothing is invented in my books; everything is lived by me or by the characters. There is no fiction, there is imagination – yes, because in all art there is imagination. Without imagination, we die instantly. We cannot live without imagination. An artist is driven by their imagination; for me, imagination and fiction are two completely different things. I have been a poet since childhood; I write poetry that breathes through my prose. People often ask me: why did you stop writing poetry? I did not stop. Poetry entered the prose; they merged. In the same way, for me, artistic writing is a kind of union with poetic form. Form is very important to me.

Form and content are very important. As Flaubert said: merging form and content is every writer’s dream. Every artist pursues this holy grail. This is the sublimation for any artist: the moment when you see how the form of your book perfectly reflects its content. That is nirvana. For me, it means merging myself with the material I write about and live within, because I inhabit these worlds for about two years. I lived with *Anima* for two years, with *Elixir* for two years. I have no other life during that time – this is my life. I do not have an office I leave in order to live comfortably for the rest of the day. No! All comfort disappears – I am there. Whether mentally or physically, I have been in that world for two years. There is no other comfort, no other happiness for me. In that sense – yes – I write in a documentary manner, because everything is lived, and because the real experience of my characters is my highest priority.

The most important thing for me, once I enter this world, is to be able to tell it honestly, with dignity, and without narcissism. Let us take the world of the livestock breeders in *Anima*, which is complex and multifaceted. When I was in that world, the most important thing for me was not survival. I am so obsessed with the subject I write about that survival becomes irrelevant to me. I lose, to some extent, my survival

instincts. For me, the most important thing is that the story survives. Any ego must be set aside. I am in the story, but my ego must not be present. The story of these people, of these places, of what is happening there is what matters! Just as everything that happened on those lands in the past is important; just as Spartacus, who was born in Struma, led the slave revolt, and that continues to matter to us in some way, because the echo of that event two thousand years ago still reaches us and remains relevant. In the same way, Kamen, Marina, Sasho and the Karakachan sheep in Pirin are important and will continue to be important two thousand years from now. Whether they will still exist or not is another question, but they will certainly be important! In that sense, we return to your question: this is how I write my books, and that is why they do not fit into any category.

And the Karakachan dog? Since the great Karakachan flocks were disbanded in the 1950s, it had endured a brutal fate. By 1990, it had been endangered for some decades. When the nomads were settled and their dogs went wild, the state invented an ‘anti- rabies’ policy which gave blanket permission to kill guardian dogs that were not used. This caused the first sharp decline in the Karakachan pedigree. It was further diluted in the 1980s by uncontrolled cross- breeding with other large dogs from completely different lineages like the Caucasian Shepherd Dog and Saint Bernard. This happened because there was no established standard for the breed.

Against this backdrop, Kámen, Achilles and Marina crisscrossed the mountainous countryside in search of more dogs like Kitan. They found them with the last of the highland shepherds – endangered indigenous breeds of dogs, sheep, goats and horses, and no one else was interested in them because their commercial value was lost.

Over the next decade, the brothers’ mission was successful: to breed authentic Karakachan dogs and have the breed officially recognised and quantified, which had never been done before. Their dogs from Kitan’s lineage ignited interest, won competitions and began to sell at home and abroad, inspiring a whole movement in the world of dog lovers. This ensured the health of the gene pool. When Kámen and Kitan were invited to a television studio in the capital, because by then Kitan had become a celebrity, the dog walked the city streets on a lead as if he’d grown up there. But the Karakachan dog is not a pet. It needs a mission: to guard. The refinement of the breed over the centuries had been merciless. I heard of cases from the 1980s when Karakachan dogs who failed to react to a wolf attack were shot by their owners : who cried as they did it. You

cannot feed a Karakachan dog that doesn't work was the brutal logic, but it was more than that, there was a military ethic at work. You could not have deserters in the ranks. In fact, these dogs were used by the army from the Russian-Turkish War in 1878 onwards. Traditionally, shepherd dogs have one of their ears clipped as puppies, the right ear for males, the left for females, due to some antiquated belief that it made their hearing better. This was still carried out in places and Marina said there was some truth to the bit about the hearing, but the practice was slipping into the past, thank God. One thing was certain – these dogs were made to be one with the tough mountains of the southern Balkans and their web of large predators, grazing animals and humans. They were adapted for these conditions and could survive, but not thrive, as house pets. Guardian dogs didn't just protect the flock from large predators. They also protected large predators from being shot by people with livestock.³

N. K.: Thank you very much for your frank answer. I asked this question for a simple reason: nowadays, when we read a book or watch a film, people often ask questions such as: “Did this really happen?”, “Did these people really exist?”, “Were these people really there at that moment, in that place?”, which leads me to think that our reality is highly fictional, or rather, implausible. That is why we ask ourselves these questions, and that is why we increasingly seek traces of something real, something that truly existed or happened. I do not know whether you share this view.

K. K.: That is a very pertinent observation. And it is very true. It is because we are suffering from “boredom”⁴. It is paradoxical, but it is a fact: we are simultaneously overstressed and suffering from boredom. What a painful paradox! That is why we are all ill in some way. The pandemic tried to show us how ill we are, but it seems that, collectively, that lesson was not learned. We did not change our way of life, or rather, the system that governs us did not change its methods. The system has worsened. It has become even more aggressive, exploitative and extractivist. We have been increasingly stressed since the pandemic and, at the same time, we suffer from this deep feeling that life is elsewhere. There is even a literary expression: *Life is elsewhere*. The feeling that life is elsewhere makes us want to live in a more

³ Excerpt from the book **Anima, A wild Pastoral**, Ed. Jonathan Cape – London, Penguin Random House - UK, 2024, p. 32-33.

⁴ In original : « ennui ».

spectacular way (something certain people seek in digital technologies). Perhaps that is why we ask ourselves this question. “Did this really happen?” is a modern question, a question of our time. Behind this intellectual question lies the real emotional question: “Could I also experience this?”, “Would I like to experience this?”. And when my readers ask me: “Were you really in those places?”; “Do these people really exist?”, the real question is: “How can I also go there?”; “How can I experience something like that?”. In fact, it is not bad that we ask ourselves these questions.

There are readers from all over the world who write to me and ask: “Do you organise visits?”. For the three books – *Border*, *To the Lake* and *Elixir* – there are readers who ask themselves such questions, and some of them set off on their own. This makes me extremely happy. For *Anima*, I have not yet heard of anyone who has gone in search of the people and places in the book, but there will be some. The terrain there is more difficult.

My readers from Italy, France, Poland and other parts of Europe have been to these places and have written to me about them. It is incredible how far people can go when their imagination, emotions and humanity are stimulated. Readers have climbed above the village of Breznitsa, in eastern Pirin, to look for the Breznitsa Hotel, which is a fictional name, but the hotel is real. They have looked for that hotel, the mosque and that abandoned monastery on the border that Zico and I could not visit. There are readers who go in search of these places, and that becomes part of their journey. They discover something about themselves, and that gives me enormous joy, because, just like me, these readers literally walk the paths and trails of these hidden and “peripheral” places, which form part of their metaphysical journey.

Perhaps *Anima* does not have as many followers who walk these paths, climb, look for the pens and the Karakachan sheep. But the most important thing is that people, metaphysically, emotionally and energetically, walk these paths and that something in their lives changes for the better. That is my greatest joy, and that is why I speak of living literature, as a counterpoint to intellectual literature, which, in my opinion, is quite worn out. To a great extent, European literature is worn out. Yes, that is a strong statement, but I defend it with all my strength – European literature is worn out because it has become intellectual literature. And that is why we seek something different.

N. K.: I fully agree. This moment of the metaphysical journey is very interesting. What is most striking in your books is that we embark on a journey from which we

emerge changed. This journey transforms us, thus fulfilling what is most essential in a work of art. When a work of art manages to transform us and make us see ourselves differently, it has fulfilled its purpose. In my view, this is the greatest form of recognition, and the best thing that can happen to an artist.

K. K.: Yes! In that sense, I believe that living art is above all a spiritual experience. What I observe is that spirituality has been absent from European art for generations. That is precisely why European art and literature are, to a large extent, sterile. Art has become an intellectual and commercial product, because spirituality has been absent from it, just as it has been absent from our lives. I think the only way to bring spirituality back into people's lives is nature – contact with nature, because nature is spiritual. I mean this in the broadest sense. Do not understand spirituality as organised religion or a cult, but as the oxygen we all need. The only way to bring spirituality back into our lives is to return to nature. That is why I am turning more and more towards these places, and why my books are becoming increasingly ecological – spiritual, like *Elixir* and *Anima*.

N. K.: Let us talk about the problem you have just mentioned: the loss of spirituality and the distancing from nature in modern humanity. When we observe children, we notice that they carry within themselves a worldview untouched by contemporary ruptures. They are naturally close to nature. What can we pass on to them or teach them so that this connection is not lost in the future?

K. K.: I do not know whether we need to say anything to children. To be like them and act with kindness, we must give them pleasant and meaningful contact with nature, regular contact that makes them feel strong and full of energy. Especially those children who are already immersed in the digital universe. Because the digital universe drains people's strength. We see this in the faces of everyone – young and old – who are trapped in digital devices. Children's vitality is the most vulnerable. For me, the counterpoint to this is the beauty of nature. Giving children a connection with nature, where they are not dependent on their digital devices, but connected to something that brings them joy, and to practical activities in nature. Not only as tourists, but so that they feel part of these ecosystems.

And this is possible. Our generation and the next, those who lived before dependence on digital technologies and artificial intelligence, are the bridge generations – we must pass this on to the younger ones, who were born into the digital world. I think we have a responsibility towards these young people and children. But

above all, we have a responsibility towards ourselves, towards the way we live. We can only show them by example.

All of this is very difficult, because reading is also at stake. Will readers survive? There will always be people who want to be writers. There are many young people who want to be writers, but they do not read. As a human species, we will always have the desire to tell stories. Storytelling comes from experience. That is why I think that even those children who do not read books need experiences, they need to be part of something alive. We still have nature, even living in Paris or in big cities. Perhaps it is good to think of these actions as an act of resistance. Be a resister! Be different! Perhaps that is what we should say to children: “be different”. There is a concept of *opting out*. Do something different and others will follow. Be original. Do not be part of the machine.

N. K.: A wonderful message! Thank you. Before we finish, share something – just a few words – about your future project.

K. K.: My next book is called *Borrowed Land*. It will be translated first into French, in January next year, and then into other languages, into Bulgarian and Italian. *Borrowed Land* is a story about the region where I live and about people who have a close relationship with nature. Again, it is a book about human ecology, told through small stories, since the emphasis in this book is very personal. It tells the story of how I came to the north of Scotland, why I am here, why I love this land and why I suffer for this land. For fifteen years, I have witnessed enormous natural destruction, the destruction of ecosystems, animals and even human communities, in the name of “green energy”, in quotation marks. Green energy is arriving with large footprints. Much is said about the carbon footprint. To reduce the carbon footprint, renewable energy is sought in the form of huge wind farms and other infrastructures which, in fact, have a huge carbon footprint. Although they are declared green energy, they really are not. They cause massive destruction in the sea, in coastal areas, in rivers, in the soil and in the air. This emerging renewable or green energy industry is proving particularly destructive and environmentally devastating. Here in Scotland, everything is for export, not for consumption. So this is a new gold rush that benefits only large global companies and energy distributors. That is what my book is about: telling what is happening here.

N. K.: The problems with these farms, as well as with the installation of solar panels, are also global problems that we observe in many countries. These infrastructures are harmful to the people and animals living nearby.

K. K.: This is, in fact, one of the great problems of our time: under the pretext of green energy, the industrial-military system continues to operate, destroying the Earth and the water. Under a new label, we continue to destroy. Instead of asking ourselves how to use less energy, we try to obtain it in other ways, continuing to exploit natural resources.

Before we finish, I would like to mention a Brazilian author who is very important to me. She is a journalist – I am not – but we have much in common in what we write, and also in activism. She lives as an activist; I do not live so much as an activist, but there are parallels between our books. I am talking about Eliane Brum. She is well known in Brazil and is beginning to be translated into other languages. I like her books very much because they are docu-fictions. They are stories about real people, on the margins of Brazil, in quotation marks. She writes with a passion and frankness that are rare in European literature, for the reasons we have already mentioned. For me, authors like her represent the future of living literature.

N. K.: Thank you very much for your time and attention! It was a pleasure to meet you!

K. K.: Thank you as well for your attention. I am very happy that we have established this connection! We speak the same language!

N. K.: Yes! We speak the same language, literally and metaphorically⁵. I wish you success and see you soon!

⁵ This interview was conducted in Bulgarian and subsequently translated into Portuguese and English.



Figure 1. Covers for the book **Anima, A wild pastoral**, available at <https://kapka-kassabova.net/1841-2/>



Figure 2. Covers for the book **Elixir, A voyage into the alchemy** available at <https://kapka-kassabova.net/books/elixir/>



Figure 3. Covers for the book **To the lake** available at <https://kapka-kassabova.net/books/to-the-lake/>

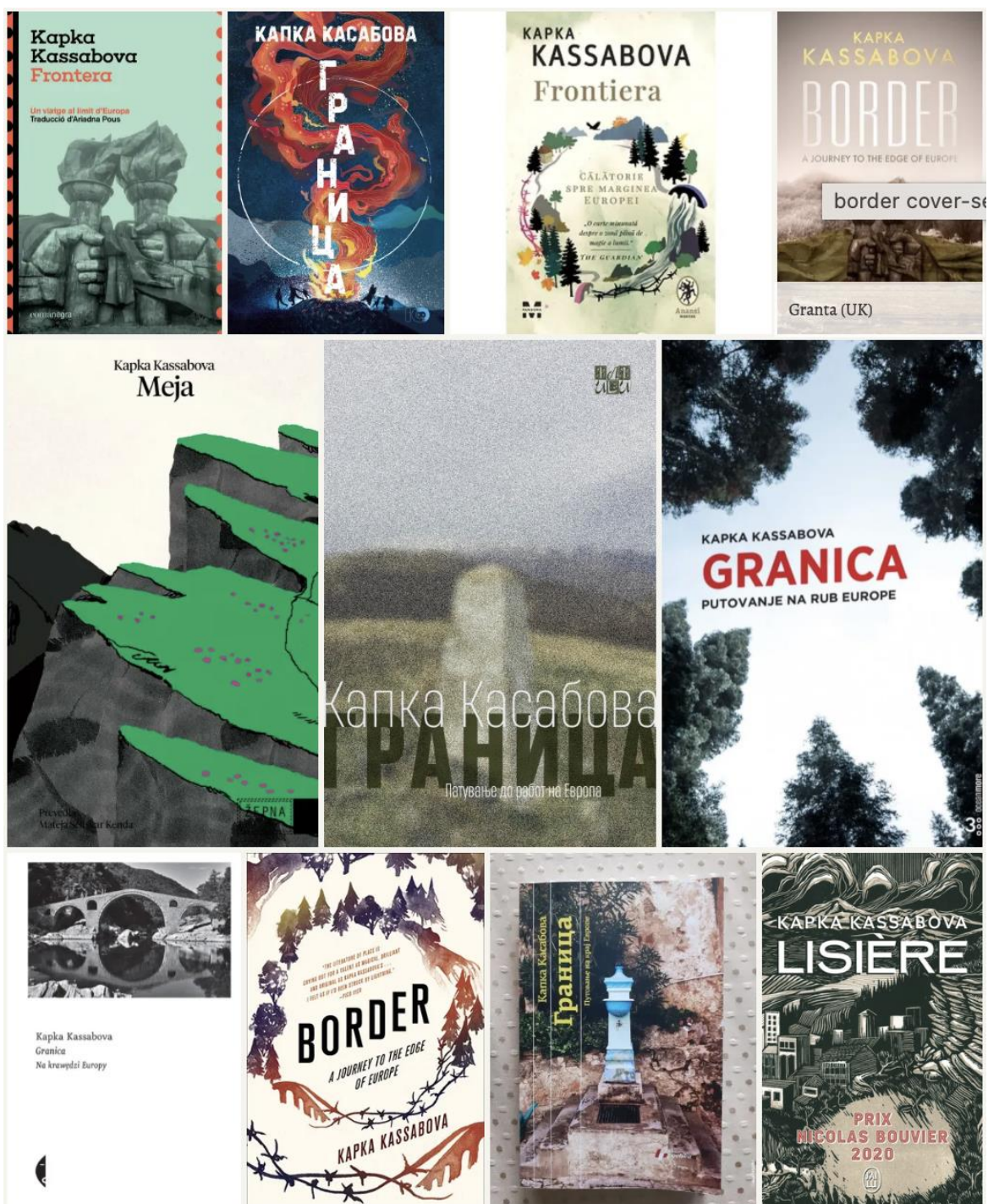


Figura 4. Covers for the book **Border, a journey to the edge of Europe**, available at <https://kapka-kassabova.net/books/border-a-journey-to-the-edge-of-europe>

About the authors

Kapka Kassabova was born in November 1973 in Sofia, the daughter of scientist parents, and studied at the French Lycée. In 1992, her family emigrated to New Zealand, where she studied Linguistics and French Literature at the University of Otago, and English Literature and Creative Writing at Victoria University. She began writing poetry in childhood. In her early years in New Zealand, she underwent a transition from Bulgarian, her mother tongue, to English, the new language she adopted for her writing. Her first books reflect this state of fragmentation – the poetry collections *All Roads Lead to the Sea* and *Dismemberment*, and the novels *Reconnaissance* and *Love in the Land of Midas*. In 2005, Kapka settled in Edinburgh, Scotland, where she wrote *Street Without a Name* (2008), a coming-of-age story set in the final years of communism and a journey through post-communist Bulgaria.

At the heart of her work lies the search for a transformative encounter with places and people. Margins, confluences, consequences – these are her places. Over the past decade, she has created a body of work that grew organically and became the Balkan tetralogy. Each book leads her to a region in the southern Balkans, in Bulgaria and along its borders. These are rich human and natural ecosystems marked by political trauma. The first two books are *Border* (2017) and *To the Lake* (2020), which explore collective stories. The last two are *Elixir* (2023) and *Anima* (2024), which investigate how humans, plants and animals are bound by a vital interdependence.

Her books have received numerous literary prizes, among them: the Commonwealth Writers' Prize; the NZ Montana Book Award; Premio Speciale Gambrinus Mazzotti; Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger (2021); BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week (February 2020); Best Books of 2020 in *The Sunday Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Herald*, *The Tablet*, and *The Bookseller* magazine; Prix Nicolas Bouvier in France (2020); Prix européen du livre, special mention of the jury (2020); British Academy Nayef Al-Rodhan Prize for Global Cultural Understanding (2018); Highland Book Prize (2018); Edward Stanford Dolman Book of the Year (2017); Saltire Society Scottish Book of the Year (2017).

To date, there are no Portuguese translations of Kapka Kassabova's books.

<https://kapka-kassabova.net/>

Nikoleta Kerinska is an artist, researcher, and art professor at the Polytechnic University of Hauts-de-France (France). Her research focuses on simulation as a means of constructing artistic fictions, on the diverse registers of the image, and—especially—on the notions of transmedia and intermediality within the field of art. The convergences and divergences between text and image as dissimilar sign systems strongly inform her reflections

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