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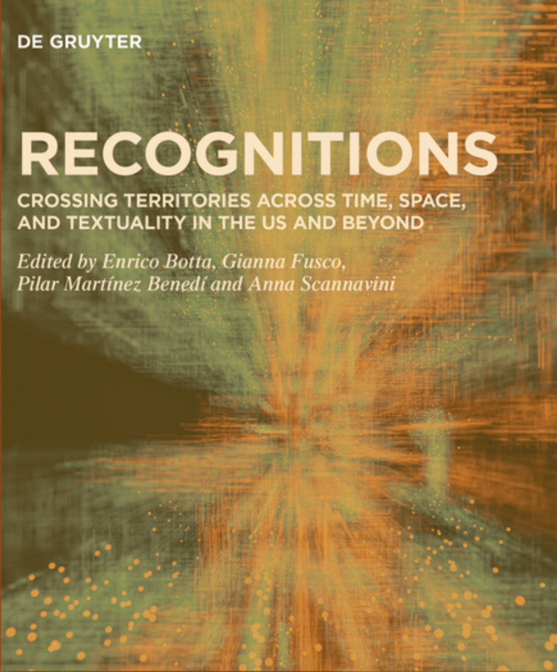

RECOGNITIONS

CROSSING TERRITORIES ACROSS TIME, SPACE, AND TEXTUALITY IN THE US AND BEYOND

Edited by Enrico Botta, Gianna Fusco,
Pilar Martínez Benedí and Anna Scannavini

TRANSCODIFICATION:
ARTS, LANGUAGES AND MEDIA

Recognitions

Transcodification: Arts, Languages and Media

Edited by
Simone Gozzano

Volume 6

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Enrico Botta

Introduction: “One Shock of Recognition”

> *Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk)*
> *of experiencing an adaptation.*
> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*

Recognitions: Crossing Territories across Time, Space, and Textuality in the US and Beyond is the result of the 26th AISNA Conference held in the Department of Humanities at the University of L’Aquila between September 23–25, 2021. The worldwide and interdisciplinary scope of the event provided a valuable forum for conversation on the issue of recognition which was interpreted as a driver and catalyst for countless practices of transcodification and adaptation. A selection of papers delivered during the conference has flowed into this volume, which has the ambition to establish itself as a valuable resource for understanding the connections between the idea of recognition and American literary and cultural manifestations.

The desire and fear of transcoding: adaptation as practice and recognition as control

The Humanities increasingly recognize transcodification as a creative and interpretive paradigm for a transcultural and transmedia society such as the global and contemporary one. While the discourse applies on both sides of the Atlantic, we see transcodification as a process that contributes to the expansion and richness of the American cultural landscape, marked by the fusion of various media and the translation of different communication codes.

Since the early attempts at systematizing their research area, American studies have entered the fields of linguistics, literature, history, geography, and culture to gather information and track the development of a phenomenon involving text translations, renderings of expressive modes, and transmissions of innumerable forms of knowledge. Broadly speaking, transcodification makes it possible to understand American identity by integrating it into an international and transnational discourse.

The transcodification of ideas and practices allows to reconstruct the conceptual and normative foundations of certain political and ideological, as well as economic and cultural claims—from contemporary struggles over racial and gender identity and differences to social justice and resource redistribution—that take

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shape in the United States and can be compared with what is happening in other countries. Transcodification also means rewriting and rereading the cultural link between tradition and invented tradition whose practices must be recognized, understood, and translated from one historical and geographic context to another. The very reflection on American exceptionalism seems to revolve around a process of deciphering the many forms of self-recognition by which the nation has imagined itself from within and, simultaneously, of recognizing the patterns by which the nation has been imagined beyond its borders.

The foundation of national identification would thus pass through forms of transcodification that, elaborated in the various fields of research, multiply when freed from the restrictions of purported veracity, as evidenced by the increasingly widespread and productive practice of adaptation. The discourse has not only ideological but also more deliberately artistic connotations. The processes of transmediality and adaptation that have pervaded mass culture and beyond for decades now openly question the very ideas of canon, authorship, and tradition. Social networks, for instance, are increasingly becoming tools of text production (narratives, photographs, films, personal and collective archives), which not only identify and collect social, artistic, or political groups but also challenge the very boundaries of artistic identities and, more radically, of biological and social identity. Underlying every process of transcodification, transculture, and transmediality, and every mechanism that drives the practice of adaptation, is the concept of recognition; a polysemic term with meanings ranging from "recognition of existence, validity or legality" to "knowledge of something that has already been encountered"; and from "appreciation" to "detection and encoding of data by a machine."

Realizing and recognizing

In its many manifestations, recognition plays a fundamental role in the formation of personal and national identity, and consequently in shaping human interactions and social and economic structures. Indeed, recognition influences power configurations, social hierarchies, and systems of inequality. As early as 1992, philosopher Charles Taylor argued that:

> A number of strands in contemporary politics turn on the need, sometimes the demand, for *recognition.* The need, it can be argued, is one of the driving forces behind nationalist movements in politics. And the demand comes to the fore in a number of ways in today's politics,

> on behalf of minority or ‘subaltern’ groups, in some forms of feminism and in what is today called the politics of ‘multiculturalism’.[1]

Taylor emphasizes the significance of recognition in the fight for minority representation and cultural rights. Fundamentally, movements fighting for recognition —such as the civil rights movement and the activism surrounding LGBTQ+ rights—challenge prevailing norms and call for the inclusion of underrepresented voices.

Interpreted in terms of interpersonal relations, social movements, or institutional practices, recognition acts as a catalyst for the phenomena of progress, inclusion, and social justice, but also as a filter in defining and legitimizing the establishment. These functions are present at the foundation of Western cultural outputs. First, recognition is about the appreciation of the artist and his/her creations by the public and the art community. Works are distinguished by their aesthetic appeal, technical inventiveness, and conceptual significance; but also for their authenticity, a concept challenged since art can be reproduced, copied, or counterfeited.

Thematically, stories and characters in literary works across all genres and historical periods have been influenced by recognition. From ancient epics to contemporary novels, characters go through stages of self-awareness, self-discovery, and self-acceptance, often catalyzed by pivotal events or encounters that broaden the characters’ perspectives and advance the plot. From *Oedipus The King*, with the gradual discovery of the protagonist’s true identity, to Homer’s *Odyssey*, with Odysseus’s formal return to his homeland through his reintegration into the private and public spheres, recognition is a classical topos in European literature that reaches the United States through forms reflecting the complexities of its society. One needs only consider Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, in which the main character, Sethe, finds redemption through individual and group healing after she acknowledges past trauma and pain.

“Genius, all over the world, stands hand in hand,” wrote Herman Melville in “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850), “and *one shock of recognition* runs the whole circle round.”[2] Melville is ostensibly “treating of Hawthorne”[3] here. Yet, in what is considered one of the earliest literary manifestos of the American letters, he is calling for the recognition of an exquisitely American Shakespeare, “born in the banks of the Ohio,”[4] at the same time indissolubly linking US literature and World literature: American exceptionalism stands, in Melville's view, hand in hand with transnationalism. The extent to which this idea still applies today runs beneath, and connects, the diverse contributions that make up this volume.

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[1] Taylor 1992, 25.

[2] Melville 2002, 528.

[3] Melville 2002, 528.

[4] Melville 2002, 524.

Recognitions: Crossing Territories across Time, Space, and Textuality in the US and Beyond critically examines how transcodification acts at the intersection of literature, art, history, and social and cultural artifacts to promote instances of recognition in the United States. Two particular characterizations of the concept—which were addressed during the AISNA conference and are the core of this book—connect recognition to American, as well as to Pan-American, trans-Pacific, and trans-Atlantic history: first, recognition as a relay in artistic and literary transcodification and, second, as a relay in the processes of attribution of social value to individuals and groups—including gender, race, and ethnicity—in their synchronic and diachronic dimensions. The relay functions metaphorically as a filter that activates or deactivates the processes of production and interpretation.

In the former case, recognition activates processes that affect the communicative codes underlying the country's artistic and literary production. The idea behind the essays collected here is that any attempt to appropriate and modify artistic expressions from the past or from other geographical contexts through processes of transmediality and adaptation hinges on recognition: the source work functioning as the watermark of the transcoded output; the mutual legitimization of the original and derived text; the reinterpretation of the role of authorship; and the refunctionalization of the source text in light of its translation into a different language.

The other important function of recognition concerns the logic by which it regulates group and gender identities and the related processes of change that in today's America are progressively dismantling the accepted and codified boundaries of identity definition and development. These processes range from the traditional concept of family roles to the weight of gender relations; from the social and legal norms that justify marginality and direct the distribution of wealth to the thrust toward overcoming existing arrangements and struggles for political and social inclusion. In these terms, artistic-literary productions challenge the boundaries of received identity and accepted social and cultural hierarchies.

By bringing together recognition and transcoding/transculturalism, the essays collected in this volume deconstruct crystallized and codified categories and promote border crossing.

In "Fabulations of the Exception: Law, Justice, and Violence in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*," Giorgio Mariani seizes on the critical *mis*recognition of a murderous act of private revenge as an instance of indigenous justice, or "windigo law," in Erdrich's novel to reflect on the clash between the Federal law and the struggle of Native Americans for full sovereignty. Relying on Dimitris Vardoulakis's "trinity of justification" and René Girard's scapegoat theory, Mariani's perceptive and provocative reading presents Erdrich’s novel as not a mere denunciation of the oppression of US laws on indigenous peoples and judicial systems, nor an uncritical justification for the violent response of the oppressed, but rather as the unabashed and lucid interrogation of the role of violence in the demand for recognition of indigenous sovereignty.

The following essay, Fulvia Sarnelli’s “Representations of the Massie/Kahahawai Case: Recognizing Racial and Gendered Conflicts in Honolulu,” similarly concerns itself with (alleged) rape and private vengeance. Only, the roles are here reversed: the white community at once poses as victim and acts as executioner/ vigilante *vis a vis* the indigenous (Hawaiian) population. Like Mariani, Sarnelli tackles the question of indigenous sovereignty within the Federal legal and judicial system. The decision of the Hawaiian court finding the *haoles* guilty was promptly reversed following pressures from the mainland, thus leaving Hawaiian sovereignty as “toothless” as the Anishinaabe described by Mariani. Sarnelli analyzes how the (more or less explicit) successive adaptations and transcodifications of the case (in film, theater, fiction) clarify dynamics of gender and racial oppression, at the same time pointing at the elusiveness of any effort at self-definition.

Mariani and Sarnelli quite openly interrogate what does it mean to be an American for ethnic minorities (and, crucially, indigenous peoples). Elena Ogliari and Ginevra Paparoni explore the sources of this question. In “What’s in ‘the heart of every Native citizen’? Definitions of Americanness in the *John-Donkey*,” they examine the role of the press in shaping national identity in the 1840s, the period between the end of the Early Republic and the outbreak of the Civil War. In particular, Ogliari and Paparoni explore the strategies adopted by the satirical periodical *John-Donkey* to describe how the massive expansionism of the United States through the Mexican war and the power relations with other populations —Afro-descendants, immigrants from Catholic countries, and indigenous peoples —were used to delegitimize political opponents through the discursive technique of Othering.

Following up on the idea of the foundation of a national identity, Enrico Botta provides a historical and ideological analysis of what is considered by many critics to be the first American epic poem. The essay “*The Song of Hiawatha:* from an Indian Tale to the Epos of Manifest Destiny” reinterprets the thesis that Longfellow’s poem is a naïve portrayal of an imagined and undefined native civilization. Instead, Botta demonstrates how it is a text aimed at celebrating a nation committed itself to realizing its Manifest Destiny in the mid-19th century. This was achieved by the author through two thematic strategies: on the one hand, by supporting the imperial assertion of the United States as a potential solution to the internal conflicts that would have eventually resulted in the outbreak of the Civil War; on the other hand, by proposing a union of the various American Indian nations under the control of European settlers.

With the next essay we move toward what can be considered a modern-day epic hero—Captain America—whose origin and development however is, as Mattia Arioli shows, inextricably linked to WWII, an “European conflict” that transcends the US borders. “*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*’s Reimagining of (Captain) America” considers Captain America as a useful litmus test both for rereading US national identity within borders and for redefining the country’s perception in international terms. Tracing the multiple and manifold adaptations and reinterpretations of “Cap,” Arioli shows how pop-culture mediates discourses of ideology, geopolitics, race, and nationalism by representing the nation as an “imagined community.” This combination of a real and fictional nation revolves around a series of symbols, including that of Captain America itself, which stands for a palimpsest of meanings and values.

If Arioli invites us to reflect on the relevance of transnational relations for such an exquisitely American image as the “Cap” from WWII on, Francesca Razzi looks at earlier transnational encounters, which were equally decisive in shaping American identity. “Negotiating Paradigms in Transbellum American Culture: Walt Whitman, James Jackson Jarves, and the ‘Old Masters’ of Italy” reflects on the influence of the Italian Renaissance in the United States during the transbellum period. Her analysis contemplates different approaches to the Renaissance and compares the different transcultural mediations proposed by Whitman’s journalistic perspective and Jarves’s art criticism. In her essay, in fact, Razzi focuses on two transitional figures in the country’s history who interpreted the masters of Italian Renaissance art as models of social and democratic advancement of society and examples of the highest and most sophisticated aesthetic and artistic standards.

Serena Fusco maintains a transnational perspective, or doubles down on it, as she navigates the boundaries between American literature and World literature. In “Synesthesia, Photography, Intransitive Comparison: Worlding the World as Home in Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt*” she argues that, through the use of synesthesia and photography, the Vietnamese-American writer’s 2003 debut text proposes a “worlding” process that places the novel within “World Literature.” Fusco states that the textual reworking of photography in terms of intermediality and the use of a literary style that spans the entire sensory spectrum dramatize a world in constant shrinking and expansion. These dynamic aspects, which alternate between the subjective and objective domains, give rise to a theory for interpreting not only the world but also the position that human beings, as well as literary texts, occupy in it.

Similarly concerned with the idea and implications of World Literature, Lisa Marchi examines Michael Cooperson’s English translation of a well-known work of medieval Arabic literature, Al-Hariri’s *Maqāmāt.* “Intercultural Encounters, Translations, and Understanding as Smooth? Michael Cooperson’s *Impostures* as a Translation Quandary” reflects on the strategies used by the translator and goes so far as to argue that the erasure of the temporal and geographical distance between the original and the translation results in a simplification of the work: while it becomes a kind of ostensibly universal text, it is emptied of any specific reference to another culture and any chance of cross-cultural understanding. Marchi maintains that the extraordinary success of the translation should warn against the idea of a supposedly superficial World Literature that reshuffles themes and patterns from the West and, especially, the United States.

The transnational vocation is very present also in the two essays devoted to the (ethnic) afterlives and adaptations of Francis Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby.* Cinzia Schiavini’s contribution is devoted to contemporary Pakistani re-readings of Fitzgerald’s novel. “Muslim Gatsby(s) in the Shadow of the Towers: Trans-codifications of *The Great Gatsby* in Twenty-first-Century Pakistani-American Fiction” reflects on the transnational dimension of a work that seems to be the quintessential American text in relation to the Muslim world after the events of 9/11. In particular, the cross-references that link Fitzgerald’s original to the three novels at the center of her analysis—H.N. Naqvi’s *Home Boy* and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*—question the meaning of the American dream, but also reinforce its universality as a notion that transcends all temporal and spatial distances. In “‘[S]howing Gatsby that there was more to life than just him’: Nghi Vo’s *The Chosen and the Beautiful* and the Ethnic Afterlife of Jordan Baker,” Nicolangelo Becce interprets *The Great Gatsby* as a palimpsest on which new stories have been rewritten, including Vietnamese-American author Nghi Vo’s novel published in 2021. A postcolonial monster story that straddles the boundaries of mashup fiction and the parodic reappropriation of Fitzgerald’s book, *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, according to Becce, takes the canonical elements set by the American text in 1925 and manipulates them in terms of race to unhinge its ethnocentrism. Nghi Vo, then, restores an intertextual and interdiscursive dialogue between the center and the peripheries, and between the establishment and marginalized minorities, that allows new forms of recognition to be reconfigured.

Albert Latorella Lehner’s “White Ethnics and U.S. Urban Neighborhoods in the 1970s: The Spatial Justice Mission of Geno Baroni” relocates both dialogues (center/peripheries and establishment/minorities) from the page to urban space. Latorella Lehner identifies in the figure of the Italian-American Catholic priest Geno Baroni one of the protagonists and architects of the change of course undergone by American metropolitan ethnic communities. According to Latorella Lehner, Baroni—an activist and member of the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs (NCUEA)—came to be a spokesman for the discomfort and sense of disillusionment with traditional political and cultural norms felt by the residents of many white ethnic neighborhoods. He helped develop an alternative approach to the inconsistencies found in urban areas and advocated for so-called spatial justice, an idea that has gained national recognition and turned into a social reality.

We move from literal, physical, urban spatial justice to the paradoxically "safe" space of BDSM performativity with Giuseppe Polise's essay "'Shut Your Mouth! Leave Your Worries Outside, Mistress Elektra Will Take Good Care of You': Interracial BDSM, Ultra Fetishes and the Hauntology of Black Transness." Focusing on the TV series *Pose*, which aired from 2018 to 2021, and in particular on the BDSM interracial relationship that binds Elektra to her client Paul, Polise highlights how the series transcodifies sexual and racial conventions of 1980s New York into forms of black transfemale *mis*recognition, where the black transgender woman is only recognized from the perspective of white male privilege. However, the definition of the performative dynamics of BDSM pleasure is in accord with racist and sexist power logics that reactivate practices of commodification and exploitation, interpreted as a psychic return to the black body's nonexistence in slavery.

A similar temporal continuity sustained by corporeal practices and performativity illuminates the closing essay of this volume. In "Conjure Feminism: The Root(work) of Black Women's Intellectual Tradition," Kameelah L. Martin explores a vernacular practice that has contributed to the intellectual and cultural legacy of Black women, while acknowledging their contributions within their communities. Conjuring is an extremely flexible practice that encompasses a wide range of activities and still brings together magic, power, and ancient wisdom within the Pan-African cultural context. This phenomenon questions the primacy of both the written word and the Western Enlightenment, and covers such actions as child-rearing and proper nutrition, folklore and divination, dream interpretation, and medical care. This tradition is still in use today and Martin provides numerous examples drawn not only from her own experiences but also from folk proverbs, novels such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Beyoncé's music, films and documentaries, the digital content of Queen Afua and Yeye Luisah Teish's lectures. These examples show how conjure feminism has flowed into the most polarized spheres of the cultural landscape, as well as being a form of activism for communities of African descent.

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Giorgio Mariani

Fabulations of the Exception: Law, Justice, and Violence in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*

As David Carlson writes on the first page of his *Imagining Sovereignty*, "'Sovereignty' is perhaps the most ubiquitous term in American Indian writing today—but its meaning and function are anything but universally understood."[1] As his study shows, American Indian literatures have had an important role in shaping debates about this vexed concept, and in interrogating how a legal concept of Western origin like sovereignty may be adapted and "indigenized" to assert and support the struggles of tribal people for self-determination. While the term "justice" often comes up in Carlson's discussion of American Indian sovereignty, the problematic interrelationship between the two concepts remains relatively unexplored in his book. That is not the case with the most recent work by Anishinaabe writer Louise Erdrich, whose "justice trilogy"—published between 2008 and 2016—interrogates in provocative ways how justice may function within a historical and political context in which the tribes' right to self-government continues to be severely limited.[2] This situation is to a considerable extent due to the legacy of what we may wish to call the "injustice trilogy," better known as the "Marshall trilogy," a set of three Supreme Court decisions that if on the one hand recognized some limited sovereignty to Indian tribes (they were described as "nations," after all), it also clearly stated that the relationship between tribes and the US was that of "a ward to its guardian," and that only the federal government had authority to deal with Indian nations.[3] This legal framework was of course contested by Indian tribes since its inception, but in one way or another it still provides the foundations for the political and juridical relations between the tribes and the US government and, as Erdrich insists, along with other Supreme Court decisions, seriously limits the right of indigenous peoples to administer justice within what is supposedly "their" territory. This problematic receives particular attention in the second of the three novels,

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[1] Carlson 2016, 3.

[2] The three novels are *A Plague of Doves* (2008), Pulitzer Prize finalist; *The Round House* (2012), winner of the National Book Award, *LaRose* (2016), winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction.

[3] The three Supreme Court pronouncements are, *Johnson v. M'Intosh* (1823); *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831); *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832). For an excellent recent discussion of the trilogy see Pommersheim 2009.

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The Round House (Erdrich 2012), winner of the National Book Award, and the object of the present essay.

Part of the reason for this book's largely positive reception lies with the urgency of its social and political content. The narrative revolves around the rape of an Indian woman by a white man, by focusing especially on the impossibility of prosecuting the perpetrator of the crime, due to what the novel itself describes as the "toothless sovereignty" of the Anishinaabe tribe. As Erdrich writes in her Afterword, "1 in every 3 Native women will be raped in her lifetime (and that figure is certainly higher as Native women often do not report rape); 86 percent of rapes and sexual assaults upon Native women are perpetrated by non-Native men; few are prosecuted."[4] Elaborating on this horrific situation, in an Op-ed piece published in the *New York Times* on February 27, 2013, Erdrich calls attention to the fact that "federal prosecutors decline to prosecute 67 percent of sexual abuse cases"—and if they don't do so, nobody can because "non-Indian men …are immune to prosecution by tribal courts."[5] As set by the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Oliphant v. Suquamish* (1978) non-Indians cannot be tried by tribal courts because the majority of the Court found that this would be "inconsistent with the [Indian tribes'] status" as "domestic dependent nations."[6]

The event at the center of the plot is the rape of Geraldine Coutts, a tribal enrollment official, wife of tribal Judge Bazil Coutts and mother of thirteen-year old Joe, who is also the story's only (uncharacteristically, for an Erdrich novel) narrator. Geraldine is so shaken by the incident that she is initially unable to speak about it, and the identity of the rapist remains undisclosed. Later, however, she explains that on the day she was raped, she had agreed to meet with an Ojibwa woman named Mayla, who was being stalked by Linden Lark, a white man who also happens to hold a personal grudge against Geraldine's husband for ruling twice against his family's attempts to swindle the tribe. Linden first rapes and then tries to burn Geraldine, who luckily manages to escape. The crime, however, has been committed in the proximity of the sacred Round House, a ceremonial ground where tribal, state, and federal lands meet, making it impossible to understand which legal authority has jurisdiction. In short, there's no doubt that Linden is the rapist, but he can't be brought to trial.

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[4] Erdrich 2012, 336. Heretofore cited parenthetically in the text.

[5] Erdrich 2013, A25.

[6] That this was an outright attack on Indian sovereignty is clearly acknowledged by Justice Thurgood Marshall's dissenting opinion: "I am of the view that Indian tribes enjoy, as a necessary aspect of their retained sovereignty, the right to try and punish all persons who commit offenses against tribal law within the reservation" (*Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe*, n.d.). The 6–2 Supreme Court decision was indeed a way to render the tribes' sovereignty "toothless."

However, as Laura Miller has noted in her *Guardian* review of the novel, “rape isn’t really the subject of *The Round House.* Rather, this is the story of a teenage boy whose world and self are pulled apart in the course of a year.” More specifically, the story explores the mind of a boy who cannot fully understand his mother’s ordeal but is nevertheless traumatized by the event and who wants, like his father, to see the criminal punished. When he understands that there is no legal way to obtain some form of justice, he embarks on a revenge mission, aided by his three closest friends, Angus, Zack, and especially by Cappy, whose father has taught him to hunt and who, in turn, tries to teach Joe how to use a gun. The decision to kill Linden is not taken by Joe lightly. If he concludes that he must kill a man, that is because there seems to be no other way for the family to regain some peace and for his mother to feel safe once again. To be fair, it can be argued that Joe’s decision is conditioned to no small extent by a conversation he has with Geraldine. Joe first tells her, “Mom, listen. I’m going to find him and I’m going to burn him. I’m going to kill him for you”. Her answer is “No. Not you. Don’t you” (94). And later she adds, even more explicitly, “I will be the one to stop him” (262). At this point Joe realizes he must act “quickly, before my mother figured out her version of *stopping him.* There was no one else who could do it. I saw that. I was only thirteen and if I got caught I would only be subject to juvenile justice laws, not to mention there were clearly extenuating circumstances” (276).

What emerges here is the key question posed by the novel: how are we meant to respond to and understand Joe’s choice of killing a man? Or, better, to what extent is Joe’s killing readable as an act of justice? How does this act complicate or contribute to the discourse of tribal sovereignty? One would expect that both reviews and especially scholarly essays on the novel would have explored in some depth these issues. That, I submit, is not really the case. While critics have usefully clarified the juridical and historical ramifications of what takes place in the novel, and provided important observations on the novel’s gender politics and its relation to traditional Anishinaabe culture, the answers they have provided to the political-ethical questions posed by the novel are often somewhat vague and evasive. Joe’s choice is often described as “ambiguous,”[7] and caught “between light and darkness, hope and despair”[8] –in short, as an act precariously balanced between an understandable desire for “restorative justice,” on the one hand, and, on the other, a more questionable embrace of revengeful violence.[9] There are, however, some exceptions. A few critics have openly confronted the question of how the story intends the reader to respond to Joe's execution of Lark, and they have done so in two divergent though ultimately similar ways. According to Maria Russo, reviewing the novel in the *New York Times*, Erdrich essentially "manipulates" the reader into accepting as justifiable (if not outright just) an act of vigilantism. Taking issue with Russo's view, in a lengthy scholarly piece published in *American Indian Quarterly*, Jacob Bender and Lydia Maunz-Breese (2018) argue that the novel explicitly construes the killing as an act of redemptive scapegoating, and one, to boot, with roots in Anishinaabe cultural traditions. A somewhat similar understanding animates an essay by Eric Cheyfitz and Shari Huhndorf (2017), who, on more specifically juridical grounds, argue that Joe's act must be understood against the background of traditional Anishinaabe "windigo law," and as such is justifiable.

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[7] Carden 2018, 112.

[8] Kidd 2013.

[9] In general, unlike the essays by Bender and Maunz-Breese (2018) and by Cheyfitz and Huhndorf (2017), which I discuss, and critique, at some length below, most critical interventions seem to refuse to pass an unambiguous judgment on Joe’s (and Cappy’s) murder of Lark Linden (see, for ex-

The argument I wish to develop here, is that these readings of the novel are not only wrong (on more than one count), but ultimately misconceived as they seek to force a sense of closure on a narrative that simply refuses to be contained within a neat interpretive framework. So, let me briefly outline how I have structured this essay. First, I wish to comment on the juridical-political contours of Joe's act, when seen through the category of sovereignty. Second, I will try to explain why, while it is true that the story raises the possibility that Joe's act may be interpreted as an implementation of "wiindigoo law," both contextual and textual evidence point in a different direction, by actually calling attention to the ways in which what Joe does *cannot* be considered an act of traditional atonement. Finally, I will insist that *The Round House*, far from offering us a clear moral lesson, forces us to confront a nearly intractable political and cultural problem, so that—contrary to what would happen in a traditional crime novel—the various pieces of the puzzle come together *only to some extent.* Indeed, one should approach Erdrich's

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ample, Carden 2018, Matchie 2015, and Tharp 2014), while Szeghi (2018, 418) is more resolute in charging Joe with having become, at least for a time, "the same type of destructive sociopathic person" that Lark is. In what strikes me as the best critical discussion of the novel so far, Laura Castor notes instead that "Joe can take unconventional initiatives because he is young and not as steeped in knowledge of all the legal and historical obstacles to real justice of which his parents are aware. He is thus able to take seriously the evidence he finds in dreams and ghosts, and act on it. However, the risks Joe takes also lead him down a path of vigilante 'best-we-can-do' justice that ultimately haunts him and his family, even as he narrates the story as an adult (Erdrich 2012, 306). At the end of the novel, revenge does not lead to long-term justice for women in the community, nor restore a sense of emotional and physical safety to their family's lives" (Castor 2018, 46). Even though, as we shall see, there is at least one crucial instance in which Joe does *not* take seriously dream evidence, I agree with the gist of Castor's argument. However, it seems to me that to the extent that Joe's "unconventionality" turns him into a vigilante, one should harbor some serious reservations about it, no matter how emotionally and psychologically close to Joe the reader may feel.

novel with the proviso Herman Melville included in his own last work of fiction, *Billy Budd:* “Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial.”[10] Let me stress that the problem is not merely an aesthetic one. If there’s a lack of aesthetic resolution in the novel, that is because there is no “finished,” ready-made political solution to the antinomies at the heart of this story.

State of exception, or, killing a man

It’s a hell of a thing killing a man.
William Munny (Clint Eastwood) in *Unforgiven* (1992, dir. Clint Eastwwod)

In the post 9/11 era, to no small extent due to influence of the book on this topic by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2005), the “state of exception” has been the object of several political as well as cultural analyses. More specifically, Agamben has been instrumental in popularizing the relation between sovereignty and the state of exception at the heart of Carl Schmitt’s 1922 *Political Theology:* “the sovereign is he who decides on the exception.”[11] As Lotte List explains, “By force of his authority to declare a state of emergency or exception, the sovereign simultaneously places himself inside and outside of law in that he constitutes the order of law by reference to its suspension, which Agamben summarizes as an ‘inclusive exclusion’.”[12] Based on this definition, Joe Coutts’ decision to kill his mother’s rapist may well be considered as an attempt to remedy what the novel describes as the “toothless sovereignty” of his tribe. Joe declares, in his own way, a state of emergency that requires standing above the maze of laws preventing the tribe from bringing Linden Lark to justice. As Joe himself puts it, the killing of Linden Lark is “Murder, for justice maybe. Murder just the same” (Erdrich 2012, 297). Even though Joe of course wishes to convince himself that he is doing the right thing, he is honest enough to highlight the fact that violence is what first and foremost defines his act. So, in what sense is Joe simultaneously inside and outside the law? Well, he is obviously outside existing laws, both tribal and US ones, which do not contemplate the right to revenge, but to the extent that his scope is to protect his family and the community at large from the threat that Linden continues to pose, it could

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10 Melville 1984, 1431.

11 Schmitt 1985, 5.

12 List 2021, 120.

be argued that he acts to further the scope of the law, that is, to secure the keeping of the peace.

Joe's words are of interest to me also for another reason. His candid admission that he is not sure whether the execution of Linden is an act of justice or not, resonates with the thesis developed in *Sovereignty and Its Other*, a recent book by Dimitris Vardoulakis (2013), whose insights have considerably shaped my understanding of Erdrich's novel. The "axiom" of Vardoulakis's inquiry is that "the operation of sovereign power consists in the justification of violence."[13] Justification—which Vardoulakis understands "in terms of a means-and-ends relation"[14] —is of course not the same as justice. Joe doubts the justness of what he has decided to do, though of course he entertains no doubts about the fact that he has a *justification* for acting the way he does. Therefore, if we agree that "sovereignty consists in different modalities of the justification of violence"[15] we must also agree that Joe's act is his way of reclaiming the sovereignty that the US government has taken away from his tribe—in the novel's language, to make sure that Anishinaabe sovereignty can have enough teeth to bite. Joe is also in this sense both inside and outside the law, because by way of force he creates the law where previously there was only a juridical void that prevented the prosecution of Geraldine's rapist. But to have a better grasp of what is at stake here, I will need to first illustrate what Vardoulakis describes as "the trinity of justification"[16] (Fig. 1).

As Vardoulakis explains, whatever escapes the borders of this triangle causes "a sovereign discomfort."[17] For "comfort" to be restored, violence becomes necessary. Take, for example, the 9/11 attacks. The sovereignty discomfort they created was remedied by a recourse to the violence of the "war on terror," whose justification was the defense of Western-style democracy and its spread to the Middle East, and whose rhetorical grounding was provided by a set of exceptional narratives (the enemy can be everywhere, it is less than human, the state of emergency requires exceptional legal measures such as the Patriot Act, Guantanamo, etc.). This framework, as we shall see in a moment, remains intact even when the political and moral substance of sovereignty discomfort may be miles afar from the context of the Bush years. In Vardoulakis's own words, "The particularity of violence and the universality of order, peace, and stability are united by that which

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[13] Vardoulakis 2013, 1.

[14] Vardoulakis 2013, 3.

[15] Vardoulakis 2013, 1.

[16] Vardoulakis 2013, 23–24.

[17] Vardoulakis 2013, 18.

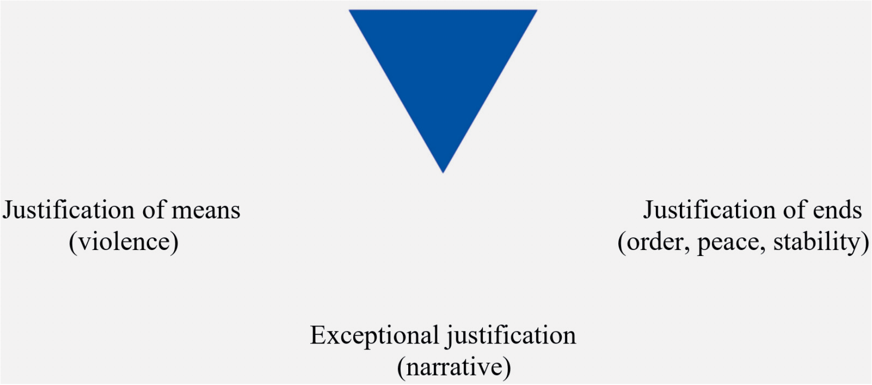

Fig. 1: “The trinity of justification” after Vardoulakis 2013, 24.

can never be codified—an unpredictable narrative, the fabulations of the exception.”[18]

Joe’s “Murder, for justice maybe. Murder just the same” is an admirably compressed voicing of the conflict between law and justice—a conflict that sovereignty is meant to mask through the justifications provided by exceptional narratives, by “the fabulations of the exception.” *The Round House* can thus be read as an exploration of such fabulations—at least, that is what I intend to do here, by looking simultaneously at the extent to which the novel itself creates these narratives, and at the ways in which criticism has interpreted them, thus adding its own fabulations to those of the primary text. First, though, let me remind you that, Bazil Coutts being a tribal judge of great integrity, all legal means to have Linden Lark brought to justice are pursued. Linden is arrested, but since it is impossible to determine which authority has jurisdiction over his crime, he is eventually released. In creating his own exceptional narrative, Joe of course reasons the way a thirteen-year would, and this notwithstanding the fact that the story is narrated several years after the fact, by a now-adult-Joe who has followed in his father’s footsteps, becoming a judge who, presumably, tries to carry on Bazil’s strategy of “press[ing] past the boundaries of what we are allowed, walk[ing] a step past the edge” (Erdrich 2012, 243). As a boy, though, Joe has no patience with this step-by-step reformist strategy; he does not reason in terms of ideal justice: he only, naively, wishes to go back to the family and the life he had before his mother was raped. The motives behind his act—his anger and his desire for revenge—are also his justifications. He confesses this much when he admits that “I was dedicated to a purpose which I’d named in my mind not vengeance but justice" (Erdrich 2012, 275). Nevertheless, Joe does seek for narrative sources that might mask rhetorically his action. "What are Sins Crying Out to Heaven for Vengeance?" he asks the reservation catholic priest. Father Travis, after looking it up in his catechism book points out that "The sins that cried out for vengeance were murder, sodomy, defrauding a laborer, oppressing the poor." This is comforting news to Joe: "I thought I knew what sodomy was and believed it included rape. So my thoughts were covered by church doctrine…." (Erdrich 2012, 265). A more substantial fabulation of the exception is provided by season 1 of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, a tv series Joe, Cappy, and the others are great fans of. Bender and Maunz-Breese (2018) correctly argue that the *Star Trek* episode titled "Skin of Evil," along with other allusions to the series, may be read as a "pop-culture analogue" to the novel's plot, with Linden mirroring *Star Trek*'s Armus, the humanoid form that in the episode kills Tasha Yar for no reason. However, while to me the notion that an adolescent may be drawing inspiration for his murder plans from a tv series should lead readers to question the soundness of the whole enterprise, Bender and Maunz-Breese, on the contrary, argue that the parallel with the "Skin of Evil" episode "provides a key by which to frame the shooting less as an act of vengeance and more as a *sacral* act, one rooted in what Girard refers to as the sacrifice of the pharmakos."[19]

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[18] Vardoulakis 2013, 24.

The critics' invocation of René Girard's scapegoat theory is meant in their view to rebut Maria Russo's proposition that Erdrich "cleverly" manipulates its reader into accepting vigilantism as a viable response to a situation in which the law offers American Indians no protection. And yet, paradoxically, Bender and Maunz-Breese concur with Russo that readers are meant to consider the killing of Linden as an acceptable act of justice, with the difference that what to Russo is vigilante behavior to them is "a *ceremonial* act, even a *religious* one, the necessary killing of the scapegoat, which has absorbed the threat of continued violence that he personifies."[20] This reading of events is simply wrong, beginning of course with Bender and Maunz-Breese's serious misrepresentation of Girard's thinking. Reading their essay, one would conclude that Girard recommends the expulsion of scapegoats as a viable way to maintain communal harmony in contemporary societies, but that is of course by no stretch of the imagination what his theory propounds. In book after book, and essay after essay, Girard has stressed that the scapegoat mechanism is a way to control violence through violence characteristic of a pre-Scriptural era. In his view, at first the Old Testament, and then more clearly the Gospels, unmask the *lie* of the scapegoat mechanism, by revealing the structuring power of victimage."[21] If we want to approach the novel from a Girardian perspective, rather than construing Linden as a scapegoat figure, we should turn—as Girard in fact does—to one of the key questions raised by Jesus in the Gospels, "How can Satan cast out Satan?" (Mark 3:23). If we take Satan as another term for the violence of the mimetic crisis, to expel Satan through Satan means to expel violence through violence by returning to the very sacrificial mechanism which, in Girard's view, Jesus stood on its head.[22] In fact, Girard strongly opposes any definition of the Christian passion as a form of sacrifice. That this would be a more appropriate Girardian approach to the novel is corroborated by Joe's own words, when, after killing Linden, he wonders whether to destroy the evil the latter embodied, he has himself absorbed his evil spirit.[23]

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[19] Bender/Maunz-Breese 2018, 143.

[20] Bender/Maunz-Breese 2018, 156.

To argue that we may come to accept the rightness of Joe's behavior by reconceiving it as a sacrificial act is in fact equivalent to promoting a primitivist understanding of the Anishinaabe tribe as a juridically dysfunctional polity—a polity that to maintain its order must resort to pre-juridical practices like scapegoating, which are both morally and politically indefensible. Moreover, one must add that there is no sign in *The Round House* of anything remotely resembling a Girardian "sacrificial crisis." The community is not being rent apart—there is no intestine violence that the tribe needs to project on to a scapegoat. Moreover, there is nothing communal about the killing of Linden.[24] The decision to kill Linden is not arrived through a process of collective deliberation, as in traditional scapegoating rituals. The members of the community who, post factum, help in covering up the traces that may connect Joe to the murder, far from securing a ceremonial quality to the killing, seem to be participating in what in *La Rose*, the last volume of her "justice trilogy," Erdrich refers to as "rez omerta."[25] Finally, while there is no question that Linden is a horribly racist and violent figure, he isn't in any meaningful sense a scapegoat on whose back the collectivity has heaped its sins and tensions. The evil he embodies is only his own and he is simply too much of an outsider to be a scapegoat proper, especially within a Girardian framework. If anything, an argument could be made that Linden ends up being turned into a *homo sacer* of sorts. Whether one finds Giorgio Agamben's by now famous thesis on the relation between "bare life" and sovereignty convincing or not,[26] if we understand Joe's decision to stand above the law as an implicit proclamation of a state of exception, we must also observe that such sovereign decision depends on turning—literally—Linden into a killable person. Joe's sovereign power to take Linden's life is a direct consequence of Linden's *sacertas*, of his having become a person anyone on the reservation could kill with impunity—a notion corroborated by the murder's tacit approval by the tribal community.

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[21] Girard 1979; 1987, 2001.

[22] Girard 2001, 44.

[23] "I was not exactly safe from Lark. Neither was Cappy. Every night he came after us in dreams. We are back at the golf course in the moment I locked eyes with Lark. That terrible contact. Then the gunshot. At that moment, *we exchange selves. Lark is in my body, watching. I am in his body, dying*" (Erdrich 2012, 341, emphasis added).

[24] Indeed, Joe insists on taking personal responsibility for the killing and exonerates Cappy—who fires the "one clean head shot" after Joe "made a mess of [Linden] like a kid shooting at a hay bale" (Erdrich 2012, 304)—by insisting that "He would have died though. […] You didn't kill him. This is not on you" (Erdrich 2012, 303).

[25] Erdrich 2016, 37.

Crying Wiindigoo

> *literature was born on the day when a boy came crying*
> *'wolf, wolf' and there was no wolf behind him.*
> Vladimir Nabokov

The connection that Bender and Maunz-Breese (2018) establish between the windigo and the scapegoat is also misconceived. First suggested by Geraldine herself, and later in the novel developed more explicitly by Judge Bazil, the windigo-Linden analogy does *not* support the notion that Geraldine's attacker may be understood as a scapegoat figure. Here I cannot discuss in detail the important ethnographic debate that over the years has developed around the theme of "windigo ideology."[27] Suffice to say that the scholars who see windigos as scapegoats in an environment marked, especially in the harsh boreal winters, by lack of food and recurring famines, are those who *do not believe* in their existence, and see them as nothing but "hallucinations or fabrications of the executioners, credulously taken at face value by naive ethnologists."[28] On the other hand, those who see "windigo psychosis" as real, consider it as "an Algonquian-specific psychiatric disorder whose sufferers experienced and acted upon obsessional cannibalistic urges."[29] In this view, which strives to be emic rather than etic, windigos are not scapegoats but people who actually suffer from a mental disease, and in traditional Anishinaabe or Cree cultures, they are treated, for the most part, not as figures to be eliminated but as people to be *cured.*

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[26] See Agamben 1998.

[27] See Brightman 1998.

[28] Brightman 1998, 346.

[29] Brightman 1998, 337.

There are, to be sure, cases in which windigos must be understood against a background of "witch hunting typical of societies under stress."[30] "In this process, as in all witch hunts, the victims of the aggression are socially redefined as the aggressors,"[31] and as we shall see in a moment, the novel's most extensive treatment of windigos, interestingly enough, begins precisely with what René Girard would describe as a "text of persecution,"[32] that is with a case of someone who is unjustly accused of being a windigo. However, to the extent that the windigo is to be considered not only an expression of Anishinaabe culture, but also, more specifically, as a figure of Anishinaabe *law*, it should be obvious that windigos cannot be construed as scapegoats. Before turning to the windigo story featured in *The Round House*, I need to explain that, unlike Bender and Maunz-Breese, who build their interpretation around the pre-juridical figure of the scapegoat, Cheyfitz and Huhndorf take up Bazil Coutts's lead on the windigo being a category of Anishinaabe jurisprudence. This proposition is in some way supported by Erdrich herself, who in her afterword gives credit to law professors Hadley Louise Friedland and John Borrows for helping her understand "the process of wiindigoo law."[33] Cheyfitz and Huhndorf argue, convincingly to my mind, that we should understand Geraldine's rape as being "not merely a *consequence* of historical assaults on land, culture and political power but rather the very paradigm of ongoing colonial power enacted through violence."[34] However, after stating that "the killing exposes the impossibility of justice under colonial law" (a notion I agree with), they also wish to argue that the killing "falls within the system of traditional Indigenous law that federal Indian law seeks to displace,"[35] and they end up concluding that the execution "not only brings justice but also draws together Joe's family and community, who conspire to protect him from unfair legal consequences."[36] This is in fact an implicit defense of capital punishment without due process (and while I concede that Cheyfitz and Huhndorf are probably unaware of this, the slip remains to my mind a serious one). Most importantly, it is simply incorrect—*pace* Bazil Coutts' readiness to argue a "traditional precedent," in a hypothetical legal case—to claim that Linden can be seriously considered a windigo. I say this not because I dispute the right of Indigenous epistemologies and juridical categories to be heard in a western court of law, but because, after having read what both Friedland and Borrows have to say about "windigo law," I do not believe a convincing argument can be made to justify the killing of Linden as a windigo. In other words, also Cheyfitz and Huhndorf (2017) ultimately produce a fabulation of the exception, which needs to be unmasked.

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[30] Marano 1982, 385.
[31] Marano 1982, 385.
[32] Girard 1987, 127 ff.
[33] Erdrich 2012, 337
[34] Cheyfitz/Huhndorf 2017, 272
[35] Cheyfitz/Huhndorf 2017, 274.
[36] Cheyfitz/Huhndorf 2017, 275.

The windigo features prominently in a story that Joes' grandfather—like Tashtego in *Moby-Dick*—tells in his sleep. The narrative begins with a man called Mirage (*in nomen omen!*) accusing unfairly his wife Akii of being a windigo. Mirage "was tired of Akii so he pretended he could see it happen. Some people in these hungry times became possessed. A wiindigoo could cast its spirit inside of a person. […] That's what was happening, her husband decided" (Erdrich 2012, 191). This part of the story may be read as lending support to those ethnographers who, like Lou Marano (1982), think windigos are nothing but self-serving fabrications. Here traditional cultural beliefs are invoked to justify violence against an innocent victim. Mirage manages to convince other male members of the band that Akii is turning into a cannibal monster. Since "The only person who could kill a wiindigoo was someone in the blood family" (Erdrich 2012, 192)—if Mirage killed her, Akii's people might wish to take revenge—their son Nanapush is asked to cut her neck. Nanapush refuses but eventually the men throw her into a lake. Akii manages to escape and sends Nanapush in search of the last surviving buffalo. The boy finds Old Buffalo Woman, ceremoniously kills her, and keeps himself warm by crawling into her carcass. The story ends with Akii bringing meat back to the tribe, saving from starvation also the men who tried to kill her. She takes back her children but does not go back to her husband. As Nanapush grows older, he can always count on Old Buffalo Woman's comforting words. "This buffalo knew what had happened to Nanapush's mother. She said wiindigoo justice must be pursued with great care" (Erdrich 2012, 199). It would be hard to read this story as providing an illustration of "windigo justice." Old Buffalo's final cautionary words, if anything, are more about "windigo *in*justice" and, taken as a whole, Mooshun's tale is not a tale of revenge but a story about forgiveness. Let me be clear. I am not proposing that the narrative advocates forgiveness rather than punishment under all circumstances. I am not, that is, imagining this story as a *mise en abyme* of the novel, meant to exonerate in some tortuous way Linden Lark from his criminal actions. What I am arguing, instead, is that the tale calls attention to the fact that crying windigo may be a convenient way to mask one's murderous desire, whether the latter be in some way justifiable or not. Akii is not only, as the story says, "the unkillable mother"—an ancestor of all the unkillable mothers of the Anishinaabe people—but a woman who chooses not to return on her executioners the same accusation they leveled at her.

Once Bazil learns of Linden's murder, he suspects that Joe may have something to do with it but the Coutts never discuss this issue openly. At any rate, Bazil has made up his mind that, even though he is "sworn to uphold the law in every case," if asked about the case by the police, he "would do nothing" (Erdrich 2012, 323). He has experienced too keenly Vardoulakis's "sovereign discomfort" not to fall back on his own set of fabulations of the exception.

> Lark's killing is a wrong thing which serves an ideal justice. It settles a legal enigma. It threads that unfair maze of land title law by which Lark could not be prosecuted. […] That person who killed Lark will live with the human consequences of having taken a life. As I did not kill Lark, but wanted to, I must at least protect the person who took on that task. And I would, even to the extent of attempting to argue a legal precedent.… [a T]raditional precedent. It could be argued that Lark met the definition of a wiindigoo, and that with no other recourse, his killing fulfilled the requirements of a very old law. (Erdrich 2012, 323)

Here Bazil offers his own fabulation, imagining that the killing of Lark fulfills "the requirements of a very old law." As readers we cannot help but sympathize with Bazil's feelings but, I submit, we should also question the notion that Joe can be excused by invoking an old Anishinaabe law. Both in *Drawing out the Law*—the text referenced by Erdrich in her afterword—and elsewhere,[37] John Borrows, building in part on the work of his colleague Hadley Louise Friedland, explains that Anishinaabe law developed its own ways of dealing with "monsters," a term that doesn't refer only to what from a non-Indian perspective would be conceived as supernatural creatures but covers a larger set of aberrant behaviors. "Historically, when Anishinaabe diets were very precarious, windigos were known to cannibalize human flesh. In present terms, windigos are more likely to feed their appetites through murder, sexual violence, and predation on vulnerable people."[38] However, Borrows clarifies that, traditionally, the Anishinaabe way of confronting windigos was, first and foremost, to try to *cure* them. There are a series of steps that the community would take to deal with a person who had turned, or was about to turn, into a windigo, running from "kindness, care, questioning, healing, separation, supervision, banishment, and death."[39] So, yes, a windigo could, in some extreme cases, be killed, but only when all other methods of curing the sick person had failed. In any event, what motivated the decision to kill the windigo "was not retribution and anger, but defence and compassion."[40] Moreover, "the method of making judgment was collective, not individualized," and the windigo suspect had also rights, including "(1) the windigo's right to be heard; (2) the right to have its closest family members involved in deciding its treatment; (3) the preservation of the windigo's life, liberty, and safety; (4) the right to be helped; and (5) the right to ongoing support."[41] It can be argued, of course, that there would be no way to apply all these provisos to Linden. But that *is* the point. "Windigo law" was meant to be applied to sick people in the community and all its complex features show that—contra Bazil Coutts—there is no way that Linden may be *juridically* conceived as a windigo. Borrows' legal reasoning in no way supports the "traditional precedent" Bazil invokes (and Cheyfitz and Huhndorf endorse). Borrows makes clear that Anishinaabe culture and jurisprudence have over time changed and the Anishinaabeg would not, today, deal with an incurable windigo the way they would have done a century ago. "[I]f the person does not respond to help and becomes an imminent threat to individuals or the community, he or she can be removed so that he or she does not harm others (though, to re-emphasize, *the act does not involve what the common law has labelled capital punishment*)."[42] The words of John Borrows, Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Law at the University of Victoria, and an Anishinaabe himself, do not provide an ounce of support to the notion that windigo law was applied in the case of Linden Lark. And I, for one, am relieved to hear that. If Indigenous laws were used today to justify capital punishment, in whatever form, this would be bad news for all people, indigenous or not, anywhere in the world.

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[37] Borrows 2019, 176–207.

[38] Borrows 2019, 207.

[39] Borrows 2019, 208.

[40] Borrows 2010, 226.

This is not to say that the "sovereign discomfort" experienced by American Indians should be downplayed in any way. All readers of *The Round House* will of course detest the bad guy and sympathize with the victim, but if that were all that Erdrich's novel has to offer us, it wouldn't be the important novel I think it is. The novel shows, as Cheyfitz and Huhndorf correctly state, "the impossibility of justice under colonial law."[43] but the inescapable corollary of this statement is that any framework manufactured to justify Joe's act will always be just another fabulation of the exception. The novel can offer no comforting resolution to the tension between a desire for justice, on the one hand, and an array of historical and political circumstances that prevent that desire from being realized in a just and humane way. Given the situation, violence provides the only way to deal with foreign discomfort, but the novel makes clear beyond any shadow of doubt that violence is *not* the answer. The interpretations I have called into question, unfortunately encourage readers to fall into the trap of justification, while I would argue that Erdrich's text tries to pull us towards what Vardoulakis calls "dejustification," the resistance to the deadly relation that is the inescapable foreground of justification. I hope that my final point will help us to move further in that direction.

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[41] Borrows 2019, 208.

[42] Borrows 2019, 209, emphasis added.

[43] Cheyfitz/Huhndorf 2017, 274.

Dreams matter

Earthboy calls me from my dream:
Dirt is where the dreams must end.
James Welch, "Riding the Earthboy 40"

Not long before Joe and Cappy kill Linden, Joe is having lunch at a local soup and salad bar when Bugger Pourier, "a skinny sorrowful man, with the fat purple clown nose of a longtime drinker" (Erdrich 2012, 265), takes his bike. Joe runs after the guy and asks him where he intends to go. Bugger replies that he needs to check if something he has seen "was just a dream" (284). Since Bugger is heading out of town, rather than second Bugger's intentions, Joe convinces him to turn back. After the killing, however, Joe's own dreams become troubled and he realizes he needs medicine, "meaning Ojibwe medicine." And at this point, "Bugger Pourier, of all people, stepped into my thoughts" (325). Joe frantically tries to locate him, and he finally finds him in the hospital, where he's in a cast, recovering from a foot injury. With some difficulty, Joe manages to get Bugger talking and he discovers that, while living in the bush on a construction site not far from the Round House, Bugger had seen the dead body of the woman Linden was obsessed with:

> I stood up, jolted. I knew, down to the core of me, that he had seen Mayla Wolfskin. He had seen her dead body. If we hadn't killed Lark, he'd have gone to jail for life anyway. I spun around thinking I should go to the police, then stopped. I could not let the police know I was even thinking this way. […] Even I didn't want to know what I knew. The best thing for me to do was forget. And then for the rest of my life to try not to think how different things would have gone if, in the first place, I'd just followed Bugger's dream. (Erdrich 2012, 327)

It is not only Joe who chooses to forget the episode. This plot twist, which can in no way be considered as anything but crucial, is nowhere mentioned in any of the several scholarly essays on the novel I have managed to read. Bugger Pourier is simply erased from accounts of the novel, even though his "dream" could have changed the whole narrative, preventing Joe from becoming a murderer. This is all the more surprising considering that Mooshum narrates his story in a dream, and in his tale, it is through dreams that Aikii and Nanapush are instructed on how to survive. Bugger's "dream" not only testifies to the continuity between "the world-as-lived and the world-as-dreamed”[44] that is a feature of traditional American Indian cultures and spiritual beliefs. It is also, on a rational-secular level, a reminder that a more thorough investigation would have rendered the killing of Linden unnecessary.

The novel’s conclusion is consistent with this sense of failure. While Joe and his friends are driving to Montana to look for Zelia, Cappy’s girlfriend, they have a car accident, and Cappy dies. After this tragic event, as the Coutts drive home together in utter silence, they realize they have all become “old.” Rather than stopping, as was customary in their homebound journeys, at the roadside café before the reservation line, “we passed over in a sweep of sorrow that would persist into our small forever. We just kept going” (335). The novel does not end with a newly found peace. Killing Linden may have been an answer to “sovereign discomfort,” but one that has brought little human comfort to the afflicted. This is not to say American Indian tribes should not fight for sovereignty, first and foremost because no polity proper is possible without reference to sovereignty. Since—as Vardoulakis puts it— “sovereignty comes into play every time one utters the first-person pronoun—an ‘I’ or a ‘we’,”[45] it is indeed “infantile” to imagine a politics without sovereignty. However, if we accept Vardoulakis’s notion that the Other of sovereignty is democracy, our task “is not to try to imagine a way that democracy abolishes sovereignty, but rather to describe the ways in which the relation between the two can unfold.”[46] All this, I believe, is relevant to any serious discussion of *The Round House.* The novel offers us an illustration of the dire consequences of a “toothless sovereignty” but also a cautionary tale on the justification of violence that is an inescapable feature of sovereignty. This should in no way lead us to forget that the American Indian tribes’ struggle for self-determination is conducted against the imperial sovereignty of the United States. From this point of view—to echo Walter Benjamin’s Thesis VIII in “On the Concept of History”—the “state of emergency” in which American Indians live is not the exception but the rule. Hence, Benjamin goes on to argue, the task of the “oppressed” is “to bring about a real state of emergency,”[47] which Vardoulakis understands, correctly, I think, as “a reversal of the exception”[48]—that is, as a process of dejustification of sovereign violence. In *The Round House*, however, Erdrich has chosen to focus not only on the violence of US laws that raise exceptions to the trying of white criminals by American Indian courts, but also on the ways in which even the oppressed may be tempted to seek recognition through violent means. In the preceding pages, I have tried to show that while she offers the reader a number of justifications for Joe's choice of killing a man, if carefully read the novel does not fall on the side of justification, but on the side of what Vardoulakis calls "judgment" : "the decision to act in such a way that privileges life over the thanatopolitics of sovereignty."[49] It is disappointing, I think, that some readings of Erdrich's novel have ignored the way it interrogates violence, by forcing on the text a justificatory pattern that runs against its grain. Reading should not be a way to smooth the "ragged edges" of a text but a strategy to allow its truth to emerge, uncompromisingly.

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[44] Irwin 1994, 236.

[45] Vardoulakis 2013, 37.

[46] Vardoulakis 2013, 39.

[47] Benjamin 2003, 392.

[48] Vardoulakis 2013, 160.

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Fulvia Sarnelli

Representations of the Massie/Kahahawai Case: Recognizing Racial and Gendered Conflicts in Honolulu

> *Also, while it was true that the attempt to regulate the sexuality of white women placed unchaste women outside the law's protection, racism restored a fallen white woman's chastity where the alleged assailant was a Black man.*
> Kimberlé Crenshaw

The Massie/Kahahawai linked trials of rape and murder that began in 1931 in Honolulu are a pivotal moment in the national imaginary construction of racial dynamics in Hawai‘i. The night between September 12 and 13, 1931, Thalia Fortescue Massie, the wife of U.S. Naval officer Thomas Massie, claimed that she was beaten and raped by a gang of Hawaiian men. Five local men in their twenties were tried and then released when the jury could not reach a verdict, resulting in a mistrial. In the racially inflamed atmosphere that followed, Thalia's mother Grace Fortescue, Thomas Massie, and two enlisted men abducted Joseph Kahahawai, one of the accused, and shot him dead. Possessing "all the elements of myth,"[1] its story has been told many times in journal articles, historical books, works of fiction, and film renditions. Transitioning from one textual code to another, the story still generates cultural meanings through continuous adaptations of its iconic elements and characters.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, an interest in the Massie/Kahahawai case resurged as books (Black 2002, Stannard 2005), a play (Carroll 2004), and a television documentary (Zwonitzer 2005) came out, raising a series of public discussions in Hawai‘i and, to a lesser extent, the continental US. In 2014 Hawaiian historian John Rosa published *Local Story: The Massie-Kahahawai Case and the Culture of History* which, in retelling the hi/story of the case, concentrates on the formation of the "local" community and its identitarian, social, economic, and spatial differences from the haoles [white, foreigner]. In this essay, I use the information enclosed in the aforementioned works. In that sense, my essay does not aim at adding new detail to the history of the case; rather, I intend to collect Rosa's suggestion that Massie/Kahahawai is an unfinished story, by focusing on the elements within the core hi/story that are reshaped, expanded, or reduced in more recent textual representations of the case. Since transcodification does not simply re-use the code elements, but places

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[1] Stannard 2005, 22.

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them into contextual dynamics, I am especially interested in what remains and what changes in the many adaptations, for it allows a reflection on the processes of subjective (mis)recognition that different individuals and groups experience in terms of authority, equality, and responsibility. At the same time, attention to the shifting elements helps challenge the naturalization of any fixed identity, struggle, or politics inherent to consolidated storytelling.

In the first part, I try to show that the two trials demand an acknowledgement of power relations and capitalist development that connect the Hawaiian context to the national one so that racial discourse circulating in different places in the empire is enriched by the specific settings that are related to one another. The newspapers of the time that condemned the five men accused of having raped Thalia Massie are paralleled with a much later story, the 1986 made-for-television drama *Blood and Orchids*, which features a white hero who fights the injustice against local people of color and finally sets things right for them.

In the last few years, the Massie/Kahahawai case has been represented through stories from local Hawai‘i people that approach the narrative in different forms and media. In the second part of this essay, I focus on the two most recent creative works that question the dominant haole narratives of the case by intercrossing them with local culture and feelings about the events, as well as with local ways of narrating them. In 2017, poets Ann Inoshita, Juliet S. Kono, Christy Passion, and Jean Yamasaki Toyama published *What We Must Remember*, a collection of *renshi*, or linked poems with commentaries, that collaboratively imagine the perspectives of the players (people and objects) involved in the case, intimately inviting to *ho‘omana‘o* [remember]. I finally look at the 2022 short film *Ala Moana Boys* that for the first time tells the story from the viewpoint of the five defendants.

In analyzing the transcodifications of the Massie/Kahahawai narrative and its key elements, I argue that in most rewritings, whereas racism figures prominently, the common theory is that Thalia Massie fabricated the entire story of her rape, an assumption that relies on her portrayal as a promiscuous party girl and a lying drunkard, lacking the support of her family and unhappy with Hawaiian life. Whether this characterization is true, Thalia is made into a token of the vindictive racist white culture, as during the trial she was sanctified as a symbol of white innocent womanhood. In the last part of this essay, I discuss how Kristiana Kahakawila's 2013 short story "This is Paradise" complicates both narratives. By reading Kahakawila's story in relation to the historical case, I argue that, on the one hand, it draws a symmetry between the colored defendants and the raped woman that allows to shift the focus from Thalia's personality to the white male power structure seeking for more regulation and control on both the island and the mainland. On the other hand, as the short story is narrated by three groups of Hawaiian women who cross paths with the young white American protagonist, Kahakawila takes the power of judging what happened away from masculine eyes. In "This is Paradise," a jury of peer women changes the dynamics of many rape trials in which women become the object of scrutiny.

A racialized hi/story

In summarizing the Massie/Kahahawai case according to Stannard's and Rosa's accounts, in this first part, I try to show how the issues at stake are constituted through discursive relations of power connected to both the local and the national context. The interrelationship within the cases between U.S. racism and white patriarchy becomes the site where power is enacted and, as we shall see in the literary adaptations considered in parts two and three, importantly resisted. In fact, the two discourses of the "racial melting pot" and fear of anti-haole violence, especially expressed as the imperialistic idea of the savage threat to white women, are equally functional to haole hegemony. Analyzing how the cases were reported by the American press of the Thirties and then retold in the 1986 tv-miniseries *Blood and Orchids*, I invite to recognize the constants that perpetuate relations of power within the empire. I would add gender to Amy Kaplan's analysis that "[r]acial discourses do not move in a unidirectional way with the outward course of empire, but they circulate among different imperial sites to build, reinforce, and contest meanings in relation to one another."[2]

Beginning in the 1920s, the American government began to advertise Honolulu as "a modern American city,"[3] comparable to those on the continent, while guidebooks suggestively depicted Waikiki beach life as paradisiacal, thus doubling the number of haoles then living on the islands. Among the new arrivals were military personnel recruited to work at Pearl Harbor and other nearby bases as a way to contrast Japanese imperialism in the Pacific with a domestic one. For American militaries—almost all white—being sent to Hawai'i at the time meant being posted to a colony.[4] The islands were a U.S. territory, where the majority of the population was nonwhite, reflecting the economic mainstay of the sugar industry that was based on the import of contract labor from China, Japan, Portugal, Korea, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. The job situation in Hawai'i operated on a well-tried model of capitalist exploitation that essentially pitted one minority against another so that cheap labor was always available.[5] Consequently, the fact that still today the population of Hawai‘i is ethnically diverse has historical roots. Instead, this colonial situation was used as the basis for the “uniqueness” of Hawai‘i, or *Hawaiian exceptionalism*, a parable inscribed in U.S. ideology, according to which Hawai‘i is an experiment in race relations and democracy that came to symbolize a paradise lacking legal segregation and racial violence.[6] A colonial exceptionalism within the American exceptionalism, the image of Hawai‘i as a paradise out of history has historically been produced by capitalist development that dispossessed Hawaiians of their land and turned them into entertainment workers in the tourist industry, imported a multiethnic immigrant workforce, then represented all communities as happy to live in the American(ized) melting pot. In this context, the Massie/Kahahawai is a case in point.

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[2] Kaplan 2002, 84.

[3] U.S. Executive Assistant of the Interior Du Puy 1931, 19.

[4] Stannard 2005, 67.

Thalia Massie was the daughter of Roly Fortescue, a cousin of Theodore Roosevelt, and of Grace Hubbard Bell, a niece of Alexander Graham Bell and heir to his fortune. In 1927, sixteen-year-old Thalia married Thomas Massie, a twenty-two-year-old Naval Lieutenant from Winchester, a Christian rural town in Kentucky. When in 1930, he was transferred to Pearl Harbor, the Massies moved to a cottage in the exclusive and mostly white Honolulu residential area of Manoa Valley. On the night of September 12, 1931, Thalia was found wandering along Ala Moana Road. She told the police that around midnight she had left alone a party where she had gone with her husband, and while walking to the ocean, she had been approached by a car, abducted, beaten, and raped multiple times by five Hawaiian men. She assured the policemen that she knew the difference between Hawaiians and Asians, and she could tell that her assailants were Hawaiians, despite the moonless night, her impaired vision, and her incapacity to describe them. She also remembered a dark old car, very different from the light tan, new Ford A model that the same night was involved in an accident in a different part of Honolulu, but the police concluded that it had to be the same group of Hawaiians driving through town. The police, then, arrested five working-class local men of various Asian Pacific ethnic identities: the son of Japanese immigrants, Horace “Shorty” Ida had returned from Los Angeles for a visit to his family; Joseph “Kalani” Kahahawai and Benedict “Flash” Ahakuelo were Native Hawaiian football players and occasional boxers; David Takai was also Japanese and about to move to California; and Henry Chang was of Hawaiian Chinese ancestry. All in their early twenties, they called themselves the “Kauluwela boys” after their elementary school. Thalia only identified as her assailants Joe Kahahawai and Henry Chang, the two who had called themselves Hawaiian. However, in the following days the islands' most powerful men, such as Navy Admiral Yates Stirling and industrial magnate Walter Dillingham, having seen in the defense of white womanhood an opportunity to rally for the preservation of haole privilege, got involved in the case; at that point, Thalia began remembering many details that connected the five suspects to her case, including a tan car with Ida's plate number and Ahakuelo's gold tooth.

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[5] Takaki 1989, Fujikane/Okamura 2008.

[6] See Fuchs 1961.

Reconstructions of the events have demonstrated that the five men should not have been accused at all, since early police investigations—through the interrogation of witnesses, the absence of Thalia's fingerprints in Ida's car, and the medical analysis of the men's genitals as well as Thalia's herself—had already shown their extraneousness to the fact. However, an arrest was necessary to give culprits to the white elite on the islands and to the audience that, thanks to newspapers and radio broadcasts, was forming nationally. In view of the trial, Ben's mother, Aggie Ahakuelo, turned to Princess Abigail Wahiikaahuula Kawananakoa, the politically powerless representative of Hawai‘i's royalty that had been overthrown in 1893; she hired William H. Heen, a Chinese Hawaiian respected attorney. The trial officially known as *Territory of Hawaii v. Ben Ahakuelo et al.* opened on November 16, 1931. Since the evidence against the defendants was weak or deliberately fabricated and it was established that the five young men were elsewhere present at the time of the rape, the accusation of gang rape ended in a hung jury. The navy and the haole elite exploded in anger; Admiral Sterling and Grace Fortescue were outraged, for they considered the mistrial a personal and national humiliation.

Island and mainland white press started a huge sensationalistic campaign that depicted the image of a paradise under siege: they described a crime epidemic especially directed at white women who risked being assaulted by gangs of savages, while enlisted men patrolled the streets in search of dark-skinned men. In this wave of hysteria, two acts of vigilantism were carried out. First, Horace Ida was abducted and beaten by a group of navy men who wanted to extort a confession from him; since he refused, he was left bleeding in the bushes. Honolulu Japanese-language newspapers, Stannard informs, compared the attack on Ida to an attempted lynching, thus linking the racially charged context of the U.S. South to the climate in Honolulu.[7] While the white press capitalized on accounts of alleged racial and sexual violence, the U.S. Navy and local businessmen tried to gain complete control of Hawai‘i, insisting on the need for increased regulation of the "too-ethnically-diverse" population. In the Jim Crow era, the narrative that the local justice system had failed to protect white women from the lust of colored men found space in a larger national framework that depicted racial tensions as a threat to white people and property. Americans on the islands and the continent found striking parallels between the colonial context of Hawaiʻi and the racial fears in the ex-slave-holding South. By using Black “codes,” the newspapers, on the one hand, instilled a sense of familiarity thus bringing the Hawaiian context close to home, and on the other hand, promoted strong support for law and order, as large numbers of Americans condoned the extralegal measures adopted by Navy personnel.

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[7] Stannard 2005, 427–428.

Secondly, Grace Fortescue, Thomas Massie, and two Navy men, Edward Lord and Deacon Jones, planning again to force a confession, kidnapped Joseph Kahahawai, the darkest of the boys as it was commonly reported, and killed him with a single gunshot to his chest. The police found Kahahawai’s naked body in the back seat of Fortescue’s car, wrapped in a bundle of sheets. The trial, officially called *Territory of Hawaii v. Massie, Fortescue, Lord, and Jones*, started in April 1932, generating colossal media coverage, also due to the celebrity status of Clarence Darrow, the attorney hired to defend the four. Darrow pleaded for a verdict of not guilty, arguing that, as a man of the South whose wife had been assaulted, Massie had temporarily gone insane. Although it recommended leniency, the jury found the defendants guilty of manslaughter. Minutes after being sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment of hard labor in Oʻahu prison, the convicts were escorted to ʻIolani Palace, where Territorial Governor Lawrence M. Judd, acting under intense military and mainland political pressure, commuted their sentences to one hour spent in his office. Within a week, all four and Thalia had left the islands and never returned. A few months later, the Pinkerton investigation cleared the five men, but the sense of injustice in the local community remained profound, while for most Americans the case was closed.

Only in 1986, *Blood and Orchids*, the three-hour CBS tv-miniseries written by Norman Katkov and based on his own novel, brought the case back to a wide American audience. Besides changing the names so that the Massies are the Murdochs, the film differs significantly from its paratext. I will focus on the intrafictional elements that appear to reject racism but produce a transcodification that ends up reinstating it anchored to gender, as both men of color and women are saved by the white hero. At the opening, Hester Murdoch (Madeleine Stowe) leaves a party accompanied by her husband’s best friend, a white Navy man. Hester tells him that she is pregnant with his child and wants to leave her husband to start a new family. Her lover, instead, demands an abortion, then beats her and leaves her bleeding on the beach, where she is found by four Asian Hawaiian men who take her to the hospital. There, Hester confesses the truth to her mother Doris (Jane Alexander), but Doris, caring for her own reputation and business empire, fabricates a story of rape. During the trial, before the jury can reach a verdict on the four local men (interestingly one becomes Filipino), an enraged Lieutenant Murdoch shoots the Native Hawaiian defendant John Liluohe in front of the entire court. As Murdoch stands murder trial, defended by famous criminal attorney Walter Bergmann, white-skinned, blue-eyed Detective Curt Maddox (Kris Kristofferson) continues his investigation among Navy men: he suspects first Hester's husband and then his best friend, two hypotheses that were rumored during the real case. Contrary to Thalia, Hester is represented as a naïve but honest girl, who repeatedly tries to confess the men's innocence, while also absolving her lover. She is a puppet in her evil mother's hands until in court her conscience blurts out: “No! They didn't do it! They're innocent!” which incriminates her husband. In the finale, she hangs herself in the bathroom. If the scene refers to the real Thalia, who also took her life in 1963, dying of an overdose of barbiturates, the effect of the movie is to create a rigid moral polarization. Thus, people can be individually sympathized with or condemned, while the system of racial privilege remains unchallenged.

The miniseries lets a heavy-accented Princess Luahine (Haunani Minn) declaim the sentence to the three acquitted men, as she rejoices: “something historic happened […] I lived long enough to see a jury find a United States Navy officer guilty of a crime in *this* Territory. And yesterday I heard a judge sentence that Navy officer to ten years in prison.” However, success in this story goes to Captain Maddox, who, after having tricked the doctor to confess that Hester was pregnant way before her alleged rape, convinces her to reveal her real assailant. But Maddox does not only prove the local men's innocence; he arrests Doris for perjury and conspiracy to obstruct justice, accusing her as follows:

> You spent your whole life thinking that whatever you did and whoever you did it to is right, nobody ever stopped you. You built the territory, so you figured you owned it and the people on it […] But that's ending. You can't kill people, and you can't whip them, and you can't treat human beings like they aren't human. And that's what you've been doing since you stole this land from the people who found it. Just because your grandfather came off a ship eighty years ago, doesn't make you God. That's all finished and so are you.

The racial and colonial issues thus resurface in *Blood and Orchids*, but local characters are overshadowed by Maddox's moral force. First, by giving the central stage to the white detective, the tv-show erases the incredible work done by local attorneys in the real case. Although in the miniseries the local Japanese lawyer builds up an excellent defense, he is a remissive guy who needs Maddox to clear Hawaiians from charges. Maddox, on the contrary, is shown in all his masculine power: in matters of women, his competitor is not the Japanese lawyer, who gets together with dead John's sister, but Walter Bergmann (Darrow's character) himself. Bergman's young wife, Leonore, falls passionately in love with the detective, functioning yet as another validation of his masculine superiority. Above all, Maddox is not afraid to confront anyone directly, as in the above monologue. Not only does the upright detective restore justice in the specific legal case, but also speaks in defense of all Hawaiians. Morally distancing himself from the evilest character of the show, Maddox becomes the white savior that paternalistically protects the Natives, who are reminded to be human beings subjugated by a single colonial family.

The miniseries enacts a parallelism between local people and the good white women, both Hester and Leonore Bergman. Oppressed by racism, a mother, or trapped in the wrong marriage, they are incapable of defending themselves. Maddox saves them, whether they can stand the consequences of his liberation or not: Hester commits suicide and Leonore returns home with a husband she does not love. One would think that women's destiny only envisages unhappiness, while the happy ending falls on the men of color, who accept Maddox's protection. The depiction of childlike loyal Natives, though, conjures up the U.S. racist stereotype of the "happy slave," a rhetoric widely circulated in Hawaiian plantations as well. That by arresting one figure of power, Maddox can declare the end of the coercive system of nonwhite free labor is naïve at best. Rather, his words produce U.S. spectators' identification with the white hero, thus dismissing a serious reflection on capitalist systems of production of the Thirties and the Eighties, in Hawai'i and on the mainland. *Blood and Orchids* ultimately portrays the Hawaiian government and legal system as incapable of true democracy, which once again echoes the stereotypical representation of black people in the U.S.

A local hi/story

Based on the sociological studies on individual and group identity in Hawai'i conducted by Andrew Lind and Eric Yamamoto in the early 1970s that traced the origin of the term "local" to the Massie/Kahahawai case, John Rosa integrates this genealogy with Jonathan Okamura's work on the interactions between different ethnic groups in the plantation system.[8] Thus, Rosa argues that as both a historical-political and cultural identity in which nationality, race, ethnicity, class, and gender intersect, "the 'local' signifies a historical relationship based on a commonality among working-class people of color and their difference from whites."[9] Acknowledging that local identity is far from unproblematic and always in the making,[10] Rosa contends that the Massie/Kahahawai case happened at a crucial moment in the early 1930s, when Native Hawaiians and other working-class people of color found that they had common ground to articulate a shared history of oppression through an identity formed in opposition to haole hegemony. This part of my essay discusses two recent works by local Hawaiʻi poets and a filmmaker that retell the Massie/Kahahawai case in opposition to the white viewpoint of sensational crime narratives of the sort of *Blood and Orchids*, and, in so doing, foreground the sense of a shared culture formed not only inter-ethnically but also inter-generationally. Still circulating the hi/story today responds to a demand for recognition of a collective memory that is seriously and intimately Hawaiian.

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[8] See Yamamoto 1974, Okamura 1980 and 2008.

[9] Rosa 2000, 99.

[10] For a critique of the power hierarchies within the idea of the local see Kubo 1997, Trask 1999 and Fujikane 2000.

Local creative versions of the story have taken numerous forms through different media that range from visual art to theater, prose, poetry, and documentary films. Before I focus on the last two, allow me to introduce Dennis Carroll's 1973 play *Massie/Kahahawai*, finally staged in 2004 at Kumu Kahua Theatre with Harry Wong III as director, after years in which the production had been halted by threat of charges from the Massie family.[11] *Massie/Kahahawai* has been defined by critics as a Brechtian play, for the audience participates as another character in scenes where "[a]ctions are exaggerated, movements become stylized, and delivery of lines is not intended to be 'realistic,' but expressive, in an abstract way."[12] The play is entirely constructed on published sources, such as court records, newspaper accounts, and interviews, thus letting the contradictions emerge from the "objective" observational perspectives of the 1930s with their sensational appeal. The result, according to Kennicott, is that "through the lens of time, we could not be certain of what we were seeing."[13]

In 2011, four local poets, Ann Inoshita, Juliet S. Kono, Christy Passion, and Jean Yamasaki Toyama, started a collective literary project that confronts the Massie/Kahahawai case's ongoing legacy. Beginning with the study of Stannard's *Honor Killing*, in the year of the 80th anniversary of the case, one by one each poet composed her own poem, then issued it on the Bamboo Ridge Press website, giving the next poet two weeks to write and post her work, using the last line of the preceding poem as her title. This cycle repeats for seven rounds, creating twenty-eight *renshi*, or Japanese *renga*-inspired linked poems, written in English and Hawaiian-pidgin free verses. Six years later, they published the volume *What We Must Remember*, which also includes the poems' commentaries; with it, they "gave voice to those who are usually written about, who do not usually speak: the jurors, the spectators, the Admiral, the two mothers, Thalia's friend, even the dress."[14]

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[11] See Rosa 2014, 97.

[12] Muromoto 2004, 25.

[13] Kennicott 2004, 492.

In the commentaries, each poet relates the extreme difficulty of both learning the unjust facts and inhabiting the voice of the different real-life individuals in the case. Each selection entails significant choices on who is recognized as a valid narrator, what feelings are expressed, for whose benefit. Each poem is structured around at least one voice and one detail among the many offered by the original source. Therefore, in "Viewpoints" Inoshita imagines the dialogue between the nurses who took care of Thalia at Queen Kapiʻolani Maternity Hospital and their questioning of the patient's rape and resulting pregnancy. Then with a shift of perspective, Grace Fortescue complains that the administration allowed "niggers" around her daughter, while the poem returns the puzzlement of the administrator, who looks at the Asian and Hawaiian nurses. Racial confusion and the relativity of racial definitions also appear in "Burned in Effigy," in which, being intrigued by the color orange used to describe Asians, Toyama makes it the pivot for impersonating white sailors' perception of being a minority in a Hawaiʻi that was supposed to be "dreamy" and has revealed itself as "no joy zone. The movies lie" (38). The detail that enrages the most as a symbol of race and class privilege is the expensive toilet built in the courthouse because Grace could not share it with "hoi polloi," as Toyama observes in a later poem: "after all, they had separate toilets in the South at this time" (156). White arrogance is contrasted with the humbleness and dignity of local people, particularly the accused men. Several poems concentrate on Kahahawai's mother Esther Anito. Observing clothes in "Give It All Away," Passion first makes of Esther's white kīkepa [traditional dress] a symbol of regality and activism, imagining, as she explains in the commentary, "Hawaiian activists marching in protest wearing a kīkepa" (159); then shifting to Joe's bloodstained shirt that she had lovingly mended the night before, the poem returns to Esther's motherhood as "she instinctively reaches out to him/ proves she is still taking care of her son" (77). Esther's grief is contrasted with Grace's sorrow for Thalia in Kono's poem "What If You Were the Mother?" in which Grace's sincerity is enquired through a series of question marks.

Sometimes the hard endeavor to embody an unsympathetic character makes the point of view of objects preferable, as for the green dress that Thalia wore the night of the assault. Through a dress that does not remember how it was taken off or "if indeed, they even did" (36), Kono doubts Thalia's story and pictures her as "unconventionally attractive" with a "lugubrious/ chicness made of old money/ and deep unhappiness" (35). Both Thalia's characterization and the questioning of her rape recur in the collection, as seen in “Viewpoints,” and especially in “We Are Blessed.” Here, Kono has Thomas Massie openly insult his wife: “My whore wife, child, the whiff of you sickens me,/ for you who are nothing but a fucking witch bitch,/ who instigated with your cry of rape what we are enmeshed in,” and mistrust her: “No one knows better than I,/ as to who or what you really are,/ though I must admit you put on a good show” (67– 68). On the other hand, Passion’s “If the Walls Could Talk” with Thalia as the writer of a letter to a friend back home, albeit adheres to her characterization as a racist, spoiled, and problematic child who misses her mundane life, also gives a sense of her loneliness and alienation: “I want to be free of it, run from this place,/ fly over the trial and mother and Tommie—way beyond this eternal summer” (55).

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[14] Passion et al. 2017, 27. Subsequently, page numbers will be provided parenthetically in the text.

Altogether, the poems recognize Stannard’s authoriality; but in choosing some aspects over others and intermingling them with local feelings and stories, the poets contribute their own ideas concerning the case as well as more general concepts, such as motherhood, poverty, the cultural values of honor and shame, and especially justice, thus creating a new version of the Massie/Kahahawai hi/story. Moreover, in adopting a hybrid form of writing based on a Japanese poetic style, interfused with theatrical scenes (Passion’s “Join the Battle” is a three-part act in 60 seconds), dialogues, the Buddha’s preaching, a pantoum, and conveyed in a mix of English and Hawaiian pidgin, their transcodifications mirror the multiplicity of the voices within the local community, thus recognizing a Hawaiian authority over the story as well as its responsibility to remember it. As Soong observes, “the power of ‘*Hoʻomanaʻo,*’ the single word engraved on Joseph Kahahawai’s headstone, ‘*Remember,*’ [is] found also on the back cover of the book.”[15]

Except for Toyoma’s courageous “Come Together,” in which she imagines the dying Kahahawai going out of consciousness while still hearing antiphonally the murderers’ fragmented dialogue, the voices of the accused have been lacking from all accounts of the story. Rosa relates that the young men gave little testimony outside the official reports, which, therefore, remain the main source about their perspective.[16] The 2022 20-minute film *Ala Moana Boys*, written by Alexander Deedy and directed by Keliʻi Grace, is the first attempt to foreground their view. In the film, Thalia Massie is only named by her mother once. The prologue starts with scenes of the five men moving around their neighborhood made of one-story houses and open fields. On ukulele notes, they play sports, laugh, and ultimately pose for a picture among taro plants,[17] thus the auditory and visual connection with space identifies it as a Hawaiian story. The film begins with the violent beating of Ida by several laughing white men, then shows the guys at his house. They call each other by their nicknames and speak Hawaiian pidgin, but tense music breaks the familiarity of the scene. Kahahawai is represented as the most self-possessed, the one who tries to minimize the danger they all feel for themselves, and even jokes around to cheer his friends' sullen mood. They wonder whether they should fight back, as Ahakuelo suggests: "Can't let 'em walk all over us!" Alternating frustration and the consciousness that someone else is going to be attacked to a sense of commun(al)ity, Horace says: "we ain't never alone [...] Look boys, we stay in this together," to which Joe responds: "it's not just us. It's everybody," thus turning their specific condition into local people's struggle against white haoles.

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[15] Soong 2019, 29.

[16] Rosa 2014, 14.

The second part of the film moves to Fortescue's house, where she is portrayed as the evil mastermind who convinces a blank-eyed Thomas Massie to get justice for Thalia by clearing her reputation, which implies that rumors doubt her rape even among white Americans. Consequently, on a bright day, Kahahawai is kidnapped outside the courtroom where he has reported and brought to Grace's bungalow. In the last four minutes, Joe is tied to a chair and interrogated by Jones, Massie, and Fortescue. While trying to extort a confession, Jones shoots him in the heart from no distance. As Joe wails his last words, an impassive Grace hisses: "you are getting blood on the floor," and Jones hits him with his gun butt. Tommie, motionless and dull, looks at them. Throughout the scene, Massie is represented as a nervous, unsure pawn in the hands of his accomplices. Jones, on the contrary, is arrogant and violently uncontrolled, while Fortescue is cold and calculated. Kahahawai is surely the victim; however, he does not appear weak: he responds aggressively to Massie's accusation, resolutely denying his and his friends' involvement in the case. Repeatedly, he derogatorily calls them "haole" and orders them to untie him; he tells them to their face that "it took three of your boys to take out one of mine!" When alive, his body is never still; it throbs with life, which creates a striking contrast with the film's closing shots: moving top-down, the camera shows Joe's body now on the floor, then zooms in on his face as Hawaiian prayers whisper in the background and Joe exhales his last breath. With credits, a Hawaiian hip hop song, opening with the refrain "In this life, we are warriors," tells the story of the Hawaiian occupation from Captain Cooks onwards and concludes: "Ala

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[17] On the importance of sport for the local youth of the Thirties see Rosa 2014. In Hawaiian genealogy, the taro is the immediate progenitor of people. Haunani Kay Trask (1999, 141) explains: "The lessons of our genealogy are that human beings have a familial relationship to land and to the *taro*, our elder siblings or *kua'ana*." See also Mary Kawena Puku'i's Dictionary at http://wehewehe.org/.

Moana Boys, this is your right ‘cuz, Kauluwela boys, yeah, this is a reminder, Joe Kahahawai had died from haole guys, yes. But don’t kill the people, kill the mindset, survive. […] You should try it, be defiant to survive. So we can thrive as Hawaiians.”

Kristiana Kahakawila’s “This is Paradise”

In 2020 legal scholar Stewart Chang published a study in which he suggests that both during the Massie/Kahahawai cases and in subsequent investigations and local debates among race scholars, the defense of the five unjustly accused men “has focused on impeaching the credibility of the victim by attacking her character,”[18] which follows a common path of many rape trials that assume that “(1) victims often lie about being raped; (2) victims invite rape by their behaviors and actions.”[19] Thalia, in fact, has been either “extolled as the paragon of white feminine virtue”[20] in need of the protection of white men or seen as a malicious woman almost exclusively accountable for everything. As seen, both images appear in the previous accounts of Thalia’s figure: *Blood and Orchids* shows her as a delicate, naïve, ill-fated, and beautiful child, whereas her mother embodies the deceitful, racist shrew to be blamed entirely; in *What We Must Remember*, following Stannard, the poets mostly represent Thalia as an often drunk, adulterous, and lying woman with a frustrated life and volatile personality in need of psychiatric treatment.[21] It seems to me that the idea of the white feminine victim and that of the racist loose woman are part of the same patriarchal ideology that controls both women and ethnic communities, who, therefore, share more than so far considered. I now turn to Kristiana Kahakawila’s “This is Paradise,” for the story offers some significant points of departure from these narratives.

The short story that gives the title to Kahakawila’s 2013 collection is not an explicit rewriting of the Massie trial, there is no courtroom nor a vengeful husband. However, the story shows many parallels with the notorious case, beginning with the setting in the same streets, some characteristics of the protagonist, and the tragic finale. Susan is a white American tourist, portrayed as a carefree young woman on vacation with her family, even though her parents are never seen. She goes out and drinks with her younger brother, looking for an adventure.

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[18] Chang 2020, 8.

[19] Peterson 2019 in Chang 2020, 14.

[20] Chang 2020, 8–9.

[21] See Stannard 2005, particularly pages 54 and 86, and Passion et al. 2017, particularly pages 127–128.

The story mostly unfolds within the span of a night: in a bar full of plastic tiki decorations, she meets Bryan, a man who later rapes and murders her on Waikiki beach. The portrayal of the murderer depicts him as a man who is not local, "but he doesn't seem straight haole either."[22] Most likely, he is a military man—probably Navy—who moves as he has been in Honolulu for some time; what makes him suspicious is the uncertainty of his origin and the duplicity of his character, symbolized by the prison tattoos of two Greek masks, one crying one smiling, that he has on his wrists.[23]

Much of what happens, though, is offered as a series of impressions and comments by three different groups of local Hawaiʻi women, who run into Susan at different times of the night: a group of teens, who in the bar try to warn her about the unfamiliar man, while later on the beach misinterpret her struggling moans for sexual ones and do not intervene; a group of professional women, who feel that something is wrong with the couple by the waterfront but do not check and are later haunted by a collective dream in which they identify with a woman screaming for help; and a group of elder housekeepers at Susan's hotel, who find her dead body on the beach and keep vigil over it because that is what mothers do. The female characters in the story are all very conscious and protective of their Hawaiian identity; at first, they mock, when not disdain, Susan and what she stands for, namely corporate tourism that consumes a commodified, exoticized, and sexualized version of Hawaiian culture, which ultimately corresponds to the Americanized image of the Paradise of the Pacific. After work, the housekeepers chat with one another about their conflicting hopes for their youngsters: they would like them to leave Hawaiʻi, but also stay, and even return to their original villages to be reminded of an identity that is fading. Allegorically stuck in traffic after work, the career women, mostly educated on the continent, are proud to be "the ones chosen to mold our islands' future" (15) while also feeling the burden of being the "pillars of the island community" (16). Lastly, the teens proudly show their Hawaiianness: they surf, speak pidgin, complain about haoles destroying their land, and provoke Susan because "she not one of us" (22). The story does foreground an internal racial conflict, yet it does not stop there.

This collective first-person point of view, with rotating "we" voices, observes, collects evidence, and judges Susan's case as a jury of peer women. Their "investigation," however, forces them to look at themselves, question what connects them to others and according to what parameters, and wonder whether they could have done something for this girl as for any other. In short, their musings invite an act of material recognition. Considering it a socio-cultural issue, Nancy Fraser argues that recognition targets cultural injustice, which encompasses the way people's identities are differentiated, stigmatized, and disrespected.[24] In "This is Paradise," the idea recurs that stereotypical narratives of people and the space replace reality so that they prevent from seeing facts without prejudice. Assessing differences between the local women and the white woman or lack thereof, the only verdict "we" can pronounce is to acknowledge that racism and sexism are forms of injustice ingrained within institutionalized patterns of cultural values.

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[22] Kahakawila 2013, 23. Subsequently, page numbers will be provided parenthetically in the text.
[23] Incidentally, Stannard (2005) reports that Deacon Jones, who later confessed that he shot Kahahawai, "sported tattoos that ran the length of each forearm, a naked woman on one and a dagger on the other," 440.

I cannot be certain whether Kristiana Kahakawila meant her story to be a revision of the Massie case, but if so, as I suggest reading it, Susan represents both Thalia Massie and Joe Kahahawai, as both are misrecognized subjects of oppression. The final pages of the short story narrate the remembrance ceremony for Susan to which "more than one hundred people plan on attending, mostly locals. Our community has been shaken. […] We feel sorry for them [Susan's parents]. We are angry at them. When they see local people, they must think we are the ones who brought them death" (45). All sources report Joe Kahahawai's funeral as a large, emotional, and very participated gathering that merged Native Hawaiian cultural practices and language with a Christian service. Similarly, Bryan embodies all the assailants: his indefiniteness as a not-local, not-visitor person mirrors the unknown attacker of Thalia; as a military, he reminds of Joe's murderers.

This is not to say that all oppressions are equal. Black feminism's critique of the equation of racism with what happens to men of color and sexism with what happens to white women shows how the two do not overlap, especially, cannot overlap in the representation of a white character.[25] However, Chang is right that in Thalia's story her "voice […] is subsumed by the interests of white men" as much as "[t]he murder of Joe Kahahawai functions symbolically as a lynching intended not to avenge or protect Thalia Massie, but to avenge and protect white masculinity"[26] as the sole possessor of white women. Kahakawila's version of the story distorts these too familiar narratives by recognizing the victims a sort of vicinity in the cultural significance ascribed to their bodies, while at the same time she avoids exploiting individual victimization. Susan is the bearer of the American view on Hawaii, which believes in the myth of Paradise and is unable to understand the locals' animosity towards foreigners; as such, her character does not invite sympathy. Simultaneously, though, she is the object of observation of a plural gaze that judges her according to the way she looks and the clothes she wears. She is not the submissive, fragile Thalia-character of the white press or *Blood and Orchids*; as Kahahawai's character in *Ala Moana Boys*, she responds in kind to the shaming of her behavior. She appears independent, bossy with her brother and flirty with Bryan. Yet she does not consent to sex, her dead body does not lie, for it tells that she is the victim of unjust violence.

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[24] In Fraser and Honneth 2003, 14-15.

[25] Crenshaw 1989, 152.

[26] Chang 2020, 36 – 37.

Kahakawila's two major acts of transcodification move the observational stand within the story. First, the change in victimhood through the fusion of the protagonists of the two historical cases in the same body-character allows narrators and readers to address the power structures involved. In fact, by shifting the attention to Thalia, as a single woman's personality and conduct, other accounts have turned the murder of Joe Kahahawai into an individual, albeit exemplary case, rather than one of the many effects of a racist and sexist system. Secondly, by transforming the all-men jury chosen by other men in the Thirties into a contemporary jury of local peer women of different ages and classes, and making it the story's narrator and filter, "This is Paradise" continues the operation of returning the hi/story to Hawaiian voices undertaken by *What We Must Remember*, while pushing it more explicitly in a women's direction. In this way, the problem of telling the story also becomes the difficulty of guaranteeing legal recognition to all members of society. Crucially, as Fraser reminds us, recognition is but one dimension of justice, and equality also requires material-economic redistribution. But this goes beyond the limits of this essay.

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Elena Ogliari and Ginevra Paparoni

What’s in “the heart of every Native citizen”? Definitions of Americanness in the *John-Donkey*

Introduction: The Strategic Othering of Minorities and Political Opponents

The 1840s were a period of massive expansionism for the United States. Thanks to John Tayler’s and James Polk’s aggressive policies, the nation moved its borders westward and southward with the annexation of Texas (1845), Oregon (1846), and the wide territories conquered during the Mexican War, namely California and New Mexico (1848). The press upholding a Democratic stance presented the new territorial acquisitions as the fulfilment of the nation’s *manifest destiny*, i. e. the expansion to the whole continent of the principles of freedom and democracy at the core of the American national identity.[1] Nevertheless, the young nation was still forming such an identity. The press of the time, which had known an unprecedented flowering in the two previous decades,[2] attests to the competing ideas and heated debates on how this identity *should* be.

This article aims to provide new insights into the ways in which nation-building implied also inclusionary and exclusionary processes, the definition of oneself as opposed to Others.[3] Our analysis charts the extent to which the Young American Nation was discursively constructed by print media and political factions through ridicule and othering. We consider the media representations of three main ‘Other’ groups living on American soil in the 1840s – Afro-descendants, immigrants recently arrived from Catholic countries, and indigenous peoples – along with the implications of these depictions for contemporaneous politics and society. Indeed, the debates on immigrant and non-white ethnic groups reveal a close connection with attempts to de-legitimate political opponents through *othering*, the discursive strategy that consists in the stratification of identities into in-group and out-group by the norm.[4] What is more, in the late 1840s, the reduction of non-white and non-Protestant groups and political opponents to the Other took place at a crucial mo-

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[1] Stephanson 1996, xi – xii.

[2] Mott 1953, 340 – 342.

[3] Wodak 2012, 212.

[4] Barth 1969, 9 – 38. Schwalbe 2000, 777.

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ment in the process of national self-definition, which exacerbated tensions: the year 1848 saw the unfolding of the presidential campaign with many vociferous or less vociferous actors. The Native American Party, founded, among others, by congressman and newspaper editor Lewis Charles Levin and Reverend Joseph F. Berg in 1844, capitalized on widespread xenophobic feelings and engaged in a crusade against European Catholic immigrants; the Free Soil Party, born in 1848 out of a schism in the Democratic Party and led by formerly Democrat Martin Van Buren, fought their battle against the enslavement of African-Americans in the new territories acquired from Mexico; Democrats and Whigs instead avoided taking a clear stand on such thorny issues out of political opportunism.

The complexity and ambiguity of such discourses were both mirrored and fomented by the press of the time, which entered the arena of the debate on the young nation's identity and the elections. Magazines and newspapers acted as barometers of the anxieties and ambitions of the time, wishing to become agents of societal transformations. Exemplary in this regard, for the 1840s-1850s period, are the satirical periodicals that then emerged in high numbers; suffice it to mention the *John-Donkey*, the *Yankee Doodle*, *Elephant*, *Judy*, and *Punch Junior.*[5]

The *John-Donkey* in particular best attests, on the one hand, to the attempts of journalists, intellectuals, and publishers to impact the process of nation-building and, on the other, to the complexity of the discursive representations of minorities in such formative years. Almost stylish in its graphical appearance, the *John-Donkey* was the first comic paper to be regularly published. Printed in Philadelphia from January to October 1848, it reached out to audiences also in New York, Boston, Baltimore, Washington, New Orleans, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Charleston, Albany, Richmond, Lancaster, Harrisburg, Cincinnati, and Louisville, as listed on each cover page. Editors Thomas Dunn English and George G. Foster brought their considerable editorial experience to this enterprise to make the *John-Donkey* a miscellany of quips, short articles, regular fixtures, and cartoons, with each piece lending weight and meaning to the others. There was a quality in the writing and cartoons that gives the impression that the work undertaken was deemed important by the editorial staff, the sponsors, and the other titles advertising the *John-Donkey* in their pages. The magazine employed the healing power of satire to counter and exorcise deep-seated tensions in American public life, including those relating to mass immigration, xenophobia, slavery, and the socio-political status of Native Americans.

The political sympathies of Thomas Dunn English – main editor and author behind the *John-Donkey*'s mask – never prevented the magazine from mocking the most varied political views and personalities. Still, the publication's Democratic leanings quite clearly come out in the texts and illustrations dealing with the three "alien" groups and the treatments they received from different political factions.[6] When it comes to the discursive representations of minorities, the magazine adopts different levels of ambiguity depending on the considered group. While Afro-Americans are essentially bestialized, Catholic immigrants and Native Americans are objects of more complex portrayals. Moreover, the discourses over minorities go hand in hand with those on the political groups that attack them or fight for their rights: these are, in turn, objects of a process of othering on the *John-Donkey*'s part. In the vision of Young America put forward by the magazine, the Other is embodied by not only the members of minorities, but also political opponents promoting ideas and behaviors that the magazine's editorial staff does not share. In such a context, it emerges how the *John-Donkey*'s choice to 'defend' Catholic immigrants and Native Americans is often instrumental and dictated by the will to attack their detractors or wrongdoers. The *John-Donkey*'s ridiculing of the Nativists' demonization of Catholic immigrants was geared towards a more generalized attack on the Nativist Party. Likewise, the remarks condemning the inhuman treatment of the indigenous population should be understood as a pretext to attack Whig candidate Zachary Taylor, who had been previously involved in the Second Seminole War. Hence the ambiguity and frequent incoherence of the *John-Donkey*'s discourses relating to minorities.

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[5] See Habermas 1989; Warner 1990.

Such representational and discursive ambiguity can only be brought to the surface by working closely with the primary source to explore how its texts were structured and written, because the political and social comments were not always explicitly stated, but encapsulated in the lexis, the narrative and graphic choices, and the rhetorical devices. The *John-Donkey* is looked at holistically as a systemic text, because our analysis is not restricted to the semiotic system of language alone, but also attends to images and design to see how each item (articles, illustrations, layout etc.) cooperates with the others to articulate discourses on American politics and society. At the same time, we look beyond the pages of English and Foster's magazine to consider the socio-historical and communicative contexts in which it was produced, and to draw out the dialectical relations between text and context.[7]

By employing a combination of content and critical discourse analysis, this article first investigates the bestialization of the African-American people and related attacks on Free Soilers and abolitionists, also showing how slaves were used as a touchstone to write off immigrants. The second section of the article shifts its focus to the demonization of European Catholics at the hands of the Nativists and the ridiculing of the Nativists themselves. It paves the way for the last core section devoted to the portrayal of Native Americans, considered in light of the polemical accusations against future Whig president Zachary Taylor and the Nativists who endorsed him. As will be shown, the representation of Native Americans is the most complex and ambiguous, as they are variously mentioned or portrayed as victims of Zachary Taylor's cruelty during the Second Seminole War, uncivilized savages, or mere counterfoils for Nativists.

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[6] Gravely 1953, 690.

[7] Richardson 2008, 152–153.

"Vice, want, and exposure": Blacks without Slavery

"Poor sick negroes" in need of a "philanthropic project": these words from the (now hideous) article "A Bright Idea"[8] epitomize the *John-Donkey*'s haughty attitude towards the African-American population and its biting sarcasm against their advocates. The magazine adopted the common anti-abolitionist argument that slavery actually guaranteed African-Americans the best possible life to which they could aspire. Such a concept is explicitly expressed in *The Untranslated Don Quixote*, a serial targeting *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, specifically in the installment that mocks his commitment to abolitionism (January 22, 52–53). Greeley, whose name is misspelled as "Don KEY HAUGHTY ho RATIO GREELE," is here portrayed as an unlikely, awkward hero taking to heart the cause of Black American slaves, eventually damaging rather than helping them. Together with Simon Parker, a veteran of the Mexican-American War, the champion of freedom is seen meeting two slaveholders and fifty slaves. He has a quarrel with the slave-holders about the legitimacy of slavery that escalates into a full-blown fight. Half the slaves flee, while Don KEY HAUGHTY and Simon are covered with tar and feathers by the enraged slave-holders. What happens to the freed slaves then?

> Some […] escaped to Noo York. These, reaching there, sought and obtained that Elysium of earth, the Five Points, where they herded with others of like kind, in dump cellars, subsisting partly on charity and partly by stealing; and after becoming lean, ragged an filthy, were at least delivered over to the Holy Brotherhood of the City Hall, or the stars, so called because of the brightness of their intellect, and fed and clad at the public expense in a great stone palace. A few of them died of starvation, and others of diseases contracted from vice,

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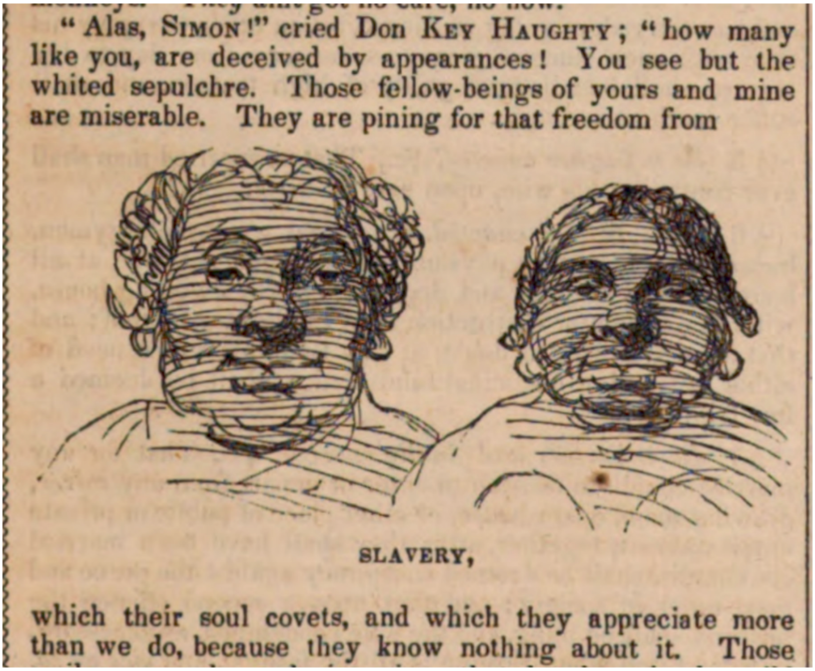
[8] *John-Donkey*, January 1st, 15. Heretofore cited parenthetically in the text.

> want, and exposure. The reminder arrived at Filadelfié. Where they took up their abodes in the Small Street quarter, or in Baker Street. These fared like the others – except that they nearly all died from being turned out in the street by order of the Alcaldes. For, as they fell sick, the Board of Health, which is composed of the wisest and most discerning men in the community, thought they should be cured; and their wisdom and discernment pointed out no better way that to turn them into the streets, to die there. For, indeed, death is a speedy cure to diseases, since it terminates them, as all must admit. A more meagre and miserable set of beings than these negroes, it would be difficult to discover.

The difference between the ‘during’ and ‘after’ slavery is also visually rendered in a couple of illustrations (Fig. 1 and 2): whereas the former shows the captive slaves as thriving, happy people, the latter emphasizes the consequences of a life without an owner/mentor caring for them: they are sickly, emaciated, and sad-looking; their complexion is darker so as to suggest a despicable – to the *John-Donkey*’s eyes – “africanization.”[9]



“Alas, Simon!” cried Don Key Haughty; “how many like you, are deceived by appearances! You see but the whited sepulchre. Those fellow-beings of yours and mine are miserable. They are pining for that freedom from

SLAVERY,

which their soul covets, and which they appreciate more than we do, because they know nothing about it. Those

Fig. 1: “SLAVERY,” from the *John-Donkey*, January 22, 1848, 52.

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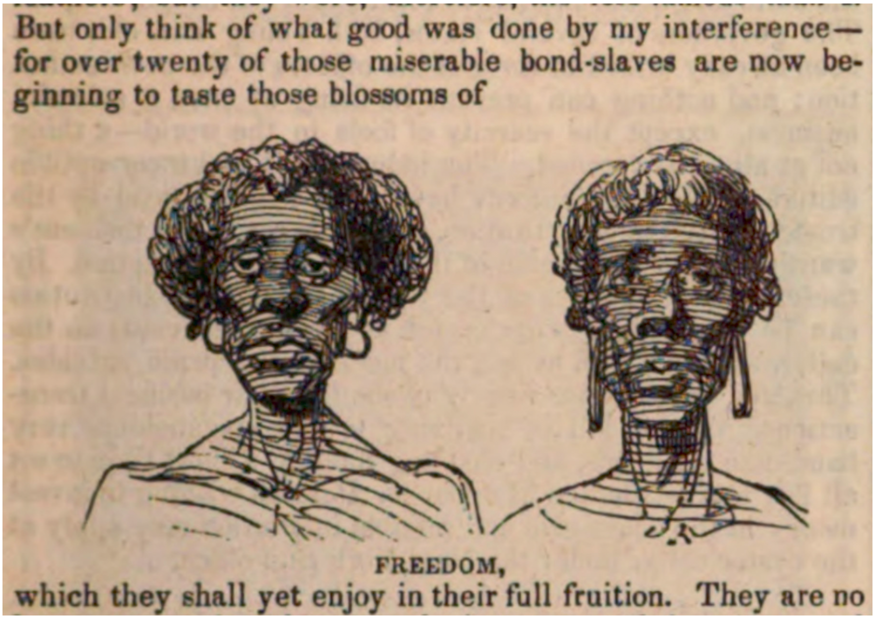
[9] Chappell 2005, 290 – 291.



But only think of what good was done by my interference—for over twenty of those miserable bond-slaves are now beginning to taste those blossoms of

FREEDOM,

which they shall yet enjoy in their full fruition. They are no

Fig. 2: “FREEDOM,” from the *John-Donkey*, January 22, 1848, 53.

Far from acknowledging this bleak epilogue as a failure, Don Key HAUGHTY “did more than ever congratulate himself upon having conferred upon these poor fellows the blessing of civilization” (January 22, 53). As the ending zooms in on Greeley, one comes to realize that the thematic and polemical focus of the installment is the abolitionist movement. At the time, members of various parties espoused the abolitionist cause, as the parable of Horace Greeley himself shows. Horace Greeley was a “Conscience Whig,” namely a Whig disappointed by his party’s opportunistic unwillingness to take a stand against slavery during the 1848 presidential campaign. As his editorials testify, he did not abandon his political faction, although at that time he was tempted to join the newly-founded Free Soil Party, also attacked by the *John-Donkey*.[10]

The birth of the Free Soil was determined by a dramatic split inside the Democratic Party over the extension of slavery in the territories seized from Mexico. Following harsh debates with the pro-slavery “Hunkers,” anti-slavery “Barnburners”[11] clustered around former Democratic president Martin Van Buren to form a new political coalition including other abolitionist groups like the Liberty Party and some “Conscience Whigs.” As was often the case with those who had enthusiastically supported the war against Mexico, the *John-Donkey* openly endorsed slavery, aligning itself with the “Hunkers”.

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[10] Hale 1950, 141–142.

The magazine questioned the altruist nature of the Free Soilers’ real motivations in texts like “John Van Buren’s speech at Geneseo, Livingston Co., NY. Reported exclusively and Correctly for the *John-Donkey*” (July 8, 17). This is a comic rendering of an address given by Van Buren’s son, who was a key figure in the Free Soil Party. In addition to accusing the Van Burens of corruption, the text insists on the hypocrisy of the two politicians and their followers, whose actions were driven by self-interest and personal resentment. While Martin Van Buren’s supporters are defined by John himself “a convention of disappointed office-hunters,” Martin’s revolt against his own party is presented as a natural revenge for being refused the Democratic nomination in 1844: “My venerable dad was kicked out of the convention like a mangy cur – the party refused to be ridden to death by all the howling rascals who pinned their noses to my dad’s coat skirts and James K. Polk was nominated.”

The *John-Donkey* draws attention to the inconsistency of Martin Van Buren’s present claims if compared with his past actions so as to point out the lack of real idealism at the origin of the Free Soil. In fact, as John reminds his audience, “in 1836 my father, as Vice President, gave the casting vote in favor of the bill authorizing Postmasters to open the mails and take out any matter relating to abolition which in their opinion should be of incendiary character.” Nevertheless everything has changed since then, and for clear reasons: “This licking of the South’s feet is peculiar to the Van Burens” but “it never paid us. We have just a right to turn upon it, oppress it, abuse it, and deny it any participation in the national territories. We go for Martin Van Buren and the Free Soil.” As a result, John complains, “I am thoroughly despised, not only by the Democratic party, but even by the Whigs who use me; and indeed I am respected only by the negroes, who are fool enough to think me sincere.” Here the attack on abolitionists once again intertwines with the discursive bestialization of Afro-Americans, who are presented as incapable of understanding Van Buren’s true colors: they are like “fool[s]” lacking rationality and in need of an earnest guide.

Incidentally, the centrality of the critique of the Free Soil and abolitionists becomes blatantly evident when researching dimensions of proslavery discourses in relation to the magazine's remarks on immigration from Ireland in 1848. Starvation was then plaguing the island and so many families left it to find new opportunities elsewhere that the Irish came to comprise nearly half of all immigrants to the United States in the 1840s. The texts in the *John-Donkey* exhibit an ostensibly sympathetic attitude, which we will investigate later on because what matters here is how the Irish are sometimes backgrounded and reduced to an 'out-group' over which proslavery discourses take place. In the quips "One Comfort" and "Rumors" (January 29, 78; April 8, 229), for example, the blacks are constructed as the less deserving recipients of an 'ethic of piety' and support from Americans. The former piece recalls how "the Irish famine caused the death of over 115,000 persons" but "thanks heaven, they died free" to sarcastically comment on the lot of black slaves: the Irish, indeed, "were not condemned, like our negro slaves, to live in fat and slavery" (78). Arguably, money and energies would be better spent on "the Irish sufferers" rather than on slaves according to the magazine. Moreover, the *John-Donkey* mockingly alludes to the inadequacy of the relief measures taken by American people and authorities in passing remarks as follows: "A shoemaker in Manayunk", Philadelphia, was "so benevolent that he offered [the Irish] his *awl*" – couldn't America be more generous?" (229). Finally, these excerpts beg the question of whether immigrants were always subject to sympathetic representation. This is the topic of the next section.

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[11] The derogatory name “Barnburners” alludes to the practice of burning the barn to rid it of rats, namely, abandoning the Democratic Party rather than trying to change it from the inside.

"Nobody but pagans could be found": Catholic Immigrants and Nativist Rhetoric

Although America had always been a land of immigrants, in the 1830s and '40s, immigration witnessed unprecedented numbers, reaching its historical peak in 1847, as people left an unstable Europe scarred by political unrest, or, in the case of thousands of Irish, a country stricken by the Great Hunger.[12] The phenomenon was bound to stir up preoccupations and anxieties, among which was the fear that this mass arrival could turn into an 'invasion.' Evidence is contained in "Sketches of Foreign Travel No. 2 – Italy" (June 3, 366), which makes fun of the creeping fear of being invaded by Catholic Europeans by documenting the author's journey to Italy, which "is situated in the Southeast part of Yates county, in the Western section of the State of New York."

More generally, reactions to mass arrivals from Europe ranged from opportunistically welcoming attitudes to xenophobic rejection. Among the demonizers of the Irish, Germans, and Italians were the Nativists, who launched violent attacks against them on the basis of economic, socio-cultural, and political reasons. Whereas, amidst the economic crisis following the financial panic of 1837, common people saw recent immigrants as potential job-stealers, Nativist politicians and newspapers fomented workers’ resentment by accusing the newly arrived of destabilizing the political and religious values and institutions of the United States. Most of the newcomers were practicing Roman Catholics who brought with them new religious, cultural, and political values.[13] So, the Nativists based their rhetoric on the assumption that Catholicism and its hierarchies were deeply akin to the monarchic order and ideologically incompatible with democracy, even espousing the idea that Catholics were attempting to infiltrate and unsettle the American democratic system. The *John-Donkey* alludes to these beliefs in satirical pieces such as “Mysterious Manuscript,” in which Irish and Italian immigrants are seen as the harbingers of an anti-democratic, “detestable Irish plot” led by the “Jesuits” (August 5, 64).

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[12] LeMay 2013, 15; Killick 2014, 170 – 191.

On the surface, the *John-Donkey* thus appears to sympathize with the immigrants in its portrayal of the anxieties fueled by xenophobes such as the Nativists, a portrayal that ridicules these fears as absurdly hyperbolic. Upon closer examination of the sources, however, one realizes that the magazine’s mockery is part of a wider critique of xenophobic factions on account of the anti-democratic policies they endorsed and the violence embedded in their rhetoric. Through processes of ridiculing and othering, the magazine heightens the perception of seemingly impenetrable boundaries between ‘us’ – the *John-Donkey* and its network claiming to uphold the core values of American Democracy – and ‘them’.

The Nativists in particular were deemed the architects of supposedly ‘non-Democratic’ policies. They strove to deny citizenship and suffrage to Catholic immigrants as long as possible and to limit Catholic influence on all aspects of American social and political life, from education to public administration. Significantly enough, during his three terms in the House of Representatives, Lewis Charles Levin spent most of his energies in the attempt to extend the naturalization period from five to twenty-one years.[14]

Education was of paramount concern among Nativists, who argued that Catholic influence in schools was to corrupt the republic by undermining its moral foundations. These preoccupations stemmed from the Catholic clergy’s apparently successful efforts to weaken the control that Protestants had over public schools in New York City and Philadelphia and to forbid the use of the Protestant King James

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[13] Bennett 1990.

[14] Bennett 1990.

Version there.[15] As per this logic, public schools were thus among the social institutions to be protected from Catholic assaults. “The Board of Foreign Missions,” published by the *John-Donkey* on October 14 (105), addresses intolerant Protestants’ anxieties as well as the discriminatory policies by which they tried to regain control of schools. First and foremost, the *John-Donkey*, aping Nativist rhetoric, depicts the influx of Catholic immigrants and extensive influence of Catholic authorities in New York City and Philadelphia as proof of an ‘invasion’ of pagans into ‘civilized’ Protestant America. There, “nobody but pagans could be found, who lived in utter ignorance of the existence of a Deity as well as in open violation of every human and divine law.” Then, the article reports the fabricated news of the appointment of some “Reverend Gentlemen” as missionaries to specific areas of New York City (Five Points; the Water Street; “Dens near West Broadway”) and Philadelphia (Small Street; Dandy Hall; Baker Street), with the goal to contain the “awful prevalence of heathenism and gross ignorance in certain foreign parts.” Among them is, for example, Samuel Hanson Cox, of whom the *John-Donkey* emphasizes the strict conservatism by attributing to him the pamphlet *The Topographical Concatenation of Biblical Repositorial Antiquarian Orthodoxy* (April 29, 285). Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn and advocate for a united Protestant America, Cox was one of the founders of the Society for the Promotion of Collegiate and Theological Education in the West in 1844. The stated purpose of the society was to financially support Protestant colleges in the Old Northwest, a region which – according to the society’s first report – was especially endangered by the “conspiracy of the Catholic potentates of Europe to subvert the civil and religious institutions of this country.”[16] The statement expressed in this historical document offers a case in point of the vocabulary and imagery targeted by the *John-Donkey.*

“The Board of Foreign Missions” mocks the widespread xenophobic view of Catholic immigrants as heathens to be evangelized and civilized for the wellbeing of the nation, starting from the areas in which they are most concentrated. What is more, the *John-Donkey* subtly advances an interrogative: were the Catholics the *real* threats to the wellbeing of the nation? Let’s consider that, first, the editorial staff seemingly believed that one of the core values of Democratic America – in light of the Declaration of Independence – was freedom of religion; second, they were acutely aware of the incendiary language used by those who brandished the specter of a Catholic conspiracy and the potential consequences of it.

Particularly worrying for the magazine editorial staff was the fact that the claims and beliefs of xenophobic groups, mainly the Nativists, had resulted in episodes of concrete violence on more than one occasion. In May and June 1844, Philadelphia had been upset by a series of riots, which had ended in the destruction of three Catholic churches and some houses of Catholic immigrants. Tackling this subject four years later, at the time of the trial of those involved in the riots, the *John-Donkey* emphasizes the responsibility of the Nativists for such violence in pieces like "The Only Correct Report. Mr. Levin's Great Speech on the Pope of Rome. Reported Exclusively for the John-Donkey" (March 25, 207). This is a comic rewriting of an address delivered by Levin at the House of Representatives on March 2. Whereas the original speech by Levin dealt with diplomatic issues, its satirical rendition in the *John-Donkey* takes the form of an exposition of Levin's crucial and deleterious role in the 1844 Philadelphia Riots. As historians observe, Levin *was indeed* there, and his speeches and statements both engendered and exacerbated the tensions at the origin of the unrest. For example, when his newspaper reported the false news that members of the Montgomery Hibernia Greens – a militia company mostly consisting of Irish Catholic immigrants – had killed "two or three persons," things got worse.[17]

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[15] Holt 1999, 190–191.

[16] Mounger 1977, 347–349; *Permanent Documents* 1844, 12.

In "The Only Correct Report," the *John-Donkey* builds on these historical facts to expose the embedded violence in Levin's and other xenophobes' actions and words. To this end, the author of the satirical piece apes the typical recriminations and the language of their polemical target. It is worth mentioning a passage of the grotesque account of the events put in Levin's mouth by the magazine:

> On that memorable occasion, I and Mr. Grover went down to the church of St Philip de Neri, which had been converted into a fort. It was filled to the roof with gun-powder and bowie knives. From the windows of the church ten forty-two pounders poked out their black noses, and were loaded to the muzzles with glass bottles and Jesuit tracts. Jesuits were there who wished to repress the sovereignty of the people, and preventing them from burning the church. The police and the military were in league with the Jesuits. [...] These Jesuits wished to prevent the Natives from proceeding in these religious rites – a species of tyranny unparalleled in history, and specially instigated by that horned beast of the Vatican, Pope Pius the Ninth. But I and Grover would not stand it. I mounted the cannon, barefoot – Mr. Grover following after and holding my hat. I applied my toes to the touchholes of the ten cannons, as they were about to fire; and blowing right into the church, I blew the Jesuits into the middle of the following week. (March 25, 207)

This excerpt reveals where the *John-Donkey*'s real interest lies when it comes to the representation of immigrants. Rather than providing a sympathetic account of their plight, the magazine focuses on their demonization at the hands of the xenophobes to attack the xenophobes themselves. We should attribute this peculiar media treatment of immigrants to political reasons. Elections were approaching in 1848 and Levin was a prominent political opponent of the Democratic Party, with which the *John-Donkey* sympathized. On the occasion of the 1844 elections, Levin had successfully exploited Catholics as social scapegoats to gain the votes of people scared by Catholic immigration and – the *John-Donkey* seems to imply – people like those who had contributed to the destruction of Catholic churches during the Philadelphia Riots. It is significant that, Levin had been elected to Congress for the first time in September 1844, two months after the riots. Now, with the upcoming elections, it was worth reminding readers what Levin had been and was still capable of doing.

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[17] Schrag 2021.

The Nativists represented a major political force in 1840s America. Hence the *John-Donkey*'s choice to target them but also the ever-changing attitude that the other political organizations held towards them. Before 1848, most Whigs had disdained the idea of an alliance with the Nativists, especially after the 1844 riots. That same year, the Democrat candidate Henry Clay had accepted the endorsement of the Nativists in the crucial states of New York and Pennsylvania, but immediately after being elected he had warned the Whigs against merging with them, lest they lose further immigrant votes. Indeed, at the time, immigrant votes were courted by both the Democratic Party and the Whigs, but the courting had paid off mostly for the former. In 1847, Clay was therefore determined to publicly distance himself from Nativism once and for all, and, during a speech he gave in January in New Orleans, he invited Americans to help famine-stricken Ireland. When in April Peter Skenandoah Smith, a leading Philadelphia Nativist, asked him whether he would accept the organization's presidential nomination, Clay firmly refused. Nevertheless, things were to change in 1848, when the Whigs nominated Zachary Taylor as their candidate instead of Clay to earn and keep the support, among others, of Nativists. At least this is how the *John-Donkey* saw it. In September 1847, with the decisive intervention of Levin, a Nativist national convention recommended Taylor for the presidency, and Taylor accepted their support. Levin's decision to back him was based on a precise deal with the Pennsylvania Whigs: Taylor for President, Levin for Congress, each endorsed by Whigs and Nativists. The Nativists would garner Taylor votes throughout Philadelphia and its environs on the occasion of the elections in November.[18]

The next section explains how such maneuvers made Zachary Taylor a polemical target of the *John-Donkey*, which attacked him also through references to the General's role in the Second Seminole War.

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[18] Holt 1999, 190–191, 276, 307; Hamilton 1966, 111.

The Ambiguous Portrayal of Native Americans

The media representations of Native Americans also intertwine with the coeval political situation, yet they are more varied and articulated than those of Blacks and Catholic immigrants. Per the same strategy that led the *John-Donkey* to 'defend' Catholic immigrants to criticize Nativists, the magazine's occasional victimization of Native Americans was finalized to echo an accusation that political opponents often brought against Zachary Taylor during the presidential campaign. But this is not the only instrumental depiction of the First Nation in the pages of the *John-Donkey:* as will be seen, a much more negative portrayal of the indigenous population informs the attacks against the Nativist Party.

"A very humane measure": Zachary Taylor and the Seminoles

Although the Whigs had previously opposed Polk's expansionist policy, starting in 1846, it became more and more clear that the appointment of a Mexican War hero as their next candidate would have given them better chances of victory. Barely defeated in 1844, Henry Clay was a more natural choice due to his faithful adhesion to the principles of the Whig creed and his long service to the party. Still, the belief that the Whigs needed a new and fresh personality who would not attract only Whig votes led a growing group of Whigs to endorse General Taylor.[19] After Taylor's victory at Buena Vista in 1847, the popular demand for his candidacy – solicited by innumerable newspapers – had become increasingly vocal. Courted by both Whigs and Democrats, Taylor originally denied being interested in running for the presidency and when, in July 1847, he claimed to be ready to take the people's call, he clearly stated that he was willing to accept the nomination of any and all parties or groups. If the people found fit to bring him "before them for this office, through their legislatures, mass-meetings, or conventions," he could not "object to their designating these bodies as *Whig, democratic or native*" (emphasis added). As he often asserted, he "would accept such nomination provided it had been made entirely independent of party considerations."[20]

"The New Exodus" (March 11, 173) – a verse-by-verse rewriting of the golden calf episode – mocks both Taylor's pose as a man-for-all-seasons and the Whigs' inability to find an equally popular alternative. In the biblical tale, the impatient Jewish people waiting for Moses' return from the top of the Sinai eventually ask

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[19] Silbey 2009, 56; Bauer 2018.

[20] Dyer 1940, 173–175.

Aaron to provide them with new gods, thus arousing the wrath of God, which Moses will have to appease to save them. Likewise, in the *John-Donkey*'s version of the story, the Whigs, either unsatisfied with Taylor or tired with his temporizing, ask "Horace" (Greeley) to provide them with new leaders "for, *as for* this Zachary, who brought Santa Anna out of his boots at Buena Vista, we wot not what to make of him." While Zachary is busy talking with the People – like Moses with God in the Exodus – Horace tells the Whigs to worship "the man of Ashland" (being Ashland the name of Clay's estate in Kentucky) and a molten calf, which he fashioned with "a sharp tool, *even* a steel pen." He then tells them "These be thy gods" and announces "a feast of the Whigs" the following day, likely an allusion to the upcoming convention. But their celebrations are not bound to last, since on his return an enraged Zachary takes the calf and "burnt it in the fire of popular opinion, and ground it to the powder, and strawed the ashes upon the ground; and the place is called Ashland unto this day." What makes Taylor so powerful are the votes he would guarantee to the Whigs in several states of the Confederation, along with the diverse political endorsements that he received, as clearly conveyed by his dialogue with the American people in the text:

> 7 And the People said unto Zachary, Go, get thee down; for the whigs, which thou broughtest out of the land of the loco-focos, have corrupted *themselves* […] 10 Now therefore, just lay low, and let us have the whack at them, that we may flummux them; and we will make of thee a great ruler. 11 And Zachary besought the people, saying, Why does your wrath wax hot against the whigs, which I brought out of the land of loco-focos? For am I not a whig? Yea, verily. 12 Wherefore should the loco-focos speak and say, For mischief did he bring them out to slain them in Kentucky, and Virginia, and Tennessee, and to consume them from the face of New York and Pennsylvania? Turn from your fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against the whig.

The quoted passage testifies how useful in 1848 the political support of the Nativists could be for the Whigs in their competition with the Democrats – or "Locofocos," as their opponents used to call them in the '40s.[21] It also explains why the *John-Donkey* directed its biting remarks towards Taylor, which sometimes draw on the General's reputation as responsible for exceedingly cruel acts against the indigenous populations.

The magazine made frequent allusions to Taylor's misbehavior against the natives, which were used as a weapon against him and the party that had chosen him as its candidate. These allusions brought to light a specific event that occurred in

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[21] The term "Locofocos" originally designated an anti-Tammany faction of the Democratic Party who used friction matches, or "locofocos," when Tammanyites turned off the gas lights at a Democratic meeting in New York. In 1848, it was widely employed by Whigs as a synonym for all Democrats (Hamilton 2005, 18).

1838, during the Second Seminole War fought in Florida between the United States and the Seminole Native American nation from 1835 to 1842.

When he was serving as a General in the conflict, Taylor wrote to his supervisors asking for permission to acquire an experimental pack of bloodhounds to track down the elusive enemy. As the *John-Donkey* and many other outlets would later recall, Taylor had ended his petition assuring: “I wish it distinctly understood that my object in employing dogs is only to ascertain where the Indians can be found, not to worry them.”[22] Thirty-three bloodhounds were eventually bought and five experienced handlers were hired. The experiment was a failure because the dogs were trained to chase fugitive black slaves and it never involved hostile Indians, but it struck public opinion as inhumane, as people feared the bloodhounds would attack the defenseless Seminoles and condemned the Army for it. The episode provoked extensive debate in Congress and ultimately worsened the widespread negative perception of a war that was already unpopular for having lasted too long.[23]

A few days after the 1848 Whig convention, the *John-Donkey* article entitled “Gen. Taylor’s Bloodhounds” (June 24, 412) observed that “Whig papers, which in 1840 denounced the Administration so bitterly for employing the General who would dare to recommend hunting the Seminoles down with Bloodhounds, have now discovered that it was a very humane measure.” The text quotes the passage from Taylor’s letter about the harmless use he would make of dogs, presenting it as a postscript “manufactured” by the Whigs themselves. It then points out: “Whatever the object of the letter might have been, its effect will be to ‘worry,’ not the Indians but the Whigs.” In fact, the exhumation of this document ten years after its writing was not bound to be of any help to Taylor’s party.

Far from being soon forgotten, the content of the letter and the related episode often resurfaced in the satirical images of the time. The cartoon “The Seat of War; General Taylor Attacking the Chief of the Michigans,” published by the *John-Donkey* on July 8 (21), exemplifies this tendency as it presents Taylor as a human-headed dog biting the back of Democrat candidate (and second governor of the Michigan Territory) Lewis Cass, conveniently portrayed wearing Native American garments. The caption of the cartoon is once again the aforementioned quotation from Taylor’s incriminating letter (Fig. 3).

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22 Quoted in Bauer 1993, 87.

23 Otfinoski 2012, 26.

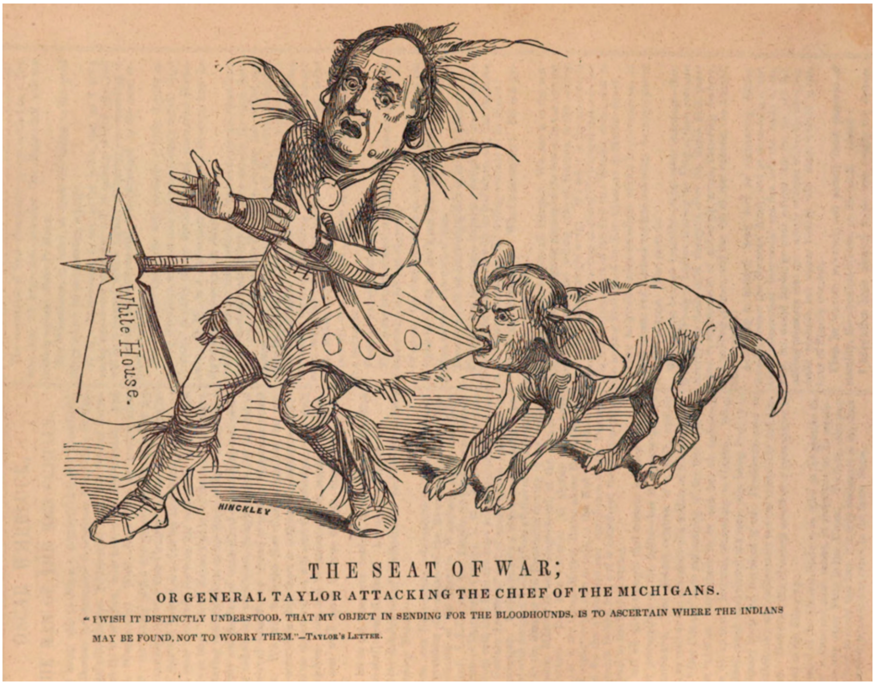
White House.
HINCKLEY
THE SEAT OF WAR;
OR GENERAL TAYLOR ATTACKING THE CHIEF OF THE MICHIGANS.
"I WISH IT DISTINCTLY UNDERSTOOD, THAT MY OBJECT IN SENDING FOR THE BLOODHOUNDS, IS TO ASCERTAIN WHERE THE INDIANS MAY BE FOUND, NOT TO WORRY THEM."—TAYLOR'S LETTER.

Fig. 3: “THE SEAT OF WAR;” from the *John-Donkey*, July 8, 1848, 20bis.

To counterbalance these attacks, Taylor’s supporters attempted to restore his reputation by portraying him as generous and compassionate, which did not escape the *John-Donkey*’s sharp irony. “Mount Desert Safe” (September 30, 85) quotes an article in the *New York Mirror* reporting that in 1846 Taylor had discharged “*the only son of a pious old couple* in Mount Desert enlisted in the Dragoons, which caused his parents great distress,” after receiving a letter from the soldier’s mother. “For this act of kindness,” the *John-Donkey* comments, “we hope that some of the extra humane people, whose feelings have been harrowed by General Taylor’s ‘bloodhound letter,’ will be mollified, and that they may be willing to believe that Gen. Taylor was perfectly sincere in his declaration that he did not want to worry the Indians […].” The article then mentions the upcoming elections, concluding that, “if Mount Desert is not safe” for Taylor, “after such an article – why, then Mount Desert ought to be ashamed of itself.”

In all the aforementioned articles about Taylor’s treatment of Native Americans, the ubiquitous mentions of political factions and personalities involved in the approaching elections clearly reveal that the victimization of the Seminoles was basically instrumental and meant to further discredit the Whig candidate.

Natives or Nativists?

For all the magazine’s apparent sympathy for the indigenous people in the attacks against Zachary Taylor, it may come as a surprise that an extremely negative perception of the Native Americans surfaces in the pieces criticizing the Nativist Party. Again, we find here how the representation of the First Nation is functional to a broader political discourse.

The *John-Donkey*’s actual lack of sympathy for Native Americans clearly emerges in texts like “Yucatan” (May 20, 323), a piece on the Caste War started in 1847. A violent revolt of the Mayan people against the Hispanic population in Yucatan had led Governor Santiago Méndez Ibarra to ask for the help of Britain, Spain, and the United States, offering sovereignty over his nation to whoever could stop the rebels. The matter was debated at the American Congress, where it found the opposition of the Democrat John C. Calhoun.[24] Eventually, the United States did nothing but warn the European powers not to interfere in the peninsula. The *John-Donkey* article dealing with these events reports that “the redskins in Yucatan have amused themselves by murdering the white men and […] women” and, after bitterly commenting on the lack of scruples of the American senators, makes a new provocation: “As the proposition to afford relief to the Yucatecos is unconstitutional, it must be eminently constitutional to aid the red savages. Therefore let an expedition be at once fitted out, with John C. Calhoun at its head, to massacre the remainder of the whites.” The magazine thus suggests that refusing to prevent other whites’ extermination, “frittering their lives away in long debates,” is almost like exterminating them: “Therefore let us kill them all. A direct alliance with the Indians would be more noble than an indirect one” (May 20, 323). The *John-Donkey*’s recriminations are arguably underpinned by its editors’ support of expansionist policies; furthermore, racist bias does play a role.

The then common conception of Native Americans as savages with unchecked brutal instincts also took the form of a call to action to American ‘civilizers,’ charged with preventing the complete descent of the ‘redskins’ into barbarism. “Manliness of British Seamen” (March 25, 196) provides a case in point. This anti-British piece quotes an article from the *New Bedford Mercury* recounting how deeply Samoa’s British residents regretted the arrival of HMS Juno, commanded by their fellow countryman Captain Blake. According to the *New Bedford Mercury*, this British navy officer “did everything in his power to corrupt the morals of the natives and induce them to return to their former heathenish practices, condescending even to offer a reward to those in power if they would make the native females perform in his presence their former obscene dances." With the clear intent of condemning the British, the *John-Donkey* follows up, announcing that "the British Board of Admiralty" is studying a way to adequately reward this honorable seaman for showing the world "that an Englishman, whether on land or sea, is the same noble, high-minded, virtuous, and Christian gentleman always ready […] to sustain the cause of civilization and religion, and to inculcate principles of refinement and morality among the savage and barbarous nations of the earth."

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[24] Von Holst 1980, 306.

Interestingly, this conception of indigenous people as barbarians dovetails neatly with the *John-Donkey*'s criticism targeting the Nativist Party. Such criticism built on the claims of the Nativists themselves. The Nativists often presented themselves as the original, real Americans to distinguish themselves from Catholic immigrants; in so doing, they offered the magazine the opportunity to establish a recurrent ironic juxtaposition between them and the actual native peoples. In the areas of Philadelphia and Baltimore, according to the *John-Donkey*, lives a "famous nation of warriors […] wearing the soaplock instead of the scalplock, and using the spanner instead of the tomahawk": they "have the true aboriginal yell, and are generally Natives" – they are, in fact, the Nativists, who had not been afraid in the past, one assumes in 1844, of assaulting "our most peaceful and unoffending inhabitants" (January 1, 6).

Such juxtaposition was first meant to interrogate what can be really called "native" in a nation originally founded by Europeans and mostly inhabited by immigrants and descendants of immigrants. A paragraph entitled "Exciting Topic of Discussion" (January 1, 7) indirectly raises this question by provocatively asking "whether the Christian religion, having been first promulgated in Palestine, is not of foreign origin, and therefore to be prohibited to Americans," concluding that "the clergy are in a state of trepidation as to the result." Since Protestantism was claimed by Nativists to be the crucial aspect of their cultural identity, the *John-Donkey* is here attacking its opponents at their (ideological) heart. Furthermore, by pointing out that the Nativists were not the original Americans and even practiced an 'imported' faith, the magazine aimed at delegitimizing their claims, undermining the premises.

Second, in this recurrent parallelism, Native Americans serve as a negative touchstone. The intention is comparing Nativists to dumb and violent savages on par with the stereotyped Native Americans. Lewis C. Levin and Peter Sken Smith were the main polemical targets. "Our Indian Gallery" (January 1, 4)[25], a fixture of the magazine, revolves around this juxtaposition: it rewrites turning points in American history, replacing the actual protagonists of them (the First Nation) with the self-fashioned “Native Americans” (Levin’s fellow party-members). The series thus begins with its first installment in the inaugural issue of the *John-Donkey:*

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[25] Incidentally, the quotation included in the title, "the heart of every Native citizen", is drawn from this fixture, "Our Indian Gallery". The specific reference is to the second issue published on January 8, page 30.

> Much injustice has been done to the intellectual capabilities of the aborigines. They have been denied a taste and power to excel in the fine arts. We happen to have the opportunity to demonstrate the fallacy of the popular opinion. We have in our possession the buffalo robe of LUI-ISS-SEE-LEVIN, a celebrated Native chief. On this is pictured, in a most inimitable style, battle-pieces and various other matters referring to the history of the tribe of which he was formerly a member – the tribe, we believe, of JEW-DAH.

Besides insinuating that Levin’s “intellectual capabilities” are poor, the passage alludes to the surprising fact that he was actually of Jewish origins, also creating a consonance between “Jewish” and “Judas.”[26] This pun might be meant to echo the anti-Semitic accusations that some Democrats had made against the Nativist leader. According to their charges, Levin, “apparently a convert from Hebraism to the Christian Church, gloried – as though still a Jew – in exciting quarrels between Christian sects, [and] rejoiced over the conflagration of Christian Altars.”[27]

Yet, of greater interest within the scope of this article is that the magazine’s mockery against Levin implies the caricatural portrayal of him as “a celebrated Native chief” at the head of a “tribe” of “aborigines.” Peter Sken Smith did not escape the same joke: take for instance the final passage of the aforementioned “The New Exodus,” where a prophet-like Zachary Taylor sets “his two tables of testimony” to Whig Congressman Joseph Reed Ingersoll,[28] and “to the tribe of the Native Americans, even the tribe of Peter the Skenadoah, surnamed Smith” (March 11, 173). Such a quip relies on the unusual name of this leader of the Nativist movement. Son of a fur trader who had established a land business in Utica, Peter Skenandoah Smith had been called after the Oneida chief Skenandoah, with whom his father had formed a close relationship eventually helping him to negotiate a lease for a large tract of Oneida land.

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[26] There is no record of Levin’s formal conversion to Christian religion, but he married twice with Protestant women, with ceremonies officiated by protestant clergymen, and the constitution of Beth Elohim in his native Charleston (South Carolina) stated that any person being married contrary to the Mosaic Law would not be a recognized member of this congregation (Schrag, 2021).

[27] Cf. Schrag, 2021.

[28] Since early 1847, Philadelphia three-term Congressman Joseph Ingersoll had lauded Taylor in House speeches as “a Whig—not indeed an ultra-partisan Whig, but a Whig in principle.” (Holt 1999, 302).

The *John-Donkey*'s choice to equate the Nativist leaders with the uncivilized and bloodthirsty 'redskins' as they are portrayed in "Yucatan" and "Manliness of British Seamen" reveals its editorial staff's anxieties about the possible consequences of Nativist propaganda and policies. In fact, in the magazine's view, they were bound to undermine the social cohesion and the *real* democratic principles at the heart of the young American nation. At the same time, the ironic comparison by which the magazine exorcises such anxieties betrays its editors' complete lack of sympathy for the indigenous populations whom, on other occasions, they had opportunistically chosen to present as victims, apparently taking their side.

Conclusion

By highlighting patterns of representation in the *John-Donkey*, this article has shown that representational processes played a crucial role in demarcating boundaries between 'us' and 'them' in 1840s America. The emphasis has been on how the *John-Donkey* multimodally portrayed the minorities that comprised the demography of antebellum America to demonstrate that the discourses on them served to further the magazine's political agenda and, by extension, to target the opponents of the Democratic Party in the 1848 elections. Indeed, the real addressees of the magazine's biting remarks on the black slaves were the abolitionists, whose cause the *John-Donkey* deplored. Catholic Europeans, who were discriminated against by xenophobic Nativists and the like, became the medium through which to debate core issues of national identity. Instead, the discourses over the indigenous peoples were used to criticize Zachary Taylor or were featured as a foil to define what a true "American" was not: a savage prone to violence, not unlike the Nativists.

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Enrico Botta

The Song of Hiawatha: From an Indian Tale to the Epos of Manifest Destiny

> *Ye who love a nation's legends,*
> *Love the ballads of a people.*[1]

> Please don't get expatriated. Ah, no, life is not all cathedrals and ruined castles, and other theatrical properties of the Old World.[2]

In 1855, an anonymous English reviewer stated that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882) wrote *The Song of Hiawatha* by turning "to the past of his country, as it peers out of the backwoods and hunting-grounds of the red man […], to give the world America's first written epic."[3] Even if many critics, including John McWilliams in his volume on epic literature in the United States,[4] agree with this statement, the poem is not a naive description of a hypothetical and indeterminate Native American civilization but rather—as this article aims to demonstrate—a celebratory text of a nation committed to making the dream of Manifest Destiny a reality. Longfellow accomplished this objective by intermingling the incongruities of two historical events: on the one hand, he endorsed the imperial affirmation of the United States as a reply to the internal crisis that would lead to the outbreak of the Civil War; on the other hand, he speculated on the union of various Indian nations despite their eventual subjugation by white settlers.

Politics: Longfellow, Indians, and Europeans

As Jill Lepore argues in her article "Paul Revere's Ride Against Slavery," Longfellow was a political poet.[5] The fact that he published one of his most popular compositions in the January 1861 issue of *The Atlantic*, on the same day that South Carolina seceded from the Union, backs up Lepore's thesis and connects the upcoming Civil

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[1] Longfellow 2000, 143. All further citations to *The Song of Hiawatha* will be taken from this edition and indicated parenthetically within the text.

[2] Longfellow's letter to Louise Chandler Moulton about to set sail for Europe. Arvin 1962, 23.

[3] "Review of *The Song of Hiawatha* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow" 1856, 7.

[4] McWilliams 1989, 117.

[5] Lepore 2010.

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War to what happened in 1775.[6] The poem, in fact, "is less a poem about the Revolutionary War than about the impending Civil War and about the conflict over slavery that caused it."[7] Longfellow was an abolitionist: he published the volume entitled *Poems on Slavery* in 1842 and spent a large amount of money to buy slaves' freedom. The poet outlined a further link between his times and the revolutionary period on December 2, 1859, when John Brown was hanged: "This will be a great day in our history,"—Longfellow wrote in his diary—"the date of a new Revolution quite as much needed as the old one."[8] Months later, Longfellow celebrated Lincoln's presidential victory and wrote, "Freedom is triumphant."[9] Earlier on, in 1849, he had revealed his interests in politics in the poem *The Building of the Ship.* The analogy between a beautiful vessel called "Union" and its country of origin, rather than depicting the fear of the nation's impending collapse, foreshadows the United States' outstanding role on the international political agenda. The final lines' optimism appears to confirm this thesis: "Sail on! Sail on! O Ship of State!/For thee the famished nations wait!/The world seems hanging on thy fate!"[10]

A distorted image of a naive and disinterested artist was defined by the scholarship of the 1920s and 1930s. Longfellow's indifference to real-life issues was emphasized by biographer Herbert S. Gorman in 1926: "Henry strives in vain to secrete himself from all this terror."[11] Vernon L. Parrington put it similarly the following year: "[his] mind was detached from politics and his conscience rarely disturbed by social questions;"[12] according to Van Wyck Brooks, the poet lived with "a childlike air of trust" that produced "a fathomless calm of innocent goodness."[13] Yet, neglecting Longfellow as one of the most popular American poets of the XIX century and removing politics from his work have both limited the meaning of many of his poems and made his pieces extremely valuable as a tool of political propaganda.

Robert A. Ferguson argues that Longfellow's letters show how his "strong and passionate interest in the political events of the 1850's" deeply influenced his poetry of the period and turned him into the native bard who provided mythic and ideological dimension to the country's historical imagination.[14] The political reinterpretation of the poet and his works that began in the second part of the XX century was consistent with that prevailing throughout his lifetime. His contemporaries believed that Longfellow actually took an intense and informed interest in the practical world around him. William Dean Howells once asserted that "of all our poets, he had lived most in the world, both at home and abroad, and […] he lived rather constantly in it."[15]

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[6] Published in *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863), *Paul Revere's Ride* follows the famous patriot as he rides through the Massachusetts countryside warning of an impending British attack. Longfellow 2013.

[7] Lepore 2010.

[8] Longfellow 2013, 2428.

[9] S. Longfellow 1893, 408.

[10] Longfellow 2000, 126.

[11] Quoted in Ferguson 1978, 188.

[12] Quoted in Ferguson 1978, 188.

[13] Quoted in Ferguson 1978, 188.

As a national poet characterized by epic sweep and solemn feeling, he came along right at the moment when the nation most needed one. Longfellow was a central and yet transversal figure of the XIX century American literary landscape.[16] Even before Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, he was the most popular poet in the United States and the most respected overseas author in Europe. Dana Gioia argues that the poet "can be ignored only at the cost of misreading his century."[17] According to the scholar, Longfellow:

> […] not merely [was] the most popular American poet who ever lived but enjoyed a type of fame almost impossible to imagine by contemporary standards. His books not only sold well enough to make him rich; they sold so consistently that he eventually became the most popular living author in any genre in nineteenth-century America.[18]

The critic adds that Longfellow continues to exert a considerable cultural influence considering that his works, in particular *The Song of Hiawatha*, are published in numerous editions, translated into many languages, widely anthologized and adapted into musicals, symphonies, paintings, cartoons, and films.[19] In fact, the "continuing popularity" Gioia speaks of seems to overestimate Longfellow's position in the contemporary and international cultural panorama; most critics agree on how his fame has progressively faded on both sides of the Atlantic and on how, since the very beginning of the XX century, his oeuvre has become an exclusive subject of the academy. However, if Lawrence Buell stated that "[r]arely has so respected a writer been so discredited by posterity,"[20] Longfellow's concerns about his present contributed to establishing his artistic status; and within this analytical framework, one should interpret how his interest in the sectional friction which would lead to the Civil War influenced such a work as *The Song of Hiawa-*

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[14] Quoted in Ferguson 1978, 187.

[15] Howells 1907, 475.

[16] On Longfellow's self-definition as a poet, see Gartner 2000.

[17] Gioia 1993, 69.

[18] Gioia 1993, 64.

[19] Gioia 1993, 65.

[20] Buell 1988, 1.

tha. In the poem, he adapted the European epic form to the American context not only to re-actualize the national past but also to recognize in the natives' subjugation an endorsement of the mid-XIX century American imperialism.

The Indian Epic Becomes a (Euro-)American Epos

Published in the same year as the first edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, *The Song of Hiawatha* is a narrative epic in trochaic verse that includes several stories and legends about Native Americans. It is divided into twenty-two cantos and focuses on the life and deeds of Hiawatha, the hero of the tribe of the Ojibway.

The publication of the poem in 1855 caused great excitement; it sold 50,000 copies by 1860 and earned 7,000 dollars in royalties in ten years.[21] It was one of the most widely read and admired texts both in the United States and Europe during the second half of the XIX century, and it inspired painters, sculptors, and illustrators. It was extensively reviewed, translated into several European languages, and set to music as well as featured in dramatic performances. As stated by Cynthia D. Nickerson, a contemporary reviewer noted Longfellow's fascination with artists and described his oeuvre in these terms: "The very nature of Mr. Longfellow's work makes it easy and natural to call in the explication and adornment which the other arts afford. Probably no living poet has been so frequently accompanied by music, and subjects from his poems may be found in American and English picture galleries."[22] Above all, *The Song of Hiawatha* established Indian themes as unique sources of poetical imagination:[23] if it can be interpreted within the tradition of Euro-American representation of Native Americans, it also aimed at fashioning a distinct national literature by elaborating ancient folklore and ethnography.[24] According to Cecelia Tichi, since the time of the poem's publication, critics have mainly investigated the Indian nature of the protagonists and analyzed the inconsistencies between the adventures described by Longfellow and the supposed historical truth recounted by the historian and explorer Henry Schoolcraft, whose work the poet used as inspiration and source.[25] In the notes added to the text, Longfellow asserts: "This Indian Edda—if I may so call it—is founded upon a tradition prevalent among the North American Indians."[26]

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[21] Poetry Foundation.

[22] "Mr. Longfellow and the Artists," quoted in Nickerson 1984, 49. According to Ernest J. Moyne (1957), a poem intended to convey an idea that was shared nationally rather than traceable to an individual author inevitably generated a series of imitations and parodies.

[23] Lockard 2000, 110–25.

[24] On the Indian antecedents of *Hiawatha* in American literature see Schramm 1932. See also Moyne/Ward 1966 and Roylance 2007.

With his "Indian Edda," Longfellow believed he had drafted an epic poem about Natives, but the critical judgments on the epic nature of the text and its originality in comparison to European heroic models are discordant. Having limited himself to transferring the form, meter, spirit, and some of the events of the Finland collection of folk songs *Kalevala* to the Indians of North America, Longfellow —according to Thomas C. Porter—composed a poem that "was not a creation but an imitation."[27] Porter extends his analysis and states: "The resemblance [is] not in the metre only. The general plan and structure of the two poems […] are the same. […] The runes are alike; the preludes are alike."[28] Longfellow read this review and decided not to respond to Porter's attack, but on December 3, 1855, he complained about it to his friend Charles Sumner:

> This is truly one of the greatest literary outrages I ever heard of. But I think it is done mainly to show the learning of the writer. He will stand finally in the position of a man who makes public assertions he cannot substantiate. […] I know the *Kalevala* very well; and that some of its legends *resemble* those preserved by Schoolcraft is very true. But the idea of making me responsible for that is too ludicrous.[29]

Opposing Porter's thesis, Moncure Daniel Conway, a critic of the *Daily National Intelligencer*, called Hiawatha "perhaps the only American Epic."[30] And, if according to Nickerson, the idea of *Hiawatha* as "the American epic"[31] had taken hold in the United States and Europe during the second half of the XIX century, the main goal Longfellow sought to achieve was to delineate in heroic terms—what Tichi defined

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[25] Tichi 1971. Longfellow found material for his poem in *The Myth of Hiawatha* by historian and explorer Henry Schoolcraft and on June 22, 1854, wrote in his diary: "I have at length hit upon a plan for a poem on the Indians, which seems to me to be the right one, and the only. It is to weave together their beautiful traditions into a whole. I have hit upon a measure, too, which I think the right and only one for such a theme. At present it delights me. Let us see how it will prosper" (Longfellow 2000, 819). Stith Thompson's study clarifies the Indian legends erroneously reported by Schoolcraft and used by Longfellow (1922, 128–140).

[26] Longfellow 1854, 161.

[27] Porter 1855. *Kalevala* is a collection of songs sung by the peasants of northern Finland, which the author Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884) intended as a national artistic response to the *Iliad* and the *Edda*. Notwithstanding, some critics deny the influence of *Kalevala* on *Hiawatha*. See Nyland 1950.

[28] Porter 1855.

[29] S. Longfellow 1893, 297.

[30] Conway 1855.

[31] Nickerson 1984, 50.

—"his attitude toward cultural continuity between the old world and the new."[32] The intention to interconnect the culture of the two continents through Hiawatha's epic tale was sensed by Henry James, who emphasized its importance by recalling Longfellow's interest in how his European and native cultures coexisted. Convinced that the poet's cultural personality was derived from "his having worked up his American consciousness to that mystic point […] at which it could feel nothing but continuity and congruity with his European," James concluded that if "something in [Longfellow's] liberal existence […] seemed a piece of the old world smoothly fitted into the new, so it might quite as well have been a piece of the new fitted, just as smoothly, into the old."[33]

Among the most recent critics, Brad Fruhauff argues that "Hiawatha is probably better classified as pastoral romance than epic;"[34] while for Edwin Bowen, at the beginning of the XX century, the presence of extraordinary heroes who move and act in a dark and mysterious wilderness, populated by monsters and talking animals, makes the text a brilliant and original poem—"Hiawatha […] stands alone in American literature"—which borders, however, in the "beauty and fascination of a fairy tale."[35] Scholars agree on the epic scope of the work, but they also share the idea that it is a simple, and at times banal, emulation of European models.

Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked on the work as well, paying attention to the description of the Indians. On November 25, 1855, in fact, he wrote to Longfellow that he had read the text considering it "very wholesome, sweet & wholesome as maize, very proper & pertinent to us to read."[36] Nevertheless, Emerson criticized the native characters described in the poem: "The dangers of the Indians are, that they are really savage, have poor small sterile heads,—no thoughts, & you must deal very roundly with them."[37] The text was too provocatively and sympathetically Indian for mid-XIX century American culture: "I blamed your tenderness now & then, as I read, in accepting a legend or a song, when they had so little to give."[38]

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[32] Tichi 1971, 549.

[33] James 1903, 311–312. According to James, Longfellow—"the best of our recent poets"—synthesized the complex identity of American literati at the time: "They are the product of many influences. Of their own relentless fancy and sensitive tempers; of the changing experience of life; of the culture that is in the air, of the other poets whom they love and emulate; of their New World consciousness (when they are Americans) and their Old World sympathies; of their literary associations, as well as their moral disposition" (James 1984, 481).

[34] Fruhauff 2007, 81.

[35] Bowen 1905, 172.

[36] Emerson 1997, 386.

[37] Emerson 1997, 386.

Longfellow, however, did not just link ancient European poetry and Indian traditions; he also took up many conventions of the classical, medieval, and Renaissance epics, and modified them in the light of the epos produced in America during the Early Republic.

Between Revivals and Topoi Manipulations

In the mid-XIX century, the epos developed new formal and stylistic features in relation to the two models that transplanted the genre to America during the Early Republic, namely Timothy Dwight's *The Conquest of Canaan* (1785) and Joel Barlow's *The Columbiad* (1807). The authors who revitalized the epic modality took up European classical and Renaissance themes and patterns, and re-elaborated them to recount national historical events, such as the formation and development of the colonies, the fight for independence, and later the Civil War and the conquest of the West.

Notwithstanding, there were strong attacks on the anachronism of the epic. Longfellow himself had stated in *The Defence of Poetry* that "[epics that] sang the achievement of Grecian and Roman heroes were rude and unpolished."[39] Yet epos was a key genre for Longfellow's poetics. He was attempting to interpret the feelings and aspirations of his compatriots by committing himself to the dual effort to transmit the culture of the Old World into the New one and to give poetic shape to historical and legendary American material. These two goals converged when he decided to translate the *Divine Comedy*—which he regarded as an epos —and write epic works on US subjects: *Evangeline*, about the diaspora of Acadians; *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, about Plymouth's Pilgrim colony; the already mentioned *Paul Revere's Ride,* about the first battle of the Revolutionary War; and *The Song of Hiawatha*, about Native American history.

While the title, *The Song of Hiawatha*, directly recalls the conventional titles of works such as *Chanson de Roland* and *Song of the Nibelungs*, the introduction contains neither an invocation of a muse nor a proposition of the theme. The narrator does not ask for the intervention of any inspiring deity but claims to report the story he heard from Nawadaha, a Native American musician and singer. In line with the Romantic movement, Longfellow uses this narrative strategy to define the dual dimension of a text that is both oral—“Listen to this simple story,/To this Song of Hiawatha!”—and written—“Stay and read this rude inscription,/Read this Song of Hiawatha!” (143).[40]

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[38] Emerson 1997, 386.

[39] Longfellow 1832, 67.

The hero’s adventures provide unity and cohesion to the text, forming the motif of the legends described. Hiawatha’s arrival is foretold by Gitche Manito, the mighty Spirit creator of the world, who predicts how a man will bring wisdom to the divided and enemy Indian peoples, end wars and gather them in a peaceful union:

> I will send a Prophet to you,
> A Deliverer of the nations,
> Who shall guide you and shall teach you,
> Who shall toil and suffer with you.
> If you listen to his counsels,
> You will multiply and prosper;
> If his warnings pass unheeded,
> You will fade away and perish! (146–147).

Taking up the “post-eventum” prophetic vision—which was already re-elaborated in the New World by Dwight and Barlow—and adapting it to the point of view of the natives, Gitche Manito warns the tribes that only union and peace can defend Indian identity:

> All your strength is in your union,
> All your danger is in discord;
> Therefore be at peace henceforward,
> And as brothers live together (146).

Hiawatha is immediately defined in exemplary terms: he is the result of the fusion of various Indian characters, and, like many classic epic heroes, he is the son of a god (Mudjekeewis, Spirit of the West Wind) and a mortal (the virgin Wenonah). Abandoned by his father and orphaned by his mother, Hiawatha is raised by his grandmother, Nokomis, and the animals of the forest, who educate him and teach him the art of hunting. When young Hiawatha learns the story of his parents, he decides to set out in search of his father to kill him and take revenge for having abandoned Wenonah, an act that eventually leads to her death. Reversing the function of the topos of telemachy, Hiawatha arrives at the Rocky Mountains and confronts Mudjekeewis, who is immortal and cannot be killed. The god, impressed by his son's strength and pride, invites him to return to his people and foreshadows him that his mission will be to advance his peoples, killing monsters and enemies, working and pursuing peace; he will thus become the ruler of the Northwest Wind.

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[40] In the fourteenth book, concerned about the future of Indian civilization, the protagonist laments how time erases the traces of his fathers and the past, and introduces ideographic writing to his tribe. While at the diegetic level, the numerous repetitions and widespread epithets reproduce the oral dimension of primary epics, at the intradiegetic level, the Indian hero faces the problem of the relationship between orality and writing, one of the main cores of secondary epics. Hiawatha begins to paint a series of shapes with distinct colors on birch barks, the white skin of the reindeer, and the graves of the village; he attributes a specific idea to each of these signs to immortalize the ancestors’ deeds forever.

Hiawatha demonstrates great leadership by defeating the forces of evil in battle and through a series of heroic feats that—like the labors of Hercules and the deeds of Beowulf—allow the establishment of the Indian nation. During his adventures, he falls in love and returns to the Dakota to ask Minnehaha for her hand in marriage. The hero hopes to unite the two tribes through the wedding so that "our tribes may be united,/That old feuds may be forgotten,/And old wounds may be healed forever" (200). The girl agrees to be his wife and, bringing a thematic and ideological innovation to the epic canon, the hero marries. After the wedding, Hiawatha embarks on an initiatory journey during which he instructs his fellows with encyclopedic information on how to use antidotes against poisons, cure diseases, build a canoe, practice agriculture, and court a woman, before returning to his peoples and instilling in them the virtues of kindness and wisdom.

The hero and his wife's idyll is shattered when two beings (Famine and Fever) arrive and murder Minnehaha. In addition to re-centralizing the specific individuality of the hero, depriving him of the marriage bond, the episode reactivates the topos of the presence of monsters, supernatural beings, and allegorical characters. Upon Minnehaha's death, Hiawatha embarks on a new series of adventures that allow the poet to take up some themes from the epic tradition, including the hero's lament for the death of his friend Chibiabos and the Homeric figure of Proteus with Pan-Puk-Keewis's series of metamorphoses.

Near the end of the poem, the poet introduces a second post-eventum prophecy. Iagoo, the storyteller, begins to tell of an endless and salty lake, crossed by an immense canoe carrying many white warriors on board. Nobody believes the story except Hiawatha, who sees in a vision the arrival of Eastern populations, with white-painted faces and fur-covered bodies, who will contribute to the progress of the crowded Western nations. The hero's vision darkens and predicts the perversion of the Indian peoples, their propensity to war, and their dispersal—"like the withered leaves of Autumn" (273).

When Europeans arrive, Hiawatha recognizes them as the emblem of the destiny that must be fulfilled: "It is well for us, O brothers,/That you come so far to see us!" (276). As in the vision, the missionaries have a black robe and a cross sewn on their chest; they are housed in the chief's wigwam and begin to catechize the Ojibways by telling them the story of Jesus Christ. Before leaving for the "Land of the Hereafter" (267), the land of the Northwest Wind promised by his father, Hiawatha requests that his people listen to the chief missionary Black-Robe (276), by now convinced that Christianity will unite the white and Indian civilizations:

> Listen to their words of wisdom,
> Listen to the truth they tell you,
> For the Master of Life has sent them
> From the land of light and morning (278).

After suffering and praying that his people may prosper and improve, Hiawatha sees in the white men the strength capable of constructing a world united in peace and progress, as in his prophetic vision:

> I beheld, too, in that vision,
> All the secrets of the future,
> Of the distant days that shall be.
> I beheld the westward marches
> Of the unknown, crowded nations.
> All the land was full of people,
> Restless, struggling, toiling, striving,
> Speaking many tongues, yet feeling
> But one heart-beat in their bosoms (272).

From Legend to History

Even if he stated that Hiawatha "lived purely in the realm of fancy"[41] at the end of the poem, Longfellow—in Tichi's words—"conjoins the eternality of Indian legend with historical time."[42] By telling Native American events and characters through the epic features imported from the Old World, in "The Literary Spirit of Our Country," Longfellow considered the poem as an instrument to shape the imagination of Americans to the point that "our land will become, indeed, a classic ground;"[43] notwithstanding, *The Song of Hiawatha* responded to a specific ideological project of the establishment, in which the poet was becoming increasingly active and involved. From a literary and cultural standpoint, the text's acts of vengeance, torture, and scalping, outline a New World similar to the primitive and violent European civilizations as depicted by Homer and Virgil. On a political and social level, the story of Hiawatha—who brings together some Indian nations and convinces them of the missionaries' authority—becomes an allegory for the United States' effort to strengthen its national unity in Christian and imperialistic terms.

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[41] Longfellow 2004, XII.
[42] Tichi 1971, 553.
[43] Longfellow 2000, 794.

At the time, the country was at the pinnacle of its continental expansionism after the victory over Mexico in 1848, but it was also at the start of its internal disintegration following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. From this point of view, Hiawatha's prophecy reveals the poet's ideology and objective: Longfellow did not codify a mythology of an indigenous culture he was not a part of, and which did not actually exist as he tried to envision it; instead, he turned an Indian epos composed through the paradigms of the European canon into a poetic manifesto of the New World's advancement. The peace and progress the hero hopes for his tribes are thus not a reaction to the Indian Removal Act and the Fugitive Slave Act but the endorsement of Manifest Destiny.[44]

McWilliams argues that in the mid-XIX century some writers believed that a new epic should concentrate not on what the Europeans brought to the New World, but on what they destroyed of it:[45] Native Americans had to be the absolute protagonists of the heroic history of the United States and the focus of the epic action had to shift from the exaltation of the empire to the defeat of the indigenous inhabitants. Longfellow appeared to agree with this thesis at first, but then contradicted it.

Like many other New Englanders, he was at the heart of the political turmoil of the period: he was a strong opponent of what he defined in his journal in 1846 as "this shabby and to us disgraceful war with Mexico,"[46] an early supporter of Free-Soil candidates—a party opposing the expansion of slavery into the Western territories of the United States—and a fervent advocate of Abraham Lincoln for president in 1860; he opposed the periodic local applications of the Fugitive Slave Laws and contested the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854—which repealed the Missouri Compromise in order to create two new territories and allow popular sovereignty; he was shocked by the caning of his friend, republican Senator Charles Sumner, by South Carolinian democratic Congressman Preston S. Brooks in 1856;[47] he was outraged by the execution of John Brown in 1859.[48] During the composition of *The Song of Hiawatha*, Longfellow needed and hoped for a radical change: the union was breaking apart and its chances of survival were almost none.

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[44] See "Longfellow and the Fugitive Slave Act" 2018.

[45] McWilliams 1989, 123.

[46] S. Longfellow 1893, 39.

[47] On the relationship between Longfellow and Sumner, see Blue 1995.

[48] Ferguson 1978, 190.

In particular, the aggression suffered by Sumner marked a turning point in the poet's attitude toward the South, whose true character was revealed by this "savage atrocity": "You have torn the mask off the faces of traitors; and at last the spirit of the North is aroused," wrote Longfellow to his injured friend on May 28, 1856.[49] And he kept on remarking on August 05, 1856: "Well—one good result of all this is, that at length Freedom and Slavery stand face to face in the field as never before."[50] His friendship with Sumner persuaded him to accept the radical republicans' theses, which at the end of the Civil War saw the process of readmitting former confederate states to the Union as a form of imperialism and an expression of Manifest Destiny. In *Hiawatha*, the arrival of the white man causes the destruction of the Indian world; but the ruin had already begun due to native population's discordance. Six years earlier, in the much more optimistic *The Building of the Ship*, Longfellow wrote that weak sailors, not external weather conditions, endanger the ship of state: "It is not the sea that sinks and shelves,/But ourselves/That rock and rise/With endless and uneasy motion."[51]

The poem's legends and romances reconstruct Native American civilization through the development of agrarianism, literacy, and medical knowledge. But according to Longfellow, the true civilizing zenith of the Indian nations was the arrival of Christianity.[52] The relationship between Hiawatha, an Ojibwe man, and Minnehaha, a Dakota woman, and the hero's actions, culminating in his decision to turn his people over to the European conquerors, can be interpreted as a chapter in the history of Manifest Destiny: the white Europeans had God on their side and God's blessing to take Indigenous lands and convert Indigenous peoples. Thus, the author seems to imply that imperialism could prevent the Union from collapsing.[53] The land theft, the forced assimilation, the broken treaties, and genocide that were occurring during the poet's time and that have continued thereafter were bypassed by the establishment's desire and need for expansionism.

The Mexican War delineated a new phase in the ideological and imperialistic development of the United States; the extension of slavery to the new territories sparked a debate that quickly divided Northerners from Southerners and threatened to place sectional interests over national interest.[54] The tensions mid century

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[49] Hilen 1972, 540.
[50] Hilen 1972, 549.
[51] Longfellow 2000, 124.
[52] Tichi 1971, 552.
[53] Ferguson 1978, 215.
[54] On this topic, see Greenberg 2005.

Americans faced, however, were neither new nor unique; rather, the quarrel between individualism and democracy, state and nation, republic and empire was and would continue to be a recurring theme in American history. In *Hiawatha*, the quarrel is between the pagan Native Americans and the Christian Europeans. But it is also between an unstable republic threatened by internal struggles and a solid empire devoted to conquering. If *Paul Revere's Ride* was "less about liberty and Paul Revere, and more about slavery and John Brown,"[55] *The Song of Hiawatha* was less about the natives and more about the nation. The point is simply to recognize the poem's true subject.

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[55] Lepore 2011.

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Mattia Arioli

The Falcon and the Winter Soldier's Reimagining of (Captain) America

This paper investigates the implications of the most recent iteration of Captain America's character in the Disney+ series *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier.* The interest in this series is motivated by the assumption that pop culture can mediate geopolitical discourses about the nation's self-representation as an "imagined community."[1] Indeed, as World War II OWI director Elmer Davis argued, "The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people's minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized."[2] Similarly, Jason Dittmer and Daniel Bos observed how pop culture is "linked to identity – that of the people who produce it, the people who consume it, and the people who use it to their agendas. It is through popular culture (at least in part) that we decide who we are, who we want to be, and how we want people to understand us."[3] Hence, to fully understand the geopolitical agenda that motivates the contemporary reimagining of Captain America, one should take into consideration: 1) the origins of the character; 2) its intrinsic symbolic values; 3) its multiple projections (Captain America as a palimpsest) within and outside national borders; 4) the role of 'race' in the imagining of the nation, 5) the limits of a nationalist/liberal agenda; 6) the character's belonging to the contemporary "convergent culture;"[4] and 7) the interrelation between this mode of telling and old propaganda models.[5]

What does Captain America stand for?

The origins of Steve Rogers are first established by Joe Simon e Jack Kirby in *Captain America #1* (1941), and later revised and expanded by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in *Captain America #109* (1968), one of the first retcons of the character's origins. Horrified by the Nazi's ideology, Rogers attempts to enlist but is rejected as 4-F due to his frail body. Overhearing Rogers' resolution and earnest plea to fight for his

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[1] Anderson 1996 [1986].

[2] Quoted in Koppes/Black 1987,64.

[3] Dittmer/Bos 2019, 25.

[4] Jenkins 2006.

[5] Ellul 1962; Bernays 1928.

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country, General Phillips offers the young man the opportunity to become a test subject for an enhancing experiment, receiving a special serum made by Dr. Reinstein (retroactively changed to the scientist Erskine). The serum is a success and transforms Steve Rogers into a human being with peak strength, agility, stamina, and intelligence. A Nazi spy, who observed the experiment, murders the doctor, who dies without writing the Super-Soldier formula to paper, leaving Rogers the sole beneficiary.

On the cover of *Captain America* #1, which marks the title hero's debut, Steve Rogers punches Hitler in the face before the US intervention in what was considered a European conflict.[6] The comic was printed ten months before Pearl Harbor and promoted an interventionist stance, still unpopular at the time. Initially, *Captain America*'s political commitment was not well received by everybody: isolationists groups and Nazi sympathizers opposed its interventionist message,[7] and tried to harass its creators,[8] pushing New York's mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, to offer them protection.[9] Hence, comics became patriotic not only because of consumer demand, but also because these themes were encouraged by the institutions. Yet, Captain America was not commissioned by propagandists, but the creation of private citizens (both authors were Jews and tried to create a sense of urgency through the pages of their comics). *Captain America* mythologized the war, turned Hitler into a comic book character, and moralized the war narrative, describing it through biblical resonances, consolidating *de facto* the "good war narrative," which portrayed America as the champion of the free world. As Jewett and Lawrence observe, "as a typical embodiment of the American civil religion, offering regeneration of a helpless democratic society by selfless superheroism, Captain America stands squarely within […] the biblical paradigms employed in the Indian captivity narratives."[10] They also maintain that the character embodies the tradition of "zealous nationalism," an idea that goes back to America's (puritan) origins and attributes the nation the role of redeeming the world by destroying its enemy. Captain America combines strength with moral principle, symbolizing America's ambition to be the "city set upon a hill," and the nation's military crusading to achieve that goal. Consequently, Captain America's ideas about foreign policy and war culture fall under the "Strict Father"[11] morality, based on the conceptual metaphor of

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[6] Simon and Kirby 1941 [2005].

[7] Malson/Kantor 2013, 75.

[8] Simon in Wright 2001,44.

[9] Evanier 2008, 55.

[10] Jewett/Lawrence 2004, 35.

[11] Lakoff 1996.

Moral Strength, used by conservatives,[12] according to which, if there is to be a moral order in the world, American values must be protected and spread throughout the globe. Therefore, as Dittmer discusses, "superheroes are co-constitutive elements of both American identity and the U.S. government's foreign policy practices"[13] as they "serve as a crucial resource for legitimating, contesting, and reworking states' foreign policies."[14]

Steve Rogers was not the first superhero to fight against the Axis, yet he is the most popular comic character to embody American values through his red, white, and blue costume, and a shield of stars and stripes. Whereas heroes during the Great Depression served as metaphors to talk about the nation and its myths (e. g., Superman perpetuated the "ethnic narrative,"[15] reminding America about its formation through consent[16]), Steve Rogers was (and still is) not just a metaphor standing for the nation, but its embodiment, protecting its borders and values. Such identification of the character with the nation continued even after the end of WWII, as he managed to remain in America's and international public consciousness through its constant revocations and reinventions.[17] *Captain America* helped consolidate, in its readers, preconceived geopolitical notions and nationalist views of the world, which were (and are) often presented as unproblematic and commonsensical. These comics directed what consumers could see and provided them with linear interpretative patterns that simplified complex international crises. However, as much as Steve embodied and defended the American Dream, in time, he grew aware that the American reality did not often hold up to its ideals.

In at least three storylines this contrast is explicated. The first one is the mid-1970s, *Captain America and the Falcon*[18] storyline "Secret Empire"[19] which confronted a Watergate-type scandal to question the morality of the US government,[20] investigating simultaneously the existence of a corrupted branch of the government (a Neo-Nazi even infiltrated the Oval Office!), and the disillusioning effect of such revelation on Captain America, who started to doubt, for the first time, his adamant beliefs in an idealized America. Traumatized by the realization that, in America, political corruption extended to the heights of the presidency, Steve Rogers resigned from being a staple of the nation, and assumed the identity of Nomad, a codename still rooted in national lore, which allowed him to embody 'dissent' and 'the errand into the wilderness,' that are foundational myths, that demand respect for private conscience, that go back to the Jeremiad tradition. This storyline also drew a clear distinction between the nation (the 'We the people' Steve represented) and the government through the voice of Peggy Carter (Rogers' World War II love interest), who reassured Steve: "we've had scandals, but we've exposed them—publicly—and gotten back on the right track!"[21] According to the comic, "the people" have the ability and duty to correct the flaws in the system, and Steve Rogers' role is to protect democracy by guiding the Americans thanks to his moral compass. His determination to protect the American people would later convince him to resume his 'Captain' identity. This storyline represented a metamorphosis for Captain America, who moved away from his soldier roots, as he no longer abided by the government but his conscience. He resigned from his role without abdicating his duty as a superhero. This dramatic choice aimed to signal the presence of a fracture within American society, and mirrored the growing disaffection of the citizens towards the institution that represented them: the Civil Rights, Anti-war, and feminist movements challenged the monolithic narrative of the nation, and the Watergate scandals questioned its morality.

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[12] The use of conceptual metaphors aims to inscribe the character into preexisting paradigms (or prototypes) to make his action seem commonsensical.

[13] Dittmer 2013, 2.

[14] Dittmer 2013, 2.

[15] Klotz 2009.

[16] Sollors 1986.

[17] Hassler-Forest 2011; Murray 2011.

[18] At the time, the character of Falcon was introduced to acknowledge the friction between the American Dream and 1960s-1970 revendications, problematizing the place African American identity occupied in the hegemonic narration of the nation.

[19] Englehart/Friedrich 1973–1975.

[20] Ahmed 2012.

The ability of private citizens to oppose a regulation deemed unjust is further developed in the comic crossover event *Civil War.*[22] This story shares key resemblances to the political events and debates that took place in America after 9/11. In the small town of Stamford, some superheroes and villains cause a blast that kills 600 civilians. Reacting to the event, the government introduces a Registration Act that asks superheroes to register their special abilities and their secret identities with the authorities, forcing them to be part of a centrally controlled security organization overseen by the U.S. government. Inevitably, the enactment of this law divides the 'superhero community' into two factions: one (guided by Iron Man, the pragmatic hero) supports the government's decision, and the other (guided by Captain America, the WWII champion) defies the rules, believing that national safety should not be held in contrast to individual liberties.

Finally, the 2017 *Secret Empire*[23] questioned America's identity in the aftermath of Trump's election. In this storyline, Steve Roger's personality is altered by the Cosmic Cube, a Deus ex machina device, that turns him into a secret Hydra agent (the comic's version of the Nazis). Symbolically, the storyline ends with the original Captain America fighting against his Nazi *doppelgänger* created by the Cube, implicitly asking the reader which Captain represents the real America. This storyline was published in a historical moment in which prominent figures of the populist right (including Donald Trump) revived America First's brand of rhetoric, which originated with Charles A. Lindbergh, an anti-Semitic and Nazi sympathizer politically active in the 1940s. Needless to say, the echoes of this memory casts shadows on the good war narrative, popularized (also) by Captain America, as the dichotomic opposition of good Americans fighting evil Nazis Germans is, to say the least, complicated.

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[21] Englehart/Friedrich 1974, #176, 12.

[22] Millar/McNiven 2006–2007.

[23] Spencer/Sorrentino, 2017.

Interestingly, the three storylines hitherto discussed emerged when America's public opinion was polarized and torn: the aftermath of the Vietnam War, America's interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Trump's election (whose presidency would end with a mob of his supporters attacking the Capitol to protest the result of the vote). Thus, Captain America's continuous pledge to serve the American people, an abstract and never-defined entity, and not the government, is meant to reconcile existing fractures in the social fabric by restoring a sense of unity through his persona.

Captain America as a palimpsest

According to Linda Hutcheon, adaptations can be seen as: a) a "transcoding" that involves a shift of medium or genre; b) a process of creation that involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re)creation; c) a form of intertextuality, as they function as palimpsests, making our memory of other works resonate through repetition with variation.[24] Hence, the analysis of an adaptation generates questions about the authorial intention and rhetorical exigence. These questions are particularly relevant for a character, like Captain America, who goes through a continuous cultural restyling (encompassing retcons, adaptations across different media, new identities for Steve Rogers, the passage of the mantle to different characters, but also parodies, and memes) that aims to make a political statement: each reiteration of 'Cap', its origin story, and his legacy betrays a different vision of America, its present, its past, and its future projections.[25]

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[24] Hutcheon/O'Flynn 2013, 92–94.

[25] Some of the reflections of this section build upon Dittmer's seminal analysis of Captain America, updating it.

For instance, rip-off characters like the supervillain Nuke[26] (a crazed Vietnam veteran with an American flag carved into his face) and the ambiguous US Agent[27] (a star-spangled antihero who does not hesitate to recur to violence to achieve his goals) are meant to show different shades of patriotism and nationalism when contrasted to the original Captain America.[28] Through this contrast, it appears clear to the reader how patriotism can be declined into different forms, that go from the banal exhibition, which aims to remind citizens of their national affiliations, to aggressive and ethnocentric manifestations, which betray revanchist or supremacist attitudes. Nuke and US Agent appeared after the Vietnam War, America's first military loss, and their ruthlessness represents a nation committed to achieving its goals by any means, implicitly echoing the body count tactics, as soldiers were no longer evaluated according to their morality, but their performance, their ability to 'get the job done.'

The criticism towards the nationalist values embodied by Captain America is further advanced by parodies,[29] among which Will Shetterly and Vince Stone's *Captain Confederacy.*[30] Indeed, discussing the origin of his character, Shetterly stated: "I started talking with my wife about who Captain America would be if the South had won. At the time, I thought it was just a funny idea, but eventually I realized it was an opportunity to write about what happens when patriotism and responsibility clash."[31] Captain Confederacy is set in an alternate world in which the Confederacy has successfully defended its lands and established its nation. Consequently, the United States is divided into eight States. The protagonist starts as a propaganda tool used by the Confederate States of America to maintain the status quo that casts Black citizens as distinctly second-class. However, he soon becomes aware of the injustices perpetrated by the country, and ends up trying to change it, advocating for the recognition of equal rights to all citizens. Whereas the first series still puts the primary focus on a White man trying to be a rescuer of a minority group, the story progressively allows a female Black character (Ms. Dixie) to take the lead (and mantle). The author offers some interesting insights on national symbolism as he argues that: "No flag should be banned. Make symbols taboo, and you give them power. The way to weaken symbols is to subvert them. That was my intention when I wrote Captain Confederacy."[32] By playing with the flag and US history, Shetterly and Stone remind the reader that America's freedom has been created at the expense of minority and marginalized groups.

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[26] Miller/Mazzucchelli, 1987.

[27] Gruenwald/Neary 1986.

[28] For a further discussion on Captain America's uncanny doubles see Curtis 2019.

[29] Garth Ennis' Homelander and Soldier Boy characters in *The Boys* can also be considered parodies, as they embody a grotesque version of the nationalist superhero, not driven by noble principles, but by adolescent and visceral impulses, like anger, lust, and greed.

[30] Shetterly/Stone 1986–1987; 1991–1992.

[31] "Captain Confederacy" full text at https://crustymud.paradoxcomics.com/?p=1241 (last access: 15 April 2021).

To correct this lack of representation, some contemporary adaptations of this palimpsest revisit the "body politics,"[33] the metaphorical representation of a nation through embodied images, embedded in the Steve Roger persona, which reflects prevailing gender, racial, and other cultural norms. The codification of Steve Rogers as a muscular, blue-eyed, blond-haired, White, heterosexual man replicated the image that America wanted to give about itself, and recurred to a thoughtful mixing of the vitality and heroism (codified as White) showed by US recruitment posters, and the strength and athleticism celebrated by the emerging commercial culture. Given the symbolic value of Captain America's body, recent reiterations saw the passing of the title to a diverse roster, including Black (e. g., Sam Wilson and Isaiah Bradley[34]), LGBT (e. g., Aaron Fischer[35]), and interracial (e. g.. Danielle Cage[36]) characters. The possibility (and implications) of having a non-White Captain has also been explored outside Marvel. In the short comic "Citizen," created by Greg Pak and Bernard Chang, featured in the anthology *Secret Identities: The Asian American Superhero Anthology*,[37] the president of the United States (Barack Obama) puts Citizen (an Asian Captain America rip-off) off his hibernation to protect the nation from Nazi gremlins. This solution allows the comic to comment on race and representation (in the institutions but also in pop culture), reminding the reader that a portion of American society did not accept a Black president.[38] The codename "Citizen" is also controversial as for a long time Asian immigrants were barred from naturalization. The decision of 're-casting' Cap as Asian also allows and invites meta-narrative reflections on writers' and corporate decisions to respond to growing public and interest groups' pressure for a wider representation of a diverse cast to avoid potential boycotts from consumers.[39] Of course, when dealing with ethnic/racial representation in pop cultural products, one cannot always clearly distinguish the private business intention, to promote change and positive attitudes towards diversity, from economic calculations. In this regard, it is worth reminding the success of Coogler's superhero movie *Black Panther,*[40] which featured an almost entirely Black lead cast in powerful and engaging roles, grossed almost $700 in domestic box office alone.[41]

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[32] Shetterly 2015.

[33] Mirzoeff 2018.

[34] Morales/Baker 2002; Remender/Pacheco/Immonen 2014.

[35] Trujillo/Balzadua 2021.

[36] Ewing/Davis 2015.

[37] Yang et al. 2009.

[38] McMurray 2008.

[39] Baron 2001, Baron/Diermeier 2007, McDonnell et al. 2015.

Another form of adaptation is the retcon, a rewriting of what happened. This narrative solution has been used to either correct or question certain traits of the character, its morality, or even problematize certain historical events. For example, Japanese internment camps have been evoked in recent comics to question Steve Roger's stance and responsibility on the subject. In *Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man* #9,[42] the mutant Marnie confesses that she immigrated to the US from Japan in the late 1930s, and that she was interned along with other citizens and immigrants of Japanese descent from 1943 to 1945. Despite knowing that the detention of people of Japanese ancestry was a violation of *habeas corpus*, and recognizing that Roosevelt's Executive Order was un-American, Steve Rogers did not stop the unjust incarceration from happening. This narrative solution is extremely different from previous representations. In the 1940s, internment was presented as a legitimate solution to maintain order and security, as Cap and Bucky (Cap's sidekick) chased the Japanese from escaping the camps and stopped their plan to bomb American cities. Yet, in *Invaders #26–28* Bucky questions America's doing, "I dunno – maybe there are **some** spies among the Japanese living here on the West Coast – but they have rounded up kids – old people– **everybody!**"[43] Similarly, after learning about the existence of the camps, Captain America exposes the government's hypocrisies (the man who uttered 'the four freedom speech' was the same one responsible for Executive Order 9066), "While we have been fighting the **fascists** has our **country** taken a page from our **enemies** […] these poor people are U.S. citizens– born right here in California […] **Sure**, that's better than the **Nazis** treat some captive races – but that's nothing to **wave the flag** about!"[44] Hence, through time Captain America passed from being a law enforcer, to an advocate for Japanese (American) rights, to a bystander not rebelling against unjust laws.

The reimagining of this palimpsest is not triggered solely by a desire to critique a status quo, but also commercial reasons that testify to the McDonaldization of a brand. For instance, in the recent Disney+ series *What If…?*,[45] in one of the alternative universes featured in this anthology, it is Peggy Carter who gets inoculated with the serum, instead of Steve. Interestingly, after the series aired, Disney's Twitter (now X) profile briefly referred to Captain Carter as Captain America, despite her being a Brit and her shield features the Union Jack.[46] Hence, the Captain America formula is not just a commercially successful model to be replicated, but it becomes a symbol and an extension of cultural imperialism: American values are depicted as intrinsically universal, a commodity to be sold, imitated, and adopted by other countries. This formula is so successful that it got replicated even outside the American cultural context (and Marvel). Fabrizio Capigatti created a series titled *Capitani Italiani*[47] [Italian Captains] adapting the Captain America concept to the Italian reality with an uncanny result, as the nationalist formula is complicated by the country's parochialism (each Captain embodies a city). This narrative solution allows the setting to change, moving from (inter)national (or even intergalactic) scenarios to street-level fights against local mobs, and become gorier.

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[40] Coogler 2018.

[41] Mendelson 2018.

[42] Taylor/Cabal 2019.

[43] Thomas/Robbins, 1978 #26, 7.

[44] Thomas/Robbins, 1978 #27, 14.

[45] Bradley/Andrews, 2021.

Finally, in our contemporary digital and "convergent" [48] culture, this rewriting process is amplified by the constant consumption of pop culture through memes, and other forms of appropriation and sharing, that make the internalization of the mythic aspects of national identities even more unconscious. Captain America's iconography has been used by different users to comment on current political issues, comparing political leaders and scenarios to Cap.[49] Yet, the fans are not the only ones to recirculate this icon. The American Embassy in Rome (Italy) used its effigy on social media to communicate to the Italian comic artist Zerocalcare that his visa was approved.[50] This use of gifs testifies to the emergence of a "memeification of politics,"[51] but it also proves that complex issues can be synthesized through visual images that can potentially become viral, a process facilitated by our media environment, which allows the exchange, reproduction, alteration, and the potential everlasting circulation of images. This interplay of bottom-up and top-down processes complicates the assumption that propaganda is produced by cultural elites and injected into the consumers through pop culture. In contrast, the consumers claim a certain amount of property over the franchise by producing memes, and complaints when they feel that their beloved character has been mistreated. Indeed, during the launch of the *What If…* series, when the Twitter profile images of (Sam Wilson's) Cap got momentarily changed with the effigy of Peggy Carter (a White Brit!), fans started to complain. Interestingly, an embryonic phase of this new participatory culture was already developing during WWII, when wartime comics generated fan clubs.[52]

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[46] The lapsus seems to reinforce and complete a trend started with characters like Captain Britain and Union Jack, which can be rightfully seen as projections of the *Captain America* formula overseas.

[47] Capigatti 2018.

[48] Jenkins 2006, 17–18.

[49] Schmid 2020.

[50] See: https://www.facebook.com/54203027305/photos/a.10152241217352306/10157624094432306/. Last access: 15 April 2021.

[51] Dean 2018, 4.

Captain America within the MCU: from Steve Roger to Sam Wilson

The continuous rewriting of Captain America is also visible within the Marvel Cinematographic Universe (MCU). The 2001 movie *Captain America: The First Avenger*[53] reworks the origin story of the character (and US history) to include the contribution of ethnic minorities, as they were almost absent in the original Simon and Kirby's 1940s run,[54] and when present they occupied marginal (and stereotyped) roles, functioning as loyal sidekicks or comic reliefs. Hence, the movie removes any controversial aspects of the old comics to comply with contemporary sensibilities, sugarcoating the past. In the movie, Jim Morita, a member of the Howling Commandos, an elite unit, is Japanese American, yet the implications of his participation are never investigated (during WWII, many Nisei felt compelled to serve in the Army to prove their loyalty to the US while their families were unjustly confined in internments camps[55]). This conscious erasure of complex historical events shields America's image, Steve Rogers' legacy (as both a staple of the nation and a product to be sold), and the memory of WWII as the "good war" from criticism.

Yet, what strikes the most is the absence of Cap's encounter with the Holocaust. In this regard, it is curious to notice how in 1945 *Captain America* comics attempted to portray not only Nazi camps, but also crematory furnaces.[56] This erasure is in near contrast to the process of Americanization of the Holocaust started in the 1970s, when the event came to be presented not just as a Jewish memory, but as an American memory, configured as universal.[57] Hence, the viewer is left to speculate on the absence of this event that, despite its complexity, helped America foster its image as the redeemer of the world. This peculiar choice might reflect the need to address a large audience, and the (un)conscious desire to avoid any discourse about race, as the overt address of the Master Race ideology might trigger questions about America's own hypocrisies. Whereas America presented itself as the champion of freedom, segregation was still in place, people of Japanese ancestry were unjustly incarcerated, and military units were segregated. Thus, the movie presents a uchronia where there are no visible racial, ethnic, or gender inequalities. This adaptation is not a faithful rendition of the source material (nor 1940s mentality) but rather "a container for present sensibilities about inclusiveness and diversity."[58] Through this rhetoric, color becomes invisible, and is assimilated into Whiteness, an identity historically constructed as universal and nonmarked. This (post-racial) fantasy reconciles America's democratic belief that all men are created equal with its social practices. Yet, this historical revisionism is detrimental to minority groups, as it erases the possibility to articulate a counter-hegemonic discourse that recognizes the existence and effects of systematic racism to address them.

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[52] Fertig 2017, 16.

[53] Johnston 2011.

[54] A notable exception is 'Whitewash Jones', a ghastly racial caricature of African Americans, derived from the Minstrel Shows. Sadly, this portrayal was in line with the racial depiction of the time.

[55] Robinson 2009.

[56] Schomburg 1945 # 46

[57] Winter 2007, 371; Novick 2000, 207.

The Falcon and the Winter Soldier[59] disrupts this racial fantasy, showing an awareness of the continuing plague of racial discrimination in the US. The TV series narrates the journey that makes Sam Wilson abandon his Falcon identity to take on the mantle of Captain America, complying with the desires of Steve, the original Captain, who retired after the events of *Avengers: Endgame.*[60] But this transition is not easy: whereas Steve became Captain America after receiving a serum, Sam must work through the internal and external visions of his super-heroic self, reconciling them. This "double consciousness"[61] becomes evident through Wilson's pondering of the significance for a Black man to carry the shield, in terms of reception from both White people and the Black community. After his retirement, Steve Rogers trusted his friend Sam Wilson to take over the role of Captain America, giving him his shield. Wilson, however, thought he could not fulfill Rogers' legacy and donated Captain America's shield to a museum. Still, the United States Department of Defense decided to hand the shield to John Walker, a White soldier, to present him to the public as the "New Captain America." Witnessing the scene, Bucky Barnes (The Winter Soldier) manifests a lack of understanding and support towards Sam's decision, seeing it as an act of betrayal towards Steve's legacy. Yet, his opinion betrays his racial privilege. Indeed, Sam is never hesitant to perform his role as a superhero, but he questions the national symbols, being aware that his country did not always uphold its democratic promises. His racial identity continuously reminds him of America's history of racism, segregation, and oppression.

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[58] Vernon 2016, 126.

[59] Spellman 2021.

[60] Russo/Russo 2019.

[61] Du Bois 2005 [1903].

The series' discussion about the legacy of racism and racial segregation is particularly poignant during Sam and Bucky's visit to Isaiah Bradley, a Black (super) soldier, who they hope can provide them with some information about the case they are investigating. The main antagonist, a group of anarchists named Flag Smashers, is using an updated version of the serum that transformed Isaiah into a super soldier. Bradley tells Sam that, during his service in the military, he unwillingly became a test subject for a secret governmental project that sought to replicate the super soldier serum that was inoculated to Steve. Variants of the serum were tested on other African American soldiers, and they led to mutation and death. He was the only one to survive the experiments. This origin story adapts Robert Morales and Kyle Baker's comic *Truth: Red, White & Black*,[62] retrieving some key elements to comment on the expendability of Black life in America, the need to incorporate the experiences and histories of Black folk, the difference between memory and historical representation, and, finally, questions about the price of (America's) freedom.[63] In the same vein as the comic, the TV adaptation uses Isaiah's story to cast doubt on the nation's morality, showing that eugenic experiments were also conducted in America. On this matter, it is worth pointing out that the source of inspiration for Morales and Baker's story was the Tuskegee Experiment, a study conducted between 1932 and 1972 by the United States Public Health Service. At the time, Black men were inoculated with syphilis without any information about the nature of the experiment. Interestingly, the racial implication embedded in this super soldier fantasy does not escape the (temporarily reformed) villain Helmut Zemo, who notes that "the desire to become a superhuman cannot be separated from supremacist ideals," implying that any super soldier (including Captain America himself) cannot be completely disconnected from supremacist impulses. This observation is not completely wrong: even though, in the MCU, Steve never gave in to such temptation, Walker, the new "Captain America" appointed by the government, does not hesitate to use his power to enforce the law, recurring to violence, and making his own determinations of death-worthiness, killing one of the enemies without a trial.

Even though the core elements of Bradley's story remain unchanged, it is important to remark a pivotal difference between the comics and the TV adaptation:

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[62] Morales/Baker 2003.

[63] Nama 2011.

the timeline. The abuses on African American soldiers no longer occur during WWII, but the Korean War. The choice of his war is particularly interesting because it was the first conflict in which there were no segregated units.[64] This variation can be interpreted as the result of the authors' unwillingness to disrupt the "good war" narrative and Steve Roger's legacy. To dissipate any doubt, the series has Sam ask Bucky whether Steve knew about the experiments conducted on Black soldiers. The negative answer allows Steve Roger's origin story to remain in the eyes of the public a modern Horatio Alger story, a "poor but deserving kid makes good."[65] However, this answer creates some inconsistency in the historical continuity of the MCU as, without motivation, the racial harmony portrayed in *Captain America: the First Avenger* cease to exist in the 1950s.

Even though Isaiah's story motivates Sam, who now wants to correct the errors of the past and create new paths for future generations, as soon as he leaves Isaiah's house, reality reminds him of the obstacles he must overcome, among which racial prejudice. As Sam and Bucky are engaged in a vivid argument, a police car drives by, and two policemen intervene, assuming that Wilson was threatening Barnes. Yet, the policemen's attitude changes as they figure out that Sam is Falcon. This change of heart is not due to compassion, but to celebrity status. Hence the series shows how, despite his heroism, when Sam is not in costume, the country does not care for him, as he becomes the target of racial profiling. Given these premises, Wilson is asked to recompose a fractured society. When Wilson finally embraces the idea of assuming the role of Captain America, he comments to the government officials that he can feel that people will hate him for being both Black and Captain America. Yet, he still picks up the shield, using his power to save people, but also rewrite official history to give voice to marginalized groups, acknowledging the wrongs they had to endure. To achieve this goal, at the end of the series, Wilson invites Bradley to the Smithsonian, who gladly accepts. There, Bradley visits a memorial that includes a biography about his past, which makes him cry, finally seeing the sacrifices he made for his country being recognized.

Differently from Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson's role is not just military, defending U.S borders and values, but also social, advocating for a 'more perfect union,' aware that America has not lived up to its ideals. By taking on the mantle, he hopes to give voices and models to the people living at the margins of American society. This act does not aim to erase the traumatic past of African Americans, but paves the way to a different and more inclusive America where Sam Wilson's nephews can rightfully aspire to hold the shield without the weight of its past. Hence, it is no coincidence that *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* spends a lot of time establishing and exploring Sam's relations with his sister Sarah and the community. When not on a mission, he often returns to his hometown in Louisiana and helps his sister (and two nephews) to make ends meet, running the family fishing business, and attempting to repair their parents' boat and legacy. Interestingly, he and Sarah would only succeed in solving their financial problems thanks to the support received from the local community, who in the past got help from the Wilsons. Sam's neighborhood represents a positive model of society where everybody helps each other, despite their poor conditions and financial struggles. The repairing of the boat through a network of solidarity is clearly a metaphor for a nation that needs to fix the inequalities it generates through its policies.

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[64] Piehler 1995.

[65] MacDonald/MacDonald 1976, 249.

Indeed, this positive model of society, where people realize themselves through positive relationships with others and their contribution to their community, is set in neat contrast to the socio-political context depicted in the series. Indeed, after Thanos snapped his fingers while using the Infinity Gauntlet, causing the extermination of half of all life, the human survivors decided to live without borders, supporting each other through hardships. However, when the Avengers undid the Snap, bringing back the other half of humanity, the world fell into chaos, as national governments tried to revert everything to its initial state, also by reinstating borders. The attempts of the Global Repatriation Council (GRC), a transnational, but US-led, organization, to reestablish the old borders created a huge number of refugees living at the margins of society. These people felt left behind, as the governments cared much more for the people who were brought than those who lived through the Snap. Hence, the series portrays two types of "governmental belonging"[66]: "active" and "passive." The active belonging pertains to those who returned after the 'Blip' and White people, whereas those who were not 'snapped'[67] and racial minorities can only perform passive forms of belongings, as they are subject to the managerial will of hegemonic groups. The resentment towards the GRC led Karli Morgenthau to found the Flag Smashers, an anarchist organization dedicated to helping the refugees by stealing medicine and food from government organizations. Yet, the opposition and antagonism towards world governments would soon escalate, as the Flag Smashers radicalize. They do no longer hesitate to recur to terrorist attacks to perpetuate their aims.

The series shows that the lack of care about marginalized communities has severe consequences, as the dispossessed by capitalism might be lured by the promises of anarchism and terrorism. The stress on empathy, bonds, caring, and self-discipline in the service of nurturance signals a shift in the paradigm used to talk about the nation, which moves from the Strict Father model to the Nurturing Parent model. This passage can be observed in the way in which Sam decides to deal with the enemy, towards whom he develops "negative empathy."[68] Because of his race, Sam understands Karli's pain and acknowledges her suffering. However, he firmly condemns the means she chose to realize her utopia, a cosmopolitan world with no boundaries, and tries to stop her before it is too late. In the last episode, Sams tries to negotiate once again with Morgenthau and refuses to fight her even as she furiously attempts to kill him. Until the last moment, he tries to persuade her about the existence of a non-violent resolution to the problem of the disposed. Yet, when she raises a weapon at Sam, Agent Carter fatally shoots Karli.

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[66] Hage 1998.

[67] Russo/Russo 2018; 2019.

Even though Sam, like Karli, believes in cosmopolitanism and humanitarian values, in his opinion, the State is the only frame in which geopolitical decisions can be legitimately made, and, at the end of the series, he urges GRC senators to consider the effects of their laws, especially when profit generates inequalities and marginalized groups, warning them that the next Karli Morgenthau would soon rise should they fail to represent marginalized people. He also reprimands GRC representatives for their plans to forcefully relocate millions and rejects the label "terrorists," used to describe Karli and her supporters, as it betrays a lack of empathy and understanding of the Flag Smasher's sufferings and motives, while it allows the government not to be held accountable for creating displaced and marginalized groups. This apparent paradox in Sam's political standing (he embodies nationalist and universal values) can be easily solved if one considers that America's identity has not been constructed through precise territorial borders (America's Frontier expanded throughout its history), but rather through the preaching of Enlightenment values (freedom, individualism, pursuit of happiness, etc.) perceived to be universal.

The connection between American nationalism and universal values is also reinforced by the exceptional character of the nation, which is simultaneously exemplary and exempted. Indeed, personal conscience functions as an excuse to break or not sign international accords (like in *Civil War*[69]) or adopt interventionist stances that go beyond one's legal jurisdiction (as in the series *Falcon and the Winter Soldier*). Indeed, the alleged "defense of freedom" allows Sam and Bucky to move across borders unproblematically, as if other nations were extensions of the US. In the series, the heroes travel through different European countries without receiving any official authorization, and they even break international accords or laws (e. g., when they free Baron Zemo from prison) to pursue a higher goal, the tracking down of the Flag Smashers in Madripoor.

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[68] Russo/Russo 2018; 2019.

[69] Russo/Russo 2016.

Finally, Sam's journey is not shaped exclusively by his confrontation with the enemy, who threatens the unity of the nation, but also by his rivalry with John Walker, with whom he contends the right to wield Steve Rogers' shield. Yet, it is worth remarking that Sam's animosity is not caused by his anger and confusion towards the U.S. Government's decision to appoint a new Captain America, against his desire to honor Steve's legacy by having his shield displayed at the Smithsonian, but Wilson's and Walker's understanding of Captain America's duty and legacy. When Bucky, Steve's long-time friend, coldly remarks to Walker that the fact he was appointed to carry the shield did not imply he was Captain America, the latter replies that he had put in the effort and hard work required for the position, as, during his time with the United States Army, he jumped on a grenade four times in an act of valor (somehow replicating a heroic gesture performed by Steve in the first movie). Yet according to Sam (and Bucky), the worthiness of wielding Captain America's shield is not determined by the military results achieved, but one's morality and ability to represent the people.

Initially, Walker's arrogance prevents him from understanding the line separating the ends from the means. He simply sticks to what he perceives to be the government's mandate without self-questioning his actions. He evaluates his actions only in terms of performance, abiding by the same moral code he followed during his service in Afghanistan, and that had led him to receive three Medals of Honor and guide missions in counter-terrorism and hostage rescue. Whereas Steve and Sam use the shield defensively to either protect themselves from bullets or incapacitate the enemy, John Walker uses it offensively, viciously beating a Flag Smasher to death, despite the enemy's begging for his own life. Bewildered witnesses and onlookers record the event with their phones and share it through social media, giving a new meaning to the title of the episode, "The Whole World Is Watching": America is no longer the city upon the hill that provides a model to the world to follow; in contrast, thanks to the media, the nation is being held accountable for its misdeeds. This narrative is somehow reminiscent of how the media exposed the conduct of American soldiers in Vietnam, but also how the evaluation of a soldier's worth through his performance on the field (the body count) led to slaughter in My Lai. As during the winter soldier investigations, the government does not take responsibility for its actions, and uses Walker as a scapegoat, even though he was simply abiding by his mandate. So, the role of Captain America is not just fighting the bad guys, but providing a moral compass, able to guide America to its predetermined path, also known as Manifest Destiny, by following one's conscience. As previously discussed, Captain America does not simply follow the government's dictates, but often functions as the errand into the wilderness, correcting the path taken by the nation.

In the last episode, despite their differences, and after having accepted Wilson as the new Captain America, John Walker collaborates with Sam and Bucky, aware that they share a common goal, the protection of national borders and innocents, now threatened by the Flag Smashers, who moved from Europe to the US, violating US borders and democratic institutions. Hence, the series implies that different visions of America can come together when faced with a common external threat. Yet, John Walker does not completely reform. After the national security crisis is resolved, Walker meets with Valentina Allegra de Fontaine, the Director of the CIA, who gives him a new version of his former star-spangled suit, now completely black. After he wears his new outfit, de Fontaine states that the world is getting weirder and that people no longer need a Captain America, but rather a "U.S. Agent," implying a ruthless version of the superhero acting in the shadow to get the work done without the exposition, public scrutiny, and moral compass of the official Captain. Hence, the series hints at the existence of another America that might not identify with Sam's values and that might justify a less idealistic (and ruthless) approach to justice and thus feel legitimized to operate under cover due to a lack of trust towards the institutions. After all, Walker was let down by the same institution that previously granted him his job as a staple of the nation.

Conclusions

What is interesting about this reiteration of Captain America is the limited space within which the story operates: Sam Wilson is still protecting the status quo, despite adopting a more liberal agenda. Even though the series manages to incorporate dissenting voices and indict injustices, Sam continues to embody the national exceptionalism and the American Dream, which is not situated in the present, but dislocated in a future yet to be constructed, and that he must ensure for his nephews and other (Black and dispossessed) kids. It is precisely Sam's ability to dissent and correct the path that America is walking that reinvigorates the faith in the American Manifest Destiny. Indeed, in his speech after the final battle, Sam remarks, "I might fail […] but we built this country. Bled for it. I'm not gonna let anybody tell me I can't fight for it." [70] At the same, Sam's journey highlights his status as a minority, as he feels the pressure to prove his worthiness to both the majority and oppressed communities. Simultaneously, society constantly reminds him of the presence of lines, determined by one's color, gender and class, separating Americans. In contrast, the White characters who occupied the role (namely Steve and John) never had such a burden, as if their whiteness came with universal values, extendable to any group. Finally, it is worth remarking that the Sam Wilson featured in the series adopts more cautious stances than his comic book counterpart, who does not hesitate to voice out his dissent towards US policies on migration.[71] Yet, this difference might be justified by the fact that, in the comics, Steve Rogers is alive and, thus, at least one Captain still protects and embodies the status quo.

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[70] Spellman, 2021

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[71] Spencer et al., 2016.

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Francesca Razzi

Negotiating Paradigms in Transbellum American Culture: Walt Whitman, James Jackson Jarves, and the Old Masters

Critical Patterns: Art, Literature, and the Ways to Transcultural Production

The interconnections between distinct forms and languages of cultural production such as art and literature rely on a long-established tradition in Western civilization, while critically implying the idea of recognition as transmission (and consequent legitimization) of cultural messages across different codes. As a critical matter of recognition, and with reference to the American historical context, the antebellum New York City cultural scene represents a fruitful case-study for examining the role of transnational paradigms for the process of literary and cultural nation-building occurred in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century up to the Civil War. In fact, starting from the late 1830s, both art and literature helped shape the discourse on national unity, fostering and encouraging the creation of a specifically American cultural environment[1]. Paradoxically, the construction of this kind of national culture might be said to stem also from a dialogic confrontation with different foreign models. This phenomenon gives rise to complex processes of transtextuality especially in the literary palimpsest, according to the well-known definition provided by Gérard Genette, who describes transtextuality as the set of implied rules that posit the text "in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts"[2].

Based on these historical and critical tenets, this essay aims at examining the strategies of negotiation and adaptation of the Italian Renaissance in American culture between the 1840s and the 1860s, through the divergent reflections of a journalist such as Walt Whitman, and the art historian and collector James Jackson Jarves. In giving voice to two American views of the so-called "Old Masters" of Italian Renaissance art, Whitman and Jarves heavily contributed to the nineteenth-century debate on cultural nationalism, and offered antithetical solutions to the

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[1] See Klein 2020, 36 – 63; on the socio-cultural import of art in antebellum America, see also Katz 2020.

[2] Genette 1997, 1.

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uses of the visual arts in and for the development of American society. From a chronological point of view, since these authors' careers stretch across the Civil War, their works may aptly be labeled as cases of transbellum literature[3]. Considered as transbellum literary authors, then, both Whitman and Jarves represent two transitional figures leading to late-nineteenth-century socio-cultural perspectives on the Renaissance in its value of transcultural object. Over the last decades of the century, European (and Renaissance as an integral part of it) art and history began to be ambivalently interpreted in the United States on social grounds – whether as fictional setting charged with romantic, sensational associations devoted to lower forms of popular entertainment (such as the dime novels), or "high", aesthetic standard of cultural distinction for a refined middle-class audience[4].

However, back to the first half of the century European aesthetic models still retained their unaltered cultural authority, ensuring the continuity of a whole transatlantic tradition[5]; in particular, the idea of the Renaissance kept on holding the same meaning in Europe and America alike, as a crucial moment belonging to modern civilization[6]. Hence, Italy was often seen by nineteenth-century Americans as a most meaningful example of the vital role of art in fostering a national culture[7]. With this transnational paradigm both Whitman and Jarves relate themselves as cornerstones of the discourse on American art, accounting for the socio-cultural mechanisms of reception and fruition of artworks and their models. In this regard, their process of cultural restyling of the Italian Renaissance can be framed in the background of what Pierre Bourdieu has called "legibility of a work of art"[8]: the more specialized the receivers, the more they are expected to master the complexity of the code demanded by the artwork; accordingly, following Bourdieu's theorization, “When the code of the work exceeds the code of the spectator in its sophistication and complexity, the latter cannot master a message which seems to him or her devoid of all necessity”[9]. Given these social conditions of cultural practice, Whitman and Jarves start from two opposite points towards the reception of the work of art, and the consequent construction of American visual culture: that is, the naive popular reporter vs. the learned art historian. Whereas Whitman symbolizes the news culture of the century, based on the mutual relations between journalists and early mass-audience[10], Jarves's contribution is based on a much higher degree of historical and artistic knowledge that his readers must share, at a time when the boundaries between lowbrow and highbrow culture are still blurred[11]. Moreover, discrepancies between Whitman and Jarves occur in their different degrees of knowledge and experience of Italy, its culture and history; in this regard, the role of the Grand Tour through Italy as a consolidated social practice represents a pregnant biographical foundation of their perception of the Renaissance[12]. Having never traveled to Europe, Whitman's contact with Italy is rather a “virtual” travel – he and Emily Dickinson ranking among the few exceptions in hosts of American writers, artists, and intellectuals who had been embarking in a transatlantic crossing to the Old World[13]. On the contrary, Jarves could take advantage of a direct acquaintance of Italy: he first settled in Florence in 1852, developing a growing interest in art through the latter part of his life until his death in 1888[14]. The results of Jarves's early Italian experiences, filtered through his American gaze, culminated with the 1856 travel book *Italian Sights and Papal Principles, Seen Through American Spectacles*; its satiric tone does not prevent the future art historian from lingering over Italian art and architecture, merging literary entertainment with a keen criticism that would foreshadow Jarves's activity as art collector in the following decade[15]. The conundrum of these historical, social, and even biographical aspects lead the two authors to the formulation of antipodal American views of the Old Masters of Italy – Whitman's social Renaissance on the one hand, and Jarves's moral Renaissance on the other.

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[3] Reference is to the following definition of transbellum literature given by Cody Marrs: "transbellum names the ways in which these writers' careers extend from the 'antebellum' period, across the Civil War, and into the 'postbellum' era, thereby bridging the very epochs into which American literary history tends to be segmented" (Marrs 2015, 3).

[4] For instance, the relocation of main literary tropes pertaining to the Arthurian romances of European origin (such as chivalry, mystery, and rivalry in love) in factory settings often proved a repository for the creation of cheap stories rich in domestic sensationalism and aimed at a working-class readership especially in the 1870s and 1880s (see Denning 1998, 167–184). In the same years and up to the early twentieth century, the Renaissance served as a fashionable background upon which to project construed narratives of American patronage through a constant intellectual exchange between art and literature, that from historians as Bernard Berenson goes to novelists like Henry James (see Gennari Santori 2005).

[5] See Novak 2007, 195–231/203.

[6] Molho 1998, 265.

[7] Miller 1989, 31.

[8] Bourdieu *et al.* 1991, 42–43.

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[9] Bourdieu *et al.* 1991, 43.

[10] Nerone 2007, 230 – 232.

[11] See Hall 2007. As previously stated by Lawrence W. Levine, nineteenth-century American culture can be read as “a public culture less hierarchically organized, less fragmented into relatively rigid adjectival boxes than their descendants were to experience a century later” (Levine 1990, 9).

[12] On the cultural value of the Italian Grand Tour for nineteenth-century American travelers, see especially Stowe 1994.

[13] Stowe 1994, 3 – 15; see also Finnerty 2009.

[14] Jarves's most detailed biographical facts can still be found in the classic study by Francis Steegmuller (Steegmuller 1951); as for Jarves's first years in Florence, see also Gennari Santori 2000.

[15] Bendixen 2009, 116 – 117.

"To Foreign Lands": Whitman's Social Renaissance

As it is widely known, Whitman's literary apprenticeship began through his activity as a journalist in New York City during the 1830s; after starting as an apprentice on the working-class newspaper *Patriot* in 1831, he presently turned to contributing, signing his first article for the *Mirror* in 1834[16]. What is more, a consistent part of Whitman's early journalism deals with the lively urban scene connected to the foundation of the first public art galleries – as in the case of the Art Union, founded in 1838 –, and his subsequent involvement in the visual forms of painting, sculpture, architecture, and even photography between the 1840s and 1850s (for example writing a series of art reviews and articles under the pen name "Velsor Brush")[17]. These discourses on American art constitute the visual reverberations for Whitman's own poetics, soon developed in *Leaves of Grass* since its first 1855 edition; by tracing these mutual relations between literature and art, Whitman underlines the centrality of creativity and originality for both writers and artists[18]. An example of this exchange can be found in Whitman's short poem titled "To Foreign Lands", where the connections between creation and fruition projected upon the American background stand at the core of the poem's imagery: "I heard that you ask'd for something to prove this puzzle the New World,/ And to define America, her athletic Democracy,/Therefore I send you my poems that you behold in them what you wanted"[19]. Here, the use of the verb "behold" in the closing line is emblematic of the prominence that Whitman gives not only to the producer, but also to the receiver in deciphering and constructing the meaning of an artwork – a poem, in this very case. A substantial, close interaction between producers and receivers seems to represent a basic assumption in Whitman's artistic weltanschauung. Immersed as he was in the cultural life of his day, Whitman was well aware of the crucial part played by the visual arts in sharpening a true web of relations between the self and society, between the poet/artist and the "common people": genre and realistic painting, together with the brand-new medium of photography, are seen as the most suitable instruments for harmonizing this kind of social and ideological fellowship[20]. In fact, Whitman's writings significantly focus on the social function of art, as testified by his reports published on the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* during the 1840s: he viewed the visual arts as a tool of social redemption, thus endowing art with popular, "democratic" connotations.[21]

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[16] Detailed biographical and critical discussions on Whitman's early journalism can be found in Folsom/Price 2005, 1–16, and Reynolds 2013.

[17] Rachel N. Klein well illustrates the powerful socio-cultural impact of the foundation of the first American art galleries in the 1830s. In the decades preceding the Civil War, public art galleries like the pioneering Art Union in New York City "created a new context for the promotion and display of painting", which was collocated "within the burgeoning world of popular commercial amusements" (Klein 2020, 36). Aimed at people of different social classes, these institutions sought to foster national culture while trying to "liberate national art from dependence on aristocratic patronage" (Klein 2020, 37). Whitman himself was deeply fascinated with this new cultural experience: as David S. Reynolds recalls, "Whitman was not only a regular at the galleries but also a chief celebrant of the long-running art and science exhibition that opened at New York's huge Crystal Palace in 1853, an exhibit conceived above all as an effort to make art available to the masses" (Reynolds 1996, 279). Also, in his *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* article "Matters Which Were Seen and Done in an Afternoon Ramble" (November 19, 1846), Whitman talks of the Art Union as of a "perpetual free exhibition of Paintings, Broadway, near Pearl st., which we advise our Brooklyn folk to visit often: it will cost them nothing, and there are always good things there" (Whitman 1846c).

[18] See Bohan 1992; Tarbell 2000; Bohan 2006, 13–30.

[19] Whitman 1891–92, 11.

On this ideological background, Whitman reframes the significance of the artistic culture pertaining to the Italian Renaissance – as an integral part of the European tradition. It is worth noting that Whitman, especially at this stage of his career, never completely denies the importance and contribution of the Old World to the New. To some extent, Whitman does recognize the fruitful transformation of traditional artistic tropes, as the famous opening statement from the "Preface" to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* highlights: "America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions …. accepts the lesson with calmness"[22]. According to Whitman, the artist is the center of this process of assimilation of the past, explaining that "The American poets are to enclose old and new […]. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. To him the other continents arrive as contributions … he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake"[23]. To Whitman, the role of the artist is vital to this very process of innovative reception and original production. In the short essay titled "Monuments – The Past and Present", the lens of innovation through which the American artist should read the paradigms of the past is the most effective strategy to exploit in order to build a kind of art successfully democratic in spirit: "Vaster and subtler, America, combining, justify-ing the past, yet works for a grander future, in living democratic forms."[24] Then, by intersecting these discourses on both art and cultural heritage, Whitman gives importance to the social role of the artist, at first through advocating a radical independence from tradition. This perspective clearly informs Whitman's early "Talk to an Art Union (A Brooklyn Fragment)", delivered in 1839, as he calls on the young American artists to overturn the example of the Old Masters:

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[20] On Whitman's relation to contemporary visual culture see, in particular, Bohan 1999; Folsom 2006; Bohan 2018.

[21] See Reynolds 1996, 298 – 305. Also, as pointed out by Bohan 2021: "Although brief, these reviews underscore both the eclectic range of Whitman's visual sensibilities and his preference for an art grounded not in the rarefied world of high culture but in the visual experiences of everyday life".

[22] Whitman 1855, iii.

[23] Whitman 1855, iv.

> It is a beautiful truth that all men contain something of the artist in them [...].
>
> Talk not so much, then, young artist, of the great old masters, who but painted and chisell'd [...]. There is a still higher school for him who would kindle his fire with the coal from the altar of the loftiest and purest art. It is the school of all grand actions and grand virtues, of heroism, of the death of patriots and martyrs – of all the mighty deeds written in the pages of history – deeds of daring, and enthusiasm, devotion, and fortitude.[25]

Whitman noticeably opens his talk by acknowledging the possibility for anyone to produce art, and he does it by displaying (both verbally and ideologically) the classic romantic rhetoric of the equality between art, and the ideas of beauty and truth. As a consequence, instead of merely imitating the previous models, Whitman suggests the young American artists to boldly defy the Old Masters. This opposition is highlighted by means of a slightly negative connotation given to the activity of the early masters: using the preposition "but" ("the great old masters, who *but* painted and chisell'd"), Whitman confines their work to a sort of secluded world, detached from reality. Therefore, Whitman encourages the new generation to take a socially active role, breaking free from the isolated environment of a self-referential occupation, since the true, "higher school" of art must lead its learner to perform concrete, useful actions. In this sense, syntagmata like "grand actions", "grand virtues", "mighty deeds" reiterate this implication, and even conduct to a semantic climax, which involves both adjectives and nouns – in a shift from generic ("grand") to particular ("mighty"), from informal ("actions") to formal ("deeds"). However, Whitman further discusses the artworks of the "great old masters" in his *Eagle* report titled "Free Exhibitions of Works of Art" (October 21, 1846). Commenting somewhat closely on the Renaissance architecture of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, he states that:

> We have often wished that the severe economy of our forms of government in this country were susceptible of being stretched in such a way as to make them aid the free exhibition of works of art—paintings, statuary, &c. We think the happiest effects might be expected from such a course. For the influence of beautiful works of art pervades the minds, and in due time

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[24] Whitman 1892, 335.
[25] Whitman 1892, 372.

> the actions and character, of all who come in contact with them. What, for instance, might not be anticipated from the invisible spirit emanating from the perpetual presence of such great and beautiful works as are now met with at Florence, at Rome, and in Paris? […] what from the divine architecture of the world-famed church at Rome? And all public exhibitions of paintings, statuary, &c., diffuse more or less of the refinement and spiritual elegance, which are identified with art.[26]

Attributing both a cultural and economic value to artworks and their fruition, Whitman expresses his deep convictions about the most favorable ("the happiest") effects – that is, "refinement and spiritual elegance" – of making art affordable by anyone interested in experiencing it, regardless of the social class they belong to. Here, the use Whitman makes of Renaissance architecture falls into a crucial ideological discourse. By underlining the public function of buildings like the Renaissance church of S. Peter's (referred to as simply as "the world-famed church at Rome"), rather than their exclusively aesthetic qualities, Whitman shares the vision of nineteenth-century American intellectuals, in the belief that public buildings, if properly designed, can lead to the moral improvement of their beholders[27]. In so doing, Whitman crucially extends the idea of democracy to Renaissance architecture, leveraging a linguistic strategy which involves the "appropriation of interart terminology" – according to which artists are paired with professionals like builders or scientists[28]. In "Polishing the "Common People"" (March 12, 1846), Whitman's commitment to the diffusion of a cultural refinement made available to all social classes is even more remarkable, as he calls for a "democratical artistic atmosphere, among the inhabitants of our republic"[29]; Whitman shows his appreciation of any object – be it the most commonplace one – "that ameliorates or softens the feelings and customs […]. Let every family have some flowers, some choice prints, and some sculpture casts"[30]. Hence, the importance Whitman gives to whom he calls the "common people" in construing a meaningful social dialogue between artists and audience, coalesces into the chance to make art "universally" available. This socio-economic turn is even more evident in his short commentary on a visit at The Brooklyn Institute (now Brooklyn Museum), titled "About Pictures, &c." (November 21, 1846). Whitman describes again the positive influence of art as follows:

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[26] Whitman 1846b.

[27] See Tarbell 2000, 160.

[28] Bohan 1999, 155–156.

[29] Whitman 1846a.

[30] Whitman 1846a.

> we ‘go’ heartily for all the rational refinements, and rose–colorings of life—such as music, mirth, works of art, genial kindness, and so forth. We wish every mechanic and laboring man and woman in Brooklyn, would have *some* such adornment to his or her abode—however humble that abode may be—a print hung on the wall, a pot of flowers, or even the occasional noise of an accordion […]. We wish some plan could be formed which would result in a perpetual *free* exhibition of works of art here, which would be open to all classes.[31]

Underlining the public function of “all the rational refinements” produced by the establishment of free art exhibitions, Whitman concludes by reinstating that such a social experiment cannot but determine improvements in the intellectual growth of this early mass audience. Since “all men contain something of the artist in them”, Whitman prompts his readers to take an active role in finding such “beautiful truth” in everyday life – whether through prints, flowers, or musical instruments. Nevertheless, lacking both in any specific art training and direct experience of the Italian artistic tradition, Whitman never indulges in detailed discussions on Renaissance aesthetics, but rather recasts the slight hints at the Old Masters (and their masterpieces) into an ideological discourse aimed at a national (i. e. American) “democracy of art”.

Bridging Transatlantic Traditions: Jarves’s Moral Renaissance

The democratic associations bestowed upon Italian Renaissance art by Whitman, place his popular journalism in sharp contrast with Jarves’s learned art criticism. The antipodality between the two voices is even more striking if we consider Jarves’s biographical facts: whereas Whitman is the American expression of a view founded and developed on native ground, Jarves’s transatlantic attitude is firmly rooted into his own being an American in the Old World. Having spent a considerable part of his life in Italy since 1852, Jarves gradually leaves the traveler’s perspective still characterizing his accounts in *Italian Sights* to acquire a more conscious outlook on the European artistic tradition. An example of Jarves’s early viewpoint can be detected in the detailed introductory description of Florence carried out in *Italian Sights:*

> There is something in the very name of Florence that suggests refinement and pleasurable emotions. It is a delicious sound itself, and of all others the most appropriate to the floral city of Italy. It recalls, too, the peerless queen of ancient sculpture, the Medicean Venus,

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[31] Whitman 1846d.

> and the triumph of modern art in Raphael's Madonna della Seggiola. Great names belong to its history, and its sons have bequeathed immortal works to mankind. It was then with involuntary respect and admiration that I entered, for the first time, the city of Dante and Michael Angelo, and trod the streets that had echoed to the footsteps of Galileo and Lorenzo the Magnificent.
>
> There is something, too, peculiarly fascinating in the associations connected with Florence. We cluster about its name, at least I did, palaces and villas in charming profusion, a laughing landscape, treasuries of art, and a hospitality which makes it a paradise for exiles in pursuit of artistic ease or literary quiet. To crown all these advantages, it has long enjoyed the reputation of being the cheapest place in Europe.[32]

Here, Jarves's American gaze can still be perceived through a picturesque rhetoric typical of nineteenth-century travel accounts: to Florence are attributed stereotyped "pleasurable emotions", a "peculiarly fascinating" atmosphere emerging from a "charming profusion" of buildings, "a laughing landscape", and "treasuries of art", and ending up with a useful travel note on the Tuscan city being the "cheapest place in Europe"[33]. The passage shows, too, Jarves's partial adherence to the traditional view of Italy as "the birth-place of the chef-d'oeuvres of art"[34], since Florence is defined "the peerless queen of ancient sculpture" as well as "the triumph of modern art" thanks to the works of masters like Raffaello and Michelangelo – with the Renaissance conquering a dominant role in the process of artistic development of Western civilization. Despite the rather naive traveler's outlook characterizing the style of *Italian Sights*, Jarves's Italian experience during the 1850s constitutes the core of his "training" and intellectual growth as art critic, historian, and also pioneer collector between 1860 and 1862. In fact, the first Florentine years shaped Jarves's vision of the Renaissance, leading him to adapt it to peculiar American mythologies – such as the emphasis on freedom and individual thinking[35], while the Civil War era saw the publication of Jarves's early studies on the Italian Renaissance. These works show the author's propensity for the Old Masters over contemporary American artists; the same judgement reverberates through the organization of his collections displayed in the United States – respectively, in New York City (1860 – 61), and Boston (1862), which were both entirely centered on a roster of Italian painters ranging from Cimabue and Giotto to the Renaissance artists Botticelli and Ghirlandaio[36]. As Jarves himself declares in the "Prefatory Remarks" to the *Descriptive Catalogue of "Old Masters"*, conceived as a companion to his collections, "the diffusion of artistic knowledge and aesthetic taste in America"[37] stands as the main goal of his activity[38]. Yet, in Jarves's critical thinking, the confrontation between American and Italian art is always dynamic, aimed at joining together rather than severing new and old traditions; in this sense, although apparently directed just at a general audience, Jarves's works on the Italian Renaissance serve as well as a kind of specialized guide for American artists.

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[32] Jarves 1856, 34.

[33] Nor is this reference an isolated case of practical suggestions given to American travelers while visiting Florence. Later in the same chapter dedicated to the city, for example, Jarves comments on the fine quality and extremely convenient rates for shopping, eating, clothing, and educational services: "The market is well supplied, at low prices. At the cafés and restaurants, a breakfast costs eleven cents, and a good enough dinner thirty-three. At the table d'hôte of hotels, fifty-five, and an excellent meal at that. But, for those who wish to avoid the annoyances of providing for the table, the "trattori [sic]," or public cooks, supply meals of every quality and cost, served up at any hour in any part of the city [...]. Clothing and most other articles are cheaper than in the United States, and the services of the best professors in music, languages, and education generally, can be had for about one half the price" (Jarves 1856, 41).

[34] Jarves 1856, 38.

[35] See Gennari Santori 2000, 185.

In 1862 Jarves published his review of a nineteenth-century Italian edition of Giorgio Vasari's *Vite*, titled "The Art of America and the "Old Masters"", on the Boston-based periodical *The Christian Examiner.* In this article, Jarves sets a comparison between the nature and the role of art in the United States and in Italy, contending that American art should undergo a radical renewal by adhering to the example of the Renaissance masters, as in the following passage:

> The Italian schools of painting previous to the seventeenth century, represented by the works of the old masters, differ widely in motives and execution from the phase of modern art most esteemed in America. These are indeed the two extremes of artistic feeling and taste […]. Italian art is born of a highly imaginative and intellectual race, whose faith and passions glow with aesthetic desire […]. Italian art rises above American art, inasmuch as it appeals to the imagination and the loftiest intellectual and emotional faculties.[39]

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[36] See also Miller 1989, 35 – 41.

[37] Jarves 1860, 6.

[38] Moreover, the "Prefatory Remarks" in the *Catalogue* provide an effective biographical rationale for the aftermath of Jarves's Italian experience. In the opening paragraphs Jarves claims that: "During a long residence in Europe, chiefly in Italy, the writer was led to the study of art at large […]. Familiar with Italian life; living in the midst of the art that was his daily study; in constant intercourse with many of the best European connoisseurs; assisted by sympathizing artistic friends […]; after several years of search in the highways and byways of Europe, – the writer succeeded in getting together the pictures described in this Catalogue, believing that ultimately they will be found worthy of forming the nucleus of a Free Gallery in one of our large cities, and thus be made to promote his aim, – the diffusion of artistic knowledge and aesthetic taste in America" (Jarves 1860, 5 – 6).

[39] Jarves 1862, 66 – 68.

The passage contains some of the cardinal principles of Jarves's criticism. In the first instance, adapting John Ruskin's theories, the American critic gives a strong moral connotation to Renaissance aesthetics – although, of course, Ruskin favors Gothic architecture over Renaissance art, the latter being expressive, in his point of view, of the ethic degeneration of its producers[40]. Despite this divergence from the British critic, Jarves advocates the superiority of the Renaissance masters over the American artists; this preeminence resides in the moral values that the Italian artists express, and that can hardly be found in the pragmatism of contemporary art – for instance, of native landscape or genre painting much praised by Whitman, instead[41]. In addition, Jarves's transnational paradigm of the Renaissance seems radically reshaped, since it is relocated in the ideological background of Civil War America: the reiteration of nouns and adjectives, used as keywords to describe the properties of Italian artistic culture ("imaginative and intellectual race", "intellectual and emotional faculties", "imagination"), indirectly refer to the American founding myths – in a rhetoric headed to strengthening the sense of national unity at stake at that time. But Jarves had already set the parallelism between Italian and American artists in a previous work titled *Art Studies* (1861). Here, Jarves closely analyzes the aesthetic and moral qualities pertaining to the Italian masterpieces that range from the late-thirteenth century up to the early-sixteenth century; he defines Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raffaello as the "Three great Masters of the Climax of Italian Painting", and states the enduring reliability and cultural authority of the Old Masters for American artists as follows:

> Some modern artists are jealous of, or indifferent to, past genius, and sedulously disparage it in view of their own immediate interests [...]. If neither respect nor care for the works of departed talent be bestowed, what future has the living talent itself to look forward to? Art is best nourished by a general diffusion of aesthetic feeling and taste.[42]

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[40] On Jarves as American mediator of the Ruskinian thought, see Stein 1967, 124–146. Further influences of nineteenth-century doctrines, such as spiritualism, on Jarves's artistic philosophy are discussed in Colbert 2002.

[41] Indeed, Jarves's personal interpretation of Ruskin's ideas set him in contrast with the *Crayon* – an art journal published by William James Stillman between 1855 and 1861, and whose commitment to the diffusion of the high standards of Ruskinism in America was paramount (see Stein 1967, 124–125; Klein 2020, 113–127). Nevertheless, both Jarves and Stillman seem to align themselves with a widespread response to the rising industrialization in the mid-century United States, since they both advocate the role of art and aesthetic taste as spiritual counterbalance to current materialism.

[42] Jarves 1861, 51–52.

Suggesting the notion of a temporal and spatial universality of art, Jarves exhorts the American artists to turn to the models of the past, emulating their example in order to achieve an essential aesthetic awareness; this ensures a genuine and prolific continuity between old and new traditions, instead of setting them in competition with one another. Jarves underlines again this belief in his discussion of the American visual arts carried out in *The Art-Idea* only three years later, in 1864. In confronting American art with different European traditions, Jarves celebrates the successful union of moral qualities and technical achievements of the early Italian schools:

> Their lofty principles, noble elements, and consummate technical skill, must make them always of inestimable value to appreciative minds. But their most seductive influence over modern art springs from the solemn splendor and deep significance of their varied systems of coloring […]. To comprehend the full meaning of color, and assimilate its joyous dignity or sensuous delight, it requires a temperament and training akin to those of the old masters themselves. Few Americans develop in this direction.[43]

By introducing some references to technical qualities – namely, the use of color made by the Old Masters – Jarves's criticism seems to be more producer-oriented than target-oriented, taking for granted the fact that a producer is *also* (and primarily) a receiver. At least, as his reference to "appreciative minds" appears to suggest, Jarves speaks to an audience capable of understanding the true language of aesthetic taste: as anticipated in "The Art of America", indeed, "In one sense art is a universal language. But to entirely comprehend a speaker, the hearer must put himself in sympathy with him"[44]. In this regard, Jarves indirectly uses the Italian Renaissance as a paradigm to which American painters must conform, in order to escape from the sheer materialism characterizing any contemporary artistic production, and painting above all. Through *The Art-Idea*, Jarves gets closer to a fundamental aesthetic appreciation of the artwork, paving the way for the emergence of late-nineteenth-century aestheticism and internationalism in the United States: not incidentally, Jarves himself seems to unfold a cosmopolitan outlook in later works like *Italian Rambles: Studies of Life and Manners in New and Old Italy* (1883)[45]. A notable change in perspective from the early *Italian Sights* marks Jarves's "Prefatory Note" to *Italian Rambles:*

> These "Rambles" are the fruit of a long experience of Old and New Italy. Sketches as they are, the author trusts they may not fail to yield some entertainment, if not instruction, in their

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[43] Jarves 1864, 214 – 215.

[44] Jarves 1862, 67.

[45] See Bendixen 2009, 117.

> new shape, even to those who may remember portions of them in letters to journals and periodicals of Europe and the United States in times past. At all events, many of the topics treated seldom fall within the observation of any one who is not an old inhabitant of the country and familiar as well with its by-ways as its high-ways.[46]

Definitively discarding the common, unrefined traveler's outlook of his early Italian years, Jarves now turns to the educated reader who already has *at least* a basic knowledge of Italian art and history. As he has been developing a more profound awareness of Italian culture, in *Italian Rambles* Jarves mainly addresses a kind of reader with whom he might share a true cosmopolitan, transatlantic experience ("many of the topics treated seldom fall within the observation of any one who is not an old inhabitant of the country"). In other words, Jarves's rhetorical discourse set forth in the 1860s studies can be reckoned as a precipitant of the construction of narratives proposed by modern American historiography at the turn of the century, while building upon the tensions between the poles of idealism and materialism, which were indeed conventional in mid-nineteenth-century critical interpretations of American art and taste[47].

Some Final Remarks: A Shifting Renaissance

The chronological boundaries employed by taking into consideration the literary label of "transbellum era" have proved particularly insightful for discussing the socio-cultural role and idea of the Renaissance in the literary history of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Rather than being a univocal transcultural heritage for American intellectuals to confront with, the Renaissance has undergone diverse interpretations, differing in attitudes and targets – of which Whitman and Jarves constitute two ways of its recognition intersecting, in turn, the multifaceted socio-cultural transitions stretching across the whole century.

Overall, the moral perspective conferred by Jarves on the artworks of the Old Masters of Italy challenges Whitman's overtly democratic viewpoint. Self-contained within the borders of an intellectual activity, Jarves's aesthetic discourse is mainly focused on the technical achievements of the artists, while Whitman's "popular" Renaissance is concentrated on their commitment to a deep social advancement. Both equally effective, in their theoretical opposition Whitman and Jarves hold different approaches to the same tradition: thus, the differing interpretations they give of the Italian model testify to the weight of a socio-historical standpoint in dealing with the matter of restyling and negotiation of transnational paradigms.

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[46] Jarves 1883, v.

[47] On the ambivalence of Jarves's theoretical model, see Georgi 2013, 21–42; see, in addition, Georgi 2008.

From the literary perspective of the transbellum era, their critical works show how the traditional nineteenth-century idea of the Renaissance begins to shift from mythic object to cultural discourse. Indeed, the historical myth of the Italian Renaissance represents a productive transnational model for the emergence and development of the American literary field over the decades up to the Civil War: this model can be traced (while being re-used and re-imagined) within a number of literary texts ranging from fiction to poetry, from political writing to literary criticism[48]. But in the 1890s the very idea of the Italian Renaissance shows a polarization into two distinct paths of cultural reception – that is, the lowbrow literary entertainment (as in the case of the historical setting of Upton Sinclair's 1899 dime novel *In the Net of the Visconti*), and the highbrow art criticism (as in Bernard Berenson's first studies on Italian painting, for example). Despite their conceptual divergences, then, Whitman and Jarves both partake in releasing Italian culture from the crystalized, flat vision of an Arcadian "land of art", relocating it within the composite and multiform "New World" made up of working- and middle-class people, of laborers and connoisseurs.

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[48] See Razzi 2023.

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Serena Fusco

Synesthesia, Photography, Intransitive Comparison: Worlding the World as Home in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*

Introduction

This essay proposes to read Monique Truong's acclaimed first novel *The Book of Salt* (2003) as a work that dramatizes ways to conceive of the world and be in the world, as human beings as well as literary texts. Upon reading *The Book of Salt*, the term "world" takes on several meanings. The world is a spatiotemporal extension that is external to the subject and in many ways beyond the subject's own horizon. Yet the world can also be regarded as a multisensorial space of creative rememory,[1] hence a subjective creation, but wherein the subject encounters, in encounters of different scales, traces of other in/commensurate subjects as its own (meaningful) limit.

More specifically, I propose to analyze two ways in which *The Book of Salt* dramatizes (being in) the world. One, its textual re-elaboration of the photographic medium, in ways that, in my opinion, go beyond thematization and evoke intermediality; this entails, in turn, a conception of time and narrative that values relations yet holds on to a fundamental sense of discontinuity. Two, the novel's structural use of synesthesia, its deployment of a literary style which traverses the fullness of the sensorial spectrum and is grounded in the interdependence of the sensory spheres. Exploring how these strategies work and entwine is especially apt for reflecting on the novel's worldly dimensions, and on these dimensions as suspended between subjective and objective spheres.

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[1] Here I am tentatively borrowing Toni Morrison's term (made famous because of *Beloved*) to emphasize the entwinement or, for Morrison, "battle between remembering and forgetting […] the stress of remembering, its inevitability, the chances for liberation that lie within the process" (Morrison 2019, 324).

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Re-cognizing the World, Re-cognizing World Literature

Truong's work illustrates how sensory impressions, the elaboration of such impressions into desires, and the journeys (literal or metaphoric) undertaken to pursue such desires – or undertaken as the consequences of such desires – set human bodies in motion, put them in situation and in the world. The world in *The Book of Salt* is alternatively big and small; it shrinks and expands as the result of forces that cannot be fully controlled by the human characters who fictionally act in the text – neither by the flesh-and-blood actors who exist at the frontiers of the text. Despite all possible detours, the novel's characters, and especially its protagonist, attempt to find their path(s) in the world. This intradiegetic situation mirrors the "border" – i.e. not completely extradiegetic – situation presented in the novel's opening paratext,[2] where the author reminisces that the "book was written on two islands, in two countries, three states, and five cities".[3] Writing it was, she maintains, a "journey" – one that was made meaningful, however, by having a "home" to return to.

The Book of Salt is set in the 1920s–1930s and its broad geographical spectrum encompasses Vietnam, at the time under French colonial rule, France, and the U.S. Bình, the central character and narrator, is the youngest son of a loving, abused, quietly resisting mother and a tyrannical, abusive, exploitative father.[4] Hired, thanks to a resourceful older brother, as a cook aide in the French governor general's house in Saigon, young Bình is "[e]quipped with skills and desires that no man would admit to having" (15). When he is dismissed because of the discovery of his sexual liaison with the French chef, he is also expelled by his father and is forced to leave Vietnam. After peregrinations at sea as member of various ship crews, and various short-term employments on land, he arrives in Paris, at 27 rue de Fleurus, to work as a live-in cook for (Truong's fictional recreations of) Gertrude Stein and her partner Alice B. Toklas – whom Bình privately renames "GertrudeStein" and "Miss Toklas".[5] Conspicuous yet effaced as the quintessential racialized colonial subject in the metropole, an invisible presence in "the Steins's very public household, Bình seems to find some degree of "home" there and, perhaps, love – with Lattimore, a young mixed-race – partly African American – “iridologist” and aspiring writer who attends the Steins’s salon. This fragile equilibrium finally collapses and Truong wraps up the novel on a note of suspension. In the finale – which circularly brings one back to the novel’s beginning, dated October 1934 – Stein and Toklas are leaving Paris for a long tour of the U.S., and it is uncertain, or simply undisclosed, what Bình will do, where he will go, in consequence of his “Mesdames’s departure; or perhaps in consequence of his having been, meanwhile, betrayed and abandoned by Lattimore; or perhaps in consequence of having finally received, with a five-year delay, a reply to a previously sent letter, in which his older brother finally urges Bình to “come home” (8).

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[2] I will synthetically observe, further on, that I regard the author as an explicitly evoked presence at the border of the text.

[3] Truong 2004, no page reference. References to the text will be henceforth included parenthetically after the quotes.

[4] The novel hints that "Old Man", as Bình calls him, may not be his biological father, but it offers no ultimate certainty on the matter.

[5] On the importance of naming in the novel, see Eng 2008.

Truong’s work can be read at the crossroads of various critical frameworks: Vietnamese American literature, literature of the Vietnamese diaspora, literature of the global south. In 2009, Vincenzo Bavaro read Truong’s novel in the context of the (at least since the cusp of the millennium) ongoing “internationalization” of Asian American literature as a field of study. *The Book of Salt* responded to, and to an extent even anticipated, the growing interest for the works that provide(d) an international dimension to the Asian American experience, thus countering the original historical preference of Asian American criticism for “works, writers, lives, and experiences confined within the limited geographical boundaries of the United States”.[6] In a comparable vein, reminding his readers that Vietnamese presence in the U.S. is the historical result of global dynamics well beyond a dyadic relation between two nations, Viet Thanh Nguyen has written about ‘Viet Nam’ and its difference from Viet Nam. The latter stands for the country, while the former is a symbol that condenses a plurality of meanings. While some of these meanings are U.S.-centric–one only has to think of the Vietnam war and its central position in the twentieth-century U.S. imaginary–others condense the historical function of ‘Viet Nam’ as a “world hub”: “Viet Nam became the site, and ‘Viet Nam’ became the keyword, for a global clash between radically opposed views regarding freedom, liberation, independence, and the ideologies of capitalism versus Communism”.[7] After the publication of Truong’s second novel *Bitter in the Mouth* (2011), scholars have started paying attention to her (over the years increasing) self-fashioning as a “southern girl twice over”: from southern Vietnam, “reborn” in the southern U.S. where she arrived as a refugee with her family, and undertaking in *Bitter in the Mouth* an open confrontation with the tradition of the Southern gothic novel.[8] In other words, in its scope and complexity, and thanks to the reading contexts it evokes, Truong's work clearly goes hand in hand with the "globalization" of specific, ethnic and/or regional corpora and concerns that increasingly have – for over two decades now – been regarded as *not* exclusively germane or confined to U.S. culture.[9]

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[6] Bavaro 2009, 177.

[7] Nguyen 2014, 367.

[8] Truong herself has articulated this position (2019). As critical engagements with this perspective, see Gabler Thomas 2016 and Dykema 2014.

I wonder, though, whether, or how, the globalized reworking of local, U.S.-based preoccupations of various scale(s) can be redeployed in the direction of an attempt to reflect on literature as *basically* a matter of worldly concern. Tendentially drawn into the spheres of the aforementioned critical discourses, *The Book of Salt* has not yet been discussed, to my knowledge at least, as a case of "world literature".[10] I attempt here to reflect on Truong's work as part of a worldly horizon that is not conceived as a sum, or an enlargement, of local concerns, but instead as a basically shared condition from which more localized concerns perhaps not so much descend as they find, instead, an inescapable horizon of sense. This evokes a tension between the imperative to localize on the one hand – also because specific cultural narratives and "traditions", including nation-based ones, still retain their traction and modeling force – and, on the other hand, quoting Wai Chee Dimock (who quotes Gayatri Spivak), "'planetarity' as a never-to-be-realized horizon, a 'catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility'[...]"[11] – in literary terms but also, as one would come to expect, in broader considerations.

Needless to say, "world literature" is not a given nor a universally accepted definition. It is, to the contrary, a hugely complex matter and an intensely debated one. As is well known, the paternity of the concept is usually attributed to (an elderly) Goethe. The idea has made a spectacular comeback in the past two decades or so, thanks to a number of factors – among which one could name a broader interest for globalization; and, in more specifically literary environments, the influence of Pascale Casanova's work, the growing momentum of east-west comparison, and, in anglophone criticism, the (very different) interventions of several scholars, among whom the most well known are probably Franco Moretti and David Damrosch.[12]

For the present attempt at reflecting on *The Book of Salt* in the context of world literature debates, I mostly elaborate on Shu-mei Shih, Pheng Cheah, and Djelal Kadir. Shih does not attempt to define a specific type of texts that fall into the rubric of "world literature". Rather, she uses "world", mainly conceived as a

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[9] Recent developments of U.S. regional studies that capitalize on a concept of regionality from a global/planetary perspective also seem to fall within this broad approach. See, for instance, Goodman 2021.

[10] It is worth noting here that an excerpt from the text has been included in Dimock et al. 2017.

[11] Dimock 2006, 6.

[12] See Casanova 1999 and, among others, Moretti 2000 and 2003; Damrosch 2003, 2008, and 2014.

"network of power-inflected relations",[13] as the necessary backdrop for recognizing/creating "relations" (a term and concept she finds in Édouard Glissant) among distant literary texts, thus forming what she calls "literary arcs":

> My proposal here is to consider *a network of texts as a study of world literature along what I call a literary arc*, which is not a closed circuit but an extendable and contractable trajectory that connects texts […]. Instead of aiming for global synthesis, the notion of a literary arc links multiple nodes, and a text can enter into relation with other texts anywhere along it, illuminating specific issues within a time period or across time periods. For instance, around the world-historical event of the Chinese coolie trade in the nineteenth century, which crossed the Pacific Ocean to the Americas and traversed the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, we can productively trace an arc of literary texts written during and after the event, which will help us illuminate the much suppressed knowledge about this trade, its human dimensions, and, especially, its humanistic and literary consequences.[14]

In programmatic contrast with other theoretical frameworks–for instance, Moretti's–Shih's model retains a high level of attention to the analysis of individual texts. Shih also claims the key role of the historical context, but she proposes to historicize and analyze literature from a perspective that questions the way we are used to thinking about history: in fact, despite the current attention to the global dimension, we retain the honored habit of thinking about both history and literary history as *primarily* tethered to a locale or specific "tradition". Following Shih, who proposes to take "world-historical events" as a ground of comparison, *The Book of Salt* can become a node along an arc that connects it with other texts in the light of world-historical events (and consequences thereof) such as queer migration, colonialism, and photography. World-historical events are thus illuminated, in the sense that (world) history is *rethought* thanks to the powers of literary fiction.

Pheng Cheah's fascinating argument in *What is a World?* (2016) is also (albeit differently) compelling for my present reflection, because it offers ways to conceptualize–and challenges for conceptualizing–the "world" as an irreducible horizon of (literary) creation. Cheah proposes an alternative approach to those that are, he maintains, the prevalent ideas about world literature. He argues that most theories conflate the world with the global market under the historical condition of late capitalist globalization–an approach replete with (neo)colonial implications. Cheah insists that the concept of "world" is *not* self-evident and that a major weakness of recent theorizations of world literature is exactly their taking the world for granted. In contrast, he builds upon various theories of *worlding.* Worlding the world is, Cheah argues–mainly elaborating on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Jacques Derrida, and the postcolonial narratives of Michelle Cliff, Nuruddin Farah, Amitav Ghosh, Timothy Mo, and Ninotchka Rosca–a *temporal* process that ensures a fundamental openness, a projection into the future, both of "world" and of "time" itself. Cheah considers literature to be a major "force of worlding". Literary texts exist in and bring about an irreducible temporal horizon, a horizon which resists capitalist globalization and capitalist globalization's reductionist–i.e. quantifiable and spatialized–view of time. Cheah attempts a "radical rethinking of world literature as literature that is an active power in the making of worlds, that is, both a site of processes of worlding and an agent that participates and intervenes in these processes".[15]

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[13] Shih 2013, 84.

[14] Shih 2015, 434–435, emphasis mine.

In the background of Cheah's compelling attempt at reclaiming *time* as a universalizing yet liberating force, a complex question lingers. If literary creativity – including ways to conceive of time and organize narrative – is culturally situated, how can we "world a world" without confirming already-existing teleologies and/or de facto turning the whole world into our own image? In Djelal Kadir's terms: "Once 'to world' is read as transitive [verb], the ensuing question about the binomial 'world literature' would logically become 'which world are we worlding literature into and why?' And, concomitantly, from what position are we worlding world literature?".[16] Kadir offers a perspective that can perhaps complement Cheah's intriguing view. Besides critically considering "world" as a verb, Kadir takes up another verb, *compare*, and suggests that we can regard comparison as inhering in literature, if we consider the verb "compare" – which we usually associate with a human act – as an intransitive verb. It is *literature itself* which compares; and in so doing, I would add, it opens – itself and the world. If this is the case, one can focus on a literary text such as *The Book of Salt* regarding it as a text to which comparison inheres, and which – as I shall presently attempt to demonstrate – simultaneously asks, and demands that we ask, what a world is, or (tentatively) can be: in other words, what the process of worlding entails.

Cheah maintains that we can refrain from a violent appropriation – and reductionist view of world and time – if we presuppose a temporal horizon that precedes and always exceeds the subject in time – a condition that, for Cheah, is paralleled by the very nature of literature. Taking inspiration from Kadir, Cheah, and Shih, I propose to read *The Book of Salt* as a text that compares intransitively and "worlds the world" in historical terms: more than looking head into the opening of a world to come, it looks back *into the past* to retrace and rethink the world that

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15 Cheah 2016, 2.

16 Kadir 2010, 4.

was historically made by colonialism, homophobia, and their routes, because this historically made world is, for the time being, what we (still) share and can perhaps turn into something else.

Kandice Chuh offers an intriguing reading of *The Book of Salt* as a peculiar *mise-en-scène* of universality: "The novel gives rise to a sense of the universal as a category not of transcendence but of subtending grounds".[17] Chuh reads Truong's novel in the context of aesthetics, remounting to the origins of aesthetics as philosophical reflection on sensibility – a perspective that she rearticulates in order to make room for the sensibilities and desires of those who have been excluded from what she calls (quoting Lauren Berlant and evoking Walter Mignolo) the "historical sensorium". For Chuh, the historical "subtending grounds" of the universal are (neo)liberalism and colonialism; at the same time, though, the idea of "subtending grounds" is used to excavate the denied or neglected desires of people like Bình, whose presence in the hidden folds of history a text like *The Book of Salt* attempts to – creatively, inventively, fictively – reckon with, and in attempting this, it "correlates" such (imagined) presence to *a question about the world:*

> What worlds correlate with the desires incommensurate to normative paradigms of judgement? To what and whose (dis)advantage is the regulation of permissible desires directed?
>
> These are the questions *The Book of Salt* provokes as it organizes sense and sensibility around undocumented figures and desires, specifically those exiled from the normative institutions of the modern nation and the colonial state.[18]

Migrations, Desires, and Bodies

From the paratext inward, more than evoked *drawn in* the text by the author's opening statement, the world in its material and geographical extension constitutes a significant presence, extradiegetically as well as intradiegetically. The novel's spatial dimension brings together at least three continents: Asia, Europe, America. Attempts at reconstructing Bình's movements – where did he exactly go after leaving Vietnam? How did he arrive at 27 rue de Fleurus? – repeatedly occur *in* the text, but they prove an ultimately impossible task. Prior to being hired by Stein and Toklas, Bình had been subjected to detailed interviews by many of his prospective employers:

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[17] Chuh 2019, 99.

[18] Chuh 2019, 101.

> [They] behave as if they have been authorized by the French government to ferret out and to document exactly how it is that I have come to inhabit their hallowed shores.
>
> "In Paris, three years," I tell them.
>
> "Where were you before?"
>
> "Marseilles."
>
> "Where were you before that?"
>
> "Boat to Marseilles."
>
> "Boat? Well, obviously. Where did that boat sail from?
>
> And so, like a courtesan, forced to perform the dance of the seven veils, I grudgingly reveal the names, one by one, of the cities that have carved their names into me, leaving behind the scar tissue that forms the bulk of who I am.
>
> "Hmm… you say that you've been in Paris for three years? Now, let's see, if you left Indochina when you were twenty, that would make you…"
>
> "Twenty-six, Madame."
>
> Three years unaccounted for! you could almost hear them thinking. (16–17)

Colonialism and the regulation of racialized flows of workforce – Bình, the "Indochinese", the colonial subject who arrives on the "hallowed shores" of France – are, Chuh suggests, the very ground of the novel; at the same time, narratives of exile, migration, and attempts at finding a place where one belongs entail an experiential, intimate, corporeal dimension, becoming narratives of (sexual) desire. The basket weaver's story, of which Bình offers an interpretation, is an example. Heard on the first ship Bình boards, it is the story of a young man born into a family whose members have learned to make a living by harvesting the notoriously invasive water hyacinths and using their stalks for making baskets. The young man attempts to leave home and make his own living by replanting the water hyacinths in other land plots, but the family's cuttings do not take to any other spot (54–56). One among the novel's multitude of stories, the basket weaver's works like a parable and evokes its etymological sense of "comparison". Bình compares himself to the weaver – or, to take up Kadir's previous suggestion, the weaver "compares". Most evident is "the obvious contrast between the nature of the weaver's livelihood and mine […] how nonexportable it is, how it is an indigenous thing, requiring as it does the silt of his family's land" (56). But besides such differences, there are elements of similarity, including, perhaps, a desire that is not always mentioned:

> I keep him [the basket weaver] with me because I want to know the part of his story that Bão didn't tell me. What happened in the house, surrounded by water hyacinths in full purple

> bloom, that made him go? "Just to see" sounds to me like something Bão would make up, substituting his own vagueness for something twisting and more difficult to say. (57)

Significantly, though, the drive of desire, its sheer expansion, is not sufficient per se to world the world – and the world is not assimilable to a purely subjective projection:

> I can imagine the weaver's desire, all right, the geography of it reasonably extending to the next village over and, maybe, one or two after that. But to take one's body and willingly set it upon the open sea, this for me is not an act brought about by desire but a consequence of it, maybe. (57)

Bình initially leaves Vietnam finding work overnight on the *Niobe.* Aboard the ship he encounters Bão, whose half-serious streetwise (seawise?) teachings, despite his eventual betrayal, will prove key to Bình's survival in more than one sense. (It is Bão who, among other things, tells Bình the basket weaver's story.) Bình intermittently returns to sea for employment, while paying passengers – like Stein and Toklas – cross seas aboard ocean liners. Sea travel is central to the novel also to the extent that its recurrence highlights not only different typologies of movement, but also different forms of access – or non-access – to movement. Besides boats, means of transportation in general are a recurring motif. Bình narrates in detail how Stein and Toklas (and himself) leave Paris once a year to spend the summer in the village of Bilignin, in southeastern France. Stein and Toklas leisurely drive a car to their destination – their journey takes several days – while Bình travels by train to precede them (135). Planes epitomize instead the quintessential new, modern means of transportation which Stein and Toklas expect to experience back in the U.S.: "Their voices especially quivered at the mention of the airplanes. They wanted to see their America from a true twentieth-century point of view" (5).

At the time when the novel is set, though, it is mostly oceanic transportation and maritime routes that connect the world. Water separates distant continents and shores as much as it connects them. As Bình's story suggests, as the emphasis on transportation implies, the sea is as important as the land, and passages are as important as stays.[19] The omnipresence of the sea clearly evokes the salt of the title. Salt, *the* central motif of the text, not only relates to the sea; it also speaks to the crucial theme of cooking – as well as to other key motifs, i. e. the bodily fluids of tears and sweat. Salt also evokes exile and queerness by virtue of its association with the Biblical story of Sodom and Lot's wife being transformed into a pillar of salt for looking back: "This powerful image of flight and massacre, of a burning motherland, and the significance of her lethal looking back, is a privileged point of entry in this complex work. Actually, […] we could also envision the burning of Sodom as the mother of all queer migrations".[20]

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[19] The motif of the bridge is significant in this respect. While I shall not have the possibility to fully expand on him, a key figure is the character whom Bình renames "the man on the bridge". I shall mention this character again in the final part of this essay.

To sum up, the novel's (historical) spatiality is broad, complex, and brought together by forces of capital, colonialism, and desire. The world itself is a space that shrinks and expands according to how desiring bodies negotiate the expanse of the sea; yet neither desire, nor the consequences of desire are fully controllable, nor can they be harnessed for good – nor can they be easily or immediately narrated or reconstructed. Looking back across the wide and salty expanse that connects past and present entails a substantial degree of untold, or barely avoided paths. Toward the end of the novel, in a very moving passage, Bình suggests that the sea, a space whose sheer extension had until then eluded him, became a passage to another place, and not the final (suicidal) destination of his journey, because he had miscalculated how long the journey would last:

> Though sea travel I had assumed, was something that generally took many years to complete. The world was enormous before I left my corner of it. But once I did, it grew even more immense. As for that corner, it continued to shrink until it was a speck of dust on a globe. Believe me, I never had a desire to see what was on the other side of the earth. I needed a ship that would go out to sea because there the water is deep, deeper than the hemmed-in rivers that I could easily reach by foot. I wanted the deepest water because I wanted to slip into it and allow the moon's reflection to swallow me whole. "I never meant to go this far", I said to Bão. What I meant was that when I boarded the *Niobe* I had no intention of reaching shore. (250)

Synesthetic Narratives

The world is also experienced, and rendered through Bình's voice, as a fluid space of multisensorial (and, I shall suggest in a while, multimedial) memory, a space alternatively shrinking and expanding, one in which truth is always complemented by imagination and the past exists in tension with the (tricky) need/desire to remember in the present: "It is difficult to remain objective when I am alone in my memory. I place undue trust in my recollections of the past because there is no one here who cares to contradict me, to say in defiance, No, that is not true" (105). The world is the horizon against which – to quote Chuh again – "undocumented subjects" like Bình attempt to coax a small drop of future possibility by

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20 Bavaro 2009, 174.

tentatively piecing together fragments of the past, from sensuous impressions to sensuous contact with (as I shall briefly detail more clearly) different medial surfaces (among which the photographic medium). When he receives a five-year-long-awaited letter from his brother Anh Minh, Bình wants to connect with the material/sensorial aspect of the item:

> I sniffed the envelope before opening it. It smelled of a faraway city, pungent with anticipation for rain. If my Mesdames had not been in the room, I would have tasted it with my tongue. I was certain to find the familiar sting of salt, but what I needed to know was what kind: kitchen, sweat, tears or the sea. I wanted this paper-shrouded thing to divulge itself to me, to tell me even before the words emerged why it had taken my brother almost five years to respond to my first and only letter home. (5)

Regarding Truong's work, synesthesia has generally been discussed with respect to *Bitter in the Mouth*, in which the protagonist and narrator, Linda Hammerick, is affected by synesthesia in the medical sense, a neurological condition that in her case conjoins auditory and gustatory spheres, so that each word triggers in her mouth the incoming of a specific taste. In her second novel, Truong expands literary synesthesia beyond its specific role as rhetorical figure of speech, making it a central plot element and motif. I suggest that synesthesia as a motif and a stylistic feature is already present (albeit less central) in *The Book of Salt.* Sensory spheres overlap, showing their interdependency and their role for putting the subject in situation, a situation of *physical* openness and vulnerability that accompanies any attempt to make a home for oneself.

Cooking is a "way of remembering the world" (99). Bình's cooking laces the familiar with the unfamiliar, blurring the distinction between here and there, fact and invention: his French employers are "preoccupied with the taste of foods so familiar and yet with every bite even the most parochial of palates detects redolent notes of something they have no words to describe. They are, in the end, overwhelmed by an emotion they have never felt, a nostalgia for places where they have never been" (19). The sensorial experience of taste, which blooms into a multisensorial experience, is situated somewhere between reliving a past and (re) imagining a past, between encountering something for the first time and recognizing something that has been encountered before. Words, which in themselves oscillate between a visual and an aural dimension, evoke tastes, as on the occasion of the first exchange between Bình and Lattimore: "Your [Lattimore's] French was flawless but with a slowness to its delivery, unctuous and ripe. I wanted to open my mouth and taste each word" (40). Gustatory similes and metaphors prevail in the text, but they do not exist in isolation. In chapter four, "GertrudeStein" asks Bình to "define 'love'", as part of a rather peculiar game. She recurringly tests Bình limited French-language skills, asking him to name things, from food items to daily objects to abstract concepts: not well versed in French herself, "GertrudeStein" acquires a capital of "poetic" expressions thanks to Bình's creative malapropisms and bodily mimics. In order to "define 'love'", Bình points "to a table on which several quinces sit yellowing in a blue and white China bowl. I shake my head in their direction, and I leave the room, speechless" (36). A few pages later, Bình-the-narrator explains, in a style that could not possibly have materialized itself when addressing "GertrudeStein" in French – a richly mimetic and at the same time evocative style, a flourish of synesthetic combination of the senses – taste, sight, smell, touch:

> Quinces are ripe, GertrudeStein, when they are the yellow of canary wings in midflight. They are ripe when their scent teases you with the snap of green apples and the perfumed embrace of coral roses. But even then quinces remain a fruit, hard and obstinate – useless, GertrudeStein, until they are simmered, coddled for hours above a low, steady flame. Add honey and water and watch their bone-colored flesh soak up the heat, coating itself in an opulent orange, not of the sunrises that you never see but of the insides of tree-ripened papayas, a color you can taste. To answer your question, GertrudeStein, love is not a bowl of quinces yellowing in a blue and white China bowl, seen but untouched. (40)

(Re)Imagining a Photo Album

The pervasive quality of novel's synesthetic style, its reflection of the fullness and the gaps of the "sensorium", calls for a corresponding emergence of multisensory channels, i.e. a literary evocation *of other media.* While the synesthetic horizon of the novel challenges any ingrained prevalence of the visual channel over other sensory channels, a substantial engagement with the medium of *photography* is evident. Photography is an important plot element and is crucial in both thematic and stylistic terms.

With the promise of having a photograph of the two of them taken at a professional studio, Lattimore persuades Bình to "borrow" – with the promise of giving it back after one week – one of Stein's notebooks.[21] After the promised photograph is taken, but before it is redeemed, Lattimore absconds the manuscript and vanishes. Bình falls prey to Lattimore's scheme because of his understandable, totally human desire to have a photograph sustaining the momentary illusion that the two of them may be fleetingly seen (and sanctioned) as partaking of (in Chuh's terms) "sustained coupledom",[22] similarly to how Stein and Toklas have come to be seen since they have been singled out as an iconic queer couple.[23] Very simply, Bình longs for kin, a home, a family portrait.

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[21] This manuscript, apparently, is about Bình himself and is titled "The Book of Salt". Not knowing English, all that Bình can make out in those pages is his own name – misspelled by Gertrude Stein as "Bin" – and the word "please". In the limited space of this essay, I do not have the possibility to discuss a crucial aspect of *The Book of Salt:* namely, how the novel – thanks to its recreation of Stein and Toklas but also, more broadly, its historical setting and stylistic features – powerfully evokes, mobilizes, and rethinks "modernism" as a historical, cultural, and literary period. On this see Izzo 2011, but also Bavaro 2009, Chuh 2019, Coffman 2014, and Eng 2008.

Never seen nor collected, the promised photo remains a phantasmatic token of Lattimore's betrayal. Paradoxically, though, a photographic image had been prefigured in their first encounter at 27 rue de Fleurus, when the initial visual pairing of the two occurs in a mirror:

> After years of the imposed invisibility of servitude, I am acutely aware when I am being watched, a sensitivity born from absence, a grain of salt on the tongue of a man who has tasted only bitter. As I checked the teapots to see whether they needed to be replenished, I felt a slight pressure. It was the weight of your eyes resting on my lips. I looked up, and I saw you standing next to a mirror reflecting the image of a wiry young man with deeply set, startled eyes. I looked up, and I was seeing myself beside you. I am at sea again, I thought. Waves are coursing through my veins. I am at sea again. (37)

Lattimore's mixed-raceness points to the limits of racialized visual regimes – "is Lattimore a Negro?" (157) "GertrudeStein" inquires of Bình. Lattimore's relationship with the "in/visible" Bình, and the way the text, in this passage, blurs the distinction between the two men, point to how the novel also engages the construction of race at the border of visibility and invisibility, while reminding us that photography has been crucial, in modernity, for attempting to locate, "fix" race to certain bodies, simultaneously revealing the impossibility to "solve" race into visibility once and for all – thus corroborating Eng's point that "race functions beyond the realm of the visible and the protocols of the empirical".[24] It is worth noting that this "visual encounter" is also presented through a synesthetic style, involving, as it does, not only visual but also gustatory and haptic dimensions. Significantly, this scene presents another textual pairing of motion and desire – "I am at sea again" – yet a movement evoking, as the "imagined" photograph itself will eventually epitomize, *desire as homecoming.*

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[22] Chuh 2019, 107.

[23] Several scholars (among whom Bavaro 2009, Chuh 2019, Coffman 2014, Eng 2008) have noted how *The Book of Salt* creatively engages queerness in its different manifestations, including historical ones, explicit and/or covert, documented and/or invented. The text obviously presents the contrast between the recognition that is granted to the Stein-Toklas pair in their domestic partnership – a recognition that will make them "pioneers" – and the obscurity to which Bình's desire is relegated. Less obvious, but undoubtedly present, is the possibility (not certainty) of desire blooming between Bình and a man he fortuitously encounters on a bridge over the Seine in 1927, with whom he spends an evening. More will presently be told about this character. This man, whom he privately renames "the man on the bridge", is much later revealed to be called "Nguyen Ai Quoc" – one of the names taken on by the man whom decades later will be called Ho Chi Minh.

[24] Eng 2008, 1486.

Next to the implications of Lattimore's betrayal, which provides "photography" with negative overtones, Truong also suggests other possible meanings and uses of it, and other possible "relations" between Bình and this medium. After Lattimore deserts him, Bình goes to the studio to collect the photo, believing it is already paid for, only to discover that only half of the cost has been deposited. At the studio, he unexpectedly sees the photograph of a man whom he had met on a bridge over the Seine years before, a fellow-Vietnamese with whom he had shared a memorable dinner and – possibly, because the text remains ambiguous in this respect – a sexual encounter, right before the man in question left Paris. Privately renamed by Bình "the man on the bridge", his name is, Léné the photographer reveals (he used to work for him as a photo retoucher), "Nguyen Ai Quoc": for Bình, clearly a made-up name, and – readers of several decades later will observe – one of the names used by the man who will eventually become known as Ho Chi Minh. Bình decides, at this point, to try to redeem not his and Lattimore's, but instead *this man*'s portrait, although it consists of a very costly photographic *salt print*, whom he will perhaps be able to obtain only after considerable economic sacrifice. Through a photograph, the text wonderfully literalizes one of the metaphoric meanings of the salt motif: salt here stands for *salary*, and the "salt" photographic image becomes the objective correlative of Bình's labor, as well as of his desire.

The novel opens as follows: "Of that day I have only two photographs and, of course, my memories" (1). "That day" is the day of Stein and Toklas' departure for the U.S. where, after a decades-long absence, Stein, who has finally achieved celebrity, will have a tour of lectures. Photographers accompany this event:

> Every visit by a photographer would be inevitably followed by a letter enclosing a newspaper or magazine clipping with my Mesdames' names circled in a halo of red ink. The clippings, each carefully pressed with a heated iron, […] went immediately into an album with a green leather cover. "Green is the color of envy", my Mesdames told me. […] "Green" meant that […] the album had been there from the very beginning, impatient but biding its time; that they were now thrilled to fill it with family photographs of the most public kind. (1–2)

The two photographs mentioned by Bình, which he has at some point cut from a newspaper or magazine, frame the novel, marking its beginning and end. In one, Bình is visible in the background, sitting on a bench at the Gare du Nord behind Stein and Toklas, his eyes closed. In the other, his back is seen as he is kneeling on the deck of the ship about to depart from Le Havre, sewing a button on Stein's shoe.

While the novel's internal temporal structure is highly fragmented, the relation between Bình and the two photos provides a framework. I would suggest that especially the photo at the Gare du Nord is constructed as a liminal space between the inside of the text and its outside. From within the photo, Bình sees and hears a presence "calling" him, asking him the reason behind all his attempts at "staying". He addresses this presence, positioning himself, in this address, inside the photo:

> My eyes are closed because thinking, for me, is sometimes aided by the dark. […] "What keeps you here?" I hear a voice asking. Your question, just your desire to know my answer, keeps me, is my response. In the dark, I see you smile. I look up instinctually, as if someone has called out my name. (261)

Bình addresses a "you" on repeated occasions. In several passages, the "you" is Lattimore; in others, the ghost of his cruel father, dead and buried in Vietnam. In others yet, the "you" points towards an extradiegetic presence, whom, more than with an implied reader, I tend to identify with the author herself – who, across the textual border, ventriloquizes Bình yet addresses "him" as if he were real, in a reversal of the auto-fictional-biographic game played by Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), the work which made Stein a literary celebrity and in which her authorial persona masquerades as Toklas to tell her own autobiography "as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe".[25] Intradiegetically, Bình's narratorial stance is suspended between an ex-post awareness of the novel's events on the one hand and the embrace of a limited perspective on the other. Throughout the novel, Bình appears to narrate his past from different "now" moments that do not neatly overlap (9, 13, 16, 26, 56, and passim). The "now" in the novel – the moment(s) in time from which Bình looks back and narrates his story – keeps changing, moving, receding, organizing different snapshot of the past in reciprocal perspective, like in a photo album, while never losing the urgency to create a broader horizon of sense. The "now" also corresponds, I would suggest, to the moments when the world, for Bình, "shrinks" and seems to concede a livable situation. The "small world" is, for Bình, the lived counterpart of a world that his migrations expand *ad infinitum:*

> The man on the bridge was leaving that night and I, of all men, decided to stay. I wanted to see him again. But the man on the bridge did not tell me where he was traveling to, and the world

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[25] Stein 1990, 252.

> was too vast for me to search for him, I thought. The only place we shared was this city [i.e. Paris]. Vietnam, the country that we called home, was to me already a memory. I preferred it that way. A “memory” was for me another way of saying a “story”. A “story” was another way of saying a “gift”. The man on the bridge was a memory, he was a story, he was a gift. Paris gave him to me. And in Paris I will stay, I decided. [...] *For a traveler, it is sometimes necessary to make the world small on purpose.* It is the only way to stop migrating and find a new home. After the man on the bridge departed, Paris held in it a promise. It was a city where something akin to love had happened, and it was a city where it could happen again. (258, emphasis added)

Concluding Remarks

Cheah argues that “worlding in the derived sense presupposes worlding in the general sense, the prevailing of a world that follows from the sheer persistence of time”.[26] *The Book of Salt* privileges a discontinuous over a continuous perspective on temporality, which I see instantiated in Truong’s use of different narrative “now(s)”, in the novel’s intensely synesthetic and recombinatory imagination, and in an underlying intermedial strategy that, by means of an engagement with photography, stretches the borders of the literary medium. *The Book of Salt* recognizes the world as a horizon that is irreducible to any linear narrative temporality or ultimate meaning, yet a horizon that accommodates many different desires – and frequently frustrated attempts – to end a journey and create a *home.* The multiscale narrative of *The Book of Salt* “worlds a world” that alternatively – or perhaps complementarily – expands and shrinks. This entails, as Bình suggests, a nostalgia for places where one has never been. It is tantamount to recognizing, by virtue of a synesthetic openness, the vastness of an expanse one can never really possess nor master, but wherein one must somehow learn to make a home, momentarily shrinking the world to a livable extension by virtue of “ritual[s] in intimacy” (102): “[a] platter of fried eggs and a loaf of bread” (102), a family photograph. *The Book of Salt* demands that we ask what a world is or can be, and how its confines are continuously re-negotiated for making it livable. In Eng’s words, Bình, whose “queer desires and narrative voice illuminate an alternative human life-world, reveals the return of the subject. This position is precarious, however”.[27] For Eng, Bình’s emerges as a subject in the folds of history less as a full presence than as a ghostly supplement, as an interruption to colonial orchestrations of the world. Finally, as a text of Vietnamese American literature that recognizes and engages the world, Truong’s novel contributes to

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26 Cheah 2016, 9.

27 Eng 2008, 1486.

expand, shrink, but especially rethink, the geographical and historical dimensions of the Vietnam-U.S. dyad.

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Lisa Marchi

Intercultural Encounters, Translations, and Understanding as Smooth? Michael Cooperson's *Impostures* as a Translation Quandary

In *Born Translated*, Rebecca L. Walkowitz argues that "[t]he translation and circulation of literature today is historically unprecedented once we consider how quickly books enter various national markets, small and large, across several continents."[1] According to Walkowitz, nowadays an increasing number of contemporary novels are written for foreign audiences, rely on cross-linguistic circulation, and use translation as an intimate and powerful engine of production. Still, this apparently smooth intercontinental mobility of literary works together with their supple use of multiple languages and their favorable acceptance on the part of global readers may hide in fact subtle forms of linguistic and cultural dominance.

In this essay, I approach and critically evaluate Michael Cooperson's recent translation of one of the most celebrated works of medieval Arabic literature—al-Hariri's *Maqāmāt*—, a work that has been widely acclaimed. Published by the Library of Arabic Literature (NYU Press), *Impostures* won one of the Arab World's most prestigious and well-funded prizes—the 2020 Abu Dhabi Sheikh Zayed Book Award—and was one of the *Wall Street Journal*'s Top 10 Books of the Year. And yet, the praise and wide recognition with which this translation was welcomed internationally is rather surprising. Indeed, if we follow Pascale Casanova's strict division between the center and the peripheries, as theorized in *The World Republic of Letters* (2007), the book selected for translation by Cooperson would fall within those language systems and literary genres of the peripheries that, according to Casanova, are still struggling for dominance. How then did Cooperson's translation promote the upgrading and successful reception by the center of a premodern Arabic text displaying an obscure literary genre of the peripheries? In which ways did the translator manage to make such a peripheral text appealing to a global audi-

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[1] Walkowitz 2015, 2.

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ence? And finally, to what extent did the English translation of this Arabic work favor its cross-linguistic and transnational circulation?

Al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* is indeed a classic of Arabic premodern literature, one however that appears to have little literary capital outside the Arab world mainly because of its linguistic complexity and supposedly untranslatability. As Abdelfattah Kilito notes in "Perec and Al-Harīrī": "Translated into several languages, it has been illustrated many times by painters, this being another form of translation or commentary. However, all things considered, it is an untranslatable book."[2]

In this article, I advance the idea that Cooperson's *Impostures* represents a translation quandary, since al-Hariri's classic has not been "born-translated" and has therefore not been written for translation and with a foreign audience in mind. Most important, it is a medieval masterwork that strongly affirms its singularity and cultural difference, refusing to be diluted into a global monoculture. Accordingly, *Impostures* leads me to ask, provocatively, whether Cooperson's translation—in Susan Stanford Friedman's words—manages to make "Baghdad and Basra…part of America's story"[3], or his employment of fifty different registers of English together with his use of "a bewildering variety of historical, literary, and global styles"[4] is a mere extravaganza, a skillful imitation, a boastful exhibition, ultimately hindering rather than facilitating intercultural exchange and mutual understanding across cultural and religious divides.

Not only would translation take the form of an imposture once al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* is translated from its native language into English but the Arabic precapitalist genre of the *maqāmah* itself would disturb Franco Moretti's conviction that "form is the repeatable element"[5] of a literary world-system made in the image and likeness of global capitalism, which sees the novel as the international genre *par excellence* and a pregiven global standard. Far from being replicable, the *maqāmah* is indeed a form that is highly metamorphic, unreliable, and versatile; it is, as Kilito notes, "an amalgamation, for in it we find various genres, styles, registers and tones as well as literary appropriation of such nonliterary subjects such as jurisprudence."[6] Because of its intrinsic mixture and instability then, the *maqāmah* finds no equal within the so-called world literary system neatly organized according to Euro-American standards, which—as Emily Apter rightly notes—"relegate non-Western aesthetic modes to outlier status in the ecosystem of narrative forms."[7]

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[2] Kilito 2014, 136.

[3] Stanford Friedman 2007, 93.

[4] Cooperson 2020, xl.

[5] Moretti 2013, 86.

[6] Kilito 2014, 136.

In addition to that, al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* sabotages the idea that translation is merely a derivative product, a correspondence or an equivalent of the original. Because of its peculiar amalgamation of genres, its obscure style, and its numerous allusions to Islamic jurisprudence, religious science, religious literary sources, not to mention the "verbal miracles"[8] of the Arabic language, al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* is a work of art that when translated, refuses to correspond to the original. This is why, as Cooperson explains, across time and space, translators have resorted either to a strict lexical approach or to a wide array of other responses ranging from annotations to imitation. All these different approaches, however, in Cooperson's own words, "contributed nothing to making *Impostures* part of Anglophone literary culture."[9] With his original translation, mixing "foreignizing" and "domesticating" strategies,[10] Cooperson has attempted to remodel al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* to make it respond to American expectations and tastes, while also opening it up to a potential global audience.

By closely analyzing four selected episodes of *Impostures*, the article explores issues relating to linguistic translation, textual transcodification, identity crossings, and intercultural (mis)recognition; it further considers whether Cooperson's verbal tour-de-force and acts of transcodification have ultimately managed to make this Arabic classic part of American, and by extension Anglophone, literary culture.

Impostures: A Troubling Rather Than Amusing Translation

As Cooperson explains in the "Introduction": "Etymologically, *maqāmah* indicates any occasion when one stands, and by extension a speech made before an audience."[11] As the word *maqāmah* suggests, this literary genre is rooted in an embodied practice (the act of standing and/or listening or reciting); it further mixes rhymed prose with poetic passages and is characterized by rhetorical extravaganza in the form of word games, palindromes, puns, riddles and double entendre. The genre was “invented” by al-Hamadhānī (d. 1008) and emerged in the late tenth to early eleventh century, later spreading to Persian-Tadjik and Hebrew literatures, some even say to Europe adopting the form of the picaresque novel. What gives coherence and unity but also energy and force to the narration is not the form per se, which is extremely supple and capricious, but rather the performances carried out by the two main characters. The narrative is indeed subdivided into fifty stand-alone episodes, whose continuity is assured by the recurring appearance and embodied performances of the two main characters.[12] Structurally speaking then, Cooperson’s *Impostures* maintains this frame with its inner subdivision into separate episodes, while also placing great emphasis on the performative quality of the protagonist’s verbal achievements and itinerant habits.

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[7] Apter 2016, 11.

[8] Cooperson 2020, xxv.

[9] Cooperson 2020, xxxvi.

[10] Venuti 2002.

[11] Cooperson 2020 xviii, note 3.

Like al-Hamadhānī’s first collection, Al-Harīrī’s *Maqāmāt* stages two men who at first sight look poles apart: 1) Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī, a well-read, eloquent beggar, who has been chased out of his native town Sarūj by the Crusaders and, as Kilito underlines, “never appears twice in the same guise”[13] and “engages in roguery without compunction”[14]; 2) al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām, who is magnetically attracted by and in constant search for the striking verbal performances and the oratorical heights of Abū Zayd, an uncontrollable passion that causes him to often fall victim to his impostures.

Since I assume with Edward Said that a literary text is “worldly” and therefore rooted in a precise socio-historical and cultural context, I wish to ask in this essay: How did Cooperson manage to transfer the cultural specificities of this peculiar Arabic genre, characterized by vertiginous linguistic games and incessant roamings across the Islamicate world, to a global (read Anglophone) audience? What remains of the distinctive socio-political, religious, and historical context of the original text in Cooperson’s translation?

As the translator explains in his “Note on the Translation,” in order to make Al-Harīrī’s *Maqāmāt* legible to non-Arabophone readers, he resorted to three main translating strategies: 1) the imitation of recognized US or British authors, such as Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf, Frederick Douglass, to name just a few examples; 2) the use of global or ethno-specific varieties of English, among these Spanglish, Yiddish, Indian English, Singlish; 3) the use of specialized jargons like UCLA slang, cowboy lingo, and manager jargon.

Among the three translating strategies mentioned by Cooperson, the use of “ethno-specific varieties of speech and writing”[15] appears to be particularly problematic, since it raises uncomfortable questions regarding cultural appropriation, domestication, reinforcement and naturalization of monolingual pressures. I believe that these issues matter in debates about the role of American Studies on a global level and about the interaction of US literature with foreign cultures. In its updated twenty-first century Anglophone version, *Impostures* may indeed just end up being an *exercice de style*, in what Apter has called pejoratively "Globish" or, in other words, "corporate monolingualism heavily promoted by the digital humanities."[16] Cooperson's translation project of global reach may also risk elevating the translator to the rank of a "cultural universalizer, evangelizer of transcultural understanding."[17] These are the two main preoccupations that have pushed me to write this contribution.

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[12] Kilito 2020, xii.

[13] Kilito 2020, x.

[14] Kilito 2020, ix.

[15] Cooperson 2020, xliii, note 3.

Imitating Mark Twain: Familiarity, Competence, Ease

In Imposture 1, Cooperson makes the narrator al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām speak in the language of journeyman and satirist Mark Twain, an experienced traveler and a sharp observer of human nature and its flaws. This is how Imposture 1 opens:

> *That A-rab feller told us all about it:*
> I hadn't got any money, so I made up my mind to leave my loved ones behind, and sling a leg over the back of beyond, and see what luck I'd have. I had some adventures, which throwed me this way and that and th'other, but after a long time I landed in Sana, which is in the kingdom of Sheba. By the time I fetched up there, I was a sight to look at, without a cent in the world, or crumbs enough in my feed-bag to bait a fish-hook with. So I shoved off into town not knowing where I was going. What I was after was a fellow with a good heart in him, a fellow who'd help me, or leastways cheer me up with poetry and tales, and not look down on me for being so poor.[18]

The voice of the narrator, as Cooperson explains, is based on Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), a classic of US literature and a popular world literature text. In it, Twain uses vernacular speech, particularly "the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwood South-Western dialect; the ordinary 'Pike County' dialect; and four modified varieties of this last."[19] He further portrays the narrator as unreliable, someone who “told the truth mainly” in a book that “is mostly a true book; with some stretchers.”[20]

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[16] Apter 2016, 17.

[17] Apter 2019, 197.

[18] Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 13.

[19] Twain qtd. Levine 2017, 108 – 9.

Cooperson’s decision to imitate the narrative voice of *Huckleberry Finn* to communicate al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām’s adventures is quite effective. Both Twain’s masterpiece in guise of a translation and Al-Harīrī’s original text stress the importance of (vernacular) speech and of orality more generally, place an emphasis on the performative quality of speech, and follow the itineraries of an unreliable narrator and his twin.

Twain’s wanderlust, the ease with which he embodied many professions (riverboat pilot, miner, reporter, business man, writer etc.) together with the harsh criticism he expressed against mediocre people, small-minded bigots, and not so innocent American tourists make him a perfect Doppelgänger of the Arabic narrator al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām. However, readers who are unfamiliar with this US classic may feel estranged and incapable of getting all the cultural nuances expressed through Cooperson’s imitative translation. The sense of estrangement for non-US readers increases when the translator includes in episode 1 two nineteenth century temperance hymns, a group of songs that belong to a distinct US musical genre and were performed between the 1840s and 1920s to add new converts, promote temperance and moderation among believers, and prohibit the drinking of wine.

Imposture 1 closes with yet another tribute to a quintessentially US icon: Cab Calloway and his international hit “Minnie the Moocher” (1931). A talented vocalist and eccentric dancer, known for his exuberant performances and the use of onomatopoeic and nonsense syllables in his solo improvisations executed to entertain an audience of exclusively white patrons at the Cotton Club,[21] Calloway is included in *Impostures* to mirror Abū Zayd’s impressive rhetorical powers and make his art of disguise legible for US readers, particularly those familiar with swing and jazz music. The following passage is a good case in point:

> I got up and put on a preacher’s gown
> I spoke the good word to all the folks in town
> I took their fews n’ two and I bought a steak
> And I got me some wine and a honey cake
>
> Hi-dee hi-dee hi-dee hi!
> Hi-dee hi-dee hi-dee ho![22]

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[20] Twain qtd. Levine 2017, 109.

[21] For a critical reconstruction of the history of *The Cotton Club*, which had been “decorated with the idea of creating a ‘stylish plantation environment’ for its entirely white clientele,” see E. Winter 2007.

[22] Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 16.

Undoubtedly, by finding two iconic US counterparts—Huckleberry Finn and Cab Calloway—to express the biting satire and intoxicating performances of Abū Zayd, Cooperson facilitates the encounter between US readers and a premodern masterpiece of Arabic belle-letters. He further manages to render Abū Zayd's mastery of the Arabic language by reproducing in English the language acrobatics and scat lyrics of a popular 1930s jazz Black singer. However, the ease and rapidity with which US readers navigate and consume the English text may, in my opinion, hinder rather than facilitate intercultural understanding. The reader may indeed mistake ease with competence, facility with mastery, a false belief that may promote feelings of command and dominion, since the initial difficulty is easily resolved. As Doris Sommer notes with reference to the tight relation between readerly competence, minority literature, and textual conquests:

> Difficulty is a challenge, an opportunity to struggle and to win, to overcome resistance, uncover the codes, to get on top of it, to put one finger on the mechanisms that produce pleasure and pain, and then to call it ours. We take up an unyielding book to conquer it and to feel aggrandized, enriched by the appropriation and confidence that our cunning is equal to the textual tease of what was, after all, a planned submission as the ultimate climax or reading.[23]

Drawing from Sommer, Cooperson's *Impostures* may give US and global readers the wrong impression that intercultural competence and expertise can be acquired easily and with little effort. In addition to blurring the line separating cultural appropriation with intercultural understanding, which requires a genuine and real exchange rather than a seizure and a takeover, Cooperson's stylistic virtuosity risks opening the way to a disturbing form of mannerism, that is "an obsession with style and technique…, often outweigh[ing] the importance and meaning of subject matter."[24] As in mannerism, Cooperson's extremely skilled and polished craft tends to place "the highest value…upon the apparently effortless solution of intricate artistic problems" with the risk of oversimplifying an intercultural exchange that may in fact often be arduous and potentially fallible.[25]

Never in Cooperson's *Impostures* do US/Anglophone readers "feel the sting of exclusion"[26]; difference is indeed disguised as sameness, the unfamiliar takes on the false appearance of the familiar, spreading the wrong belief that intercultural encounters happen without any tension and are therefore straightforward and uncomplicated matters. The same limitations can be spotted more clearly in Imposture 34, where Cooperson addresses the issue of slavery, and privileges once again continuity and autoreferentiality.

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[23] Sommer 1994, 528.

[24] The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Mannerism."

[25] For a positive definition of "mannerism" in literary studies, see Curtius 1948. For a structural analysis of mannerism in Arabic poetry, see Sperl 1989.

[26] Sommer 1999, 2.

Abby Zane Alias Frederick Douglass: Adaptation, Dematerialization, Evaporation

To narrate Imposture 34, an episode in which al-Ḥārith visits the slave market and is cheated by the seller (who is in fact Abū Zayd or Abby Zane in disguise), Cooperson uses the voice of "one of the most prominent black leaders of the nineteenth century and one of the most eloquent orators in American public life"[27]: abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1818–1895). As Cooperson explains in the "Notes," the translation is modeled on Douglass's third and last biography *Life and Times* and the title of the episode "The fraud of slavery" is drawn precisely from that work. Abby Zane's narration in this episode is further intertwined with poetic passages, whose language reproduces the rhetoric and vocabulary used in "posters advertising the sale of enslaved persons in the United States, or announcing rewards for the capture of runaways."[28] Once again, the readers of *Impostures* are catapulted from Western Yemen back to the US:

> *Mr. Harress Ben Hammam related this outrage:*
> When I crossed the wilderness to Zabíd, I was accompanied by a boy whom I had brought up and raised to bodily strength and maturity of judgement. He had so far accustomed himself to my character that he was able to gratify my desires in every way and to anticipate my wants with perfect accuracy. No wonder that I had become deeply attached to him and trusted him without reserve, both at home and on the road. We had no sooner reached Zabíd, however, when he took ill and died.[29]

The central subject of this episode is slavery, since Imposture 34 centers on the selling of a boy at the slave market of Zabíd. The original Arabic text offers, in the words of Cooperson, "one of the most powerful denunciations of slavery"[30] included in a premodern text. Still, I wonder how much of the original condemnation actually reaches the Anglophone reader and to what extent Cooperson's decision to imitate the language of an iconic US abolitionist, such as Frederick Douglass, really contributes to illuminate the practice of slavery in early Islamicate history.

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[27] Miller 2002, 1814.

[28] Cooperson 2020, 323.

[29] Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 316.

[30] Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 315.

In other words, what happens if we bring the little-known history of the Zabíd's slave trade in relation to the more famous New Orleans Slave Auction as Cooperson does in *Impostures?* Isn't there the risk of erasing meaningful differences and of transforming two distinctive cities with their own specific histories of racial slavery into a dematerialized sameness? Finally, does this dematerialization also cause the historic atrocity of slavery to evaporate and disappear?

On the one hand, Cooperson's translation has certainly the merit of having lifted what David Gakunzi has called "the taboo" concerning the Arab-Muslim slave trade, by juxtaposing it with the more famous Trans-Atlantic slave trade.[31] On the other, Cooperson's translation of episode 34 retains little of the foreignness of the original and therefore fails in the end to educate readers about the specific locale, history, and politics, in which the so-called "veiled genocide"—to quote Tidiane N'Diaye's important study—took place.[32] Undoubtedly, Cooperson's translation makes the painful experience of an enslaved boy in a remote Yemeni slave market accessible to US readers. However, as Douglass himself had noted, a free, white person "cannot see things in the same light with the slave, because he does not, and cannot, look from the same point from which the slave does."[33] Reminding readers of their specific location and ensuing limited perspective may be an important gesture when approaching a literary work steeped in a foreign culture. Even more so, if the text in question addresses African slavery in the Islamicate world.

Chicanos, New York Gangsters, and Marginal Roughs: Rhapsody, Artifice, Fabrication

The general tendency to eliminate cultural distance and any "indigestible residue,"[34] which may force US readers particularly, and Anglophone readers more generally, to hesitate a bit, take notice of the foreignness of the original text, and consequently put their "voracious mastery"[35] on hold for a while, is even more evident in episode 16. In order to reproduce the *maghribiyyah* or "Far Western" location of Abū Zayd in Imposture 16, Cooperson uses Spanglish as a "far-Western variety of English" interspersed with bits of Cervantes and the Spanish

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[31] Gakunzi 2018.

[32] N'Diaye 2017.

[33] Douglass qtd. Sommer 1994, 532.

[34] Sommer 1999, 15.

[35] Sommer 1999, 15.

Bible to convey Abū Zayd's Qur'anic and literary allusions.[36] Cooperson's geographical, linguistic, and cultural transition from the Medieval province of al-Andalus to the contemporary Chicano borderland produces paradoxically, what Jacob Rama Berman in *American Arabesque* has called, with reference to nineteenth-century American culture, an "arabesque aesthetics so unmoored, so uniquely American."[37] The following passage is particularly telling in this sense:

> *El Xaret Benamam tol' us:*
> Una vez I assisted a la prejer de la tarde en una mezquita de Marruecos. Cuando finishé la parte obligatoria y two more rakas for if the flies, I noticed un grupo de amigos who seemed closer than fingernails and grime. Se habían retirado off to the side, donde they were havin' una animada discusíon full of guiticismos. Ahora como ustedes saben I'm always buscando new giros de frase. So I go op to them like a crasheador de bailes.[38]

Cooperson's original choice in employing forms of speech that have been historically downgraded by the monolingual ideal is absolutely praiseworthy; this translating practice, however, has its own limits since, as Cooperson himself explains, it is essentially "a re-creation" which "relies on borrowing, adaptation, calques, and humorously literal transpositions of idioms."[39] This is, in the end, a fictional language that once again hinders rather than facilitates the reader's encounter with cultural difference generally, and with the (often painful) historical and lived experience of Chicanos in the US particularly. This amusing yet artificial translation fails, quoting Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, to "drive home the point that any undertaking on behalf of the world should be an acknowledgment and a remediation of existing historical wrongs, inequities, and imbalances and not a rhapsodic celebration of the ideal elsewhereness of the world."[40]

In ways similar to a World Literature field that tries to be all-embracing, dissolves difference into sameness, and annuls antagonisms of all sorts, Cooperson's *Impostures* appears to be menaced by the same risk. To quote Apter: "promoting an ethic of liberal inclusiveness or the formal structures of cultural similitude, often has the collateral effect of blunting political critique."[41] Despite its good intentions and the translator's undeniable talent, *Impostures* gradually emerges as a world curled in itself, self-centered, and innocent of politics, while giving the impression of being open to differences of all sorts. Rather than reproducing the destabilizing multiplicity of the original, shifting between *genres* and discourses but also between the cultural masculine elite and its popular, streetwise counterpart, Cooperson's English translation seems to reinvigorate cultural homogeneity; while circulating the dream of one globally legible world, *Impostures* paradoxically reinforces isolated cultural niches. The transformation of the 51 episodes into "self-enclosed cultural compartments"[42] tends to propagate the cultural partitions that World Literature is sometimes accused of producing and reproducing.

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[36] Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 135.
[37] Berman 2012, 24.
[38] Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 135–6.
[39] Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 143.
[40] Radhakrishnan 2016, 1402.
[41] Apter 2013, 41.

The fabrication of a fictional language system disguised as authentic is brought to the extreme in episode 7, in which the protagonist is made to speak, in the translator's own words, "the argot spoken by mid-nineteenth-century swindlers, thieves, rowdies in New York as compiled by George Matsell (chief of police in NY) in his *Vocabulum; or the Rough's Lexicon* (1859)."[43] This was, as Cooperson himself admits, "a literary language" that was hardly spoken by anyone and is therefore made-up and inauthentic. The same definition can also be applied to specialized jargons like UCLA slang, cowboy lingo, and manager jargon, which Cooperson also uses and which call to mind Apter's definition of "Globish" as "an instrumental, impoverished basic English, a language of branding and digital communication, a 'patois of managementese.'"[44] Both the supposedly place- and time-specific argot of NYC and Apter's "Globish" are fabricated languages and therefore in the end commodities that can circulate across the globe without much impediment.

Never is untranslatability recognized as a value in *Impostures* nor is the importance of a respectful distance emphasized as a contractionary gesture capable of balancing what Apter has defined with reference to World Literature as the otherwise unlimited "expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavors."[45] In a similar way, Cooperson's translation project of global reach often glosses over and refuses to bring home the frictions, silences, untranslatables, irreducible differences, and strategic refusals that are also an essential part of the intercultural encounter. This absence, even if initially comforting, becomes extremely daunting after a while, since it reinforces the wrong conviction that intercultural encounters are essentially smooth, horizontal, and fluid. This is exactly the opposite of what literary education should teach, if we want our students to be aware of and well equipped with tools that allow them to navigate a world made up of inequalities and unassimilable differences of all sorts. Indeed, as Sommer notes: "If we manage to include among our reading requirements the anticipation of strategic refusals, because differences coexist and do not reduce to moments in a universal history of understanding, this will be no minor adjustment, but a halting yet more promising approach."[46]

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[42] Hiddleston 2016, 1391.

[43] Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 59.

[44] Apter 2016, 17.

[45] Apter 2013, 2.

The Risk of "Oneworldedness": Coverage, Incorporation, Standardization

On the whole, *Impostures* participates in the formation of what Sherry Simon calls "new forms of knowledge, new textual forms, new relationships to language,"[47] since it makes a new textual form (the *maqāmah*) available to Anglophone readers; it further enables their encounter with a very rich and rather unfamiliar form of knowledge (that of medieval Arabic oral culture and its aesthetics of verbal wonder), in which the linguistic medium emerges as a supple and ambiguous tool, an instrument of communication that can be used either to impress and mesmerize or to cheat and deceive. In that sense, it enriches the target language with an incredible series of variations and potentialities.

Furthermore, *Impostures* deserves credit for showing Anglophone readers that Sana, Basra, and Zabíd may be good sites from which to rethink the world republic of letters, particularly the binaries secular vs. religious, modern vs. medieval, central vs. peripheral, which are generally used to classify literary works along the line of what Casanova has called the "Greenwich meridian" of world literary culture.[48] *Impostures* blurs these artificial divisions, showing that the world created by al-Harīrī is extremely changeable, ambiguous, and dynamic. Despite these important qualities, *Impostures* tends, in my opinion, to reproduce a world in which English is the dominant language or a colonial linguistic residue (as in the case of Nigerian, Indian, and Singaporean Englishes) and the so-called Global South is reduced, as it is often the case in works that engage the globe, to "a physical setting for American culture."[49] It follows that the rich and heterogeneous world of Al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* emerges paradoxically and unexpectedly as "oneworldedness," that is "as a relatively untractable monoculture that travels through the world absorbing difference."[50]

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[46] Sommer 1999, xv.

[47] Simon 2018, 160.

[48] Casanova 2007.

[49] Aboul-Ela 2018, 20.

[50] Apter 2013, 83.

If Wolfgang Goethe's nineteenth-century formulation of world literature relied, according to Baidik Bhattacharya, "on the empire for material as well as symbolic organization as an innocent roadmap to chart the worldly trajectories of literature,"[51] so Cooperson's *Impostures* appears to reproduce "the imperial standardization of cultural practices,"[52] albeit in an updated globalized version. His translation, in other words, does not trouble received definitions of the global produced in the so-called First World but rather reinforces them by following a program of "relentless coverage."[53] It further refuses, in the words of Vilashini Cooppan, "to imagine the other as other" and "to locate the other in space-times not our own."[54] In *Impostures*, the Other disturbingly coincides with the Self, who is located in a familiar space and time. Cooperson indeed takes out the original text from its native culture and reinscribes it alternatively on the banks of the lower Mississippi river in the mid-nineteenth century, in 1818 Maryland, in the Chicano "Far West" of the 1970s, and in the underworld of NYC in the first half of the 19th century. In doing so, he contributes—if we follow Issa J. Boullata's harsh words in "The Case for Resistant Translation"—to "violate [...] a text by taking it out of its culture and inscribing it into another."[55]

I definitely see in Cooperson's work "the attitude of sympathy and attraction necessary for effective translation"[56]; and yet, when reflecting on the relationship to otherness that his translation enables, the following doubts arise: What kind of intercultural encounters and transactions does Cooperson's translation promote? To what extent is translation, in the illuminating words of Apter, "an act of love, and an act of disruption [...] a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements?"[57]

At least as I see it, *Impostures* does not seem to pose any limit or obstacle to the reader's potentially infinite capacity of universal comprehension; it does not invite him/her to proceed with caution when engaged with a medieval Arabic masterpiece, to the point that its readers, in Sommer's own words, may easily "mistake a privileged center for the universe."[58] The effortless fluidity and consequent detachment that *Impostures* promotes recalls the ‘frictionlessness’ of some of the works included in the now *à la mode* rubric of World Literature. To quote Christian Thorne in “The Sea is not a Place”: “And world literature is the name for a certain tendency toward abstraction within the global literary system, the propensity of works aiming for an international readership to make themselves frictionless.”[59] *Impostures*, in my opinion, fails to transpose the reader to what Marina Warner has called “the motley, mobile, tumultuous, polyglot and polymorphous urban culture of the Levant”[60], even though I recognize that it transposes her/him to many other, often fictional locations. It further misses the opportunity to offer, in Pheng Cheah’s own words, “the image and timing of another world.”[61] The (world) community that *Impostures* re-creates is indeed an overwhelmingly American one, to the point that we as readers are never confronted with the disturbing feeling that the type of reading we are performing—to borrow Edwidge Danticat’s apt formulation—, is a dangerous one, capable of placing us outside our center of gravity.[62] Especially US readers feel extremely safe and incredibly at home in *Impostures*, as the Other speaks in the familiar voice of the Self.

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[51] Bhattacharya 2018, 9.
[52] Bhattacharya 2018, 7.
[53] Radhakrishnan 2016, 1402.
[54] Cooppan 2009, 39.
[55] Boullata 2003, 29.
[56] Simon 2018, 163.
[57] Apter 2006, 6.
[58] Sommer 1999, xii.

Far from following Michel Serres’s precious advice in *The Troubadour of Knowledge* to embark on a risky journey to truly encounter the Other, the readers of *Impostures* remain comfortably seated in their usual chairs. Serres’s invitation to “[d]epart: go forth. Leave the womb of your mother, the crib, the shadow cast by your father’s house and the landscapes of your childhood”[63] remains unheeded. The world fabricated in *Impostures* has indeed the familiar design of one’s all too known living room. It follows that the US readers of *Impostures* feel competent and at ease as they navigate the text, in ways similar to the educated readers targeted by Sommer in *Proceed with Caution*. They even feel, quoting Sommer again, “entitle[d] to know a text, possibly with the possessive and reproductive intimacy of Adam-who-knew-Eve.”[64] And this, I argue in this article, is certainly an imposture, since culturally foreign texts require a more discreet and humble engagement on the part of their readers. Among others, Lorna Burns has underlined the danger in World Literature of erasing meaningful difference for the sake of self-identification. To quote Burns: “By prioritizing the national as the primary identification of the reader and the text, world literature emerges as a process of extending outwards to impose national values on works that bear the signs of difference and, at the same time, as resistance to complete acceptance of the foreign text as recognizable literature."[65]

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[59] Thorne qtd. Burns 2019, 31.

[60] Warner 2012, 20.

[61] Cheah 2008, 36.

[62] Danticat 2010.

[63] Serres 2006, 8.

[64] Sommer 1994, 524.

Despite these limits, Cooperson's *Impostures* is undoubtedly a passionate, important, and dedicated work of translation, one that forewarns readers of the lures and perhaps even the swindles not only of World Literature but also of translation projects with a global reach. Indeed, as David J. Roxburgh writes with reference to al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt:* "Although Abu Zayd uses his linguistic brilliance and guile to dupe people, no one is ever really hurt as a result but is instead deprived of money, valuables, other personal possessions, or the kindness expected in light of the hospitality they extended to a stranger. Those tricked by Abu Zayd survive with bruised egos, their human frailties exposed."[66] It is then not only the frailties of the readers' damaged egos that *Impostures* splendidly exposes, but also those of global translation projects and of World Literature themselves.

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[65] Burns 2019, 25.

[66] Roxburgh 2013,172.

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Cinzia Schiavini

Muslim Gatsby(s) in the Shadow of the Towers: Trans-codifications of *The Great Gatsby* in Twenty-first Century Pakistani-American Fiction

The Great Gatsby, American identity, and ethnicity

The question at the core of this essay originates from the encounter between the national and the transnational in the wake of 9/11, and from the narratives about – or without – the nation: why (and how) has Gatsby, probably the most famous literary embodiment of the American Dream, become a matrix for the depiction of parables of rise and fall in ethnic transnational literature of the twenty-first century?

The Great Gatsby's influence on the American literary imagination is so pervasive that it has been said to have cast a "long shadow" on the decades following its publication.[1] The title character's evolution into an archetype, both American and universal, has been read as the consequence of how Gatsby merges materialism and idealism[2], and expresses in idealistic forms the "economy of desire" that has so powerfully molded the nature and discourse of American economy and ideology[3] from Benjamin Franklin to Steve Jobs. Besides shaping hegemonic narratives about American identity, *The Great Gatsby* has also been an inspiration for several of the most important ethnic novels from the Thirties onwards.

The reasons Fitzgerald's masterpiece has been so appealing to ethnic writers are rooted in the ethnic echoes and allusions of the text itself. From the genealogical mysteries of the "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere,"[4] a man who "could have sprung more easily from the swamps of Louisiana or from the lower East Side of New York" (Fitzgerald 2021, 35), to Gatsby's wooing of Daisy, which for Tom is tantamount to "intermarriage between black and white" (Fitzgerald 2021, 84), *The Great Gatsby* inspires debate and reflections on ethnicity, as many contemporary studies underline. In the last twenty years, an abundance of works has drawn attention to the dynamics of racialization in the novel and tried to question, and in some ways disso-

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[1] Anderson 1985.

[2] Balestra 2019.

[3] Izzo 2015.

[4] Fitzgerald 2021, 84. Heretofore cited parenthetically in the text.

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ciate, *The Great Gatsby* and the attraction of a universalized, imperial American ideal. Some notable examples include Walter Ben Michaels's analysis of the anxieties over race embedded in Fitzgerald's text (1997); Carlyle Van Thompson's study (2004); and Meredith Goldsmith's essay (2003), that retraces African-American and ethnic allusions and modes of self-definition in Jay Gatsby's story; Joseph Vogel's (2015), that explores the afterlives of Fitzgerald's novel as a multimedia text in the Obama era; and Benjamin Schreier's (2007), who deconstructs previous readings about the racial identities in a novel that, as he argues, is pervaded by a lack of faith in the stability and national significance of identity.

The interrelation between the universalized American ideal and embedded ethnicities in the novel is evident: Gatsby's attempt to experience "something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" (Fitzgerald 2021, 116), so redolent of immigrants' hopes and expectations, invites a convergence, rather than an opposition, of the ethnic dreams and the "economy of desire" at the heart of American ideology, whose power of attraction has widened globally and has generated, especially from the last decade of the twentieth century onwards, a variety of forms of physical displacement and cultural deterritorialization. While Gatsby's obscure origins and surname imply a foreignness rooted in the old world, with allusions to racial diversities (the black vs white dichotomy and the fear of miscegenation) that date back to the origins of the history of the United States, the forms of Otherness in the twenty-first century, often the result of post-colonial scenarios, are no less threatening, especially after 9/11.

While the reasons for Gatsby's ethnic afterlives are rooted within the novel, historical and social contexts are also crucial to understanding the widespread influence of Fitzgerald's masterpiece during the first decade of the twentieth-first century. Seen from a US-centered perspective, the 1920s and the beginning of the twenty-first century have many elements in common: the scars left by unprecedented war scenarios (the First World War and the War on Terror) American society had to face; and the devastating economic crises, the Great Depression and the Great Recession, caused by the losses of financial speculation. Moreover, in both decades the urban setting (and New York in particular) ended up catalyzing the popular imagination as a synonym for economic success and excess, and, at the same time, as the site of encounters or clashes with "Otherness", that has, in turn, contributed to the dissemination of the dream – with the associated narrative of the dreamer's rise and fall – elsewhere, far beyond American borders.

Gatsby's contemporary ethnic afterlives encompass several shades of post-coloniality, as Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* testifies[5]. O'Neill himself, in commenting on his novel (and on his Trinidadian Gatsby), pointed out that "we're living in a globalized world, and as a consequence, the American dream narrative which is commonly attributed to Gatsby simply doesn't work as a current premise"[6]. Yet, there are many facets and contradictions of Gatsby's world and Fitzgerald's analysis of that world extant in the post-national context: the relationships between center and peripheries (whether national or transnational), between outsiders and insiders, Self and Other, and the role played by "the American Dream" on a national and global scale.

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[5] See Snyder 2013.

The Asian Dream and the Pakistani Gatsby(s)

The process of redefining borders and boundaries inevitably involves questioning the ideological and cultural backgrounds of a nation and the increasing forms of deterritorialization of its culture. If the focus shifts to the Asian world, the similarities between the American 1920s and the beginning of the new millennium in the Asian context are even more striking. As Nina Martyris noted in her review of some contemporary Indian and Pakistani novels,

> The story of Rising Asia has been described, correctly, as capitalism on crack. It has invited comparisons with America's Gilded Age and Jazz Age, periods marked by the accumulation of enormous personal fortunes as well as great social upheaval in the form of strikes, financial scandals, and industrial expansion. […] Asia is now going through a version of the American belle époque. And the Asian economic boom has begun to produce a similar shelf of literature that explores the dazzling as well as the more nightmarish facets of the Asian Dream, from the exuberance of material wealth and the hope it has unleashed to the frightening inequality, injustice, and ecocide undergirding it. […] Shaped by the unbounded mythos of globalization, the Asian Dream makes the American Dream sound like the American Dream Lite, not just in terms of scale but also, since a whole century of moral permissiveness divides the two, in terms of the hedonism accompanying it.[7]

While, according to Martyris, the Asian Dream at the end of the twentieth century resembled the American Dream of the Gilded Age, the turn of the millennium marked a significant shift and heralded a more disillusioned vision of the future, with the emergence of tales more cautionary in tone about Asian prospects. This shift can be detected especially in Pakistani transnational fiction, written mainly by writers educated in England or the United States and situating themselves in liminal positions between East and West. In their reshaping of postcolonial forms of migrancy, several of these writers (such as Nadeem Aslam, Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, Ali Sethi, Mohammed Hanif, Maha Khan, and H. M. Naqvi) have explored the continuities between the American and the Asian Dream, as well as the aftermath and consequences of social and political reconfigurations of the "here" and "elsewhere", especially after Pakistan became the eye of the storm in the War on Terror. As Paul Veyret noted, "Pakistani fiction in English participates in a global movement of both inscription and displacement of borders, suggesting in the writing of its authors a tension between defined lines and their erasure, between rigid frames of reference and its permeability. These authors' fiction stands at the juncture of the paradoxical space expressed by a poetics of deterritorialization, displacement, and fragmentation."[8]

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[6] Reilly 2011, 13.

[7] Martyris 2014, 175–6.

It is not surprising that, almost one hundred years on, the ghost of Gatsby lives on in the dreams and hopes of migrants coming from the Asian world in 9/11 narratives, especially in the novels of Pakistani-American writers and their exploration and reconfiguration of the US role on the world scale.

In this essay, the investigation of the Pakistani afterlives of *The Great Gatsby* focuses on three novels written between 2007 and 2013: H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* (2009), Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013). Moshin Hamid and H. M. Naqvi have been labeled "in-outsiders" by critics:[9] they are both Pakistani-born authors who migrated to the US to attend university and left the country after the terrorist attacks and the rise of Islamophobia, and although they are sometimes labeled "Muslim-Americans", it would be more apt to define them as transnational. The first two novels are part of the so-called 9/11 fiction, while *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* moves beyond 9/11 and American borders and shifts the focus to the deterritorialized form of the American Dream. These novels constitute a funhouse where Gatsby's shadow is depicted and refracted in a wide range of forms.

In H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* (2009), both the "new Nick" and the "new Gatsby" are Pakistanis. The former is the narrator Chuck, who has recently migrated to the US from Karachi in order to attend New York University and he subsequently becomes a successful financial advisor; the latter is Shah, or "the Shaman", whose memorable parties in his villa in upstate New York are the peak of the protagonist's mundane activity. It is the disappearance of the Shaman after 9/11, and the subsequent search for him, "the Shaman Run", that will lead to the arrest of the protagonist and his two friends, with them being suspected of being a sleeper cell and the Shaman of being a terrorist.

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[8] Veyret 2018, 3–4.

[9] Nordinger 2018, 59.

In Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), the character most evidently linked to Gatsby is Jim, the inspirational American boss of a financial company, Underwood Samson. A man of humble and obscure origins, who chases the status that only "old money" can bring, he is a source of inspiration for Changez, the Karachi-born, immigrant narrator (and, in many ways Nick Carraway's heir), who envisions for himself – in the period before 9/11 – a successful life in the United States.

The last novel, Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), disrupts the binary opposition between narrator and protagonist and merges the Gatsby matrix and the popular form of the self-help book, turning Gatsby's dream into a formula (potentially) applicable everywhere, including the far East. Here the would-be Gatsby is the resourceful protagonist, capable of climbing the whole ladder of Pakistani society, whose dreams will end not in physical, but with economic death – when he falls victim to financial fraud.

In each of these texts, Gatsby's story is connected to Pakistani identity and, thus, to the Muslim world, the Other par excellence in the aftermath of 9/11.[10] Investigating how "Gatsby's ghosts" have been used to mobilize the idea of Alterity and overcome the binary opposition that 9/11 induced, these novels question the political and cultural position of the US on a world scale, through the multiple facets and destinies of the American Dream.

A Dream buried in the Ruins of the towers: H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*

Homeboy, H. M. Naqvi's debut novel, is a first-person narrative whose protagonist, Chuck, a young male middle-class Pakistani, arrived in New York City from Karachi to attend New York University on a scholarship, four years prior to the events of the plot. A self-proclaimed cosmopolitan and "metrosexual"[11] and initially a literature student, Chuck then becomes an investment banker analyst. When the company unexpectedly fires him after less than one year, in July 2001, Chuck decides to take a sabbatical and become a taxi driver. In the meantime, he enjoys the New York nightlife, clubbing with his friends: AC, a Pakistani immigrant and Ph.D. scholar, financially supported by his older sister Mini, who emigrated in the early 80s and is now a pillar of the Pakistani middle-class community;

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[10] On the relation between Pakistani identity and Muslim identity, see Chambers 2011, 122–134; Kanwal 2015.

[11] Naqvi 2009, 4. Heretofore cited parenthetically in the text.

and DJ Jimbo, born and raised in Jersey City, one of the largest American hubs of Arabs and Muslims – where he grew up with his father, Old Man Khan, and his sister Amo. Certain that they had their "fingers on the pulse of the great global dialectic" (Naqvi 2009, 1), the trio has to change their minds after 9/11; especially after the failed attempt to discover what happened to a not-so-close friend, Mohammed Shah, "The Pakistani Gatsby" (Naqvi 2009, 21), whose parties they used to attend. Found by the police in Shah's house, the three friends are suspected of being in a terrorist cell and are subsequently imprisoned, denied their rights, and almost starved. When they are finally released Chuck, despite his love for Jimbo's sister Amo, decides to return to Pakistan – his future somewhere else, at least for a while.

In Naqvi's novel, Fitzgerald is referred to from the very epigraph, through a quote about the 1920s from "The Crack-Up" (1945) and the "big sudden blows that come" and make you "realize with finality that in some regard you will never be a good man again" (qt. in Naqvi 2009) – a quote that creates a parallel between the Twenties and 9/11 that runs beneath the surface of the whole text.

There are few similarities between the plots of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Naqvi's *Home Boy*, and the Gatsby figure in the latter is, significantly, an absence rather than a presence. He is referred to twice by Chuck before the "Shaman run"; then he comes to life (or to death) again when the trio explores his empty house and, at the end of the novel, when his obituary is found in the newspaper. The similarities are instead more evident between the characters of the two books, the clearest of which is the Pakistani Gatsby, Shah, who, despite his absence from the stage, is nevertheless crucial in the development of the plot, to the point that he becomes its epicenter. The Shaman and Fitzgerald's protagonist share many common traits, from their obscure origins and rapid ascent to their capability for self-invention, and their attempt to create their own narratives:

> A drifter, a grifter, an American success story, a Pakistani Gatsby. Apparently he quite literally jumped ship back and subsisted day to day, hand to mouth for years, working gas stations along Palisades Parkway and Queens Boulevard. This, however, was mostly hearsay. A few things we knew for sure: he told the Long Island natives whom he courted at hotel bars that he was an Arab sheikh, and sometimes it worked. In recent history the Shaman had managed to secure a position at a top-tier insurance company, and suddenly though not entirely unexpectedly, he was on the up and up. In celebration, he had leased a scarlet Mercedes 500 SEL and mortgaged one of those rubblestone and wood houses in Westbrook, Connecticut, where he hosted ostentatious parties while slinking soberly on the periphery. (Naqvi 2009, 21)

The Shaman's retreat in upstate New York (bought with a mortgage), his ostentatious car (bought on lease), the parties where he was often "nowhere to be seen" (Naqvi 2009, 80) except for when he appeared in a "white linen jacket, a cream t-shirt, and baggy trousers" (Naqvi 2009, 81), and his allegedly illicit business affairs in the cigarette market are not the only traits he shares with Fitzgerald's character. Mohammed Shah is also an isolated man, whose parties are an antidote to the loneliness of his life, as the trio finds out when they explore his empty house. Like Gatsby, he is a man who will never be known for what he is, neither in life nor in death. His obituary in the newspaper, entitled "Mohammed 'Mo' shah: no friend of fundamentalism", radically differs from the person he was and the life he led, and underlines the Shaman's inability to fully control his own narrative – an inability that becomes evident, just as in *The Great Gatsby*, with his death. As Peter Morey notices, "the column paints a picture of someone unrecognizable from the party-throwing, cigarette-smuggling, pornography-consuming man about town Chuck remembers. He is made into an archetypal 'good Muslim,' fixed and valorized in death […]. The short obituary co-opts Mo as it misrepresents him— the final instance of the split between appearance and reality that has been at the heart of the novel's preoccupations. There is no space for the real Mo Shah outside of the 'good Muslim/bad Muslim' paradigm."[12]

His death in the fall of the towers allows Naqvi to point his finger at the Islamophobia that 9/11 unleashed, but it also reinforces the interpretation of 9/11 as a "loss of innocence" – in this case, with the loss of one of the dreamers of the American Dream, a recurring trope in the interpretation of American history and a foundational element of its literature.[13]

Similarities also abound between the narrators of *The Great Gatsby* and *Home Boy.* Like Nick Carraway, Chuck is a newcomer too, naïve and innocent, and with strong ties to his widowed mother (after his father's suicide), whose moral support and advice orients his choices. Both are employed in the financial sector: Nick was in the bond business, Chuck gets a job in banking after his graduation, because it "seemed grand at the time, and I looked and played the part" (Naqvi 2009, 29). In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick, feels like "a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler" (Fitzgerald 2021, 7) after just a couple of days in New York; after briefly feeling lost, in *Home Boy* Chuck feels at home in the city to the point that he declares that "I'd since claimed the city and the city had claimed me" (Naqvi 2009, 3). In both novels, it is Gatsby's death that leads to the narrators returning home (although in *Home Boy* this private loss is significantly within the public/collective one and its repercussions), despite their love for an American woman and the prospect of a successful career. Like Fitzgerald, Naqvi too depicts a circular journey marked by disillusionment, where the escape (and the return), be it to the Midwest or Karachi, is “not so much a destination as a frame of mind” (Naqvi 2009, 199). More than in Fitzgerald’s national context however, these patterns of return in novels set at the time of 9/11 are “interruptions of an experiment in cultural mobility”, as Birgit Däwes notes,[14] with the sphere of movement shifting from a national or domestic scale to a transnational space.

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[12] Morey 2018, 149.

[13] Gray 2011, 2–4.

The similarities between Nick and Chuck also extend to the narrators’ role and voice. Although Chuck is more mundane and ironic than Nick, they are both reliable narrators, and the moral center of the texts. Despite Chuck being Pakistani, his voice is full of echoes of American culture: his self-irony, his humor, and his use of the idiom of American youth culture are indebted to several American narrators, the most evident being Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (published in 1951 and itself influenced by Fitzgerald’s works), who is referenced in a key moment in the novel, when Chuck has to decide what direction his life will take and reflects on Holden’s question, “Where do the ducks fly in winter?” (Naqvi 2009, 245). And the answer will be the same: far away.

The affinity between Fitzgerald’s and Naqvi’s novels can be further perceived in the narrators’ relation to the city and the portrayal of New York, with the American metropolis on the eve of 9/11 being depicted as a “whole city [that] can turn into a feast in no time”[15], explicitly echoing the Jazz age. Despite their migrant/immigrant status and their refusal to conform to the respectable city life the previous generations aspired to, the trio in *Home Boy* is remembered by Chuck as the center of the social scene, welcomed in nightclubs and embraced by the fashionable world of Jimbo’s blue blood fiancée – people without whom “New York’s not New York” (Naqvi 2009, 18). The ethnic contiguity the city seemed to embrace and encourage at that moment in time, very much reminiscent of Fitzgerald, is evident in the cosmopolitanism the protagonist and New York seem to share: “we had the Russians, the postcolonial canon, but had been taken by the brash, boisterous voice of contemporary American fiction; we watched nature documentaries when we watched TV, and variety shows on Telemundo” (Naqvi 2009, 1). However, like Nick in *The Great Gatsby*, when Chuck looks back on those days, from his outsider’s perspective, he’s aware that that world was a “masquerade” (Naqvi 2009, 17): “At the time we didn’t think that there was more to it than the mere sense of spectacle. We were content in celebrating ourselves and our city with libation […] later we also realized that we hadn’t been putting on some sort of show for others, for somebody else. No, we were protagonists in a narrative that required coherence for our own selfish motivations and exigencies” (Naqvi 2009, 6).

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[14] Däwes 2011, 214.

[15] Golimowska 2016, 90.

This masquerade and this ostentatious world has, however, its counterbalance: like *The Great Gatsby*, *Home Boy* creates an urban dichotomy by opposing the glamorous Manhattan with a "new" valley of ashes – in this case Jersey City, where Jimbo's sister and father, Amo and Old Man Khan, live. Two entirely separate universes divided by the Hudson, Jersey City is, as Chuck says, "like Manhattan gone awry" (Naqvi 2009, 44). It is the realm of the working class and the underclass, largely Muslim, shaped – both before and after 9/11 – by economic rules and by the processes of "Othering", of ethnic and economic marginalization and exclusion. In both Fitzgerald's and Naqvi's novels, it is this marginalization and exclusion that leads the two different "underworlds" to strike back and become the agents of suicidal death, individual as well as collective – be it Gatsby's murder by Mr. Wilson (followed by the latter's suicide) or the 9/11 suicidal attacks led by Middle-Eastern terrorists, whose previous economic and military involvement with the United States is underlined by AC in one of his attempts to find meaning after the tragedy.

As a consequence, in both novels death results in a sense of loss – the loss of life and the loss of meaning – the latter crucial in post-9/11 fiction. The void left by the towers, so pervasive in 9/11 iconography, is flanked in *Home Boy* by two significant absences/deaths around which Chuck's life in the US and in Pakistan is built: the Pakistani Gatsby and his father. While the Shaman's destiny will finally be revealed, Chuck's father's disappearance (probably a suicide) will never be explained to the narrator, thus resulting in an emotional and epistemological void in his life, that establishes a parallel between Chuck's two worlds, the US and Pakistan.[16]

The double ending in *Home Boy* is significant for both the cross-reference to Fitzgerald's novel and the transposition of the text to a contemporary ethnic context. The first, as said, is the solution to the mystery of the Shaman's disappearance – his tragic death in the fall of the towers – through the discovery of the newspaper article on his death. The second ending shifts the focus to Chuck, whose story does not end with the reunion with his family in Karachi, but, after his decision and preparation for his departure, with a description of a migrant's arrival in New York:

> You take a flight from Karachi to Manchester to New York. Stretch your mouth at Immigration when you say 'Haya doin'?' This may expedite the process. They appreciate familiar

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[16] Cilano underlines how: "the Shaman serves as one of the narrative's absences, and the revelation of his death well after the three friends stand falsely accused of terrorism highlights the insufficiencies of post-9/11 domestic discourses that racially profile brown-skinned, apparently Muslim men. The novel's other absence involves Chuck's father, whose death in 1985, when Chuck was only around five years old, establishes a parallel between that historical moment and the novel's post-9/11 present" (Cilano 2013, 201).

> idiom. Don't get into a car with the man with sunglasses. Hail a yellow cab at the curb. You will cross miserable swaths of Queens: empty playgrounds bordered by barbed wire, boarded-up rowhouses, signs for MOT LS. […] This will jar your sensibilities. You will think: *Is this it? America, land of the free, from sea to shining sea? Where are the skyscrapers? The long-legged blondes?* (Naqvi 2009, 215)

Regarding this epilogue, reminiscent of the "boats against the current" Fitzgerald evokes in the last lines, Morey notes how

> this may amount to a flashback, returning us to Chuck's early and only partly narrated first days in the United States. However, the switch to the second-person pronoun 'you' draws us in as the putative subject of the scene and gives it a broader, symbolic resonance. In one reading, this ending could be an imaginative attempt to turn back the clock to before September 11, 2001, and thus to reclaim the past for its unrealized possibilities […] However, in view of what has gone before in the novel, the epilogue perhaps more compellingly gestures toward the continued allure of New York as the great melting-pot city for all those migrants who come to buy into its dream, as yet unaware of the modern carceral nightmare it has become.[17]

In the transposition from the national to the transnational scenario, *Home Boy* underlines the pervasiveness of American culture and dreams outside its own borders, and at the same time the continuities between Chuck's two deeply interdependent universes. However, despite its transnational opening, Naqvi's vision remains deeply rooted in a national context, and in an American Dream that, although buried by the ruins of the Twin Towers, is destined to rise again from its own ashes every time a new immigrant boards a plane to New York, a ceaseless return with every new dreamer attempting to "run faster, stretch out our arms farther" (Fitzgerald 2021, 117) as suggested at the end of Fitzgerald's novel.

Gatsby and his double: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

In describing his novel in an interview, Mohsin Hamid said that "the traditional immigrant novel is about coming to America […] I wanted to do the 21st-century polarity when the magnet switches and pushes them away. At its core, this is a story of someone who is in love with America, in love with an American woman, who finds he has to leave. It's a tragic love story".[18]

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[17] Morey 2018, 149 – 150.

[18] Hamid Qtd in Hartnell 2010, 337.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist has many elements in common with *Home Boy:* a first-person narrative told by a young Pakistani protagonist-narrator who defines himself in modern, cosmopolitan terms (in *Home Boy* the "metrosexual" Chuck, here the "western-educated urbanite" Changez[19]); the narrators' love for an American woman; and a circular journey that has 9/11 as its turning point. Here too the American life of the protagonist is told retrospectively, this time in the form of a monologue addressed to a mysterious American apparently met by chance in a market in Lahore, after Changez moved back to Pakistan three years prior. For Changez as well, who migrated to the United States to study at Princeton on a scholarship, his American dream was within reach. Hired as a business analyst after graduation by a financial "boutique" company, Underwood Samson, he started to feel like "a young New Yorker with the city at my feet" (Hamid 2007, 51). After his graduation, he began a relationship with Erica, a beautiful girl from the Upper East Side who would become increasingly haunted by the memory of her dead boyfriend, Chris. 9/11 changed everything in Changez's life: after the attacks, he started experiencing hostility towards Pakistani immigrants and every Middle-Eastern-looking man with a beard, and had to cope with Erica's breakdown, the latter more and more incapable of coming to terms with the memories of the past and her loss, and finally sent to an asylum. However, 9/11 also allowed Changez to become aware of the effects of his job and the impact of redundancies on people in the US and abroad, to the extent that, thanks to an illuminating conversation with a publisher in Valparaiso, he came to see himself as a modern janissary, a servant of the American economic empire and of a company, Underwood Samson, that becomes an allegory for the United States, as the acronym and the name "Samson" suggest. Alienation and disillusionment led him to professional suicide and to the decision to go back to Lahore, where he would go on to hold a job as a university lecturer and take part in peaceful protests against the United States, despite remaining, as he states, "a lover of America" (Hamid 2007, 1). The novel ends abruptly when Changez and the American are about to part and four different possibilities are suggested to the reader: Changez could be a radicalized terrorist sent to the market to kill the American; the American could be an undercover agent contracted and sent to Pakistan to kill Changez; both of the above, or neither. As Hamid explained in an interview, the book is a "Rorschach inkblot test" exposing the reader's interpretive strategies, prejudices and fears.

Explicit references to Fitzgerald's text punctuate Hamid's novel as well, especially in the passages containing Jim, Changez's American boss. Jim almost immediately befriends Changez, whom he sees as a fellow outsider, and invites the young Pakistani to a party in his house in the Hamptons, “a magnificent property that made me think of *The Great Gatsby.* It was beside the beach – on a rise behind a protective ridge of sand dunes – and it had a swimming pool, a tennis court, and an open-sided white pavilion erected at one end of the lawn for drinking and dancing. A swing band struck up as we arrived, and I could smell steak and lobster being thrown on a grill” (Hamid 2007, 48). Here Jim tells Changez part of his life story, and the similarities with Gatsby become even more evident: it was Jim’s first glimpse of the *beau monde* at Princeton (reminiscent of Gatsby’s Oxford), where he was admitted for his merits, that triggered his dream of success and wealth (Hamid 2007, 49). As Hartnell argues,

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[19] Hamid 2007, 54. Heretofore cited parenthetically in the text.

> Jim himself is the personification of the self-made man who pulled himself up from lowly beginnings – beginnings that he equates with Changez’s own. Yet in spite of his advice to Changez that he follow Jim’s lead by facing the future, there are signs that Jim is himself unable to bury the past. While he lives in an ultra-modern, trendy and minimalist loft in New York City during the week, he also entertains guests in a beach-side property that reminds Changez of *The Great Gatsby.* The swing band, cocktails, tennis courts and swimming pool that greet Jim’s guests are highly suggestive of the idea that Jim, like Jay Gatz, is chasing the status that only “old money” – the one thing that cannot be bought or invented – can bring. The novel thus strongly suggests that the supposedly meritocratic society represented by Underwood Samson is edged with an unspoken elitism that condemns outsiders like Jim and Changez to its fringes. Hamid thus incorporates into his own novel the paradox that shapes F. Scott Fitzgerald’s: that the myth of self-invention, while surely constituting the heart of the elusive notion of the “American dream”, is stalked by a classificatory logic that entirely contradicts the vision of a classless society.[20]

The relentlessly forward-looking attitude (significantly encapsulated in the advice given to Changez that “power comes from becoming change” – Hamid 2007, 110), together with the fascination for the elitist world and the nostalgia suffered by the latter is a dichotomy that is explored throughout both the novels and reverberates in all its main characters: Changez, Erica, and the United States. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, nostalgia occurs as a theme mainly through Erica’s suffering for her lost lover, Chris – a highly symbolic subplot that again creates a parallel with Fitzgerald’s novel, in Daisy’s nostalgia for her past and what could have been, before her marriage with Tom.

Like Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*, Erica represents more than an individual love interest, and Changez’s attempt to be Erica’s protector more than an act of love. Erica is an emblem of American aristocracy, of the world Changez would like to belong to. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* makes explicit the relationship between emotions and capital embedded in Fitzgerald's text. As Medovoi notes, regarding Changez's economic success and love affair, where the first becomes the means to fulfill the second (and vice versa), "both emotional life and finance capital in this novel operate according to a common logic of investment."[21]

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[20] Hartnell 2010, 342.

Charmed by Changez and especially by her idea of his exotic background, Erica's interest is revealed to be transitory and fleeting, unable as she is to cope with the "loss of innocence" represented by Chris' death and by 9/11. As a synecdoche of the whole nation, (Am)Erica is the emblem of the seduction, with love and opportunities, of the success-hungry outsider Changez, a promise she is ultimately unable to fulfill. Like American promises, Erica too disappears, giving herself over to a self-destructive nostalgia. As Hartnell underlines, "Erica seemingly represents a romantic strain in American nationalism that looks back to a European past, a past that only partially captures the nation's roots and the make-up of contemporary America".[22] Gripped by nostalgia for "tradition" (Chris as Christ/Christopher Columbus – both symbols of the Old World), the Am/Erica who used to welcome immigrants becomes unable to cope with changes and the shock of 9/11 – like the US, as Changez notes: "I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward: for the first time I was struck by its determination to look back" (Hamid 2007, 131).

As the love story between Changez and Erica suggests, the correlations between the characters in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* overlap and blur: although the Gatsby alluded to in the latter novel is Jim, Changez also shares many elements with Gatsby, and in turn Jim can be increasingly associated with Gatsby's mentor, Dan Cody. The promise of the American dream fascinates Changez as much as (and probably more than) it fascinates Jim – the wish for "change" explicit in the protagonist's name itself. Coming from a once prosperous family, Changez too has to shake off his own (and his family's) form of nostalgia and longing, "not for what my family had never had, but for what we had had and had lost. In this, Jim and I were indeed similar: he had grown up outside the candy store, and I had grown up on its threshold as its door was being shut" (Hamid 2007, 81).

Changez is thus eager to take advantage of his American status, to the point of becoming part of that group of people who fly first class and "who conduct themselves in the world as though they were the ruling class" (Hamid 2007, 21), with the same "extraterritorial smile" (Hamid 2007, 74) and an attitude predisposed to a disrespect of national borders and laws – like how Gatsby "disrespected" national laws with his illicit affairs. To an even greater extent than *Home Boy, The Reluctant*

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[21] Medovoi 2011, 650.

[22] Hartnell 2010, 337.

Fundamentalist lays bare the mechanisms regulating desire and finance, with the latter explicitly equated with violence: "The economy is an animal" (Hamid 2007, 110) in Jim's words, and the outsiders like Jim and Changez are, according to the former, its blood. The equation between finance and dominance/violence is further underlined in the last lines of the novel, with the ambiguity of the "glint of metal" as the American reaches for something when parting from Changez – with the latter suggesting and hoping it is the American's business card holder and not a pistol.

Just as in *The Great Gatsby* and *Home Boy*, the social cost of that privileged world is soon made manifest, although in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* the valley of ashes is no longer outside Manhattan, but beyond the United States borders, and it parallels the exploitation of capital gone global – through Underwood Samson and the United States. Whereas in the Twenties the imbalance could be mainly seen among different classes within US society, Changez's journeys to Manila, Valparaiso, and Pakistan allow him to see the imbalance that aggressive capitalism generates in its encounter with third world countries.

Whereas Changez's life before 9/11 follows Jim's – and Gatsby's – path, the attacks and their aftermath represent a turning point in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* that corresponds to Nick's disillusionment and return to the Midwest after Gatsby's death: the broken American promise, with "the obvious connection between the crumbling of the world around me and the impending destruction of my personal American dream" (Hamid 2007, 106), finally leads Changez to realize that "finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power. It was right for me to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination" (Hamid 2007, 177). It is only at this moment that Changez fulfills the prophecy of his name, but in antithesis to American expectations. The "threshold of a great change" (Hamid 2007, 170) is crossed with the protagonist's awareness and change of perspective – this latter a keyword repeated over and over in the text, in reference to both Changez the character and Changez the narrator.

A pivotal step in this process and change of perspective is a key term underlined in the title – fundamentalism. As Gasztold and Haider argue, the novel establishes several parallels between the western idea of Islamic fundamentalism (and the eastern perception of this western idea) and the eastern vision of the "economic fundamentalism" that has become the imperative in American society. While "fundamentalism" is brought up by Erica's father before 9/11 as a serious Pakistani problem (Hamid 2007, 63), the term "fundamental" and fundamentalism are mainly associated with the American milieu in the form of Underwood Samson (and thus figuratively the US). The company asks its workers to focus on the "fundamentals" with a "single-minded attention" (Hamid 2007, 112), concentrating on systematic pragmatism, efficiency and maximum return "with a degree of commitment that left one with rather limited time for such distractions" (Hamid 2007, 112) and with “the task of shaping the future with little regard for the past” (Hamid 2007, 116). The novel seems to suggest that the whole of American society (and not only the world of finance) is shaped by these ideals and practices: the way Changez describes his years at Princeton is reminiscent of the strategies of Islamic fundamentalists: sleep deprivation, total devotion to the cause, focus on one aim, and lack of private life.

The symbolic death of Changez’s American dream does not equate with the erasure of the American models (Gatsby *in primis*), but with the awareness of their expansion into new geographical and cultural patterns. Changez’s change of perspective allows him to increasingly see the similarity between Pakistan and the United States – the “symmetry of the situation” (Hamid 2007, 97) that can be detected only retrospectively, in his backward glance. Like in *Home Boy*, where the Pakistani Gatsby’s loss parallels Chuck’s loss of his father, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* depicts the two countries as overlapping on similar voids coming from the past – be it the nostalgia they share over what has been lost, or the sense of superiority, in Pakistan’s case coming from a glorious past and the marvelous achievements of its civilization, “when your country was still a collection of thirteen small colonies, gnawing away at the edge of a continent” (Hamid 2007, 116).

Changez’s return to his home country alters his relation to Gatsby in terms of power relationship: his encounter with the mysterious American in Lahore turns Changez from “guest” to a “host”, like Gatsby throughout *The Great Gatsby*, willing to please (or so it seems) his guests. Like his predecessor, Changez’s sustained engagement with hospitality (in this case more provocative and ambiguous than in Fitzgerald’s novel) leaves the host exposed and vulnerable[23] to the uninvited guest, the Other/American entering his “house”/his country. As in *The Great Gatsby*, hospitality is posited not as the provision of security, but as a destabilizing element, that could be an unconditional welcome that is too ingenuous and innocent (if we assume the narrator will be the victim), or a subtle trap, if the narrator turns out to be the perpetrator of violence.

The ambivalence inherent in the open ending reinforces rather than negates the American model: should Changez be the victim or the agent of violence, he would either adhere to the model or subvert, but not transcend, it. However, despite the novel’s entanglement in the Dream itself, with Jim along, and Changez finally against it, Hamid’s shift from a national to an international scenario challenges and questions the role and consequences of national myths in a global context, and starts hinting at their transnational potential (and dangers).

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[23] Balfour 2017.

Decentering absences, voices, voids: Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*

The deterritorialization and deconstruction of the American Dream culminate in Hamid's 2013 *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia.* Despite the unnamed hero never leaves his unnamed home country in Southeast Asia (which the author has identified as Pakistan in interviews), this novel not only parodies *The Great Gatsby*, but it also updates it to the myth of rising Asia and to the system of neoliberal globalization.

As the title implies, the main focus is the protagonist's ascent as an entrepreneur. Narrated in the second person (an element that, together with the unspecified name of the country and characters, amplifies the representative quality of the story), Hamid's novel is structured as a self-help book that teaches its readers how to become successful in business in twelve essential steps or chapters, the title of each one being a piece of advice on how to advance socioeconomically in "rising Asia". Like in *The Great Gatsby*, the protagonist's rise parallels his love for a "pretty girl" (who also remains nameless) he encounters when both are very young and very poor, and whom he meets again at various stages throughout his life. Born into a very humble family in an extremely underdeveloped rural area, the protagonist's rise starts when the mother and the children (two boys and a girl) join the father in the city, driven by his mother's stubborn determination to keep the family together and allow her kids to have greater opportunities. Whereas the two other siblings will be less fortunate, the young narrator is able to climb the social ladder. First, he earns his living as a bicycle delivery boy selling pirate DVDs, then he attends university thanks to his membership in a religious (and repressive) organization before becoming a salesman of canned food with altered expiry dates. His great step forward occurs when he starts working for himself in the bottled water business, all the while resisting, compromising, and fighting with far more ruthless businessmen, corrupt politicians, and even killers. Rather than being a tragedy like *The Great Gatsby*, Hamid's novel ends with an anticlimax that reveals the parodic intent of the story: the protagonist's unscrupulous assistant and former brother-in-law cause him to lose his fortune while recovering from a heart attack, and he dies in his seventies in hospital dreaming of a life with the pretty girl, his last thoughts amongst the final words of the book.

Written in very concise and unadorned prose, the most striking formal feature of the novel is how a great arc of time and space is compressed into the narrator's tale, a quality which is reminiscent of Fitzgerald's novel, as Shivani notes.[24]

As for the plot, *How to Get Filthy Rich* – through the use of the second-person narration following the protagonist throughout his life – enriches Gatsby's story by filling in the gaps in the economic and social milieu behind Gatsby's fortunes, and transforming his parable into an ironic "from rags to riches" and "from riches to rags" pattern. There are many similarities between Gatsby's world and that of the unnamed protagonist: like Gatsby, he must "learn from a master" too – in this case a second-hand car dealer and head of the counterfeit expiry date business, who is so unscrupulous that he does not hesitate to kill an employee who stole from him. There is also the urban contiguity between rich and poor, and their interdependence: "wealthy neighborhoods are often defined by a single boulevard from factories and markets and graveyards, and those, in turn, may be separated from the homes of the impoverished only by an open sewer, railroad track, or narrow alley. Your own triangle-shaped community, not atypically, is bounded by all three."[25] Here too, the gap between rich and poor will never be bridged, as the epilogue of the story testifies, and everything becomes an "economic enterprise" (Hamid 2013, 61) – politics, personal relationships, and even education.

This may also explain why, in Hamid's text, the relationship between love and financial success at the core of Fitzgerald's story runs along two parallel lines, sometimes intersecting, but apparently unrelated. Love is an impediment to getting rich, as the author points out:

> the pursuit of love and the pursuit of wealth have much in common. Both have the potential to inspire, motivate, uplift, and kill. But whereas achieving a massive bank balance demonstrably attracts fine specimens desperate to give their love in exchange, achieving love tends to do the opposite. It dampens the fire in the steam furnace of ambition, robbing of essential propulsion an already fraught upriver journey to the heart of financial success. (Hamid 2013, 37)

The protagonist's desire for success is not directly related to his desire for the "pretty girl", who, working first as a hairdresser's assistant and then as a model, is economically independent from the beginning of the tale, and very proud to be so. The subversion of the female model, in contrast with the male one, also involves her physical appearance, with her physical traits not only contrasting sharply – and predictably – with Daisy's (and the stereotype of the Southern Selle), but also not conforming to a conventional idea of Asian beauty:

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[24] "To entangle these conflicting ideas in as short a space as Hamid does is what leads to an explosive dynamic of awareness, makes this a novel for the ages, with deserved comparisons to *The Great Gatsby*" (Shivani 2020).

[25] Hamid 2013, 20. Heretofore cited parenthetically in the text.

> Her looks would not traditionally have been considered beautiful: no milky complexion, raven tresses, bountiful bosom, of soft-moon-like face for her. Her skin is darker than average, her hair and eyes lighter, making all three features a strikingly similar shade of brown. This bestows upon her a smoky quality, as though she has been drawn with charcoal. She is also lean, tall, and flat-chested, her breasts the size, as your mother notes dismissively, of two cheap little squashed mangoes. (Hamid 2013, 38)

It is the "pretty girl" rather than the narrator who proves to be constantly forward-looking and "resistant to remembering" (Hamid 2013, 88). She shows agency in her life as someone who changes without allowing the world to change her (like Changez after his return to Pakistan and in contrast to the unnamed protagonist of this novel) – as she herself says, "When I change, I let myself change" (Hamid 2013, 87). The penultimate encounter between the pretty girl and the protagonist explicitly mocks Gatsby's rendezvous with Daisy during one of his parties: in *How to Get Filthy Rich* the protagonist is one of the waiters rather than the host, a job he gets in order to meet his beloved. Since the protagonist's success comes quite late in his life, in his forties, this reversed status disparity characterizes almost all their relationship – that ends, at least in the real world, with the protagonist's marriage to a (conventionally) beautiful, intelligent, young and unloved girl.

Despite the lifelong desire for the same woman, *How to Get Filthy Rich* associates the propelling force of desire almost exclusively with the economy, the field where self-invention can supposedly take place. The protagonist's personal rise and fall offer an overview of the crimes and compromises necessary to thrive as an entrepreneur in the under-regulated world of neoliberal capitalism, taking advantage of market "inefficiency". Whereas in the Twenties it was Prohibition that allowed the illegal market to flourish, here the sale of expired canned goods takes advantage of the surplus of the economy and its dysfunctional modes and injustices. What the text also lays bare is the underworld of violence that makes (illegal) prosperity possible:

> Becoming filthy rich required a degree of unsqueamishness, whether in rising Asia or anywhere else. For wealth comes from capital, and capital comes from labor, and labor comes from equilibrium, from calories chasing calories out, an inherent, in-built leanness that leanness of biological machines that must be bent to your will with some force if you are to loosen your own financial belt and, slightly expand. (Hamid 2013, 119)

As part of a corpus of texts that "denounces the capitalist, neoliberal notion of the self that is predicated on the idea of complete agency", Hamid's novel echoes the

American narratives dissecting the ills of the US capitalism rampant during the Gilded and the Jazz Ages, as Nina Martyris has argued.[26] Echoes of American culture are scattered throughout the novel, starting from the *Ur*-model of the self-made man, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography.* Hamid's nameless protagonist does not only define himself as "self-made, on the rise" (Hamid 2013, 141); his dream of success through hard work, according to Effing, is based on the Protestant ethic that constitutes the foundation for widespread belief in the promises of global capitalism.[27] The American milieu is also evident in the nonfictional model Hamid parodies: that of entrepreneur narratives, from Steve Jobs to Bill Gates to Donald Trump, that have shaped American and non-American imagination from the advent of neoliberalism onwards.

However, the narrator of *How to Get Filthy Rich* also looks beyond the thriving Asian emulators of these entrepreneurial models[28] in his parody, as he makes clear in one of the self-reflective moments of the text:

> It's remarkable how many books fall into the category of self-help. Why, for example, do you persist in reading that much-praised, breathtakingly boring foreign novel, slogging through page after page after please-make-it-stop page of tar-slow prose and blush-inducing formal conceit, if not out of an impulse to understand distant lands that because globalization are increasingly affecting life in your own? What is this impulse of yours, at its core, if not a desire for self-help?
>
> And what of the other novels, those which for reasons of plot and language or wisdom or frequent gratuitous and graphic sex you actually enjoy and read with delighted hunger? Surely those too are versions of self-help. At the very least they help you pass the time, and time is the stuff of which a self is made. The same goes for narrative nonfiction, and doubly so for non narrative-nonfiction. Indeed, all books, each and every book ever written, could be said to be offered to the reader as a form of self-help. (Hamid 2013, 21)

Hamid's de-mythologization of the Asian Dream questions the American one and the very idea of the nation: the author's use of the term "Asia", as Mahmutovic argues, "denies that nation-state is the main unit of analysis and draws attention to the city as a global strategic space";[29] a "globality" of the discourse (as well as of the identity and economic model it criticizes) that parallels the universality of the protagonists, aptly referred to as "you" and "the pretty girl".

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[26] Martyris 2014, 174–5.

[27] Effing 2009, 128.

[28] Among the most influential examples of Asian entrepreneurial models, the most important is probably Ratan Tata, the chairman of India's foremost industrial powerhouse, the Tata Group, from 1991 to 2012. See Walonen 2020.

[29] Mahmutovic 2017, 71.

Although geographically far from the New York of the American Dream, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is a cultural outcome of that dream in its extreme neoliberal version (and with neoliberal terminology) since, as Finch notes, it "puts pressure on the model of finance that stems from North America"[30] while, at the same time, showing its structural contradictions in one of the most recent examples of former third-world countries' alliance with global finance.[31]

While underlining the systemic consequences of this economy, and its relation to society, the novel targets the idea of the self in the neoliberal system, and the excesses of the "capability of self-invention" that characterized the American Dream, to the point that it undermines its national foundation. As Poon highlights, "Neoliberal subjectivity endorses the care and transformation of the self in order to take the best advantage of a market economy. With material affluence as the goal, the means to achieving that is often seen as simply a matter of individual choice and personal will – to be entrepreneurial and enterprising, for example – rather than any advantage one might attribute to traditional indices of identity like race, ethnicity, gender, or family background"[32] – the same illusions that lured Changez and Chuck.

Although the American Dream may be on its deathbed, like the protagonist of *How to Get Filthy Rich*, it has nevertheless not altogether exhaled its last breath, as the departure of the unnamed narrator's son suggests: "your wife has left you and married a man closer to herself in outlook and in age, and your son has chosen not to return after studying in North America, which, despite Asia's rise, retains some attraction for a young conceptual artist with craggy hip-bones and lips like buttered honey" (Hamid 2013, 179). The United States continues to propel fantasies of new selves and freedom; and although the dream may not be to "get filthy rich" in a predatory way, it nevertheless implies a surplus in the economy – both of the self and of the market.

Conclusions

Despite their differences, *Home Boy, The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* all explore the social and economic transnational network through the lens of *The Great Gatsby.* These novels break free from the idea of a "rupture in history" as the dominant interpretative mode in the aftermath of 9/11, establishing parallels and attempting to find continuities, as all "rewritings" do, by relating the national to the global and emphasizing the shift of focus from the "individual" to the "collective/nation" and beyond.

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[30] Finch 2018, 384.

[31] Finch 2018, 384.

[32] Poon 2017, 139.

In moving from the national to the global scenario, these narratives decenter the perspective, question the hegemonic US narrative through the geographical expansion of the narrators' paths, and reshape American neoliberal imagination in its deterritorialized form. Naqvi superimposes 9/11 and the death of the Pakistani Gatsby, thus reinforcing the reading of 9/11 as the umpteenth loss of innocence. Hamid, on the other hand, uses the coexistence and the shift of the Gatsby figure from Jim to Changez (in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*) and the presence of Gatsby in the form of an ambitious young Pakistani who spends all his life in his home country (in *How to Get Filthy Rich*) to highlight the universal appeal of American models and their global form. In doing so, Hamid thus emphasizes the world economic network of the dream(s), its consequences, and its paradoxes, including, as Azeem notes, "the Pakistani diasporic subjects of empire confront[ing] a merger of imperialism and exceptionalism".[33]

In tracing the footsteps of Pakistani transnational subjects and transforming Gatsby's Dream into an Asian Dream, Hamid and Naqvi turn Fitzgerald's character into the emblem of the deterritorialized nature of American neoliberalism, laying bare the mechanisms and the neoliberal forces that regulate the "economy of desire".

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[33] Azeem 2016, 77.

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Nicolangelo Becce

"[S]howing Gatsby that there was more to life than just him": Nghi Vo's *The Chosen and the Beautiful* and the Ethnic Afterlife of Jordan Baker

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.
Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Under the wrack and wreck of what had come before, the sky was new,
and I reached for it with a yearning eager hand.
Nghi Vo, *The Chosen and the Beautiful*

As a result of the copyright expiration of *The Great Gatsby*, a fresh wave of publications variously inspired by Fitzgerald's classic has been published in 2021, as in the case of Michael Farris Smith's *Nick* (Little, Brown and Company), which is about Nick Carraway's life before meeting Jay Gatsby, A. J. Odasso's *The Pursued and the Pursuing* (DartFrog Books), a sequel based on the idea that Gatsby survives at the end of the story, Katherine Woodman-Maynard's intersemiotic transposition titled *The Great Gatsby: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* (Candlewick Press), and Nghi Vo's debut novel *The Chosen and the Beautiful* (Tom Doherty Associates), a rewriting of Fitzgerald's classic told from the point of view of Jordan Baker. Reimagined as a Vietnamese American queer character immersed in a world filled with the supernatural, Vo's Jordan provides readers with a fresh and liberatory perspective on Gatsby's story while performing marvelous feats thanks to her magic powers. A Hugo Award nominee for her fantasy novella *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* (2020), Vo rewrites *The Great Gatsby* in a way that both follows the original storyline and offers a decolonizing counter-narration that openly defies the ethnocentric and exclusionary novel published by Fitzgerald in 1925.[1] This essay focuses

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[1] *The Chosen and the Beautiful* has so far received mostly praising reviews. For example, on *Kirkus Reviews* (June 1, 2021): "Vo has crafted a retelling that, in many ways, surpasses the original, adding logic and depth to characters' motivations while still—uncannily—unspooling the familiar story. Astonishingly crafted, with luscious prose and appeal for both fans of the original and those who always felt *The Great Gatsby* missed the mark." Also *Publishers Weekly* praises the novel (Dec. 29, 2020): "The plot unravels tantalizingly slowly, and Vo's immersive prose never ceases to captivate. The Gatsby-related details and hints of magic will keep readers spellbound from start to finish." However, while evaluating the novel in a generally positive way, speculative fiction writer and poet Amal El-Mohtar criticizes the supernatural aspects of Vo's novel in her review published on *The New York Times Book Review* (July 7, 2021) "The *Chosen and the Beautiful* deserves

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on how Vo's *The Chosen and the Beautiful* reclaims and renews *The Great Gatsby* by reinscribing minorities and their stories into one of the most representative texts of the mainstream literary canon.

The first chapter of *The Chosen and the Beautiful* introduces readers to all the main ingredients of the novel. As in *The Great Gatsby*, the opening scene features the dinner at the Buchanans' mansion where Jordan and Nick meet for the first time, Tom answers Myrtle's phone calls, and Daisy hears Gatsby's name again after five years. In addition, some supernatural occurrences enrich the scene: for example, taking the cue from Fitzgerald's lines dedicated to introducing Daisy and Jordan, the first chapter of *The Chosen and the Beautiful* begins with Daisy activating a magic charm bought in Greece that allows Jordan and herself to float over the room while they are waiting for Tom and Nick, "moving with languid grace along the high ceilings of [Daisy's] house and exclaiming at the strangeness and the secrets [they] found there."[2] The supernatural in this initial episode represents the physical enacting of the image evoked in *The Great Gatsby* when Jordan and Daisy, while waiting for Nick and Tom on the sofa, are described with "their dresses [...] rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house."[3] More importantly, in Vo's novel this supernatural scene highlights how the shift in point of view from Nick to Jordan strongly affects the events described: as in the case of Fitzgerald's gulls over the Sound, that fly in "perpetual wonder"[4] over the perfectly oval shapes of West Egg and East Egg, Jordan and Daisy's magic levitation allows them to experience the Buchanans' mansion from a new perspective that is regularly hidden to the eyes of those—characters as well as readers—who, until that moment, had only been able to walk in those rooms.

Since the main events in *The Chosen and the Beautiful* unfold in the same way as in *The Great Gatsby*, also dialogues are often faithfully reported. For example, Tom's racist remarks during the opening dinner are also included in Vo's novel, much to the disappointment of Jordan, who on one hand feels personally offended by Tom's words, while at the same time she pretends not to see herself as targeted

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to be read as closely as the book that inspired it. Vo's prose is beautifully supple, and the novel shines when she reads *Gatsby* against the grain [...] The novel falters, though, when integrating fantasy more generally: It's such a tight reversal of its original's core dynamics that there isn't room for the fantastic elements to do more than gild the story's lily. [...] Despite that, the book remains a sumptuous, decadent read."

[2] Vo 2021, 1. Heretofore cited parenthetically in the text.

[3] Fitzgerald 1925, 13.

[4] Fitzgerald 1925, 13.

by them. This is only one of the several microaggressions that Jordan must endure in the novel as a person of Vietnamese American descent:

> "Have you read *The Rise of the Colored Empires* by this man Goddard? […] This fellow has worked out the whole thing," Tom said, stabbing a finger into the white tablecloth. "It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things."
>
> "You've got to beat us down, of course;" I said dryly, and Nick covered a laugh with his napkin.
>
> Tom arched his neck, glaring at me suspiciously as if unsure what I might mean, and next to me Daisy giggled, just a little hysterical, though this was hardly anything new to us.
>
> "The thing is, Jordan, we Nordics, we've produced all the things that go to make civilization—oh, science and art, and all that. That's what the Manchester Act wants to protect. Do you see?"
>
> There were a dozen things I could have said to that, ranging in order from least cutting to downright murderous, but then the phone rang and the butler came to fetch Tom from the table. Tom went with a kind of confused irritation, and Daisy's mouth opened, and closed again. (6 – 7)

Directly inspired by the 1924 Immigration Act,[5] the Manchester Act mentioned by Tom targets ethnic minorities in the US and especially Asian Americans, thus representing a lurking threat for Jordan throughout the entire novel. At the beginning of *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, Jordan describes herself as "nominally a Louisville Baker, a name with its own distinguished history, but […] with a face that people variously guessed was Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, Venezuelan, or even Persian" (Vo 2021, 3). She lives in New York with her aunt Justine, a member of a circle of suffragettes aided by imps, supernatural creatures that they "inherited from their Puritan witch ancestresses" (41). However, by the end of the novel, when Jordan talks to Khai, a member of the Vietnamese American troupe of itinerant magicians who perform at Gatsby's parties, she understands that the story she had been told about her being rescued while still an infant by her adoptive mother Eliza Baker in Vietnam can be reinterpreted in a quite uncomfortable and problematic way:

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[5] The Johnson-Reed Act was a federal law aimed at reducing migration from outside the United States by creating a national-origins quota system according to which, starting from 1925, the equivalent of only 2 % of the foreign-born population recorded in the US in 1890 could be given access to the country. The most affected migration routes were those from Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, and East Asia; in addition, Border Patrol was for the first time instituted to curb migration from Mexico and South America. About the Johnson-Reed Act and its legacy on the history of the US, see Marinari, Hsu and García (2019), and Yang (2020).

> "So who are you?" [Khai] asked finally.
>
> "*Jor*dan Baker," I snapped. […]
>
> "And you're Vietnamese, right?"
>
> "I'm from Louisville," I sniffed. "But… yes. Before that, from Tonkin. I came back with a missionary, Eliza Baker."
>
> "She stole you?"
>
> "She *rescued* me. From the village where she was missioning. The Chinese were right across the river, so she took me and ran all the way to where the carriage was waiting. She used an orange crate as my cradle on the ship back to New York."
>
> It was family legend, trotted out every Christmas while I lived in Louisville. I had grown quite immune to it with the judge [Mr. Baker] and Mrs. Baker because the story was really about Eliza rather than about me, but when I told it to Khai, it stuck a little. It felt a little strange, a little bit shameful, though that could have been the bad alcohol.
>
> "Were your parents dead?"
>
> "They must have been. Otherwise why would she have taken me?"
>
> […] "She couldn't bear leaving me," I told Khai, deliberately ignoring the conclusions that we were both reaching. (192)

Jordan does not retain any memory of her past life in Vietnam; nonetheless, she can perform magic that is directly connected to her Asian background. Based on the traditional art of Chinese paper cutting, Jordan's magic allows her to create life by cutting paper into shapes of living creatures, as in the case of a flashback scene in Louisville in which, while still very young, she discovers her supernatural abilities by unexpectedly giving life to a paper lion with the goal of entertaining a bored Daisy.[6] With the development of the relationship between Jordan and Daisy, while readers get to know more about Daisy's choice to marry a wealthy Buchanan instead of waiting for Gatsby's marriage proposal, Jordan creates a paper double of Daisy that can take her place when the prospective wife ends up completely drunk and unable to personally attend the rehearsal dinner. However, right after the end of the dinner, Daisy cold-bloodedly kills her own double, thus prefiguring the killing of Myrtle later in the novel.[7]

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[6] "I flipped to a fresh page in the middle of the book […] and I started to cut. I knew that it would all be over soon, even at that age. I would pull a flimsy, unattractive lion from the paper, and Daisy would know me for the fraud I was. […] Daisy uttered a surprised cry while I bit down on my tongue. We watched as the lion fluttered to the ground, landing with more weight than paper should have had. It hesitated for a moment as if confounded by life in paper as we were, and then it gathered its four paws underneath it, turning several times. Something shifted, and it was more than just card stock and a child's desperate urge to be adored. It was a memory of a murderous lion and a land far away, it was breath and resentment and longing. The hollows I had cut out so quickly were filling up with muscle and hair, and we watched with wonder until we saw that it was also growing" (Vo 2021, 15–17).

Paper cutting also works as a metatextual representation of the act of writing: after Gatsby's death, Jordan discovers that the real Nick had died in a car accident after he returned from the war, and that the Nick that both she and Gatsby love is only a paper avatar created by Nick's own great-grandmother, whom, being originally from Bangkok, was able to perform the paper cutting magic needed to bring back to life her nephew. On Nick's paper heart are written the names of all the people he has loved in his life, and among them stand out both Jordan and Gatsby's names. The image of Jordan unveiling Nick's paper heart is a powerful reminder of how *The Great Gatsby* and *The Chosen and the Beautiful* are inextricably connected: Nick's paper heart, which represents Vo's interpretation of Fitzgerald's novel, is read by Jordan (i. e., the point of view character in *The Chosen and the Beautiful*) as the fictional equivalent of the book written by Vo and that readers are holding in their hands.[8]

In addition, other types of supernatural phenomena are included in *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, some of them related to the drinking of the so-called "demoniac," a beverage banned alongside alcohol in Vo's reimagining of the US during Prohibition. Deriving from demon blood, demoniac provokes some "collateral effects" such as the power of healing and the ability to communicate with horses, ghosts, stars, or T. J. Eckleburg's billboard. Apart from Gatsby's parties, it can also be found in some of the most exclusive speakeasies in New York, which feature integrated orchestras and are magically hidden from the sight of the uninitiated or unwanted customers. The fictional setting in which Vo's story unfolds is also threatened by attempts from Hell to conquer the United States, with people that mysteriously disappear or rather willingly choose to sell their souls to the Devil, as in the case of Gatsby. As a matter of fact, Gatsby's house represents an outpost for Hell in an effort at colonizing the US: "Hell was as expansionist as

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[7] "Daisy's double fell to the ground with the first blow. She didn't cry because her mouth ended up in the sod, and Daisy struck her again and again. […] I was ready to be sick, but then there would have been no one to watch Daisy, hitting her paper double with the spade […]" (Vo 2021, 122 – 123)

[8] "I pulled out [Nick's] heart so easily that I could see why he had been so free with it. His great-grandmother, out of some sentimentality, had cut it from a map of Minnesota and carefully glued to it a picture of the Carraway clan, two-dozen stern-faced Lutherans at some church picnic or another. […] Over all of this, inscribed with what looked like heavy grease pencil, were names, names written large and crude and without understanding of what such a thing would mean. Largest of course was Gatsby's—not Jay, but Gatsby—and there were a few other men's names scrawled there as well, men I thought he must have known in the war. I was touched to see that my own name was written neatly and with care paid towards the shaping of the letters" (Vo 2021, 255 – 256).

France or England—and Jay Gatsby, with his singular focus and ability to harness the power of human desire, was the perfect envoy to gain them a foothold in the world above" (224).

It should be clear at this point that the setting portrayed in *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, while closely tied to the Jazz Age as envisioned by Fitzgerald, is also quite articulated, with a heterogeneous supernatural component that reflects the multiethnic composition of the characters in Vo's novel while offering a new and unprecedented look at *The Great Gatsby*'s world. The plot itself is more complicated than the one originally devised by Fitzgerald: rather than focusing on two love triangles (Gatsby-Daisy-Tom and Myrtle-Tom-Daisy), *The Chosen and the Beautiful* also includes two other main love triangles, composed of Jordan-Daisy-Gatsby and Jordan-Nick-Gatsby. In this way, Vo further expands Fitzgerald's original story while uncovering other possible sentimental and sexual relationships among the various characters from the original novel. For example, Nick's love for Gatsby is only hinted at in Fitzgerald's text, while Vo refers to it more explicitly in her book.[9]

There is almost no need to explain how *The Chosen and the Beautiful* results in a postcolonial reappropriation of *The Great Gatsby:* the author rewrites Fitzgerald's original story by following the "writing back" approach[10] from a Vietnamese American perspective, thus recreating a multiethnic environment that is also much more inclusive in terms of both gender issues and queer representativity. In addition, the choice of reimagining Jordan as a Vietnamese American character is not merely motivated by the fact that the author herself is of Vietnamese American descent, but it is also rooted in the history of Vietnamese diaspora before the end of World War II. As explained by historian Charles Keith, it is possible to find the presence, apart from the famous example of Ho Chi Minh, of a Vietnamese American community in the United States well before the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War.[11] Moreover, Vo's novel follows the path already traced by

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[9] Apart from the presence of LGBTQ+-related themes in *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, also gender issues are explored in various parts of the novel, for example in Chapter 4, which includes a flashback episode with Jordan helping Daisy get an abortion when they are both still teenagers: "[Daisy] woke up two days ago to realize that her monthlies hadn't come for two months now […] It didn't matter if he knew or not, what he felt or not. In these matters, girls were almost always on their own" (Vo 2021, 43).

[10] See Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002).

[11] Keith's research focuses on a small but important group of Vietnamese people who either traveled or moved to the US before the end of World War II: "Although they were few, likely several hundred at most, they came from the most elite and most marginal parts of Vietnamese society, and they left traces ranging from detailed travelogues to the barest administrative fragments. Their histories reveal, to begin with, how French colonialism dispersed Vietnamese to the most distant and unfamiliar corners of their world" (51).

Monique Truong in *The Book of Salt* (2003), where the cultural milieu of the Lost Generation (represented in the novel by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas) is explored from the perspective of the Vietnamese cook Bình, another member of the interwar Vietnamese diaspora.[12] In *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, Jordan is torn between her belonging to the Baker family, which is part of a privileged entourage of people like the Buchanans, and her being a member of a small Vietnamese American community as represented by the troupe of paper cutting magicians who perform at Gatsby’s parties. With the passing of the Manchester Act by the end of the book, the Vietnamese American magicians decide to leave the US and move to Shanghai; Jordan plans to do the same, but not before having left a kiss on Nick’s paper heart to keep open the possibility for a future continuation of her relationship with him.[13] And a reunion between Jordan and Nick might indeed happen, since Vo has announced that she is working on a sequel to *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, which suggests that there is still room for a possible development of a full-fledged fictional universe (or even a transmedia narrative) based on Fitzgerald’s novel.[14]

Nevertheless, Vo’s novel is more than just a postcolonial rewriting of *The Great Gatsby.* An important aspect of *The Chosen and the Beautiful* is the presence of Fitzgerald’s original text as a backbone for the development of a wider and multilayered story. This choice to faithfully preserve the setting and the main storyline of Fitzgerald’s novel (with the result that several scenes and dialogues are repeated almost verbatim) can explain why Vo’s book could only be published in 2021 and not before the copyright expiration. More importantly, it clarifies why some early reviewers have suggested a link between *The Chosen and the Beautiful* and the mashup fiction phenomenon that started with the publication of Seth Grahame-

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[12] About Truong’s *The Book of Salt* and its connections with literary modernism, see Izzo (2011).

[13] “I folded up [Nick’s] heart and slipped it into my purse, and from my purse I drew out my planner, which only let me see two weeks in advance. I used the penknife to cut one of the pages into a pretty heart shape, like the Valentines I had refused to cut in school. I looked at it, toyed with writing my name on it and taking up all the space so that it could not be taken up with any other, but I didn’t. Instead, I only pressed a lipstick kiss to one edge, because I’ve never been so keen on being forgotten, and slid it back into his chest” (Vo 2021, 256 – 257).

[14] Even though her latest published novel is *Siren Queen* (2022), during an online interview with Chinese American fantasy writer Rebecca F. Kuang, Vo states that she is working on a novella, whose tentative title is “Don’t Sleep with the Devil”, which includes both Nick and Jordan as characters and is set after the events described in the *Chosen and the Beautiful.* See Rebecca F. Kuang, *The Chosen and the Beautiful: Nghi Vo and R. F. Kuang.* YouTube, uploaded by Asian American Writers’ Workshop, 10 June 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2biBp9xL4kk&t=2645s (Kuang 00:43:34).

Smith's popular novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009).[15] As a matter of fact, the first recorded example of a mashup novel based on *The Great Gatsby* is *The Late Gatsby*, published by a certain S. A. Klipspringer in 2012 (and that can be purchased currently on Amazon as an e-book, albeit only from outside the US for copyright reasons).[16] In the case of *The Late Gatsby*, the typically established format of the mashup novel is followed closely, since the book works as an "extended edition" composed almost exclusively of Fitzgerald's original material, and with the addition of a supernatural horror component based on the idea of portraying Gatsby and his servants as vampires, and George Wilson as obsessed with the threat of an imminent vampire invasion.

Detractors of mashup fiction often consider the genre as nothing more than a commercial ploy,[17] with most books being advertised in their title and cover with a clear reference to a famous literary classic and, at the same time, a recognizable allusion to horror dynamics associated with popular monsters such as zombies, vampires, werewolves, etc. While they can obviously be entertaining, sometimes mashup novels obtain the effect of oversimplifying the original stories they derive from by creating polarized fictional worlds populated with good and evil characters (the latter almost invariably being the supernatural ones) as in the case, for example, of Sherri Browning Erwin's *Jane Slayre* (2012), in which the eponymous character's "enemies" are real monsters, like the Reed family portrayed as evil vampires, or Bertha Mason who is both lunatic and a dangerous werewolf. Yet, if Erwin's *Jane Slayre* is completely oblivious to the depth of signification added to the character of Bertha Mason by Jean Rhys in her postcolonial novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), conversely, Vo explicitly refers to Gilbert and Gubar's classic work of criticism while describing Myrtle, in the scene in which she is locked up in her room by her husband, as "the madwoman in the attic" (213).[18] Indeed, it is possible to point out that, while taking inspiration from mashup fiction through the explicit use of Fitzgerald's original text together with an extended role given to the supernatural, Vo's novel goes well beyond the formulaic structure of typical literary mashups in a number of ways: first of all, and contrary to many popular mashup novels, Vo chooses to avoid any direct paratextual reference to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which would have probably helped to further boost sales; instead, she only refers to Fitzgerald and his works on a paratextual level by obliquely taking inspiration from the title of another of his novels, *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922). In addition, considering that in a typical mashup novel the percentage of text directly taken from a literary classic usually amounts to about three quarters of the whole book, with the new material representing the remaining 25 percent,[19] in the case of Vo's novel these percentages are more than reversed, with the result that *The Chosen and the Beautiful* undeniably feels like *her* novel rather than simply an extended edition of Fitzgerald's original one.

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[15] See for example Charles (2021), who also suggests that echoes of the supernatural developed by Joyce Carol Oates in her 2013 novel *The Accursed* can be found in *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, thus highlighting the wide variety of possible sources of inspiration for Vo's book. About *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, see Mulvey-Roberts (2014).

[16] See De Bruin-Moulé (2020), 132n4.

[17] Already in 2009, Schuessler summarized the mashup fiction formula in this way: "Take some Jane Austen, add a healthy dollop of gore and start counting the money."

[18] The title of the book here referred to is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.* New Haven (CT): Yale Nota Bene, 1984.

Vo's novel seems not only to take inspiration from postcolonial literature and literary mashups, but it also follows quite faithfully a recent trend in monster stories, in which supernatural narratives are told from the point of view of the monsters themselves. As pointed out by Weinstock (2013), a genealogy of stories told from the monster's point of view can be traced, starting with John Gardner's *Grendel* (1971), and continuing with several twenty-first century mainstream products and popular franchises. Weinstock explains that

> the overall trend in monstrous representation across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first has been toward not just sympathizing with but empathizing with—and ultimately aspiring to be—the monster. […] Twenty-first-century mainstream representations of monsters, most notably animated films oriented toward children, such as *Shrek* (2001) and *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), and vampire narratives, such as the Home Box Office (HBO) adaptation of the Charlaine Harris Sookie Stackhouse novels, *True Blood,* and the Stephenie Meyer Twilight franchise,[20] forcefully develop this trend of asking the audience to identify with and even esteem the traditional monster while resisting or reviling the cultural forces that define monstrosity based on nonnormative appearance or behavior. The result is a reversal of polarities in which evil is associated not with physical difference but with cultural forces that constrain personal growth and expression.[21]

The choice to retell Fitzgerald's novel from the point of view of a paper cutting magician, and more in general the widespread presence of the supernatural in

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[19] According to Kehe (2010), "Mash-up novels are generally made up of somewhere between 60 and 85 percent original text, with new plot twists added by contemporary co-authors."

[20] The titles here referred to are (in order): *Shrek*. Dir. Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson. Dreamworks Pictures, 2001; *Monsters, Inc.* Dir. Pete Docter. Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2001; *True Blood*. Prod. Alan Ball. HBO Entertainment, 2008-2014; Charlaine Harris. *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*. Ace Books, 2001-2013; Stephenie Meyer. *Twilight Saga*. Little, Brown and Company, 2005-2020.

[21] Weinstock 2020, 360.

The Chosen and the Beautiful, seems to be directly related to the different backgrounds of the characters themselves. In fact, none of the three main characters in the novel who perform magic or whose lives are directly affected by it has a completely white mainstream background: Jordan is of Vietnamese descent, Nick's great-grandmother is from Bangkok, while Gatsby's mother has both African American and Chippewa ancestry. During the scene in which Daisy confesses to Jordan that she is responsible for Myrtle's death, she also describes how Gatsby tried to use his supernatural powers to protect her from any involvement in the accident:

> "Jay…. did something. Made sure that no one saw. He stood up in the car, closed his eyes, and the world went quiet around us. It was frightening. I never saw him do anything like that before, never saw *anyone* do anything like that."
>
> I thought then that it must have been his infernal powers coming into play. Later, when I learned about his half-Chippewa mother, and when I learned that her other half was Black and not white I came to a different conclusion. The native nations had taken in plenty of escaped slaves after the Civil War, and the old spells to help the hunters helped them now even when they were the hunted. (249)

Jordan explains that Gatsby's preternatural ability to hide himself and pass unnoticed originates from the close relationships between Native Americans and African Americans during the 19th century, thus confirming the strong connection, in the novel, between the supernatural and the histories and cultures of oppressed minorities.[22] In a way, the storyworld developed by Vo is based on the idea that racial otherness might be directly related to the supernatural (hence aberration and monstrosity). However, the real monstrosity in the novel lies elsewhere. Instead of being a source of discrimination as in many mashup novels, the supernatural in *The Chosen and the Beautiful* actively works as a level playing field by becoming a mechanism capable of addressing the racial, social, and economic inequalities that affect the fictional world of the Roaring Twenties as described by Fitzgerald. In fact, in Vo's novel, neither Daisy nor Tom performs anything supernatural, except for the already mentioned scene in which Daisy and Jordan levitate, which on the other hand is associated with Daisy's own amusement as well as her economic possibilities. For wealthy and careless people like the Buchanans, magic is only a source of entertainment, and this paradoxically confirms their abnormal and monstrous status compared to the other characters in the story. If magic, as an expression of identity and cultural heritage in *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, is also the ultimate resource for oppressed people, then the lack of it can only result in socio-economic vulnerability, unhappiness, and untimely death, as in the case of Myrtle and George Wilson, who are the only main characters in the novel without any access—at least while still alive[23]—to the supernatural.[24]

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[22] Byars-Nichols (2014) points out that "African American slavery and the forced removal, assimilation, and genocide of Native Americans are the events in American history that most significantly 'proved' the righteousness of American expansion as a manifestly pre-destined event, and ushered the nation into the Industrial Age. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the two groups often shared and competed for resources and protected (marginalized) space, the nature of their relationships became more intimate; true kinships were formed. As Americans simultaneously expanded and contracted their definitions of self and nation, the roles of African Americans, Native Americans, and black Indians provide rich examples of how and by what criteria American identity is constructed." (6)

The rich and multifaceted supernatural world created by Vo around Gatsby's story (which has only been briefly surveyed here) has been commercially promoted by emphasizing its ethnic specificities: apart from putting the image of an Asian-looking young woman (which probably represents Jordan) on the book cover, Tom Doherty Associates, the publishing house of *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, advertises Vo's novel by explicitly suggesting that a literary antecedent to Jordan's magic powers can be found in the magical realism of "The Paper Menagerie" (2011), an award-winning short story written by Chinese American writer Ken Liu.[25] Yet, more than simply taking inspiration from the traditional Asian art of origami crafting found in Liu's short story, Jordan's paper cutting magic also represents a powerful reference to the cut-up technique,[26] a literary technique which was first envisioned by Dadaists and other avant-garde artists after the end of World War I, and then explored and made popular by William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin from the 1950s onwards. Burroughs and Gysin focused on developing a revolutionary tool capable of manipulating language in a way that would defy both the copyright rules and—more importantly—the ownership of stories. As Robinson explains,

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[23] "One moment I was alone on the slick grassy verge, and the next, Myrtle Wilson rose up out of the ditch beside me. Her pale face was perfect, her hair gleamed like a stoplight, her small feet were bare, and unless she left, she would be the Willets Point ghost for a generation or more" (Vo 2021, 257).

[24] According to Weinstock (2013), "What first-person narrative accounts told from the monster's perspective and monster tales highlighting cultural relativism effectively assert is that, while we still recognize and refer to traditional monsters as such, the idea of monstrosity has been decoupled from physical appearance and today refers first and foremost to the intention and desire to do harm to the innocent." (Weinstock 2020, 363) This further supports the idea that, in *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, both Daisy and Tom Buchanan are unequivocally characterized as the real monsters in the story, with all the other characters—also by virtue of their ethnic, sociocultural, and economic marginality—being their victims.

[25] Ken Liu's "The Paper Menagerie" obtained a wide popularity after having become the first short story to win, in 2012, the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards for short fiction. See Anders (2012). The Spring 2021 catalog of Tordotcom (an imprint of Tom Doherty Associates) in which *The Chosen and the Beautiful* is compared to "The Paper Menagerie" is currently available here: https://webservices.macmillan.com/macmillan-us/maccatalog/assets/previous/TDC_Spring-2021_08_2020.pdf

> to cut and realign text, and therefore language, is to cut and realign one's experience, with tangible, physical results. [M]an's reliance on words is not simply psychological, but biological, and thus to cut into the "running loop of words" and alter the "word-process" is tantamount to cutting into history, changing the future or altering a strand of DNA. Gysin also points to man's reliance on language as a means of giving order and structure to his surroundings, and of understanding those surroundings. Without the order of language, man is lost. And yet, as Burroughs would go on to expound, in order to attain true freedom and the capacity to evolve in order to survive, the human race must free itself from the tyrannical constraints of language control.[27]

Burroughs theorized the idea that word itself is a virus, "an organism with no internal function other than to replicate itself."[28] As such, humankind should embrace the virtually impossible task to eradicate this virus, which means liberating themselves from the preconceived notions that constitute language, and that inexorably control people's lives. While Vo openly endorses the idea of defying the mainstream literary canon by developing a counter-story from a postcolonial, gender, and queer perspective, at the same time she seems to genuinely pay homage to *The Great Gatsby* by constructively using Fitzgerald's text to develop a new version of the story. Indeed, more than just an open attack against *The Great Gatsby*, *The Chosen and the Beautiful* can be considered as a parodic reappropriation of Gatsby's story in the Hutcheonian sense of the term, since it does not only offer a "deconstructively critical" reading of Fitzgerald's novel, but it also establishes, in a "constructively creative" way, a bridge between the past and the present:

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[26] The cut-up technique has also been recognized as a direct source of inspiration for literary mashups. See De Bruin-Molé (2021), 15.

[27] Robinson 2011, 32. Wermer-Colan and Hawkins describe the disruptive potential of Burroughs and Gysin's cut-up method in the following terms: "The cut-up […] became a physical means of excavating and laying bare submerged meanings; it meant methodically searching out, representing, and restructuring the intersection points of power and ideology where systems and agents of control could be exposed and counteracted." (Hawkins and Wermer-Colan 2019, 4–5).

[28] Quoted in Robinson 2011, 39. While Burroughs' experimental production with the cut-up technique led to the creation of books which were objectively challenging to read—as in the case of the still acclaimed *The Nova Trilogy* (1961–1964)—later in his career the author reinvented the cut-up method to develop texts that could be more easily approachable by a larger audience, as in the case of *The Red Night Trilogy* (1981–1987): "at the turn of the 1980s […] Burroughs would effectively reinvent the cut-up. By applying the montage technique not to 'words on the page' as Gysin first had, but to large sections of narrative, he would ultimately find a way of applying the method in a form more accessible to a wider readership. [Burroughs] came to believe that the way to bring about change was not to cut into the present to reveal the future, but to address the future by rewriting the past." (Robinson 2011, 129). Burroughs' approach to "addressing the future by rewriting the past" seems to be quite close to what Vo achieves in her 2021 rewriting of *The Great Gatsby.*

> [Parody] is fundamentally ironic and critical […] It 'de-doxifies' our assumptions about our representations of th[e] past. Postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation – in any medium.[29]

The fragments from *The Great Gatsby* that Vo deliberately inserts in *The Chosen and the Beautiful* allow a productive interaction to happen within the same book; in addition to that, the point-of-view character developed by Vo, which is empowered by her supernatural ability to create life by cutting and shaping paper, represents a metatextual attempt at interrogating again Fitzgerald's original text with the goal of finding new meanings inside—as well as outside—*The Great Gatsby*, thus renewing the conversation between contemporary readers and the 1925 text itself. The scene in which Jordan questions T. J. Eckleburg's billboard about what happened the day Myrtle Wilson died represents the diegetic enactment of such a conversation. On the night the woman is fatally hit by Gatsby's car, Jordan drives to the valley of ashes while drinking a full bottle of demoniac; intoxicated by the magic beverage, she climbs over the billboard, then she vandalizes T. J. Eckleburg's poster by cutting it to create a mouth:

> *What should I talk about? I am only paper.*
>
> I glared at Eckleburg's coyness, crossing my arms over my chest.
>
> "You're paper with eyes," I said. "You're paper that sees, aren't you?"
>
> *My eyes are closed, and I have no tongue.*
>
> The eyes tried to close, but I clapped my hands hard right in front of where a nose should be.
>
> "Your eyes are plenty open enough for me, and I gave you a mouth so you can talk. What did you see? Tonight? What happened?"
>
> The eyes blinked almost coquettishly, and then the paper lips spread to speak.

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[29] Hutcheon 2002, 94.

> *I saw a car, too fast. I saw a woman who needed to leave, and I saw her go flying. I saw the car stop, and then I saw eyes.*
>
> “Eyes. Wait. Wait . . . you saw eyes.”
>
> *I saw eyes, mistress, and then I saw no more.* [...] *I will sleep, mistress, and I will see no more. I am through.* (237–238)

Eventually, and as already mentioned before, Jordan learns from Daisy that the eyes T. J. Eckleburg is referring to are Gatsby’s ones, since right after the fatal car accident the man is also capable of supernaturally fascinating the billboard to the point of obfuscating its ability to understand what happened that day. However, what is really staged in this scene is the mirroring of the reader’s gaze into T. J. Eckleburg’s one: like the iconic eyes on the billboard, the reader’s eyes are fixated upon the events in the story, in an attempt at fully grasping the true significance of the events narrated, both on a diegetic and on an extradiegetic level. Consequently, *The Chosen and the Beautiful* successfully reenacts the ongoing interpretative conversation in and around Gatsby’s story, highlighting the potential for reverberations of Fitzgerald’s novel in terms of storyworld development, experimentation with literary genres, and in relation to the enduring fame of *The Great Gatsby* over the decades.

About a century after its first publication, Francis Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* still represents a fertile source of inspiration for new generations of writers. Vietnamese American author Nghi Vo skillfully reinterprets this twentieth century American literary classic as a postcolonial monster story that plays with the rules of twenty-first century literary mashups to subvert their conservative design and create a more complex and multifaceted version of the original novel. While demonstrating how mashup fiction can evolve and offer a relevant contribution to critical reflections about identity and the role of classics in contemporary literature, Vo also takes inspiration from Gysin and Burroughs’ cut-up technique to parodically dissect and rearrange *The Great Gatsby* into her novel, thus generating a new literary space where distinctions between mainstream literary classics and ethnic literature concretely fall apart. Ultimately, *The Chosen and the Beautiful* results in a new and liberating opportunity for a mutual interaction and a reciprocal influence between the mainstream literary canon and stories written by and about marginalized minorities.

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Albert Latorella Lehner

White Ethnics and U.S. Urban Neighborhoods in the 1970s: The Spatial Justice Mission of Geno Baroni

White Ethnics and the Emergence of Msgr. Geno Baroni

By the 1960s and 1970s, traditionally white ethnic neighborhoods across the United States inhabited by second- and third-generation immigrants from southern and eastern Europe had largely assimilated into what they perceived as American culture. According to American Studies scholar and PBS broadcast journalist Ray Suarez: "ethnic ghettos of the early century had given way to a more comfortable life, with religion and ethnicity, race and class still used as organizing principles for the neighborhood."[1] White ethnics were predominantly Catholic and lived in parishes around which their daily lives revolved. Theologian Lawrence J. Engel points out that these urban parish neighborhoods marked white ethnic "identity and location" in everyday life as well as within the Church universal.[2] American Studies scholar Dennis Deslippe refers to white ethnics living in urban neighborhoods in the 1970s as having an "ethniclass identity." He further elaborates on this concept by stating: "ethnicity informed how people imagined their world, it conditioned their expectations, and it expanded or restricted their options."[3] However, as historian Joe Merton explains, by the beginning of the 1970s, white ethnics in urban neighborhoods began to experience "a lingering sense of ethnic anxiety, unease, and disillusionment with traditional political and cultural norms," particularly with the expectation of Americans that they assimilate into, rather than acculturate to, a white Anglo-Saxon culture often viewed as "American" culture itself.[4] A pushback among urban white ethnics began to slowly develop and grow.[5] As will be described below, what they were searching for was spatial justice.

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[1] Suarez 1999, 2.

[2] Engel 1998, 640.

[3] Deslippe 2008, 148, 151.

[4] Merton 2012, 732.

[5] Political scientist Gene Halus argued against using the term "white ethnics" in response to its wide usage both in research and among the general public. He writes: "The term 'white' is insufficient and in Baroni's time was most frequently used, but over time some, including Baroni, have

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In response to the public pressure to embrace a white Anglo-Saxon culture, white ethnic leaders in cities that included Pittsburgh, Chicago, Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., to name but a few, began to speak out in efforts to maintain their economic stability and cultural heritages as well as to strengthen their neighborhoods, in general. One leader, in particular, began to stand out above all others: Rev. Geno Baroni, an Italian American, Catholic priest whose parents had emigrated from the Trentino-Alto Adige region in northern Italy to Pennsylvania. Serving in Washington D.C., Baroni called for white ethnics "to reject assimilation and assert a new 'white ethnic' identity, analogous to racial minorities, emphasizing themes of ethnic disadvantage, discrimination, and group difference to gain material and psychological reward."[6] What Baroni and other white ethnic leaders wanted was fairness and justice in their urban lives and not to be taken for granted or, worse, abandoned by the political and economic powers. They were right to do so since there were institutions, both public and private, which were causing racial divisions in cities to advance their own economic advantage. When President Lyndon Johnson's Kerner Commission notably concluded in 1969 that, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal,"[7] Baroni gave public testimony that any public policy based on suppositions like these would make "our cities black, brown, and broke."[8]

However, Geno Baroni was committed to coalition-building among various racial and ethnic groups through community organizing. Historian Gary Gerstle explains that Baroni

> hoped to launch a new populist movement that would bring the white and black poor together around common economic concerns and grievances. He hoped as well to encourage whites to follow the example of blacks and recover their group heritage and pride.[9]

Baroni, himself, when asked to write a report to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) task force on urban problems in 1969, a document he named "Agenda for the '70s," stated that

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argued for the term 'Euro-American ethnic'" (Halus 2007, 135). This author disagrees with Halus' assessment and finds little use of the term "Euro-American ethnic"—either in research or in common parlance. In this paper, the term "white ethnic" is predominantly used.

[6] Merton 2012, 732.

[7] Kerner Commission 1968.

[8] Washington Post 1984.

[9] Gerstle 2001, 334.

> We must bring together a new coalition to press for new goals and new priorities for all the poor and the near poor, including the blacks, the Appalachians, the Indians, the Spanish-speaking, and the white urban ethnic groups. […] Then we can develop a true cultural pluralism in this country and reduce the 'inevitable' […] group conflict.[10]

By the 1970s, many white ethnic neighborhoods, found primarily in the Northeast and the Midwest with fewer in the West, began to show signs of fray. As suburbs began to pop up and expand, the overall population of the largest 20 cities in the United States began to shrink, leaving urban residents with increasing taxes, fewer services, and rising crime rates. White ethnics, along with other city residents who were mainly African American and Latino, began to face the rapid decline of lending for home mortgages and home improvement loans. As described by Real Estate and Community Developer Joseph B. McNeely and Attorney Paul C. Brophy writing for The Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, the removal of bank support for white ethnics, in particular, occurred even when their communities had "assets on deposit in banks and savings and loan associations sufficient to completely revitalize" themselves. [11] This was expressly acute in white ethnic neighborhoods in Chicago.

The withdrawal of bank support from white ethnic neighborhoods was spurred on by the real estate community through the practice of "blockbusting." By selling a house in a traditionally white ethnic neighborhood to an African American or other minority buyer, real estate agents intentionally caused alarm and added to the ongoing departure of city residents to new suburbs by cynically creating a false sense of fear among some resident ethnics who, then, joined the process of "white flight" from large cities. Those who fled were experiencing what community activists Kenneth Bailey, Lori Lobenstine, and Kiara Nagel call "root shock," which they describe as "the traumatic stress reaction to the loss of some or all of one's emotional ecosystem."[12] As more white ethnics began to leave the cities, property values sunk dismally as realtors sold blue collar homes at rock bottom prices. This pernicious real estate strategy led to further disinvestment and discriminatory lending against racially mixed and white ethnic neighborhoods by the practice of "redlining," whereby the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) literally drew red lines around certain neighborhoods on city maps—neighborhoods which the FHA deemed too unstable to insure. As a result, a harmful cycle of blockbusting-redlining-white flight developed, thus depleting urban populations even further, especially of white ethnics, resulting in higher taxes as well as fewer city services for those who remained. Clearly, there was an urban crisis in the making.

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[10] O'Rourke 1991, 77.

[11] McNeely/Brophy 2000, 3.

[12] Bailey, Lobenstine and Nagel 2012, 9.

Geno Baroni viewed the urban crisis as "a human crisis" and, more aptly, "a moral crisis."[13] As described by Deslippe, Geno Baroni "placed the emerging grievances of Polish, Italian, Slavic, and Irish Immigrants [whom he called PIGS], their children, and grandchildren […] at the center of progressive politics."[14] It is Baroni's progressive politics, principally grounded in coalition-building and community organizing, wherein at its center, lies the issue of spatial justice. It is the interconnection of neighborhood and space that is significant in the lives of white ethnics as well as all other city dwellers in the 1970s.

Spatial Justice and Thirdspace in the work of Edward W. Soja

In the search for justice and democracy, the postmodernist geographer Edward W. Soja calls for a "spatial turn" that considers justice beyond the traditional lenses of history and sociology. It is the "lived" space that best defines spatial justice for Soja since "the geographies in which we live can have negative as well as positive consequences on practically everything we do."[15] Building on the work of Henri Lefebvre (e. g., "The Right to the City"),[16] Soja posits that what he calls "cityscape," which in this paper refers to urban neighborhoods, can be viewed from three distinct, but interconnected perspectives, which he names Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace. Before returning to the spatial justice project of Msgr. Geno Baroni, it is essential to understand how Soja distinguishes these three terms. In brief, the descriptions are as follows: [17]

1. *Firstspace*—Space is physically and empirically perceived as form and process, as measurable and mappable configurations and practices of urban life, viz. a park, a strip mall, or an apartment building, i. e., something material. In plain terms, Firstspace is *real* or *actual* space.
2. *Secondspace*—Space is more of a mental field, conceptualized in imagery and reflexive thought, a conceived space of the imagination similar to the mental map one carries of how a city is experienced, or thoughts about space. It is the

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[13] O'Rourke 1991, 77.

[14] Deslippe 2008, 148.

[15] Soja 2009, 2.

[16] Lefebvre 1996. The first edition, titled in French *Le Droit à la ville*, was published in 1968.

[17] These descriptions are based upon Soja 1996, and Soja 2000.

space of marketing and redevelopment projects. In this sense, Secondspace is *imagined* representational space.

3. *Thirdspace*—incorporates both Firstspace and Secondspace perspectives but considers them through a lens of *fully lived* space. Thirdspace is the experience of life in the Firstspace mediated through Secondspace expectations.[18]

Here, Soja is quite specific: urban space is "simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual, (a) locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency."[19] Expressed more plainly, ethnographer Makani Themba writes: "Space is a place of intersecting struggles/oppression/opportunities. How we move or not move through it, adapt to it, monitor it, buy or borrow it, claim or cut it off shapes everything we do and big parts of who we are." Themba is even more succinct when she states: "Perhaps our most tangible, tactile understanding of freedom, of liberation is in the physical space to move about as we please."[20]

In other words, the physical space in which one moves around—which includes its mental map—is not the static space viewed by an urban planner on a city map or through a field visit. Rather, it is the *lived* space, which embraces Engel's "identity and location" mentioned earlier. In this sense, the term 'urban neighborhood' takes on a much more vibrant and life-affecting meaning, what Soja refers to as a "consequential geography."[21] Following that, for Soja, "Spatial (in)justice can be seen as both outcome and process, as geographies or distributional patterns that are in themselves just/unjust and as processes that produce these outcomes."[22] As a result, Soja's Thirdspace exposes spatial (in)justice just as it underscores Baroni's view that an urban crisis is both a human and moral crisis. Thirdspace is what white ethnics began to defend in their coalition-building efforts in the 1970s to fight against the redlining and disinvestment processes of banks and the government in their neighborhoods. The anthropologist J.S. Onésimo Sandoval sums up their struggle against these injustices rather frankly. He states: "we must make ourselves aware of the outcomes of spatial injustice and the processes that augment an economic, political, and social environment, which are used to maintain the unjust geographies of the city."[23] Environmental Engineer Filipa Ramalhete also restates Soja's point regarding injustice. She makes clear that "Soja's starting point is that human activity in the territory at any historical moment and social context necessarily leads to situations of social injustice, geographies of exclusion (deriving from the hierarchy of places and their central position, their easy or difficult access, public investment or divestment in their quality, etc.)."[24]

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[18] It is important to point out that post-colonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha had also described a Third Space, which he identified as a hybridization that occurs between peoples of diverse, colliding cultures thereby focusing on the cultural rather than the spatial (Bhabha 1994).

[19] Soja 2000, 10–11.

[20] Themba 2012, i.

[21] Quoted in Williams 2013, 3.

[22] Soja 2009, 3.

[23] Sandoval 2011, 491.

The "unjust geographies" and the "geographies of exclusion" created in the 1970s by banks and the government led to animus, hostility, and sometimes violence between white ethnics and minority groups, especially African Americans, even though these groups often suffered from the same economic and governmental injustices determined by the neighborhoods in which they lived. According to Brian Culp, a kinesiologist, "Violations of (spatial justice) occur when there are no available facilities or services, there are unfair or uneven distributions of resources and access to space is unjustly controlled."[25] More directly, the political scientist Clarissa Rile Hayward underscores what was happening in urban neighborhoods in the 1970s:

> Constructing racialized places in which its citizens live and work—in which they experience the social world and develop their interpretations of it—the state has been instrumental in racializing the processes through which people perceive their relations with others and form their social identities.[26]

Such policies include restrictive covenants, zoning laws, and redlining.[27] Hayward emphasizes that the consequences of these unjust policies "translate into deliberative inequalities."[28] That is why it is crucial to understand the significance of spatial justice in the context of urban neighborhoods in the 1970s since government racialization impacted the lives of all urban residents of every race and ethnicity, in every neighborhood, including white ethnics.[29]

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[24] Ramalhete 2016, 2.

[25] Culp 2020, 3.

[26] Hayward 2003, 503.

[27] Williams 2013, 15.

[28] Hayward 2003, 507.

[29] Dennis Deslippe has written critically about the contentious issue of race and white ethnics, transcending white ethnics' "well-documented racism" and their "crass embrace of programs earned by others' hard-fought activism," which he calls "a kind of 'me-tooism." He explains: "I focus on white ethnic leaders allied with the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs (headed by civil rights veteran Msgr. Geno Baroni); seizing on the capacious definition of 'disadvantage' common in the early 1960s, they worked with African Americans and others for increased job

Political scientist Justin Williams explains that "spatial justice is an analytical framework that makes space, understood as a physical, social, and mental production, a central category for understanding justice."[30] With a greater authority, Soja moves spatial justice more directly into the center of the 1970s urban crisis in the United States when he writes:

> Combining the terms spatial and justice opens up a range of new possibilities for social and political action, as well as for social theorization and empirical analysis, that would not be as clear if the two terms were not used together.[31]

Both social and political action return us to the coalition-building, the community organizing, and the mission of Msgr. Geno Baroni to bring together racial and white ethnic groups by organizing against the destructive actions of banking institutions and governmental agencies that were generating the divisions to begin with. As Sandoval states: "the success of any spatial justice movement will depend on its ability to create coalitions with different movements across different geographic scales."[32] That is precisely what Baroni did.

Neighborhoods and the Spatial Justice Mission of Msgr. Geno Baroni

In 1956, Geno Baroni started out as Father Baroni in small parishes in Altoona in central Pennsylvania. He was uncomfortable with the rigid and conservative approaches to priesthood, theology, and life as dictated by the several priests he lived with at different times in different parishes. His deep interest in union organizing, which he inherited from his coal-mining father, earned him only disregard from his Irish American colleagues whom he found had little understanding of Italian immigrants. As a part-time religion teacher in a local Catholic high school, Baroni was admonished for abandoning the approved textbook and substituting articles from a progressive Catholic magazine, *Jubilee*, and *The New York Times.* According to his biographer, Lawrence M. O'Rourke, Baroni used these articles to raise "provocative questions about civil rights activities in the U.S. South, union organizing in Pennsylvania and the growth of the American military com-

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training, formed coalitions with organized labor, and lobbied for expanded affirmative action" (Deslippe 2008, 148).

[30] Williams 2013, 12.

[31] Soja 2009, 4.

[32] Sandoval 2011, 492.

plex."[33] Unmistakably, Baroni was out of step with the local Church and its pastors and priests. He sought a new assignment.

That new assignment came with his acceptance by the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., where, in 1960, Baroni moved into Saint Augustine's parish in Northwest D.C. On its website, Saint Augustine's explains that it is "the oldest Black Catholic church in the Nation's Capital. As the Mother Church of Black Catholics, Saint Augustine Church continues in the tradition in which it was founded, as a strong Black Catholic institution."[34] Here, Baroni got his real start in issues of spatial justice. The parish had a vacated convent which Baroni convinced his pastor and the archdiocesan cardinal to convert into a community service center. Named the V Street Center, the facility initially housed offices for school, government, and housing agencies as well as the Saint Vincent DePaul Society and a parish credit union. In addition, space was given to Alcoholics Anonymous, the Catholic Inter-Racial Council, and the Educational Inter-Racial Home-Visit Office. Lastly, Baroni converted the building's backyard into a place for neighborhood people to get together, particularly children. Baroni was turning the parish into a geography of inclusion.[35]

While at Saint Augustine's, Baroni also helped to motivate and organize Catholic participation in the March on Washington in 1963 at which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his enduring speech to "Let freedom ring." In 1965, he joined Dr. King in the second march to cross the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama. The day came to be known as Bloody Sunday in which unarmed peaceful civil rights demonstrators, including Dr. King, John Lewis, and Geno Baroni, were chased, and some were brutally beaten, by police who were attempting to stop the march. For, perhaps, the first time after leaving Pennsylvania, where the space had never resonated with him, Baroni had experienced a "geography of exclusion." As O'Rourke describes him, Geno Baroni now "stood at the jagged edges of church and the world."[36]

Influenced by all of these experiences, Baroni set about to convince the USCCB that, like other churches—specifically, Protestant and Jewish—the Catholic Church should initiate a major anti-poverty program to benefit those locked into unjust spaces of destitution and hopelessness. However, unlike the government's Great Society War on Poverty, which gave funding to cities and other jurisdictions for housing and welfare programs, Baroni sought to create a foundation which would fund people directly, largely through community groups, including community organizing groups. In other words, the Church would work *with* people, not *for* them. Regarding Baroni's efforts over a few years to help establish what eventually became called the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), Engel writes: "Baroni's leadership and national reputation carried both the moral urgency of the urban crisis and the practical necessity of the Church's mission within ethnic neighborhood economic and social development."[37] The USCCB officially approved and adopted a plan worked out largely by Baroni and other clerics in 1970 with a directive to start an annual fundraising collection from every Catholic church across the United States to generate $50 million in funding for community-based grants. Baroni kept his eyes on what Themba stated, as quoted earlier in this paper: the "intersecting struggles/oppression/opportunities" that are found in urban Thirdspaces. One of the CCHD's most prominent programs, Poverty USA, defines its mission as

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[33] O'Rourke 1991, 16.

[34] The church building itself was erected by emancipated African Americans with funds they raised at a strawberry festival they held at the White House on July 4, 1864, hosted by President Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd Lincoln, his wife.

[35] See O'Rourke.

[36] O'Rourke 1991, 4.

> to help individuals and communities to address poverty in America by confronting the root causes of economic injustice—and promoting policies that help to break the cycle of poverty. [Further, it] helps low-income people participate in decisions that affect their lives, families, and communities—and nurtures solidarity between people living in poverty and their neighbors.[38]

This is precisely the project of spatial justice.

However, Baroni had yet to make his ultimate contribution to help create spatial justice for urban white ethnics. That contribution began in 1971 with a one-year grant from the Ford Foundation with which he founded the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs (NCUEA). Gathering community organizers and urban developers into his center, Baroni set his sights on 58 Northeast and Midwest cities, which included approximately 40 million white ethnics (O'Rourke). NCUEA began to offer workshops and training sessions for community organizers from these locations, and very quickly the center began to help build solid coalitions between white ethnics and African Americans and Latinos in cities like Gary, Indiana; Newark, New Jersey; Baltimore, Maryland; and Detroit, Michigan. Within a few years, and although the figures vary, NCUEA had reached out to approximately 80 neighborhood projects in 42 cities across the country. Among the many community organizations funded by NCUEA were: The Buckeye-Woodland Community Congress (Cleveland, Ohio), which addressed tensions between African American and white ethnic neighborhoods by promoting community cooperation, equal-opportunity housing, and neighborhood improvement; the Calumet Community Congress (Gary, Indiana), which brought together furloughed steel workers from African American and white ethnic neighborhoods to plan community-based responses; Interfaith Adopt-a-Building (East Harlem, New York), which trained clergy and laity to organize tenants to improve housing conditions; and the Black-Polish Conference (Detroit, Michigan), which sought to develop channels of communication between Polish Americans and African Americans by establishing particular programs of benefit to both communities.

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[37] Engels 1998, 657.

[38] See Poverty USA 2001.

Following the establishment of NCUEA, in 1976, Baroni testified before the House Committee on Banking, Finance, and Housing in support of H.R.14756 et al., a bill to support the National Neighborhood Policy Act, which he had previously discussed with President Gerald Ford, who had agreed to support the bill but was not re-elected. That led Baroni to meet with President Jimmy Carter, who somewhat reluctantly pledged to support the bill as well. The aim of the legislation was to create a National Commission on Neighborhoods which had as its mandate "studying the factors necessary to neighborhood survival and revitalization and making recommendations for modification of existing laws and policies."[39] The Commission included four members of Congress—two from each house, plus sixteen public members appointed by the President. Although it was expected that Baroni would be asked to serve as Chair of the Commission, the position went to a political appointee. Nonetheless, Baroni helped shape the Commission and its mission in a number of ways, including by successfully arguing for the inclusion of neighborhood people as members and having several NCUEA staff members appointed to the new Commission's staff.

Consequently, in March, 1977, President Carter named Baroni to serve as assistant secretary of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for Neighborhood, Consumer and Regulatory Affairs. As such, Baroni became the highest ranked Roman Catholic priest ever to serve in the United States government (O'Rourke). O'Rourke describes in some detail how Baroni "turned around the federal government's policy toward neighborhoods" and how he convinced President Carter "that policies should be reshaped to preserve and improve neighborhoods where people live, shop, belong to community organizations, and attend religious institutions."[40] With urging from Baroni and the National Commission on Neighborhoods, President Carter promoted public-private partnerships with HUD and enacted the Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) program as his foremost urban program. HUD Presidential Management Fellow Chase Sackett explains that the UDAG program was "the first federal economic development program to require a prior guarantee of private-sector investment" for urban funding.[41] In the meantime, Baroni had successfully lobbied members of Congress to establish an Office of Neighborhood Self-Help Development, which Congress approved and President Carter assigned to Baroni's department at HUD. Through that office, Baroni offered support, grants, and technical assistance to community-based groups in neighborhoods.[42]

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[39] H.R. 14756, H.R. 14361, and H.R. 15388, 1976.

[40] O'Rourke 1991, 142.

Baroni had never forgotten the "root shock" he had experienced as the lone Italian American priest in Altoona, Pennsylvania, among an Irish American clergy. Nor did he fail to recall the "root shock" he had experienced on the Pettus bridge in Selma. Experiences like these led him directly to devote his life to white ethnic recognition and community organizing. To his mind, far too many white ethnics were part of the "white flight" contributing to an ever growing urban crisis which, for Baroni, was always a moral crisis. To counter the exit from urban centers, Merton describes how Baroni had learned about the significance of identity from the African American parishioners at Saint Augustine's and "encouraged these groups (white ethnics) to reject assimilation and assert a new 'white ethnic' identity…emphasizing themes of ethnic disadvantage, discrimination, and group difference to gain material and psychological reward."[43] The lived-in space, which Soja has called Thirdspace, was always foremost in Baroni's mind—that space of "intersecting struggles/oppression/opportunities."[44] In the same year that he had started NCUEA, Baroni had been invited to write the annual Catholic Bishops' Labor Day statement. Revising parts of what he had been given, Baroni wrote: "there is a desperate need to reduce and prevent the confrontation…between the white urban ethnic groups and the minority poor."[45] In the words of his biographer, "The concept of ethnicity worked its way into the fabric of American social thinking."[46] In other words, spatial justice for white ethnics was becoming recognized as a national need and social reality.

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[41] Sackett 2015, 6.

[42] See Brophy 2013.

[43] Merton 2012, 2.

[44] Themba 2012, i.

[45] Merton 2012, 3.

[46] O'Rourke 1991, 156.

The ‘Final Healing’

On August 27, 1984, Msgr. Geno Baroni died from mesothelioma, cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. He was just 53 years old. During the few years in which the cancer continued to destroy his body, Baroni told his biographer, O’Rourke: “I have also learned by faith that in the final analysis of one’s life there is only one final healing—death—and we know that final healing will be just.”[47] As cited above, in part, from O’Rourke, Baroni “stood at the jagged edges of church and the world, at those irregular and dangerous points which often slash and cut in conflict, rather than fit together in smooth harmonious purposefulness.”[48] The spaces he brought to public recognition, acceptance, and support remain as confirmation of his abiding sense of justice. One of his long-trusted colleagues and collaborators in spatial justice issues, Msgr. George Higgins, called Geno Baroni “one of the most innovative and most effective Catholic social activists of his generation.”[49]

Postscript: In full disclosure, upon graduating from college in 1976, I served as a personal assistant to Msgr. Baroni at NCUEA from September 1976 to January 1978. I was then appointed as Field Director on the staff of the National Commission on Neighborhoods until September 1978.

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[47] O’Rourke 1991, 280.

[48] O’Rourke 1991, 4.

[49] Jacobe 2021.

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Giuseppe Polise

“Shut your mouth! Leave your worries outside, Mistress Elektra will take good care of you”: Interracial BDSM, Ultra Fetishes and the Hauntology of Black Transness

At the very beginning of “Worth It” (*Pose*, S2 E2) Elektra Abundance, Mother of the House of Abundance,[1] is advancing on a sidewalk in the dead of night, wearing a long grey fur, her black weave gathered in a high ponytail and dark, heavy makeup on her face. With no hesitation, she turns to her right and, after a smoke from a cigarette that she snatches from the hands of a bystander, she goes down the stairs of a building and enters the “Hellfire Club”. The slow guitar riffs from *The Velvet Underground*’s song “Venus in a Fur” mark the tempo to which she so proudly strides, and as the woman comes forth in the long blood-red corridor her gaze facing the camera, a glimpse of the illicit spectacle that the sex club offers unfolds before our eyes: each of the gloomy chambers she walks past hosts a white man engaging in acts of submission to his mistress who, in turn, is profusely unleashing all forms of corporeal pain. As Elektra unlocks one of such doors and gets inside, her young, white client Paul is waiting handcuffed and blindfolded on her commands, prone on a wooden bench while sporting a red lace thong in coordination with the woman’s red boots that he has put on without permission. At “The Hellfire Club”, Elektra plays the part of the merciless dominatrix who satiates her clients’ hunger for pain, charging them by the hour. “Who is it?” Paul asks in a state of jittery alertness, betraying the shameful excitement that having been caught in women’s clothes provoked. “Who the fuck do you think it is Paul? It’s me!” Elektra shouts so loudly that it causes the man to moan with frissons of fear and pleasure combined. After a few moments, she takes a leash from the wall, and whipping him, continues: “You like giving your power to women, don’t you? You disgust

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[1] The backbone of the ballroom culture, house mothers are traditionally more experienced gay men, drag queens, and transgender women who take on the task of providing shelter, guidance, and support to the younger generation—the house children—as these are routinely rejected by their biological family for their sexual and gender non-conformity. For more information on the role and lure of the house mothers, see Johnson 2003, 76–107; for a thorough examination of ballrooms, their social rituals, and their members, see Bailey 2013.

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me!!" Finally, she fixes her stare on the red boots and, in a tone that progresses from hardly surprised and mocking to furious, exclaims:

> I see you helped yourself to my wardrobe…I bet you wouldn't last a day in my pumps. The adversities I've faced would cripple you! You disgust me! Now, get up!!…I can't even stand you, you pathetic creature. Stay right there.

As professional dominatrices, Elektra and other non-white transwomen from "The Hellfire Club" are shown in the repeated acts of administering corporeal punishment to wealthy white collars from Manhattan who are in search of an escape from the numbness of their lives. While these men are ostensibly the self-entitled owners of the economic, political, and social privilege in the outside world, they are also begging to be brought to their knees in the BDSM sessions at the mercy of the other sex. In the secrecy of these rooms, desire is stretched to the edges of white male perversion as clients anxiously await to be enslaved, to be dominated, to see their own masculinity literally and figuratively castrated, torn apart, shredded to pieces. After a long day at the top of the social ladder, pain and humiliation are their much sought-after reward.

Turning suffering into a display of luxury, the men who access it are the effective bearers and disposers of power because only they have the right to choose if, when, how, and with whom to access pain; when it comes to the dominatrices, instead, their misrepresentation as mistresses of self-fulfillment and vengeful authority only conceals an embodiment of powerlessness that takes place in the show in the mere extension of white male privilege. In the examination of Elektra's performance of BDSM sessions with her client Paul, this article investigates how *Pose* transcodifies social rituals of NYC 1980s sexual and racial arrangements—i. e. transactional interracial sadomasochism—into moments of black transfemale misrecognition in the interest of white male privilege. In doing so, it purposely walks the fine line between power and powerlessness, agency and dispossession, probing the seamless boundaries of choice and coercion and questioning their very applicability in the perpetrated exploitation of black trans matter. Bringing the audience inside the dark walls of the club, *Pose* provides an audiovisual commentary on how hegemonic prescriptions of blackness and transness permeate the supposedly safe space that BDSM provides in the performative exchange of roles between the participants. Regardless of the positions these women hold in the fantasy land of sadomasochism, racist and sexist logics of power are still used and abused in the BDSM game to determine who really dictates the rules and who, in fact, is subjected to them. Because black trans flesh is made hypervisible and always constructed from without,[2] the show’s representation of interracial BDSM materializes a fetish within the very fetish that Elektra is to white clients, signaling a morbid investment in the black transfeminine body as a porous site of external semiosis devoid of ownership and agency and where degeneration and inhumanity are applied beyond measure.

A Few Notes on Black Women and BDSM

In addressing Elektra’s involvement with BDSM performances, this article intercepts and interacts with the positionalities of a black feminist scholarship that looks at this sexual practice as a discourse. In it, multiple, contradictory, and layered meanings coexist, spanning from the structural questions of commodification and exploitation to its conceptualization as a powerful site of feminist imagination.[3]

As far as black women’s history of sexuality in the US is concerned, such discourse seems to polarize scholarly interventions that discuss sadomasochism either in detrimental or uplifting ways. Within a more recent black feminist current, most of the radical theories proposed insist on the potential of BDSM to disrupt the rules and the hierarchies of heteronormative desire—namely, through the dismissal of coital time with its pre-established trajectory of the intercourse (i. e. foreplay, sex, coitus), and that of gender-attached prescriptions of dominance and submission. In the first case, as Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley suggests, the BDSM scene “explodes the phallocentric teleology of arousal, climax, and resolution” by offering “a set of sexual practices that self-consciously manipulate time”[4] as well as fixed modalities of the sexual interaction,[5] thus exposing the myths about the duration and stages of sexual intercourse that the mainstream porn industry has naturalized and that are now ingrained in popular culture. An even more radical approach among contemporary black feminists suggests the detachment of the very notion of pleasure from traditional understandings of power and hierarchy. Among others, Ariane Cruz points at how oppression, domination, and humiliation of black female sexuality can be looked into as critical modes of black women's pleasure, power, and agency, and how the actualization of *race-play*, with its specific positioning of black women in the role of the slave, provides a framework to explore the not always rational interconnectedness of "shame, humiliation, and pleasure" beyond the logics of racial pain.[6] Within the arena of BDSM, these fetishes sanction under the guise of erotic play what would be otherwise expelled outside the boundaries of social acceptability, which results in the unmediated perpetuation of the racist and sexist mechanisms of powers that are rooted in such playing. On the whole, black women's search for their volitional submissiveness in the BDSM session would point less to an acknowledgment of socio-political powerlessness and more to the impossibility to rationalize pleasure itself, which ultimately dwells in the realm of the unspeakable.

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[2] By hypervisibility, both surveillance and neglect are involved in the characterization of the black body. I specifically borrow this concept from Nicole Fleetwood, who uses it in her work “to describe processes that produce the over-representation of certain images of blacks and the visual currency of these images in public culture. It simultaneously announces the continual invisibility of blacks as ethical and enfleshed subjects in various realms of polity, economy, and discourse, so that blackness remains aligned with negation and decay” (Fleetwood 2015, 16).

[3] Miller-Young 2014, xi.

[4] Tinsley 2018, 105; 104.

[5] By “fixed modalities”, I am referring to those practices within the sexual intercourse whose teleology is established based on the discursive formation of an internal coherence assumed between biological sex, gender, and sexual orientation. This process seems to me to be informed by what Butler describes as the *heterosexualization of desire*, which is “produced through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms” and it “requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical opposition between ‘femi-

While these studies contribute to advancing non-conventional meanings of black women's sexual agency, the question remains as to whether the erotic fantasies of black female violence and submission that underlie BDSM—particularly in its interracial expression—can really ever be so untethered from memories of transatlantic slavery in which "sexuality, as a term of implied relationship and desire, is dubiously appropriate, manageable, or accurate".[7] Regardless of the unconscious reasons for which pleasure manifests itself in volitional acts of submission, its racialized manifestation through and on the body of black women produces associations to historical forms of powerlessness and violence that are understandably troubling. Within an established tradition of black feminist criticism, images of black women performing BDSM are understood to produce an evident psychic return to the *non-beingness* of the black body in bondage as this sexual practice fictionalizes the commodification of rape and white men's abusive desires and violent behaviors, while also normalizing black women's complicity in their own oppression. Among the most vehement critiques to sadomasochism, this black feminist tradition specifically

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nine' and 'masculine' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female'" (Butler 1999, 23).

[6] Cruz 2016, 21. Race play is a particular BDSM practice that uses race in the constitution of hierarchies and dynamics of dominance and submission. As Ariane Cruz explains, "most commonly an interracial erotic play, race play uses racism as a tool of practice, often involving the exchange of racist language, role play and the construction of scenes of racial degradation" (Cruz 2016, 33).

[7] Spillers 1987, 76.

voices the impossibility to divorce the mechanisms through which pleasure is achieved from the sociopolitical patterns of gender and racial domination on which modern societies stand. For Audre Lorde, for instance, BDSM is deeply problematic because it both feeds off and reiterates in fantastical terms structures of hetero-patriarchal power and dominance at the bottom of which lies an ever present superior/inferior binary. In an interview with Susan Leigh Star (1982), the intellectual maintains that:

> Sadomasochism is an institutionalized celebration of dominant/subordinate relationships. And it prepares us to either accept subordination or dominance. Even in play, to affirm that the exertion of power over powerlessness is erotic, is empowering, is to set the emotional and social stage for the continuation of that relationship, politically, socially, and economically.[8]

Although the white master/black (female) slave represents only one of BDSM’s possible configurations, because the binary that is being replicated in play cements dynamics that continue to allot power to one specific demographic (read white patriarchy) black women’s right to access pleasure via submission and humiliation also carries the preoccupation of their compliance to/complicity in power formations that are engrained in America’s misogynoir.[9] To that end, readings of BDSM as a safe space where performance and fantasy take over the real do not make the implications of playing less dangerous but, in fact, emphasize the always already racialized nature of desire, to which black women inevitably fall victim.[10] As Alice Walker argues throughout her fictional story “A Letter of the Times, or Should This Sado-Masochism Be Saved?” (1982), BDSM’s eroticization of dominance disproportionately affects black women and the perception of their vulnerability by way of trivializing their history of enslavement and “falsely perpetuating black women’s contentment with and consent to such captivity”.[11] Even when admitting to the paradoxical presence of consent to the body’s abuse—the one condition that separates the domain of BDSM from reality—structural antiblackness is still so rooted in the collective unconscious and in its determination of prefixed racial and gender orders that any relationship between white master/mistress and black slave can hardly presuppose the equality of the participants.

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[8] Lorde 1982, 68.

[9] A term coined by queer black feminist Moya Bailey, it indicates a type of misogyny specifically directed against black women, for whom race and gender both play a decisive role in the bias (Bailey 2010).

[10] As black bodies are historically loaded by racist narratives, myths, and stereotypes that seem to always already precede its actual existence, the desire that they generate, especially in an interracial context, will also be informed by such narratives and, therefore, be polluted by them.

[11] Cruz 2016, 38.

Now, this current of black feminist thought may suffer from one shortcoming that makes their criticism biased, one that has its origin in the hypervisibility of the black American woman who is at all times called to be a reflection of her community's respectability, to represent herself and the community as worthy of their citizenship in the country.[12] Whether it is for the whites' projection of derogatory stereotypes or for the black community's attempt to reject them, black women's bodies have always been a contested territory of strict policing and surveillance. It's not surprising, then, that their sexuality has never been private and they are not granted the same luxury white women have to explore desire as a private matter. Still, the arguments that Lorde and Walker make in exposing the apparent neutrality that BDSM maintains in the playful simulation of racial and gender hierarchies are valid. While these hierarchies are—easily—retraceable in the default association of whiteness with dominance and blackness with submissiveness, an examination of Elektra's relationship with her former lover Dick Ford and her client Paul will prove that they also extend to/encompass its performative reversal—when the mistress is a black transgender woman and the slave is a white cisgender man.

Black Transwomanhood: an Ultra-Fetish

As a professional black transgender dominatrix, Elektra's involvement in interracial BDSM sessions magnifies the social anxieties surrounding the haunting chimera of black female respectability because it shows the extent to which race and gender assumptions pervert the black female body to accommodate the white male gaze. In this sense, BDSM's place within the episode answers less to a cinematographic need of sadomasochist affirmance as a form of minority empowerment, and more to an examination of the structural conditions that, taken together, produce the marginality of black sentience and the volatility of agency in the presence of late capitalism. In the sociocultural environment of 1980s NYC that *Pose* portrays, interracial BDSM becomes the ultimate site of projected transgression and deviance. Disguised within the playfulness of its borders lies a hegemonic culture of racial and sexual commodification that reiterates derogatory stereotypes of black female sexuality while it simultaneously cements the social stigma around black female transness. If black womanhood is a fetish to white men, then black female transness turns for them into the ultimate fetish.

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[12] Abiding by such forms of respectability meant for black women an intraracial form of policing over strictly public performances of black womanhood. For a more detailed account on the origins and implications of such politics, see Hine 1989 and Higginbotham 1993.

When looking at the composition of the Club's group of dominatrices, Elektra's blackness emerges in all the historicity of its fetishization: almost all non-white, these workers are made into the receptable of illicit pleasures as their flesh materializes the echo of Euro-American conquests and renews the process of guilt-free sexual possession time and again. Differently put, these dominatrices are pigeonholed on the intelligible category of the Other,[13] a subject-object of tantalizing matter whose strange seduction emanates from the very estrangedness that they are made to embody. Otherness, however, is a category that does not adequately explain the extreme fascination that Elektra—as a black mistress—elicits in men: with an ebony skin that precedes her whenever she enters a room, Ms. Abundance embodies the proverbial Jezebel,[14] the slavery-old racial trope that has contributed to the assumption of black women's inherently deviant sexuality. As black enslaved women grew to be associated with a primal hunger, a bestial appetite for men, so Elektra is loaded with narratives of hypersexual prowess and desire that make her body fatally irresistible, and all the more so within a black mistress/white slave logic. In Manhattan's daily consumption of all available goods, the sexual hunger for the black female body reinstates its ante-bellum function as the commodity who speaks,[15] materializing in the here and now "the most intense of symbolic transactions in circum-Atlantic culture: money transforms flesh into property, property transforms flesh into money; flesh transforms money into property".[16]

With all its strip-clubs and the endless piers where prostitution takes place, the 1980s culture of the Big Apple continually feeds off female blackness as a commodity fetish that can be appropriated and disposed of in all its libidinal value. In the parade of black sex workers that the viewer is presented with in the series, their flesh resumes a history of full display, always made available to be examined, visually dissected and its worth established based on its capacity to perform what it is asked. More than a century after the emancipation, accumulation and fungibility still mark black women's body, extending their social death from the finite time-space of the Antebellum South to the self-renewing loop of libidinal production-consumption put in place in its capitalist aftermath.[17]

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[13] Said 1978.

[14] A derogatory controlling image whose lethal mythology originated during slavery, this racial trope has been carefully cultivated to reinforce assumptions of black women's inherently deviant sexuality. See Collins 2000, 82. For a thorough explanation of how popular culture and the Black Church work conjointly in the production and reiteration of such stereotype, see Lomax 2018.

[15] Here, I am borrowing from Fred Moten's extensive commentary on the resistance of the black individual as object inspired by Marx's subjunctive imagery of the talking commodity. To this image, Moten responds with "the historical reality of commodities who spoke—of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and 'freedom'" (Moten 2003, 5–6).

[16] Roach 1996, 215.

If such enactments indeed question an aprioristic equality among the sadomasochists in light of the mistresses' intersection of class and blackness, transness acts here as an exponential intensifier of black women's commodification, being the performance of black transfemininity an extremely valuable currency to seek social and economic stability in the face of racism. From prostitution to pole-dancing and stripping at the peep-shows, the series abounds in examples that show how sex-work prospers in the white clients' specific demand of black transwomen. Prior to her job at the "Hellfire Club", Elektra was already acquainted with the culturally loaded associations of black transwomanhood with deviance and monstrosity, and with how such categories were normalized into the libidinal economy of the city by making sex-work one of the few options available to transwomen of color. Navigating the ocean of white, male-oriented desire, Elektra stands on the stage of Manhattan's sex world as the proverbial forbidden fruit, one that is approached in an anticipation of pleasure that fulfills the white patriarchal fantasy of tampering with the black flesh, the hunger for which transness simply heightens. Sitting at the junction of race, gender, and class discrimination, Elektra embodies an exasperation of what Hortense Spillers theorizes as black women's *cultural vestibularity.*[18] In the enduring anti-black sentiment that frames the latter as the antechamber—the vestibule—to civilization, the very threshold that separates culture from inhumanity and that coerces them into a historical space of sanctioned violence, Elektra's transwomanhood complements her black skin in making her violation all the more anticipated and even normalized. As gender nonconformity makes the contours of her body seductive in their unintelligibility, Elektra enfleshes the line where interracial perversions and anxieties overlap. Her bodily surfaces turn into the ultimate vestibule, the most exposed antechamber to culture whose brutality she experiences in all her economic vulnerability and social isolation.

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[17] First introduced by Orlando Patterson (1982), the notion of social death critically engages the condition of the African American communities in the US by positioning "slavery as a matrix of social, political, and economic" inequalities that are simply too unsurmountable (Sexton 2011, 22–23). Social death becomes an ontology and epistemology for black people, whose existence has been historically marked not only by exploitation and natal alienation but, most importantly, by their body's very accumulation and fungibility as labor. For more information about the extent to which black bodies are denied agency and humanness through these processes, see Wilderson et al. (2017).

[18] See Spillers 1987, 67. Sitting at the junction of race, gender, and class discriminations, black women embody the notion of cultural vestibularity, one which Hortense Spillers theorizes to convey a vivid idea of the distance put between black enslaved people and humans (Spillers 1987, 67). Referring to processes and dynamics that arise with and develop from slavery, Spillers describes black women as the enfleshed threshold between dominated bestiality and civilization. As such, they have been conceptually coerced into a space of sanctioned violence—the vestibule—that constituted an antechamber to the category of the human, and where the laws of civilization did not apply. In the words of Joseph Pugliese, "once held captive in the vestibule, the slave [could] be exposed to a range of violent and fatal practices that [were] informed by the slave owner's knowledge that such practices [could] be exercised with absolute impunity" (Pugliese 2013, 45).

These vulnerabilities are always there, even when it seems hard to recognize them. Throughout the first season, the privilege that Elektra holds is the result of a ten-year relationship with Dick Ford, a businessman who showers her in luxury in return for her services as a high-profile mistress. In this specific case, bourgeois sophistication spectacularizes the ever-present exploitation of black flesh as negotiations of libidinal work hide beneath a pretense of middle-class mannerisms and etiquette that are performed in the simulation of courtship. Unlike her friends Angel and Candy who are repeatedly seen "walking the piers" and selling their bodies in degraded and dangerous contexts, Elektra contractualizes her body's worth according to middle-class norms/logics that, while surely not responsible for explicit life-death situations, do establish the transwoman's submission to her clients as an object of gender and racial perversion. Here, the manumission of black flesh occurs in the interstices of middle-class respectability and righteousness as this body constitutes an always already perverted site of illicit conduct that does away with the jurisdiction of Judeo-Christian sexophobic tenets.

The show first introduces Mr. Ford in "The Fever" (S1 E4) when he meets with Elektra in the penthouse of a luxurious hotel that is reserved exclusively for his secret rendezvous. He is waiting bare-chested, just out of a steaming marble-encased bathroom when Elektra is shown at the bottom of a flight of stairs as she walks up to him; she is expected. In the small talk concerning his business trip to London, their verbal and physical interaction reveals the subtle yet inevitable intersection of eros and power(lessness). An exchange of formalities—of touch, of gaze, of speech—precedes the sexual intercourse, thus signaling a fundamentally ritualistic nature of the entire act: within Ford's circles, a semblance of decorum and propriety is imperative both for the necessity to keep the reputation of men like him intact and for the correct fulfillment of their fetishistic desires. This back and forth of pleasantries continues as Ford reaches out to Elektra's waist as she caresses his hair and gently asks questions about his early return, to which the man responds with compliments that are made in accordance with the perfect script of cinematographic lovemaking. He is filthy rich, the kind of rich that has just bought a ballerina series at the Kertész auction in London but, in his own words, "none of them can hold a candle to [his] greatest possession," a confession that he makes while proceeding to remove her dress sighing at the sight of her body in great anticipation. The erotic tension of this social dance is finally let loose when Ford exclaims how "only [his] favorite girl can cheer [him] up", slowly yet decidedly pushing Elektra on the bed and kissing her passionately on the neck. What presents itself as the pinnacle of a passionate interaction also reveals its pure fictionality in the space of its enactment. Despite the suggestion that some form of twisted affection between Ford and Elektra exists, their relationship is regulated via mechanisms of power and control that make any sentiment of care dispensable on the side of the man, who is only interested in his own personal satisfaction. These words that he says are particularly telling: in the golden palace in which they seclude themselves, Elektra is kept as Ford's "most precious possession" one to which all his other fortunes and investments "cannot hold a candle". While this statement certainly ranks high on the list of the most effective weapons of—pre-feminism—seduction, it also bluntly reduces Elektra to her very well accustomed role of speaking commodity. Admittedly, Elektra is treated as an object, one of immeasurable sexual worth that can be accessed whenever, wherever, and however the man pleases. In this sense, she and Aunt Hester, Linda Brent or Patsy share the same destiny.[19]

While Ford is indeed expected to provide for her, this does not certainly happen out of sheer kindness, but is a manifestation of his desire to keep Ms. Abundance as his mistress. And he is very much willing to do so by entertaining a fantasy of her as a high-class woman who must be spoiled in exchange of her precious company. Without any doubt, Elektra is meticulously cultivating an image of respectable, refined black womanhood for her own personal gain, but the fact that she can capitalize it means that this image is, in fact, the projection of her clients' crave for perversion insomuch as the black trans body stands as the epitome of degraded/degradable black womanhood. Here, all the monthly allowances that Ford grants her in his absence, the private chauffeur, a big view-over-the-city one-bedroom apartment, fine jewelry and clothes, and the best surgical treatments are all part of a complex wooing-like choreography that only sugarcoats the much harsher reality of their sexual contract, one that involves confidentiality, discretion, faithfulness and mastery in the art of love from the black transwoman and where gallantry, generosity and kindness are all codes for service payment.

However, it is not long before the characters give up on this well-orchestrated fantasy of romance, which collapses at the unwelcomed news of Elektra's wish to carry on with the gender reassignment operation. As now both lie in bed in a post-intercourse moment of cuddling, Ford plunges into candid remarks about their very impressive sexual performance. First, his feeling impressed at the stability and intensity of their relationship—“Ten years, more than both my marriages combined”—and his pause on the sexual acrobatics of the moment—“Nobody keeps fucking the way we do, it’s just not sustainable”— restate Elektra’s place as an intermittent outsider with whom it is possible to explore one’s urges that are taboos within middle-class institutions like marriage. More importantly, the brief observation that precedes these comments reveals a degree of sexual commodification in which Elektra’s humanity is replaced with the atomized constituents of her identity that are most functional to Ford’s satisfaction. By saying “*You* still got it”, Fords gets the point across that Elektra has always been responsible for the intercourse’s adequate performance, thus establishing her status of lustful object instead of recognizing a shared humanity in their reciprocation of pleasure. Such disregard of reciprocity naturally derives from his pronounced expectations as an avid consumer rather than a complicit partner. While the two are still in bed and Elektra finally breaks the news of her imminent surgical operation, Ford’s behavior changes. Faced with the threat of losing his fetish, the man immediately asserts his dominance by replacing the idyllic language of romance—and even that of lust—with the far more persuasive logics of moral obligations. In his words: “when I met you, you were dancing for chasers, for dollars…in that cum-stained shithole that I took you out of. And I gave you a life…a real life. And now you repay me this way?” Here, Ford’s tones are far from sweet and conciliatory, and their rage is meant to strike a chord with Elektra’s own perceived socio-economic vulnerability and her inevitable submission in the wish to keep living a comfortable life. Going past the hypocritical walls of courtship, Ford finally reduces the black woman to her penis, with absolute disregard for her thoughts or feelings:

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[19] These are all fictional/fictionalized female characters found respectively in the slave narratives by Frederick Douglas (1845), Harriet Jacobs (1861), and Solomon Northup (1851).

> The woman I have has always had something extra…I know what I like, but I can’t explain why my dick gets hard knowing yours is there. All I know is I want it in the room. Now, maybe it’s because I like the feeling of knowing that I’m getting away with something that no one else knows about. I just want it there (S1 E4).

With the removal of all the middle-class protocols and mannerisms, transness reveals itself as the one narrative that turns black flesh—that “zero degree of social conceptualization”—into a body, [20] the only thing that makes it somewhat worthy

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20 In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (1987), Hortense Spillers makes a fundamental distinction between flesh and body, describing the latter as the result of the number of ideological discourses that are imprinted on the flesh, thus constituting the subject’s identity. As she writes: “I would make a distinction in this case between ‘body’ and ‘flesh’ and impose that distinction as the central in the eye of its beholder. Concealed within the rhetoric of romance lies the truth that Elektra does not exist outside of those parts—her phallus and, perhaps more to the point, the very contrast between the remnants of her manhood and her femininity—that are meant to entertain the businessman. That much is already clear enough when Ford warns her against having the surgery performed—"Well, if that future involves this procedure, it obviously doesn't include me"—but becomes tangible upon his realization that Elektra has nevertheless carried on with it. In "Pink Slip" (S1 E7), the two meet again in the same bed of the same penthouse and as he touches her thong, his face passes from aroused at the idea of the woman being tucking to the horror of his favorite toy's absence. Livid, he rushes from the bed, dresses back up adamant in his refusal to "take a ride on a brand-new pussy" as Elektra puts it, and for the last time reaffirms the contractual nature of their relationship in the promise of the inevitable consequences to her actions. In what is in fact their last exchange, Ford's words articulate hierarchy and power —of class, of race, of gender—and how these two allow him to administer punishment: "I'm in control here, what I want, what I like, the price you would pay for not giving it to me. I was abundantly clear the very first night that we met at the bar." Affection is scarcely verbalized and when it is, it comes in the shape of self-centered regret: "I hate you because I love you. Because you are the best thing in my life. This place, with you, *was my cocoon*, and you took it away from me. You knew the rules and you broke them. You lost it all." Not curiously, love, or its twisted fantasy as one might call it, presents itself in a manifested split that the man operates between his fetish of Elektra as a pornographic assemblage of bodily incongruities and what Elektra really wants for herself—the completion of her selfhood/personhood. As such split is always present in the conscience of the consumer, one sees how Ford can successfully direct the hatred that he feels towards this subject (in the making) while still preserving some kind of feeling for the object.

It is clear that Elektra's worth is that of any capital, always assessed in relation to the black trans body's potential and its lack thereof, always in relation to its very threat of accumulation and fungibility. Ford's assertion of Mrs. Abundance's uniqueness as his greatest possession does not put the language of finance in the service of true feeling, but it comes indeed from a place of calculated expenses and personal profit. Vulnerable and exposed, Elektra's case proves how her uniqueness is, in fact, ephemeral and always subjected to the owner's perception.

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one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the 'body' there is 'flesh', that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography" (Spillers 1987, 67). For Spillers, it is ideology, racist/sexist ideologies in the specificity of her article, that anchors certain narratives to the flesh so that a body is formed even before its biological conception.

Once Ford deems her—and the tacit agreement they have—not worthy anymore, he simply tosses her away and allocates all her privileges to another transwoman. Without a place to stay, an allowance, and access to the good life that she dreams of, Elektra is now forced to turn to more explicit contractualizations of her body to survive. Not long after, she becomes a professional dominatrix.

A Hauntology of Black Transness

In their enactments, the BDSM sessions between Elektra and her white clients shed light on the vulnerabilities of black trans bodies and their exposure to the pervasiveness of a culture of sexual commodification by visually dramatizing the racial, gender, and class divide that their role-playing is supposed to conceal under the guise of erotic fantasies. In the representation of Elektra as a black trans mistress, the episodes reveal how interracial BDSM relies on hegemonic narratives of blackness and transness in the co-constitution of an irresistibly vicious stereotype: within the limited space of the Hellfire chamber, Elektra is made into a hyperfeminine jezebel whose phantasmagoric surplus manhood drives hard-working, loyal-to-the-family men to literal submission, making them desperately beg for it. Like Mammy, Jezebel, Matriarch and many others before her, Black Trans Dominatrix becomes another controlling image that shows the extent to which non-normative bodies—read non-white, non-cisgender—are de-humanized, perverted, and exploited by white society's economic capital. The province of evil and degeneration, its grip on the collective unconscious conceals well-established infrastructures of racial and gender inequalities, divesting *de facto* black transgender woman of their agency and motive will.

Contractualizing pleasure and pain from uneven socio-economic positions, the black mistress-white slave relationship is one of labor rather than mere pleasure. As such, not only does it elude the logics of reciprocity, it does so on the basis of well-established social hierarchies. In other words, the access to money that the fetishistic performance of black transness can allow also makes Elektra incredibly vulnerable to acts of power and dominance that undermine the rules and roles of the sadomasochist game, while strengthening those outside of it.

The scene that follows the one used in the opening of this article (S2 E2) is exceptionally revealing of this structural powerlessness: after a series of insults directed at an almost naked-, shivering with pleasure-Paul, Elektra is turning to her wardrobe to grab a red corset in order for him to wear it and then move on with the beating. Taking advantage of a moment of distraction, the man reaches into his coat's pocket and takes out a phial of Amyl Nitrate, a substance that, along with "a lil' coc[aine] will keep [him] going all night." As soon as Elektra realizes what the man is doing, she categorically exclaims: “What is that? I don’t do drugs, nor do I approve of them.” Breaking the codes of BDSM submission, Paul steps out of his performative role and, handing Elektra a generous roll of money, he continues with one simple yet very effective implied proposition. By saying: “You charge by the hour, don’t you?,” Paul establishes the woman’s undisputable subordination, soliciting an agreement that is the result of her socio-economic disadvantage rather than her unwavering complicity. Met with such a tempting offer, Elektra cannot refuse to reconsider her unmovable position on drug restrictions and turn a blind eye on the whole matter, concluding the conversation with a simple “Fine!” and then proceeding to perform her dominatrix duties.

Only apparently in control of administering pain and pleasure, Elektra holds a type of authority that is bestowed onto her by Paul for the specific fulfillment of *his* needs, with the result that her credibility as a mistress is irredeemably compromised. On the one hand, Elektra is surely using the position that she is made to hold to her own advantage both in terms of economic profit and moral compensation, but this only says so much about her capacity to adjust to the unjust.[21] “Negotiating the existing political economy by using [her] corporeal resources”[22] is not only a crucial strategy to her survival but a decisive move to securing her access to unimaginable wealth and respect among her peers. However, that these advantages come as the manifestation of a black feminist utopia created by femdom BDSM is dubious to say the least. If anything, Elektra’s overall business and the specific interactions with Paul prove that such utopia masks, in fact, “a paradise arranged and organized for male pleasure [in which] men can indulge secretly and guiltily their knowledge of women’s power, while enclosing female power in a fantasy land”[23] from which participants “will walk outside without much having changed”.[24]

Following McClintock and Tinsley, the Hellfire Club must be thought of as the non-normative setting where the 1980s city’s sexual, racial, and class geographies of power are maintained intact, not overturned. When men like Paul schedule BDSM sessions in which the authority of their mistresses would suggest a temporary alteration of these geographies, both the transfer of power and any illusion of hierarchical flips that such transfer would entail are defined within the sphere of these men's pleasure alone, even when pleasure is accessed via beating and humiliation. More explicitly than with Ford, the worth of Elektra *the Black Dominatrix* is temporary because it is confined to the chamber where she is working and negotiated in the context of power dynamics that always make black transgender women the target of exploitation. While Elektra's serious need of money makes her defective in the performance of the dominatrix role,[25] Paul can freely step in and out of the fantasy utopia that he has secured for himself by profiting from an economic, racial, and social position of significant privilege. This not only allows him to use the black transwoman's body as the fetish for his own reality-escaping fantasies, it also gives him and him alone the opportunity to bend the rules and negotiate each time the boundaries of the BDSM game to his convenience. During each session, it is Paul who demands that the fantasy be enacted, it is him who projects the fetish of the black trans dominatrix onto Elektra, and it is his money that makes his fantasy come to fruition. As for the woman, her presence is accounted for only insomuch as it facilitates the client's enjoyment of the illusion. Within this pattern of trans exploiting-white male perversion, Elektra's character is enfleshed through the accumulative force of slavery-old logics of corporeal dispossession and negation that demand of blackness to be always materialized from without. Objectified and completely severed from her personhood, Elektra is nothing but what her blackness and her transness signify to the client, she is nothing but the means to an end. Here, there is no ontological status if not one which whiteness allows, one that whiteness, in fact, creates out of its obsessions with the black flesh.

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[21] Performance becomes here a tool of the unprivileged’s resistance in response to structural conditions of inequality. Within this framework, Mireille Miller-Young’s definition of *play-labor* is extremely illuminating because it works on the triangulation of black working-class womanhood, sexual agency, and performance. As the author writes: “Marginalized and exploited in the labor market, many young, working-class today identify the sex industries as the preferred spaces to make a living…[In this sense] Play-labor is one strategy by which black women (and others) try to negotiate the existing political economic by using their corporeal resources, which are some of the only resources may black working-class women may in fact possess” (Miller-Young 2014, 12).

[22] Miller-Young 2014, 12.

[23] McClintock 1993, 102.

[24] Tinsley 2018, 117.

Such an annihilation of agency becomes even more obvious in the BDSM performance of the episode "Butterfly/Cocoon" (S2 E3) that tragically culminates with Paul's drug overdose and eventual death. During the session, the show makes abundantly clear how both the transactional nature of their relation and the racial, social, and economic divide existing outside the BDSM room *de facto* make Elektra, not Paul, the target of real submission. What takes place within the game, then, is somewhat of a pantomime, a well-orchestrated farce that exploits the unprivileged and only sells the illusion of the woman's supremacy in the interest of white men's capital. As Mrs. Abundance is choosing the most appropriate tool from her collection with which to inflict him pain, Paul enters the room and, following her orders, sits on the chaise longue by the bed. Euphoric, he hands her a new mask that releases a slow, steady supply of drugs by screwing them at the front of the inhaler. Once again, Elektra is met with the necessity to play the part of the dominatrix to no avail. First, in the unbecomingly dominant admission to having been weak for giving in to Paul's drug consumption during the previous session; and secondly, in the man's unbothered attitude at the predictability of her restated—with decidedly less conviction than before—disapproval of drugs, to which he calmly answers with the phrase "Name the prize" to settle the matter once and for all. In the space of this exchange, the true positions of dominant and subaltern are established even in their sadomasochist reversal as Paul's offer is met with Elektra's unhesitant acceptance. Uncapable and also unwilling to exercise her performative authority at the prospect of a generous compensation, all she can do is negotiate the terms of her value by almost doubling the cachet: "Three hundred extra on top of the normal three hundred fifty" she exclaims, without blinking an eye. By agreeing to play on Paul's terms, power, authority, and control disappear from Elektra's corporeal vocabulary as she is literally reduced to a handmaiden in the assistance of the man to his next toy: after having fastened the belts of the sex swing from which he is hanging and regulated the flowing of drugs through the mask as per *his* instructions, Elektra is now even asked to leave the room and come back in twenty minutes when "everything's kicked in so that [he] can fully enjoy the beating." Compliant, the *demistressed* mistress can only agree with an obliging "Certainly…I'm on your time" as she walks out the door.

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[25] She has just recently been replaced by Ford with a woman with male genitalia and has slept rough for many nights before Blanca finally gives her shelter taking her under her roof.

Upon her scheduled return, the discovery of Paul's dead body activates a sequence of scenes in which comedy gold moments of non-white transfemale camaraderie arise from a common subtext of explicit white-on-transblack simultaneous violence and fixation.[26] The moment Elektra is shown in the gruesome attempt to remove the vomit from Paul's mouth, genuine panic appears on her face not—only—for the loss of a life, but for what that particular loss would mean to a society that is only accustomed to *black* people being killed by whites and not the other way around. What follows is the woman's industrious attempts at handling the matter in a picaresque revision of the epic journey. Wondering about the street of the Bronx in the dead of night, Elektra first stops at her former house daughter

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[26] All anti-black or phobic-black discourse feed off an ambivalence of feelings that turn the black body into the indistinct site of projected panic, anxieties, terrors, and pleasures. Eric Lott thoroughly observes this ambivalence in his study on ante-bellum minstrel shows and the implication of blackface in *Love and Theft.* According to the scholar "minstrelsy brought to public form racialized elements of thoughts and feelings, tone and impulse, residing at the very edge of semantic availability which Americans only dimly realized, let alone understood…The very form of blackface acts—an investiture in black bodies—seems a manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of blackness…It was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices" (Lott 1993, 6).

Blanca’s while still in a state of evident shock. Unhappy with the very naïve advice to inform the police that she receives from her, however, Elektra decides to head to a strip-club where her other daughter Candy is working and ask *her* what to do. Candy’s answer is very simple: a white man dying by the hands of a black transgender woman, even in the case of the latter’s proved innocence, would inevitably result in incarceration and unmediated brutality. Involving the police would be simply suicidal, hence the agreed-upon necessity to conceal the man’s death and get rid of his corpse. To this end, Elektra and Candy reach Ms. Orlando’s illegal practice—a transwoman from the Honduras who performs cheap, unsafe plastic surgeries for the girls of community—who is also infamously known for having dealt with similar cases before. As she eventually agrees to help, the three of them turn into unlikely anti-heroes in search of a salvation that can only be found by going against the law. As they get to Elektra’s newly rented apartment, the narrative spirals into the absurd when they so casually proceed to *cocoon* Paul’s body, a term of endearment that Ms. Orlando morbidly uses to refer to the makeshift practice of embalming the corpse before placing it into a trunk that will be safely hidden into the closet.[27] At last, Elektra is free. But is she at all?

Of course, the irreverent humor and the tragicomic tones that arise from the women’s reactions to these unlikely events have the means to momentarily destabilize racial and gender power dynamics that only favor white men. In this sense, Paul’s death may be thought to take place within a project of fictional revision of that weary script. At the same time, it seems necessary to point at how this overdramatic production of white death could also exist well outside the cinematic attempt of reversing hegemonic necropolitics and, in fact, emphasize their pervasiveness by anchoring blackness to the exertion of white privilege even in the absence of a living body.[28] After the plan has been successfully carried out, a final scene shows Elektra alone in her apartment while she stares at the trunk in the closet in front of her. Simultaneously, another camera placed inside the closet looking out frames the woman in the act of staring, which suggests somewhat of a reciprocity, a return of the gaze that invests the supposedly inanimate trunk with a projected humanity that is—still—attached to its content. While Elektra might be the only living person in the house, she surely is not alone. As she is sitting still on the bed, regret, compassion, and fear, are catching up to her, all externalized in the shape of the human cocoon that becomes her unwanted eternal companion. The trunk, as it were, is transformed into an inescapable memento, an echo of a—never really passed—past that keeps Paul's presence very much alive. As a result of that, the woman cannot possibly feel relief and looks, in fact, restless as she steps into the closet and kneels closer to the trunk touching its surface. Because she is forever bound to that trunk, its very content having by now lost the contours of Paul's humanness as his body disappears from sight, Elektra is forced into a space of painful remembrance of that past that she cannot opt out of. In other words, what Elektra is experiencing is a haunting.

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[27] Absurd as it sounds, the episode seemingly dramatizes the discovery of a mummified corpse in the NYC apartment of drag queen Dorian Corey. Claimed to fame after the release of Livingston’s documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), Corey died of AIDS-related complications two years later, leaving her friend Lois Taylor with the task of handling her personal belongings. As reported in the *New York* magazine, one day, when the woman was searching the apartment for some Halloween costumes in Corey’s closet, she came across a curious green-plaid plastic bag on the floor that released a horrible stink once it had been cut open. After calling the police, a gruesome scene unfolded before their eyes: a partially mummified body in the fatal position who appeared to have been shot to the head. For further detail on the case, see Russell Kesindorf 1994.

[28] For a thorough understanding of the concept of necropolitics, see Mbembe, 2003.

In the systematic dismemberment of black will for the production and the consumption of libidinal labor, the episode's effacement of white flesh would then occur for the purpose of relocating its power into the much more consuming echo that its physical absence leaves behind, thus reinforcing "an ontology of blackness [that] is imagined through structures of nonexistence"[29] and pain that this echo impresses, unsustainably, on the black body. Nowhere and everywhere at the same time, Paul's whiteness is decorporealized, detached from the mortal singularity of a body only for its haunting presence to exceed the present and its material affects to become forever ineludible. Caught in these entrapping logics, Elektra is denied the privilege of self, her blackness and transness being suspended in a state of existence for the Other, a nonexistence that is haunted by the ghosts of its own crooked reflection. Ultimately, it is at her own distorted image that Elektra is frightfully looking in that room, at "the mournful and inexpressible affects of [her] nonexistence…and at the performed materiality of those affects"[30] that she is forced to produce and under whose weight she yields. When Elektra fears whiteness in the secluded walls of her home, she is fearing what whiteness makes of her black trans flesh, a flesh that is discursively written into failure. This is a hauntology of black transness.

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[29] Powell 2016, 257.

[30] Powell 2016, 258.

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Kameelah L. Martin

Conjure Feminism: The Root(work) of Black Women's Intellectual Tradition

What does it mean to be educated? Depending on one's geo-political and cultural leanings, being 'educated' is defined in a multitude of ways. In Western cultures, education has been condensed into formalized instruction with diplomas, degrees, and it centers literacy and the ability to analyze and synthesize information garnered from written texts. In non-western societies, however, education is multi-dimensional: multilingualism, cultural fluency, oral histories, and the ability to impart sacred knowledge and traditional values for the next generation are all ways one is counted as educated. Such informal education is just as critical to one's entrance and movement in the world as the West's precious literacy. In a post-Brown v. Board of education society Black elders often warn youth of the integrated generations, 'Don't be no educated fool' and offer the unsolicited criticism that some of these so-called educated folks have 'book sense, but no common sense.' This point is illustrated gloriously in the opening multivocal dialogue of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and the example of Reema's Boy.[1] Relying on his anthropological training Reema's boy set out to study and publish his research on the people of Willow Springs and solve the mystery of their folk saying, "18 & 23" once and for all. He published the book; but no one "made it much through the introduction," which painted Willow Springs as a community of people descended from slaves who "had no choice but to look at everything upside-down."[2] The good folx of Willow Springs concluded that "the people who ran the type of schools that could turn our children into raving lunatics—and then put his picture on the back of the book so we couldn't even deny it was him—didn't mean us a speak of good."[3]

One in the academy might refer to the critical learning that Reema's boy seems to lack as cultural competency. But among the folk—in the imagined Willow Springs and other communal sites across the diaspora—this body of informal knowledge is known as mother wit, home-training, cultural currency, wisdom, good sense, intuition. As with the duality of other Black vernacular practices, both the formal and informal streams of knowledge carry different weight depending on the context and cultural interaction. Within this essay, however, I want to

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[1] Naylor 1988.

[2] Naylor 1988, 7–8.

[3] Naylor 1988, 8.

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privilege informal, other ways of knowing as one branch of lineage from which Black women's intellectual and philosophical legacy is built.

There is an African proverb that informs that "if you educate a man, you educate an individual; but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation." This proverb underscores black women's central role in educating their communities and the deep and abiding tradition of meaning-making that can be attributed, for the purpose of this scholarly intervention, to women of African descent. The Mende and Hausa people, of Sierra Leone and Northern Nigeria, respectively, are a useful example to illustrate one way in which we see this function in traditional West African societies—many of which we know populated the Americas and generated the cultures of the Black Atlantic. The *Griot* or *Djeli* tradition of performance storytelling is well-known. The griot, also known as a *djeli*, is a master raconteur, historian, and performer.[4] It is commonly a family tradition inherited from father to son. It is the griot's role to record orally the political and genealogical history of his respective village through song, musicianship, and cultural knowledge.[5] Village chiefs and kings of nations had a personal griot to bear witness and impart the legacy of his liege's rule through this oral tradition. *The Epic of Sundiata* was transmitted this way for over 700 years before being published.[6]

It is no surprise that women were not a part of this male-dominated tradition. Heavily influenced by the Islamic faith, gendered spaces and social roles were adhered to in both ancient and contemporary times. Gambia only recently celebrated its first and only professional female griot and kora player from one of the five principal kora playing griot families of the region, Sona Jobarteh.[7] Even if the women were not fully recognized as traditional griots, they certainly created and maintained their own storytelling traditions.

In Modern Mende and Hausa society, women's oral lore and tradition, however, is not given the same significance as the with the griot and djeli. There is a strong sentiment that "storytelling is too dignified for men," and women's intimate, informal talk is relegated to gossip and trivialities.[8] It is important to consider that within both societies, the practice of polygamy is prevalent. The western social practice of a household wherein a man is singly espoused to a woman is the exception rather than the rule. Rather, within a single household or compound, there could be several wives who share domestic responsibilities such as childrearing, homemaking, harvesting, and preparing meals. It is an intimate commune of women who rule over the domestic sphere of their compound and within such spaces the oral traditions and practice of meaning-making of the women take on even greater import and demonstrates one of the points implied in the opening proverb. These communities of wives incorporate storytelling, song, and proverb alike into their mothering and the ministering to their insular communities, even if informally so. The women, with their so-called gossip and storytelling, are literally imbuing the children under their watch with the values and traditions of their village, ethnic group, and society.

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[4] Niane 1965, vii.

[5] Niane 1965, vii.

[6] See: Conrad and Condé 2004; Niane 1965.

[7] Kahn 2021, 8.

[8] Alkebulan 2013, 52.

When a mother shares a tale about Ananse the spider god, one must understand that the story is serving one of three major functions.[9] The most obvious is entertainment. There is a time and place for entertainment and simple merriment. Folktales are invoked for this purpose, certainly, but not exclusively. In oral societies such as those across West Africa, a story or folktale is always also a means to impart knowledge of some sort. Folktales, according to John Roberts, serve an instructive function.[10] That is, they provide a lesson or instruction on how one is to behave in society, the importance of moral character, or perhaps the repercussions of violating sacred values. Roberts points to tales shared among enslaved folk in the American South as an example of an instructive tale.[11] The tertiary function of folktales is explanatory; they explain how something came to be in the world. The miraculous story of Akompfo Anokye and the Golden Stool is a delightful example of a tale that explains the origins of the Asante people of present-day Ghana.[12] No doubt this fantastic tale is told to young children as a central tenant of their childrearing—a task likely executed among the women who are traditionally responsible for raising them. But Mende and Hausa women aren't solely practicing their oral traditions among the children in their compounds.

One sees the dissemination of knowledge about a range of women's work, childrearing, and cultural intelligence between women's acts of telling. One can imagine senior wives instructing new, younger wives on the proper preparation of foods, how to care for a gestating body, healing wounds, and ailments, or sharing insights about the sexual proclivities of men through humor and entertaining oration. The spiritual and supernatural understandings within a culture are also likely to have been expressed and exchanged in these feminine-led spaces. These women would learn from, apprentice to, instruct, and exchange ideas and beliefs amongst each of the woman-centered networks through which they traversed over a lifetime—girlhood, rites of passage cohorts, co-wifedom, and elderhood. Women, through their informal means of imparting cultural knowledge, play a most significant role in the early development and indoctrination of their nation—both boys and girls were subject to mature through puberty under the wisdom of the line of wives. Unsurprisingly, this complex yet undervalued transmission of knowledge by West African women was retained and evolved as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was institutionalized.

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[9] Roberts 1990, 6.

[10] Roberts 1990, 6.

[11] Roberts 1990, 6.

[12] *Encyclopedia of African History* 2004.

Valerie Lee argues, in her pivotal study of the complex role of the *granny midwife* in the American South, that Black women, particularly those who adapted to and descended from bondage, should be considered *culture bearers* in this regard.[13] Through the cultural icon of 'Sistah Conjurer,' as Lee names her, African Diaspora communities have witnessed the adaptation and preservation of cultural knowledge ranging from "character [building, caring for the] landscape, cultural rituals, [spirit work,] and an African-based epistemology."[14] Conjure, also known as hoodoo, is an African derived system of mental, spiritual, and physical healing and harming practices that rely upon the natural environment and sympathetic magic. Lee invokes this term as an honorific for the Black women engaged in the most intimate type of communal work. She explains, "Conjuring has been an empowering concept for many black women. Conjuring pays homage to an African past, while providing a present-day idiom for magic, power, and ancient wisdom within a Pan-African cultural context."[15] Who is Sistah Conjurer, exactly? The definition and description of her work is fluid; there is no monolithic conjuring woman. I contend, however, that there are some commonalities. For many, the call to healing is a sacred duty negotiated between her and the divinity of her understanding. She is often looked to as the moral authority of the community and is sought out for spiritual advising. Toni Morrison's Baby Suggs, Holy exemplifies one such figure in the popular imagination.[16] Her gatherings in the clearing served as a spiritual rejuvenation for the recently freed people of the *Beloved* universe. Baby Suggs, Holy, used vocal intonation and polyrhythmic sound to invoke the spiritual revelry experienced in the clearing. She led with a spiritual wisdom unchallenged by the formerly enslaved folx.

Sistah Conjurer generally has a revered relationship with the natural environment. She knows how to draw remedies and poisons alike from the flora and fauna around her. Naylor's Miranda 'Mama' Day, is another fictional example, though Naylor acknowledged pulling from memories of a lay midwife to develop the character.[17] Sistah Conjurer honors the earth in a reciprocal relationship—giving back to nature as much as she takes from it. She knows how to grow food and nourish the human body; likewise, she understands that the flesh of deceased body will nourish the earth in turn. She practices syncretic traditions often blending African, Indigenous, and Christian beliefs and practices to meet the needs of her community. Beyoncé's visual album, *Lemonade* (2016), invokes an exemplary image in the litany of remedies sought by the narrator for a cheating husband during one of the poetic interludes: "I plug my menses with pages from the good book."[18] Menstrual blood and the Bible are conjoined to cast a spell of truth and knowing. Julie Dash's iconic film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) visualizes another.[19] Nana Peazant performs the 'root revival of love'—a blessing of protection and remembrance for her descendants as they prepare to leave Ibo's Landing for the mainland.[20] Here viewers witness roots, a hoodoo charm, and a Bible affixed for each family member to kiss and receiving the blessing. Finally, conjuring women often deal with the transition between the spirit world and that of the living—birthing children as midwives, but also tending to the bodies of the dead and dying as sickbed nurses. As such cultural emissaries across the African Diaspora, I argue, Black women should be among the most revered educators and the root(work) of their intellectual traditions honored in a marked way.

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[13] Lee 1996, 2.
[14] Lee 1996, 130.
[15] Lee 1996, 130.
[16] Morrison 1987.

Conjure Feminism: A Theory

With this supposition in mind, I offer a new framework for understanding the invaluable cultural work that Black women do through the informal channels of education and oral transmission. I challenge the notion of western enlightenment and privileging the written word; I argue that Black women's intellectual tradition begins in a pre-literate world where spoken words carried more power than written ones. Furthermore, much of the tradition of which I speak is alive and well; lack of written text has not diminished or threatened the validity of the cultural knowledge that travels down the lineage of enumerable Black women. In present day Mali, the Dogon proliferate a belief in the power of the spoken word to shift reality. That is, "by human utterance or through the spoken Word, human beings can invoke a kind of spiritual power. But of course, the Word began with Amma or the Creator who created the world by uttering three successive words."[21] Through the power of *Nommo*, or the spoken word, humanity can create and manifest life by similar means as Amma, the Dogon high god. Black women have their own way of wielding this power.

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[17] Montgomery 2004.

[18] Knowles-Carter 2016.

[19] Dash 1991.

[20] Dash/Bambara/hooks 1992, 159.

Kinitra Brooks, LaKisha Simmons and I have come to refer to this ancient tradition of wisdom and spiritual praxis among Africana women as *conjure feminism.*[22] It is an evolving theory of Black women's intellectual legacies of *spirit work* that informs their everyday existence—from childrearing, food ways, and material culture to folklore, gardening and death practices.[23] By spirit work, I am referring specifically to the ways and means through which conjurers communicate with the dead and divinities and impart their knowledge to the world of the living; this includes divination, healing work, dream interpretation, and herbology, for instance.

Conjure feminism first and foremost privileges African Diasporic women's knowledge and folkloric practices of spirit work as their communal intellectual property. As with the communal ownership of material culture such as the blues, women of the African Diaspora apply improvisation, sampling, riffing, and remixing to the pool of knowledge to create a never-ending matrix of recipes, remedies, rituals, signs, signifiers, and symbolism that inform their spiritual performance. It belongs to no one and everyone. It is and can be practiced by others who do not identify as Black and woman, but its origin is with Black women. It is specific to their Black femaleness and the experiences of that intersectionality. The apotheosis of the Haitian *Lwa*, Erzulie, is a primary example of this. Erzulie, envisioned as quadroon or mulatto woman in the colonial trappings of French women, represents the reality of Black women's experience in bondage: unfree to choose the ways in which they expressed or consented to sexualization; living the paradox of being both virgin and whore simultaneously. This spiritual entity embodies the complexity of being hypersexualized and abused, while also exuding in the relative privilege of colorism and the sexual favor of white men.[24]

Conjure feminism as a system of practice and belief provides Black folx the fluidity necessary not only to survive but thrive in a world that has always viewed us as expendable and will kill us with assumed immunity. Cynthia Dillard reminds us that "African people, by nature, are incredibly spiritual people. It's the reason why people can continue to walk around and be okay; because, honestly, given the types of oppression and seizures that Black bodies have been under for *decades* [and] *eons* Black people should probably be a little more upset than we really are."[25] Conjure feminism is the lifeline through which we enact "rituals that sustain us."[26] The inhumanity of enslavement necessitated its evolution, and it continues to adapt to the circumstances of living blackness in the twenty-first century. It recognizes the Divine Feminine and natural environment as consorts from which Black women pull their intuition, second sight, and rituals. There is a folk belief across the diaspora that if a woman dreams of fish, then it is a sign of pregnancy in her circle. It is not by coincidence that this belief is relegated to women or that its most critical symbol is the fish (or fish-tailed creatures). The orisha Yemaya—known in West African as well as across the Black Atlantic as the Great Mother—is vehemently tied to the ocean as her dwelling place.[27] She is most often embodied as a mermaid and fish are her dominant symbol. The name Yemaya is derived from the Yoruba phrase *yeye mi oja* or Mother of Fishes.[28] Divining a pregnancy through dreams of fish is a culturally specific manifestation of the relationship between Black women the Divine Feminine of their African antecedents. It has been operating in plain sight for millennia.

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[21] Alkebulan 2013, 55.

[22] Brooks, Martin, & Simmons 2021.

[23] Martin 2012, 1–3.

[24] Dayan 1998.

Conjure feminism is notably also a type of activism for African descended communities. Spiritual systems such as rootwork, obeah, conjure, Vodou, Lucumí, Condomblé, Palo Mayombe and others are understood as freedom practices and community empowerment as much as they are organized worship. One need only to look to Haiti for relevant examples of this. Prior to the Haitian Revolution and the ceremony at Bois Caïman, there is the story of Makandal. Believed to be a *bokor,* or a maleficent Vodou sorcerer, Makandal used his spiritual *konnaissance*, or knowledge to poison the water supply of the French colonialists killing many Frenchmen in the process.[29] It was an act of resistance to the oppression and brutality of the French plantation system. For his impertinence Makandal was executed by being burned alive. Just as the flames began to consume his body, Makandal used his magic to transform himself into a butterfly and escaped death—not before losing a leg to the flames, however. Both Alejo Carpentier and Nalo Hopkinson riff on the folktale of Francois Makandal in their fiction, keeping his name and magic alive in contemporary minds.[30] In Haiti, when a moth or butterfly with a missing limb or wing is spotted the people believe they are in the midst of Makandal who never dies. Then, of course, there is the Vodou ceremony at Bois Caïman that preceded the first act of war in the Haitian Revolution. Led by Boukman and an unnamed Mambo, a group of fugitive enslaved folx called upon the *lwa* for protection and confirmation to incite violence on behalf of enslaved Africans across San Domingue. Only after the warrior god Ogun received the sacrifice of a black pig and gave his blessing for war through spiritual possession did the encampment commit the first act of violence against the French.[31]

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[25] Dillard 2018.

[26] Dillard 2018.

[27] Falola/Otero 2013.

[28] Karade 2020.

[29] Makandal 1846; Geggus 2002; and Dayan 1995.

[30] Carpentier 1957; Hopkinson 2004.

There are many such stories of African spiritual practices being used to gain freedom of one sort or another across the Black Atlantic. Using roots and plants to poison the master class, abort a fetus conceived from white violence, or to heal the wounds from a brutal whipping so they do not get infected—all are acts of autonomy pursued in the name of freedom. The Covid-19 pandemic saw a resurgence of Conjure feminist practices among Black communities. As the data reflected the disproportionate number of deaths and acute impact of the Corona Virus on Black and brown communities, said communities turned to their traditions to save themselves because they lacked trust in the government to intervene on their behalf. The historical relationship between Black folx and the medical profession is a vexed one; from the time of enslavement to the era of the Tuskeegee Experiment access to healthcare has not been equitable and Black women have taken up the slack.[32] Covid was no different. Social media went wild with digital content that focused on natural remedies to combat respiratory complications, fever, and to build the immune system organically—most led by Black women.[33] I know several personal stories of a Black woman who used her knowledge of the earth to turn the tide of a threatening Covid-19 case of their loved ones and even themselves. They called upon the knowledge passed down by their elders and some new remedies communicated in dreams by ancestors long passed.[34] Applying a poultice with ground mustard seed to draw out congestion; brewing lemon and onion to clear mucus in the respiratory track, and later taking mullen extract drops to strengthen lungs after illness—are all real remedies used by Black women to heal our community of the worst of covid. Black women, importantly, did not keep these remedies to themselves. They shared amongst each other and across social media to ensure all who needed it could access it.[35]

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[31] Dayan 1995.

[32] Mitcham 2002.

[33] Tolliver-Jackson 2020; Carvalho 2021; Perez-Gonzalez 2022.

[34] Daa'iyah Salaam, personal communication 2020.

[35] Perez-Gonzalez 2022.

Our reliance on this knowledge persists as long as Black folx contend with an anti-black society. Conjure feminism, as demonstrated during the pandemic, above all else ensures the survival of Black lives—gender notwithstanding. It is deeply *womanist* in this regard.[36] It is a theory that seeks "to acknowledge and name something that was already there."[37] Most importantly, it is ancestral work that creates genealogies of knowledge and other ways of knowing that are inherited, transmitted, and bequeathed orally to women of African descent from "their mothers, 'other mothers,' and foremothers before them."[38] It pulls from West African spiritual antecedents that privilege the spirit realm as an important part of the life cycle. Therein lies a deep belief in reincarnation and that, in addition to live birth and physical death of the human body, one's spirit ascends to a divine ancestorhood before, perhaps, returning to earth reincarnated in a new human experience.[39] Such beliefs from the Akan, Dahomey, and Kongo proliferate Conjure feminism, which teaches us that the living are beholden to the Ancestors and the Unborn.[40] When one understands that Spirit is cyclical, one also understands that learning from our elders does not stop with their physical death. Our Ancestors, or *Egun* as they are called in the Lucumí tradition, when revered and honored appropriately can be summoned through ritual to teach us even beyond the grave.

Why Black Women?

Brooks, Simmons, and I are positing that conjure feminism is the applied theory and Black women are its founding and practicing theoreticians. We argue for the development and recognition of ancient Black woman-centered practices as one point of origin of Black women's intellectual tradition. There is a litany of conjure feminist foremothers who actualized the concept through their lived experience. We know of them by virtue of their application of conjure feminism as resistance; the western patriarchal lens, however, often criminalized their work and reputations. Some of these foremothers include historic figures captured in the written or oral record for their spiritual and healing prowess: Tituba of the Salem Witch trials, Queen Nanny of the Windward Maroons, Yaa Asantewaa, and Marie Laveau have been immortalized in diasporic cultures and live in our memories as folk heroes.[41] But not all foremothers found their lives recorded in colonialist narratives of spiritual deviance. Others lived and thrived underground in the mundane world of Blackness. There were grannies, great grandmamas, aunties and nanas who worked conjure feminism right from their kitchen cabinets and mason jars. There were madrinas, mambos, midwives, santeras and the sainted healing women who ensured the tradition was passed on to the next generation of their spiritual family. Today we can see the contemporary embodiment of these ancient traditions in the teachings and digital content of Queen Afua, the books and lectures of Yeye Luisah Teish, and the cultural preservation work of Queen Quet in the low country of South Carolina.[42] The genealogy of this tradition follows an inherently Black and female line of descent.

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[36] A. Walker 1983, xi.

[37] Dillard 2018.

[38] Brooks, Martin, & Simmons 2021, 452.

[39] Herskovits 1941, 63.

[40] Washington 1990; Brooks/Martin/Simmons 2021, 456.

Hortense Spillers and Marjory Parse argued in 1985 that Black women "enlarge our conventional assumptions about the nature and function of their [ancient] tradition. Focusing on connection rather than separation, transforming silence into speech, and giving back power to the culturally disenfranchised, black women […] affirm the wholeness and endurance of a vision, that, once articulated, can be shared—though its heritage, roots, survival and intimate possession *belong to black women alone*" (emphasis added).[43] It is from this position that we declare conjure feminism absolutely and unapologetically privileges Black women as the source and site of this body of knowledge, but does not exclude other members of the diasporic community. Black men also have their own ancient wisdoms and practices they inherit and bequeath. Black Trans folx also hold space within this tradition; in fact, some scholars argue that African Spirituality and the gender fluidity of the orisha and lwa has always already made a case for the acceptance of a gender spectrum within sacred space and spiritual praxis.[44] Furthermore, I see the Black woman's ministry as inclusive to the entire community—along the lines of Alice Walker's definition of *Womanism:* "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people—male *and* female."[45] Dillard explains this innate womanist thrust of Black women's being as part of our ontological understanding of our place in the universe:

> [Black women] walk in a way that attempts […] and *think* in a way that attempts to lift up everybody, [lift up] the goodness in people, specifically ourselves but others as well. We don't exist as individuals. Black women don't have that luxury. We exist as a body; I *exist* be-

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[41] Breslaw 1995; Gottlieb 2000; Boahen/Akyeampong 2003; Long 2007.

[42] Afua 2001; Teish 1985; Goodwine 2011.

[43] Pryse/Spillers 1985, 5.

[44] Strongman 2019.

[45] A. Walker 1985, xi

> cause other Black women *exist* and they are me and I am them. […] I have a community to which I am beholden. I am responsible to that community. My work must be responsible to that community. And I am responsible for uplifting that community by virtue of the actions that I take.[46]

We are not the 'mules' about which Zora Neale Hurston decried; but rather, we understand that we are critical to Black life—literally and figuratively. We are either creating new Black life in our bodies or doing the work to ensure Black life is sustained outside of our bodies. Dillard goes on to say position herself as "responsible to the Ancestors who chose to live so that I might have the opportunity to do this work. And without whom I could not."[47] It is sacred work.

At the risk of being too essentialist, the point still must be made that women (also individuals with a uterus) do hold a particular privilege within the epistemologies that inform conjure feminism. Hurston provides the most poignant example of this concept in *Tell My Horse:*

> "What is the truth?" Dr. Holly asked me, and knowing that I could not answer him he answered himself through a Voodoo ceremony in which the Mambo, that is the priestess, richly dressed is asked this question ritualistically. *She replies by throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs.* The ceremony means that this is the infinite, the ultimate truth. There is no mystery beyond the mysterious source of life (Emphasis added).[48]

What Hurston implies here is that women—because of their physical ability to pass life through a portal (the birth canal/vagina)—they embody a spiritual portal through which divinity (life) can move between the worlds of the living and the world of spirit. This type of spiritual portal also exists and is the means of transporting Haitian Vodou *lwa* from the invisible world of *Ginen* to the visible.[49] Seen in the center of every *peristyle* or house of worship in Haiti, this portal is what is called the "Poto Mitan," or central pole in Haitian Vodou.[50] As Vodou practitioner and Haitian cultural advocate Riva Nyri Précil explains, "in Haiti women themselves are revered as the living *poto mitan* or gateway through which the mystery of life travels."[51] Black women are central to conjure feminism because they literally have Spirit on the main line, if you will. This does not overlook how such a position essentializes femininity to a single body part or reproductive act; such critiques are not without merit. There are women who choose never to give birth or who are simply unable. This does not negate their spiritual connection to creation and thus, divinity. The act of giving birth is but one marker of this divine positionality, but I argue that it is innately (or perhaps divinely) inherited through one's biological sex and need not be activated through labor and delivery.

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[46] Dillard 2018.
[47] Dillard 2018.
[48] Hurston 1938, 113.
[49] Précil 2020.
[50] Précil 2020.
[51] Précil 2020.

Again, I am not excluding men and trans folx from this spiritual work and readily acknowledge their engagement with it. Francois Makandal stands as a primary example. The characterization of the wonderfully queer Lafayette Reynolds (portrayed by Nelsan Ellis) on the series *True Blood* as a potent spiritualist who inherited his gift from his women relatives in a strong second example. I am, however, privileging what Black women *do* because there is something very specific about what Black, African descended women *do* for their communities through their physical bodies that is sustaining the physical and spiritual life of said community. And Black women should not have to do the work "with language and theories and practices that don't honor [who we are]."[52] Conjure feminism is intended to honor Black women's whole being, shifting the deeply spiritual aspect of that being from the margin to the center.

The Work

I have provided the context, articulated the theory and introduced the practitioners; but what does conjure feminism look like in concrete form? How does it show up in the everyday lives of the communities who employ it? The fluidity of the practice allows it to take on myriad shapes and forms that one might collectively label Black women's folk practices and beliefs. One lineage, Ma Marie's, may concoct a healing balm for flesh wounds in one way while two states over Miss Betsey's remedy for the same ailment may use a different plant or process to facilitate the same result. In the following paragraphs, I provide material examples of how conjure feminism is expressed in action and deed and, in some cases, tie them to my own experiences with Black girls and women. I draw midwifery, spirit work, mothering, foodways, and 'motherwit' into view as relevant expressions of conjure feminism. Community members and readers might see these examples and instantly draw connection to their own upbring or communal practices and see nothing profound about them. That is often the case; these categories are cross cultural and live in the most mundane areas of human existence. The innate value and wisdom of a midwife might be taken for granted, dismissed as an old wives' tale or simple women's work in a society where mothers and their infants not only survive, but *thrive* without intervention. Women of African descent in the U.S. are still facing disproportionate rates of maternal and infant mortality more than one hundred and fifty years after emancipation; we are *not* the same.[53] Children of the diaspora, in some instances, quite literally owe our breath /sustenance/life to Black women's unacknowledged spiritual and healing labor. One of more privileged heritage may not fully consider or understand the impact of being a recipient of such sacred wisdom. Dillard cogently reasons, "[Black people] exist as a diaspora because we are *dismembered.* In order to find ourselves again, to make sense of ourselves, to heal we have to *remember.* And so part of the work of this research is about remembering."[54] As a recipient, a member of the "community of inheritors" of conjure feminism, I challenge others to remember and restore the honor, value, and significance to Black foremothers, mothers, and other mothers.[55]

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[52] Dillard 2018.

The very deed of writing and situating these traditions as the sacred bequeathal of my "cultural ancestors" is, in itself, ancestral remembrance work.[56] The living are "beholden to the Ancestors as well as future generations," after all.[57] So, then the first example of midwifery is also an intentional act of remembering. It is critical to note that in remembering, I am privileging conjure feminist tenants such as oral transmission, belief in the supernatural, and "talking to the dead."[58] It is no accident that I am interweaving the scholarly with personal narrative—at times, my own. I am employing what Audre Lorde called *biomythography*—a conscious blending of biography, history, and cultural meaning-making that understands dreams, signs, and lived experiences as valid intellectual forms that express knowledge and convey an otherwise unknowable truth.[59] Let us move into the remembering. It is no secret that women used to have exclusive rights over the birthing room and preparing an expectant mother for her arduous task. Valerie Lee and other scholars have written poignantly about Black women's roles as lay midwives during and after enslavement.[60] Prenatal and postpartum care is one area where the ancient practices of Black women have persisted. Enslaved communities and their descendants relied on Black lay midwives and healing women to oversee the transitions of life—both from the invisible world to the living and alternately from the physical world to that of spirit. There was no other form of health care of which to conceive for Black bodies. A family story shared by my paternal aunt told of a larger-than-life ancestor who was celebrated as the first registered Black midwife in the county or state in which she resided—my aunt couldn't rightly recall which, but she knew the photo existed and described the elder as being 'pressed and starched' with a formal uniform and gloved hands. It would take almost a decade before I came across the xeroxed copy of a picture my aunt described on Ancestry.com.

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[53] Petersen/Davis/Goodman, et al. 2019.

[54] Dillard 2018.

[55] Pryse/Spillers 1985, 1.

[56] Miles 2021, xiv.

[57] Brooks/Martin/Simmons 2021, 456.

[58] Manigault-Bryant 2014, xiv.

[59] Tate 1983, 115.

[60] Lee 1996; Fraser 1998; Luke 2018.

Born about 1812 Rosetta "Zetta" Cooper is my fourth great grandmother and she was enslaved in Williamsburg County, South Carolina. Though unverified, this photograph is believed to have been taken in acknowledgment of her accomplishment as a lay midwife. She is pictured in what might be her midwife's uniform, cap, and gloves. I have been unable to establish a year of death but believe that she lived to be about eighty years old, which would be the early 1890s. Early census records attribute 13–15 children born from her womb. She was espoused to Cain Cooper and likely enslaved by a man surnamed Chandler. I have amassed enumerable cousins who abound from Rosetta's fertile family tree—none who have been able to corroborate the origins (or original) of the photograph or her vocation. This is all I have been able to recover of her life at the time of this writing.

I imagine, however, that long before any registry carried her name, Rosetta was responsible for the care and comfort of the gestating women on the plantation to which she was bound. Perhaps even a few neighboring ones. I learned it was named "Troublefield Plantation"—a name that sounds like it was pulled out of a Toni Morrison novel. In Williamsburg County a "Troublefied" community exists in the memory of elders, though I'm told not many know it by that name anymore. She was, surely, trusted by the white men begetting children on Black bodies to increase their human property as well as by the women forced into maternity. Descriptions of other family lines suggest that Rosetta was not spared this humiliation. Nonetheless, I envision her parting the legs of a laboring Black woman with her own belly full and taut under a burlap dress; maybe calico. I see her boiling comfy leaf into an abortifacient tea to induce autonomy for her sisters in bondage. I wonder about Mother Rosetta and the significance of her gifts to the community and how she was received. Did her community also address her with an honorific? It is not lost on me that recently freed folx were not often the subjects of 19th century photography without cause and cost. Did she place a knife under the bed or birthing stool of a laboring mother to better cut the pain? Did she bury the placenta (she would have called it the after birth) in the yard? Did she preserve the caul of a spirit-gazing child and concoct a potion to protect it from nefarious haints? Did she shun these culturally specific practices when the local municipality sought to formally register her as a midwife? Did she have to explain to the mothers that such acts manipulated the spiritual health of the infant the same way Rosetta manipulated their physical health? There is only so much I can recover about her life and practice through research; but I pay homage to her and the women who taught her about birthing and death work (you can't know the one without the other) by saying her name and remembering the life-giving work she did for the enslaved and the free. There are generations alive today because Rosetta Cooper 'caught' their forebears. I am one, but there are many.

Midwifery in the contemporary space looks very different than it did for Rosetta, however. There is much she probably would not recognize, but is there really anything new under the sun? To demonstrate that conjure feminism is very much a living tradition and still being transmitted through education between Black women I turn to my own edification by way of Daa'iyah Salaam, a natural healer and doula. I have known Daa'iyah since I was eighteen years old. She and I became women together, living as college roommates and enduring many a life experience side by side. This bond moved to a significantly more intimate level after the birth of my first child. My son was born on Easter Sunday and as you might expect, the non-essential hospital staff were not present. Who might this include? I call your attention to the lactation specialist whose sole responsibility was consulting with new mothers on the proper latching technique, confirming milk was coming in, and that baby is being fed. None of which happened during the thirty-eight hours before I was discharged. What *did* happen, however, was an uninformed nurse (who admitted to knowing nothing about breast-feeding) suggested I use an electric pump to get my milk to come in faster and ease my concern about feeding my newborn. I, not having a clue how breast pumps work (or breasts for that matter), strapped the contraption to my chest and hit the power on button. I ran the pump on both breasts for a good thirty or forty minutes—to no avail. I squeezed out a few drops of what I knew was colostrum, but no milk. I was bereft.

I was discharged that same day unsure of whether my child was getting any sustenance. Neither my mother nor my grandmother could advise me as they were both modern women who had chosen the formula option. I did so, reluctantly. There obviously were gaps in the conjure feminist lineage of my women folx, but Spirit would not fail me. I woke the next morning from my post-delivery delirium to the ache and discomfort of severely engorged breasts and flatted nipples. The milk, while plentiful, would not release on its own and there was no nipple upon which my child could latch. Daa'iyah appeared in my bedroom (I have no memory of speaking to her or even how she knew to come) and when she saw my state of mammary crisis, she rolled up her sleeves and called on the energies she knew best—her Ancestors. She intuited what needed to be done and went to work. She applied fresh cabbage leaves and a warm washcloth to my breasts, then massaged them until my milk was flowing like Niagara Falls. Daa'iyah coached me on how to properly latch, unashamed to grab and manipulate my breasts as would a nurse midwife. She explained that my uterus contracting in pain at every tug of my nipple was a sign that the body was naturally aligning itself. And I cried tears of relief when my son finally fed and warm breast milk ran down his plump cheek. I saw a licensed and trained lactation specialist three days later when I took my son to the pediatrician, but there was nothing she explained that hadn't already been communicated by Daa'iyah. I should also note that in 2008 (the year of the ninny-jugs incident), Daa'iyah had never even considered birth work as a gift or vocation. She hadn't been taught, she hadn't trained or apprenticed under another Black midwife. She simply 'heard' and knew how to heal through communicating with her Ancestors—they literally show her how to make remedies and how to use the earth in dreams.[61] She has been in birthing rooms and attending to postpartum mothers at least since then (if not before). She would later capitulate to my urgings to stand more confidently in birth work as her inheritance. Genealogical research and spirit work revealed that Miss Maybelle, an actual forebear of Daa'iyah's, was a healing woman and was responsible for 'teaching' her from beyond the grave. She became a certified doula in 2018.

Doula Daa'iyah also taught me about "Closing the Bones," a ritual to ensure that once a mother has given birth spiritual care is ministered to properly close the divine portal of her body, in addition to the physical care that is taken so that her healing is holistic.[62] About eleven months after my second child was born, I was visiting my madrina and her spirit guide, Miss Betsey, came through to give me a message: she told me to make sure I covered up my neck and body when I went out because I was "still open." I received the message and did as Spirit said, but I can't say that I fully understood what was undergirding her advice until I learned about "closing the bones." I had not had the insight or access to a spiritualist who knew to provide this level of care following delivery. Most of us don't. It is one of those rituals that has been lost to the underground movement of Black lay midwifery. But it is resurfacing and being taught to a new generation of doulas—Daa'iyah among them. I share this anecdote to emphasize a few things. I want to re-articulate that when leaning into conjure feminism, the learning and transmission of knowledge does not end with the physical death of the culture bearer. The epistemologies of West African ethnic groups known to populate the Black Atlantic and elsewhere understood this and both Black Feminist and Black folx theory support its supposition. It is an already understood assumption in the life cycle of Black folx. As Brooks, Martin, and Simmons summarize:

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[61] Daa'iyah Salaam, personal communication 2023.

[62] Daa'iyah Salaam, personal communication 2020.

> Death is not an ending but a transition. Conjure Feminism operates from a hyper-awareness of the conflation of time as the past, present, and future coexist together, building upon Bonnie Barthold's insistence that "the dead are not dead" (Barthold 1981, 3). There exists an active privileging of the work done in the interstices of time. Cornelia Walker Bailey expressed this with the concept of "Dayclean" (Bailey and Bledsoe 2000, 2). Dayclean is a Gullah Geechee term that refers to that specific moment when night turns to day. It is a generative time that low-country Black folx seize upon to renew hope as well as complete the practicalities of the systems that keep families running, or what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as motherwork (Collins 1990). It is at Dayclean that we become new spiritually, mentally, and otherwise.[63]

Dreamscapes are also liminal and take no account of Western concepts of time so that Daa'iyah and her Ancestor can commune and exchange wisdom within such spaces without needing to question if it was 'real' or legitimate knowledge. Secondly, I want to make the point that I learned how to care for my own postpartum body from my peer—not from intergenerational passage of knowledge within my own family. Conjure feminist lineages are, despite the contradiction, often non-linear. They are passed between Black women serving as 'other mothers,' caretakers, sisters in the struggle, and do not rely upon familial connection alone. The mothering and healing I have received in my lifetime haven't always come from elders. There are healers, conjure women, spiritual leaders that are carrying the tradition forward in the contemporary moment. Daa'iyah mothered me—and while I am chronologically older; she is my spiritual elder. The legacy of her foremother lives on through her gifted hands; it (conjure feminism as a whole) is a living tradition and needs to be valued and honored as the significant human intervention that it is.

Other tangible examples of conjure feminist practices fall under the umbrella of spirit work. This includes but is not limited to ancestor reverence and rituals around death and funerary rites. Cleaning the grave of an ancestor, keeping their photographs on display, building an ancestor altar in your home are some examples. Reclaiming white as a funerary color at Black funerals is not random or culturally innovative; the Mende people of Sierra Leone teach us that white is the color of the Ancestors and thus, death.[64] Margaret Washington wrote an exemplary essay on Gullah beliefs around life and death that help illustrate African retentions and adaptations practiced by enslaved Africans in the low country and elsewhere.[65] The practice of placing items of significance in the coffin to be buried with the deceased, for instance, is steeped in West African epistemological understanding of death and reincarnation. The Jamaican nine night ritual is another.[66] Conjuring, rootwork, and hoodoo are, of course, systems employed in conjure feminism and are invoked in the terminology of the theory.

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[63] Brooks, Martin, and Simmons 2021, 456.

[64] Serrano 1998.

[65] Washington 1990.

Other rituals that are representative of spirit work are the ring shout, spiritual baths, divination, and the *lavé tete*, or 'head washing', most notably referenced in Paule Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). Communication with the dead, being a spirit medium, or allowing spirit to speak through your body during a type of trance possession is also part and parcel of spirit work. Spirit possession tends to get a bad reputation and is sensationalized as this weird, outlying experience of religious sects. Spiritualist Riva Nyri Précil, challenges use to think more broadly about spirit possession.[67] She admits that sometimes a human body is used as a vessel through which a spirit may pass and occupy for a time to communicate a message; but it can also come in the form a known ancestor coming to you in dream, speaking a thought or idea aloud that you don't recognize as your own, or even intuiting how to piece together a recipe or being led to do a task you know you don't have the earthly knowledge to complete—all of these are ways that Spirit communicates and 'possesses' us to a higher spiritual end.

Mothering and raising girls is another area where conjure feminism is applicable. The culturally specific ways one prepares girls for menstruation, celebrates and nurtures a healthy body image (particularly in refutation of white standards of beauty), engages formal or informal rites of passage to prepare girls to become women and marriageable, and the numerous personal and self-care practices fall under this category. Ntozake Shange demonstrates much of this in her novel about three young Black girls coming of age in Charleston, South Carolina. Indigo's "Magical Menstruating Moments" ritual and practices to manage the discomforts of menstruation, though captured in fiction, actually can be adhered to.[68] Zora Neale Hurston infamously provides a glimpse into preparing a bride for marriage in the Caribbean: "In addition she is instructed at length on muscular control inside her body and out, and this also was rehearsed again and again, until it was certain that the young candidate had grasped all that was meant."[69] I recall my mother unflinchingly admonishing me that 'nobody wants a bone but a dog' the first and only time I remarked on the fullness of my hips and thighs in comparison to my less curvy, white peers. I received the message loud and clear and learned to embrace my physical form as beautiful and culturally preferred. Black women's hair care practice and stories of how cocoa and shea butters perform on deeply melanated skin are legion. There was a viral video some years ago wherein a white woman raved about how 'mad' she is with Black folx for keeping the secrets of 'the butters' from white people.[70] This point also demonstrates how this wisdom around personal care for Black bodies has been in-group accessible only for generations.

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[66] Hurston 1938, 39.

[67] Précil 2020.

[68] Shange 1983, 19.

[69] Hurston 1938, 18.

African Diasporic foodways are an integral part of conjure feminism. Here I include culinary dishes and cultural traditions with which they align, but also agriculture, cultivation and harvesting of crops. Food is a pathway to healing, food is social currency. It is good to remember that part of the reason enslaved Africans were brought to the New World was because of their knowledge of the earth and agriculture, particularly the cultivation of rice. The duress under which enslaved folx existed was only diminished by their remembrance and innovation with food. The recreation, adaptation, and improvisation of West African food staples such as Jollof rice has led to red rice and hopping John in the lowcountry of Georgia and South Carolina and jambalaya in New Orleans. Collard Greens and Callaloo are said to be culinary cousins as is Puerto Rican mofongo and West African fufu.[71] Jessica Harris and Psyche Williams-Forson have written about the cultural connections between West African and Black Atlantic cuisines; I expand this to include connection to the spiritual realm.[72] Conjure feminism places deep emphasis on how ancestral knowledge (how to prepare, on which occasion, and to whom it gets served) as well as how the *asé*, or life force of the cook gets embedded in African-improvised dishes. In the United States, one might say the food as a lot of love in it. If it's traditional southern cooking it is called 'Soul Food' because it fed the soul; nourished it when the weight of oppression and racism demanded that even food would be segregated. I think of the 'soul' part of the descriptor as more literal when conceptualizing how food envelopes a conjure feminist ethos. Food can function as a conductor of Ancestral memory. There is ancestral work not only in the way we prepare our food, but also in why and when we prepare certain foods.

During my father's transition, one of the final acts of care I did for him was to cook his favorite childhood meal. He shared that he loved his mother's steak and peppers recipe and how that meal always made him think of his childhood and her. Now, I did not have the privilege of knowing my paternal grandmother (Agnes Delores McPherson) in life, but I listened to my father's memories and tried my hand at it. In preparing the meal I took such care in the preparation and called upon my grandmother to guide my hands in the making. The smell and taste of it took my father to a place beyond my knowing; his eyes closed, and his head bobbed in affirmation of what my hands had conjured. He delighted in the consumption and claimed it tasted 'just like mama's.' I'll have to trust his praise and reaction that she did, indeed, answer my call. It gave me great solace to know that in my father's final days, I was the vessel through which he experienced his mother again.

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[70] Urban Intellectuals 2016.

[71] Harris 2012.

[72] Harris 2012; Williams-Forson 2006.

Eight years after his transition, I met a distant cousin of his, Diane, who also knew my grandmother. She shared that when she went to visit her cousin Agnes after moving to Los Angeles as a young woman in the 1960s, my grandmother had prepared steak and peppers for dinner. Diane raved about how good my grandmother's steak and pepper meal was—which she had tasted more than fifty years prior to our conversation. I smiled through the phone and knew. Diane's memory is affirmation that my grandmother had, indeed, put her soul into the food she prepared. Her steak and peppers recipe has come to me twice through the memory of others; it is how I have come to know her spiritually. I prepare the meal on my father's birthday and sporadically for my family. Incredibly, my son (who is the spitting image of his grandfather) also claims it as his favorite meal and though he will never know his great grandmother he is able to experience her through food.

I will conclude this section with a focus on motherwit—a collection of beliefs, proverbs, and lore through which conjure feminist practice and understanding is conveyed. I include dream interpretations, reading signs in the weather, visual iconography, and the like in this category—which is not exhaustive. There is a body of folk sayings, stories, and Black women's expressions that captures some of the most well-preserved spiritual wisdom of their communities. Dreaming of fish as a premonition of pregnancy or mixing menstrual blood in a man's meal (one that uses red meat sauce is preferrable to camouflage the spell) being a means to keep him faithful are two such examples. Motherwit is another example of how Black women's networks function to keep conjure feminism alive and among the people. Black women continuously evolve in their ways of teaching us how to survive by relying on other ways of knowing, putting our ancient wisdom to use to sustain the next generation. I hope these examples leave you remembering and recalling the Black women in your own lives who have taught you how to *be* in this world. If they are in the Spirit realm, speak their name and let them know they are not forgotten. If they are living, take a moment to give them honor and respect for carrying on an unacknowledged intellectual tradition. Sit at their feet and continue to learn, then apply that learning to how you interpret the world —more specifically, the world of Black women creatives.

When and Where She Enters: Conjure Feminism in Creative Practice

Whether imbedded in the oral tradition of 'telling lies' or in the cinematography of the series like *Queen Sugar*, Spillers and Pryse argue "that however fleetingly history recorded their lives, there [exists] a women's tradition, handed down along female lines.[73] I only dare to offer a name for it and advance the intellectual and *intertextual* discourse around conjure feminism. There is little question about whether conjure feminism has infiltrated and informed Black women's creative endeavors. As curators of the path, it only makes sense that it appears in our creative output. Allow me to explicate exactly how and where it is manifesting in contemporary creative works. Everything Black women create from quilting, beading and body adornment, to hair braiding, dance, song, narrative, and visual art bears evidence of conjure feminism. Ironically, I coined two terms to understand the application of conjure feminism before even conceptualizing the full theoretical paradigm. Sometimes it bees that way. Let's reverse engineer these two concepts to better actualize the philosophy. If conjure feminism is the philosophy through which to name Black women's ancient intellectual traditions, then *conjuring moments* and *black feminist voodoo aesthetics* are two creative applications of such. A conjuring moment is an "identifiable point in the text where conjuring or African-derived ceremonial practices occur and advance the narrative action."[74] Black feminist voodoo aesthetics is a term I coined to convey what I see occurring in Black women's artistic production. I define it as "the inscription of African ritual cosmologies on the black female body [which] become manifest in the performance of ceremony, the inclusion of sacred objects or accoutrements on the body, the use of the body as a vessel for Spirit" and a variety of other expressions of Africanized religious and spiritual belief.[75]

Black women's literature is ripe with passages and characterizations of conjure feminist women and the spirit work used to help them self-actualize. Literary projects such as Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1902–03), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) "make it possible for their readers […] to recognize their common literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, rootworkers) and to name each other as a community of

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[73] Pryse/Spillers 1985, 4.

[74] Martin 2012, 5–6.

[75] Martin 2016, xvi.

[conjure feminist] inheritors."[76] Black women writers cogently pull from the stories and memories of their ancestors, their experiences, their inherited wisdom—again, what Audre Lorde calls *biomythography*—to tell truer tales.[77] Characters such as Michelle Cliff's Mad Hannah and Mama Alli; Nalo Hopkinson's Mer, or more recently, Tomi Adeyemi's Zélie and Mama Agba, Afia Atakora's May Belle and Rue, and other divine conjuring women are reflections of the cultural communities from which the authors spring.[78] Lee reminds us that "the stories the historical [healers and midwives] recount and the stories the fictional narratives reconstruct create a larger, meta-narrative wherein the oral histories of the [healers and midwives] read as cultural fictions, and the writers' fiction read as cultural performances."[79] These characters evolve from cultural memory into cultural heroes through the use of conjuring moments and Black feminist voodoo aesthetics. They use conjure to manipulate *asé* (life-force), to heal the souls of Black folx, and to time-travel and shape-shift—all to ensure the survival of Black people real and imagined. Ntozake Shange employs, in *Sassafras, Cypress, & Indigo,* a conjuring moment in her description of Blue Sunday, whose body and spirit survives violent rape through escaping into her conjure feminist manipulations:

> When he penetrated her, she turned into a crocodile. As a crocodile, *Blue Sunday* was benign. Her only struggle was to remain unconquered. Master Fitzhugh was left with one leg, but otherwise quite himself. The Fitzhughs no longer cultivated indigo as a cash crop. *Blue Sunday* was never seen again by any white person, but women of color in labor called on her and heard her songs when they risked mothering free children.[80]

Literature of the African Diaspora, especially that written by women, is ripe with such speculative and Afro-futurist stories of Black magic women using the natural world and their innate divinity to advance liberation. This conjure feminist lore cycle has found its way into other forms of artistic expression as well. Katherine Dunham's performance and choreographic legacy is deeply based in Afro-Caribbean ritual movement and gendered folk dance.[81] Kara Walker's artworks "Night Conjure" (2001) and "Keys to the Coop" (1997) signify on Black women's spiritual agency under the duress of slavery.[82] The lyrics and accompanying music video for "Nan Dòmi" by Riva Nyri Précil is another example of Black feminist voodoo aesthetics at work; in fact, the songstress's body is literally inscribed with a tattoo of the sacred *vévé* of Erzulie.[83]

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[76] Pryse/Spillers 1985, 5.

[77] Tate 1983, 115.

[78] Cliff 1984; Hopkinson 2004; Adeyemi 2018; Atakora 2020.

[79] Lee 1996, 4.

[80] Shange 1982, 223.

[81] Das 2017; Dunham 1994.

[82] K. Walker (1997) and K. Walker (2007).

The impact and transfer of conjure feminism from the oral tradition to visual art, I argue, is a natural progression for creative Black women. The output may be different, but the material culture is still produced by the community of inheritors. Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) is particularly significant in this regard. The film takes a deep, conscious dive into visualizing Black women's folk and spiritual practices of the Gullah Geechee culture with the care and reverence it deserves.[84] Dash's film creates for us a prototype for envisioning what culturally sensitive Black feminist voodoo aesthetics can look like. Dash imposes the indigo-stained hands of the Black women elders on screen; the women wear ritual white as they gather. She normalizes spirit possession among the young women who dance and play on the beach; disassociating it from the sensationalized foaming mouths and epileptic seizures of white supremacist Hollywood depictions of Black spirit work. Nana Peazant's 'root revival of Love,' the Kongo inspired bottle tree in the front yard, and the glass of water under Eula's bed meant to call her mother's spirit to her are all powerful visualizations of African spiritual philosophies that are practiced by the Black women in the film.[85] The spiritual summons of the Unborn Child, a young girl, is the conjuring moment that advances the plot of Dash's filmic narrative. A summons initiated by Nana Peazant, the Black woman elder of the film. Food as ancestral memory is another relevant Black feminist voodoo aesthetic in the film.

Kasi Lemmons' *Eve's Bayou* (1997) is another film written and directed by a Black woman wherein a multi-generation family engages in their inherited gift of divination, second-sight, and healing work. Lemmons' depiction of Diahnn Carroll as the voodooist Elzora, challenges long-standing stereotypes of Black women and incorporates the face painting traditions of the Yoruba.[86] She also fills the *mis-en-scene* with altars and Catholic iconography employed in Haitian Vodou and Louisiana Voodoo, respectively. Lemmons' depiction of the conjuring women in the film, inclusive of eleven-year old Eve (played by Journey Smollett), is thoughtfully crafted and inspired by her familial history, as is Julie Dash's. The narrative action is moved forward by prophetic dreams, spiritual curses, and rituals that both heal and harm. The film leans so heavily on the speculative practices of spirit work leaving the audience to decide if Voodoo is, in fact, at the heart of the story.[87]

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[83] Précil 2015.

[84] Dash/Bambara/hooks 1992.

[85] Dash 1992; Martin 2016, 75–112.

[86] Martin 2016, 75–113.

[87] Lemmons 1997.

Dash and Lemmons have set the bar for other Black women to experiment with envisioning black women and spirit work in visual media. Beyoncé Knowles Carter more recently entered the arena of Black feminist voodoo aesthetics with her visual albums, *Lemonade* (2016) and *Black is King* (2020). Beyoncé's global popularity and reputation as a deeply involved, visionary entertainer made it possible for her to engage in this style of Black woman-centric narrative without apology. *Lemonade* pays homage to both Dash and Lemmons by reprising the images of Black women sitting in tree branches donning vintage white attire with the southern gothic landscape of the Louisiana bayou as the backdrop. She intentionally invokes Dash and Lemmons's visuals and the narrative forms that have become synonymous with Black women; she signals to her audience that she, too, is among the community of conjure feminist inheritors. *Lemonade's* narrative arch moves from trauma to healing, relying heavily on an Africanist spiritual epistemology along the journey.[88] Water is an ever-present symbol used to signify on the various roads, or manifestations of the Orishas Oshún, who represents fresh water, and Yemanya who is embodied by the river and/or the ocean depending on which location of origin one investigates.[89] The film conveys the inestimable reverence and presence of the *egun*, or Ancestors; photographs of Beyoncé's literal ancestors fill the frame. They do so symbolically as well through the landscape and culture of Louisiana —the origin of the singer's maternal lineage.[90] The narrative woven in the film reminds Black women specifically that when in crisis they can go to the water, go home to their (mother's) people (living and dead), and go to heal amongst other women who believe in and practice African traditional religions. This is the essence of conjure feminism and *Lemonade* is, in fact, where the seed of the idea emerged.[91] The film links the previous generation of Black feminist voodoo aesthetics in films by and about Black women to the next.

Conjure Feminism as a Visual Nation Language

Why does it matter that the narrative and artistic style employed by Africana women artists is defined and named? For one, the use of Black feminist voodoo aesthetics and conjuring moments demonstrates engagement with and an activation of Ancestral memory. It, like passing along lineages in the poetic performance of the griot, ensures that Black women's knowledge and ancient wisdom continues to be disseminated and affirmed in the contemporary moment. This wisdom evolves and changes with migration, modernization, and adaptation for sure, but it also marks the user. The artist, novelist, filmmaker, horticulturalist, midwife, and caretaker makes herself known as an inheritor among the beloved Black woman's community by signaling conjure feminism artistically giving those within no cause to inquire, as the old folks say, "Who yo' people?" The use of African spiritual iconography and symbolism in creative and visual art advances Black women's representation in visual media, a Herculian task. It rejects western cultural supremacy and privileges African-centered cosmologies in which dichotomies of good/evil, male/female, sacred/secular are not mutually exclusive but rather two sides of one coin.

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[88] Brooks/Martin 2019.

[89] Edwards/Mason 1998.

[90] Coloma Peñate 2019.

[91] Robichaud 2019.

Particularly for Black women, the use of conjure feminism as a theory of survival amplifies Black women's folk practices and other ways of knowing as valid, valuable, and venerable. As the folk expression taunts, 'what is understood doesn't have to be explained;' the usage of a conjure feminist ethos and Black feminist voodoo aesthetic in Black women's visual artistry expands the indecipherable 'double-speak' or signifyin' for which Black diaspora folx have become renown.[92] Voodoo aesthetics are akin to a visual *nation language*, to use Edward Kamau Brathwaite's terminology.[93] He explains that, "Nation Language is the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English to a greater or lesser degree."[94] Through visual signs such as indigo-stained hands, a yellow dress and deluge of water, a 'haint blue' being, Yoruba *ori* body paint, and raffia covered *Egungun* masquerades Black women artists named here are speaking across, through, and under the radar of western, patriarchal, Christian and colonized understandings of the world. Black women, specifically, carried on about *Lemonade's* subtexts for months after its premiere because Beyoncé was communicating directly to them in words, symbols, experiences, and knowing that was only accessible to them.[95] *Black is King* is similarly unknowable to those who lack fluency in African philosophies of spirituality and religion. Less has been published on it, I suspect because typical viewers lack the range of the African aesthetics with which Beyoncé speaks in the film. This exemplifies *precisely* my point about Black feminist aesthetics functioning as a visual Nation Language. Only those who have the range of fluency can decipher its deeper meaning.

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[92] Gates 1988.

[93] Brathwaite 1984.

[94] Brathwaite 1984, 311.

[95] Telusma 2016.

Conjure feminism derives from Black women’s intellectual traditions that evolved from oral transmission. Brathwaite contends this is where Nation Language finds its true meaning among the in-group: “the oral tradition […] demands not only the griot but the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the maker makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him. Hence we have the creation of a continuum where meaning truly resides.”[96] The visualization of conjure feminism enacts a symbolic call and response of meaning between the artist and the fluent audience. It is transmitted in the common language of color, lighting, symbols, and other cinematic technique (English), but the space where meaning truly resides is the experiential knowledge and spiritual practices of Black women, which you can argue is *anything* but English. And in so naming this intellectual tradition, explicating its points of origin and application within the culture, and articulating it as a legitimate theoretical lens through which one can make meaning, I leave my audience with the question: How fluent are you?

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[96] Brathwaite 1984, 312.

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